

Archaeological and Documentary Insights into the Native World of the Luna Expedition

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Abstract

Excavations at the terrestrial settlement of Tristán de Luna y Arellano on Pensacola Bay suggest that the material culture of the colonists at the site between 1559 and 1561 included a significant amount of contemporaneous Native American ceramics evidently scavenged along with food from evacuated communities along the coast and interior. Combined with newly-discovered documentation detailing the establishment and use of a road between Pensacola and the temporary Spanish settlement at Nanipacana in central Alabama, and deteriorating Native-Spanish relations during this period, these new data offer important insights into the indigenous social geography of this region at a pivotal time.

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Between 1540 and 1568, three Spanish military expeditions pushed deep into the interior of southeastern North America, then known to the Spanish as *La Florida*. The first, led by Hernando de Soto, achieved a broad if imperfect understanding of the geography of the Southeast by establishing the first terrestrial route that traversed the Appalachian summit by way of a string of indigenous chiefdoms stretching from the Atlantic Coastal Plain to the Gulf Coastal Plain.¹ Even though Soto's army never actually reached the coast of the Atlantic or northern Gulf of Mexico, Indians in the provinces of Cofitachequi in central South Carolina and Tascalusa in central Alabama reported that their respective coasts were not far away, and thus the eventual survivors of the Soto expedition possessed a mental map of the interior Southeast that hinged on a terrestrial route that arced well north of the straight-line distance between the Atlantic and Gulf, crossing the Appalachian mountains and bringing them through a then-populous indigenous chiefdom known as Coça, or simply Coosa today. This route was the only one that any Spaniard had ever actually seen and walked, and thus Soto's Appalachian road came to dominate Spanish thinking about the interior Southeast. Both subsequent expeditions into the Southeastern interior, including that led by Tristán de Luna y Arellano between 1559 and 1561 and the successive Juan Pardo expeditions between 1566 and 1568, used the Soto route as their guide to cross between the Atlantic and Gulf.²

More than a decade after the return of the Soto survivors, and confronted with increasing threats of French corsairs in the Caribbean and potential French settlement in *La Florida*, in 1557 the King of Spain Felipe II ordered the Viceroy of New Spain Luis de Velasco to establish a Spanish colonial settlement on the Atlantic coast at the Punta de Santa Elena, a prominent feature on period maps that was first named in the 1520s during the leadup to the failed colonial attempt

¹ Hudson (1997).

² Priestley (2010); Hudson et al. (1989); Worth (2018a); Hudson (1990).

of Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón.³ The Viceroy's plan to implement this directive, however, involved the establishment of a first port settlement on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, followed by a military *entrada* along Soto's route across the interior through Coosa, finally leading to the Atlantic coast at Santa Elena, where a second port colony would be established. The site chosen for the first settlement was Pensacola Bay, then known as Ochuse following its discovery and repeated visitation by Francisco Maldonado during the Soto expedition. From Ochuse, the army was to travel inland to join Soto's route at the chiefdom of Tascalusa, following it to Coosa and ultimately to the Atlantic. In part for this reason, several of the expedition's officials and company captains were veterans of the Soto expedition, and four Indian women originally native to Florida were also brought back as advisors and interpreters.

The Luna expedition is well-documented in comparison to both Soto and Pardo, but even though a large number of letters, lawsuits, and financial accounts have been available to researchers for decades,⁴ new and important documents continue to come to light. As a result, the following discussion incorporates pivotal new details that have appeared in service records and expense accounts that I and my students and colleagues continue to uncover in both Spain and Mexico,⁵ and thus some of these historical details are as-yet unpublished and thus not covered in previous secondary works. Moreover, the 2015 discovery of Luna's settlement on Pensacola Bay has opened up a wealth of new archaeological data that was also not available to previous researchers, and these findings are also incorporated into the following discussion.⁶ In short, we are currently experiencing a new fluorescence of Luna expedition research that both

³ Hoffman (1990).

⁴ e.g. Dávila Padilla (1625); Priestley (2010); Ybarra (1564); Yugoyen (1569).

⁵ e.g. Sotelo (1566); Velloso de Bouro (1582). I am particularly grateful to Michael Francis for sharing the Velloso *meritos* manuscript with me.

⁶ Worth (2016a, 2016b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c); Worth et al. (2017, n.d.).

augments and corrects previous scholarship on the subject, and this paper is one step in that process.

By late August of 1559, the 1,500 members of the Luna expedition established their settlement on what we now know was a high bluff overlooking the heart of Pensacola Bay, naming it Santa María de Ochuse. Luna promptly dispatched 100 men in two companies inland along the principal river at the head of the bay, which Soto survivors had long believed led directly to Tascalusa and Coosa. As it turned out, however, this was an error, and the Escambia River only led inland to a sparsely inhabited region of the Alabama Coastal Plain, where this segment of the river today is called the Conecuh. Compounding this mistake, however, as the members of these detachments were returning, a massive hurricane struck Pensacola Bay and devastated both the settlement and the fleet at anchor on September 19-20. Leaving the settlement with little food and even more mouths to feed, Luna quickly sent his sergeant major with twice as many soldiers even farther inland with orders to continue northward past the eastward turn of the Escambia River until they discovered a populated region with surplus food, still seeking the road to Coosa. Several weeks later he also sent a small detachment with boats up the Escambia-Conecuh River with similar instructions, ordering them in the case of failure to return to the point where the first expedition branched north from the river and follow their path to wherever they might be.⁷

It was not until mid-November that a detachment of men returned to the Pensacola Bay settlement with good news; the larger expedition had successfully traversed the uplands between the Escambia-Conecuh and the next and much larger river drainage to the west, the Alabama. There, they had finally discovered a native province known at that time as Piachi, and had occupied the largest town in the province, named Nanipacana, where the inhabitants recalled the

⁷ Luna y Arellano (1559).

passage of Soto's Spanish army some 19 years previously. With preliminary reports that the local Indians had corn and other food and were at that time interacting peacefully with the 200-man Spanish detachment, Luna kept the bulk of his army at Pensacola awaiting the first relief fleet from New Spain, which finally arrived in December. During this same period he ordered a master carpenter to oversee the construction of two new shallow-draft brigantines using local lumber in order to aid in reconnaissance of the rivers and bays and for the transport of people and goods to Nanipacana, planned for mid-February.⁸ Finally departing shortly before the end of February,⁹ all but about 100 of Luna's soldiers and other settlers gradually made their way both by water and by a newly-opened land route to Nanipacana, most apparently arriving in March. What they found, however, was even more bad news; during the Spanish transfer the Indians of the Piachi province had taken all their food and withdrawn, implementing a scorched-earth policy for many leagues around the Spanish occupation at what was christened Santa Cruz de Nanipacana. Fields were cut, villages were burned, and even the edible wild plants were ripped up, all in an effort to isolate and starve the Spanish interlopers. Some 1,000 Spanish soldiers and their families, servants, and slaves, along with accompanying Aztec Indians, and even a herd of cattle and other livestock,¹⁰ were now stranded some 40 leagues inland in what was at that point a depopulated province without a supply of local foods.

What began next was a three-month period during which Luna's main army struggled to survive off what food they had with them, while simultaneously dispatching several riverine expeditions both upriver and downriver from Nanipacana in search of food and other supplies, all the while maintaining regular overland contact between the remaining detachment still at Pensacola Bay, where the second relief fleet was anticipated in late summer. It is this period that

⁸ Velasco (1560).

⁹ Luna y Arellano (1560).

¹⁰ Velloso de Bouro (1582).

can now be described in better detail than was ever possible before using new documentary discoveries,¹¹ and in combination with previously-known documents, we now are in a position to understand how Spanish-Indian relations in the region deteriorated far more seriously than was evident before.¹² Moreover, we now have a much clearer understanding of the native social geography of central Alabama, a point to which I will return shortly.

Not long after the main army's arrival at Nanipacana, Luna's two new brigantines and other smaller vessels were sent upriver in search of food, but found all the nearby riverside villages abandoned and devoid of food, followed by an equally-lengthy uninhabited stretch, and three weeks later they returned to Nanipacana without food. The vessels were dispatched once again, this time downriver along the Alabama River, where they discovered a Spanish bark that was still struggling upriver with sick people and women and children.¹³ After providing supplies to them and also to a small Spanish detachment stationed at the mouth of the river on Mobile Bay, the vessels proceeded to the confluence of the Tombigbee River (called the Tomé in Luna's era) and ascended the river in search of provisions hidden in the woods and swamps by the Indians. The detachment finally returned to Nanipacana with the supplies six weeks after departing. Of no small importance, in later testimony for the service record of the detachment's leader, one of the soldiers detailed that "they found corn and beans and jars and other things from which they provided the camp,"¹⁴ providing modern researchers with evidence that Luna's men specifically collected native ceramics in addition to food, a fact that bears directly on the archaeology of the Luna settlement. There, the ceramics used by the Spanish settlers included just 39% Spanish and Aztec ceramics, as compared to 61% native ceramics, dominated by

¹¹ Sotelo (1566); Velloso de Bouro (1582).

¹² Worth (2018c).

¹³ Sotelo (1566).

¹⁴ Vega (1566).

Pensacola series types common to the Gulf Coastal Plain,¹⁵ as well as at least a few central Alabama types, including Alabama River Applique. Many or most of these ceramics seem likely to have been part of the plunder taken by Spaniards from abandoned villages across central Alabama and the Pensacola region.

In mid-April, Luna decided to send his sergeant major again with a new 200-man detachment to travel overland upriver and northward in search of the province of Coosa itself. Not only was this expedition directed to find food for the starving army at Nanipacana, but it would theoretically establish yet another forward base from which the expedition could continue its primary mission toward the Atlantic. Unfortunately, this detachment moved slowly through the depopulated zone and only managed to find a small quantity of food they finally found in a town in the Atache province downriver starting at the end of May. But by the time it arrived in Nanipacana, however, the town had already been abandoned by the Spaniards.¹⁶ During the interim, not only had the food crisis worsened, leading to the decision to begin eating their own horses, but the Indians across the region were now actively mounting attacks against the Spanish. The new documents provide descriptions of several attacks carried out by the Indians in and around the Piachi province, who were specifically described as “risen up” in numerous declarations in service records. Late in June, for example, a small group of seven Spanish soldiers narrowly avoided an ambush by Indian warriors as they passed near the provincial capital at Piachi,¹⁷ and at about the same time a shallop with eleven soldiers was ambushed and forced to turn back as it pushed upriver in search of news from the Coosa detachment.¹⁸ And as the final flotilla of vessels descended the Alabama River from Nanipacana, Indians were reported

¹⁵ Worth et al. (2017, n.d).

¹⁶ Porras Alvarado (1566).

¹⁷ Velloso de Bouro (1582).

¹⁸ Sotelo (1566).

to have attacked them from the riverbanks, shooting arrows at the boats and rafts as they passed.¹⁹ At least one captain's black slave was killed by the Indians during these hostilities, along with three of his horses.²⁰ And even after Luna's army had returned to Ochuse on Pensacola Bay, when a detachment of 25 soldiers was sent back to Coosa in early September to recall the soldiers back to the coast, they were ambushed on their way northward in a village called Talpa upriver from Nanipacana, severely wounding their pathfinder.²¹ Despite this, the party continued the journey to Coosa, where they found the 200-man detachment intact and comparatively well-fed after their three-month stay in that distant province.²² Returning to Pensacola Bay by early November, the number of settlers dwindled after evacuations during the second and third relief fleets to less than 200 by the following April of 1561, when all but a detachment of 50-60 men were withdrawn for an abortive maritime expedition to Santa Elena. The colony on Pensacola Bay was finally abandoned in August, two years after its establishment.

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to make some preliminary observations about what all this new documentation reveals regarding the indigenous social geography of the interior. In 1560, Nanipacana was apparently the largest town in a native province that was named Piachi, or Upiachi, located along the middle Alabama River. Several other native towns within the province are named in various Luna documents, including the capital town of Piachi, as well as towns named Talpa, Utihiile, and Ynicula. Precise locational data for these towns is scarce, but based on the testimony of multiple witnesses in newly-discovered service records, the provincial capital of Piachi was apparently located to the south and downriver from Nanipacana,

¹⁹ Sotelo (1566).

²⁰ Sotelo (1566).

²¹ Velloso de Bouro (1582).

²² See Hudson (1988) for details about the Spanish-Coosa military alliance during this stay.

while Talpa was situated ten leagues upriver from Nanipacana.²³ The province of Piachi appears to have been surrounded by uninhabited zones both upriver and downriver. The riverine expedition noted above recorded a 30-35-league settled zone upriver from Nanipacana, and an equally lengthy stretch of river beyond without any settlement.²⁴ While the reported distances seem likely to have been somewhat exaggerated due to the sinuous path of the river, the later terrestrial expedition to Coosa also reported a lengthy unoccupied zone extending for a full 25-26 days' slow march²⁵ without provisions before they finally found food in a riverside town called Caxiti in the next province upriver, called Atache at the time.²⁶

Downriver from the Piachi province, there is not a single reference to any Indian towns or provinces all the way to the mouth of the river in Mobile Bay, though Luna's company captains did report that "the natives had depopulated all the river below and had gone away from their houses," making it possible that there were indeed other unnamed towns or provinces farther south. The fact that the Spaniards maintained a small outpost under a company captain guarding the river's mouth during this period²⁷ could suggest either that the Mobile-Tensaw Delta was largely unpopulated by 1560, or alternatively that there were indeed enough local Indians hiding from the Spaniards to warrant a military garrison to ensure free passage up and down the river from the coast. The reported travel time downriver from Nanipacana to Mobile Bay was at least four to five days by water, while the travel time between Pensacola Bay through Mobile Bay and upriver to Nanipacana was a full 25-30 days.²⁸ Moreover, the overland distance between the Pensacola Bay settlement of Ochuse and Nanipacana was variously reported as 40-50 leagues, a

²³ Velloso de Bouro (1582).

²⁴ Montalbán (1561).

²⁵ Montalbán (1561) specifically reports 25-26 days' journey, but Anunciación et al. (1560) indicates a total of 43 days had passed, with the difference presumably being accounted for by multi-day stops along the way.

²⁶ Montalbán (1561) refers to this as the province of "Taxcaluça," but this is clearly what all others refer to as the province of Atache.

²⁷ Sotelo (1566).

²⁸ Acuña et al. (1560).

distance that took as much as 9-12 days to traverse before Portuguese pathfinder Domingo Velloso discovered an old Indian trail between the rivers, shortening the terrestrial travel time to just five days.²⁹ All of these clues suggest that the Piachi province was well inland.

In broad view, the relative proportions of distances between and within specific provinces and towns and uninhabited zones described in the Luna documents correspond quite well to a regional configuration that locates the Piachi province along the middle Alabama River, the Atache province around the confluence of the Tallapoosa and Coosa Rivers, and the Coosa province extending from the upper Coosa through the Oostanaula to the Coosawattee Rivers in Georgia.³⁰ And although it is not my intention to draw any detailed or definitive archaeological conclusions here, since consultation and collaboration with and among regional specialists is definitely the next logical step, my own distillation of new and old documentary sources relating to both the Luna and Soto expeditions through central Alabama has permitted me to draw some general conclusions about the indigenous social geography of this region during the pivotal era of the mid-16th century, which should be instructive for ongoing research.

To this end, the social geography described in the totality of available Luna documents seem to me to be most consistent with an archaeological identification of the Furman Phase, or the early stages of its successor the Durand's Bend Phase recently defined by Sheldon and Jenkins, as the 1560 province of Piachi, more specifically focusing on the relatively dense cluster of archaeological sites in the portion of the Alabama River defined by Sheldon as the Wilcox Segment.³¹ To the east, the Atache province would seem most likely to correspond to the

²⁹ Velloso de Bouro (1582).

³⁰ This configuration is not novel, and generally corresponds to reconstructions of Luna expedition routes proposed by previous authors, including Hudson et al. 1989 and various authors in Knight (2009). An adjustment to this route reconstruction has recently been proposed by Jenkins and Sheldon (2016), but substantially different routes have also been proposed by Curren et al. (1989), Little and Curren (1990), and Galloway (1995:143-160).

³¹ Little and Curren (1990); Regnier (2006, 2014); Sheldon (2009); Jenkins (2009); Jenkins and Sheldon (2016).

contemporaneous Big Eddy/Shine II Phases. While this would potentially mean that the subsequent Alabama River Phase³² extending between these two areas may largely post-date the Luna expedition, in my view the documentary evidence now available to us makes this a likely possibility to consider and evaluate.³³

Of no small importance is the conclusion that there was definitely a significant uninhabited buffer zone between the two provinces of Piachi and Atache, much more so than was described between the corresponding Mabila and Tascalusa provinces in the Soto-era accounts.³⁴ Precisely within this expanded buffer zone was the border town of Piachi that resisted Soto's army in 1540, but this location is far too close to Soto's Tascalusa province to match the Luna accounts that place it downriver from both Nanipacana and Talpa. Despite my initial hope that this newly-discovered Luna-era location of Piachi would help us finally find the earlier site of the famed Battle of Mabila farther west, I am reluctantly forced to conclude that the most likely explanation is that the town of Piachi had already relocated considerably downriver in the aftermath of Mabila's 1540 destruction, and by 1560 was essentially on the opposite side of the province that it had come to lead 20 years later. Such a downriver migration is certainly not unexpected, especially given the fact that by the end of the 17th century, a group known as the Mobila to the Spanish or Mobilians to the French was situated even farther downriver, in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta region above Mobile Bay itself, possibly representing the lineal descendants of Soto's Mabila province and Luna's Piachi province.³⁵

³² Sheldon (1974); Jenkins and Sheldon (2016).

³³ The recent identification of the Luna settlement glass bead assemblage as being characterized predominantly by Nueva Cadiz and Seven Layer Chevron beads means that Soto-era and Luna-era trade bead assemblages are presently impossible to distinguish from each other using these main types, complicating our ability to discriminate the chronological affiliation of native sites between 1540 and 1560; Worth (2016a, 2016b); Worth et al. (2017, n.d.).

³⁴ See analyses by Ethridge et al. (2009).

³⁵ The connection between Mabila and the Mobilians has long been recognized; see, for example, Waselkov and Gums (2000:6-17), and Waselkov et al. (2009).

One aspect of this debate that has always guided interpretations of both Soto's and Luna's routes is the remarkable 16th-century Spanish artifact assemblage from native funeral context at the Pine Log Creek archaeological site just upriver from the confluence of the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers,³⁶ as well as a matching brass candlestick found far upriver at the Durant's Bend site.³⁷ There seems no doubt that much of this collection derived from either or both of the Soto or Luna expeditions, likely accumulated through trade or tribute by the individuals with whom they were eventually buried.³⁸ However, in light of my current reconstruction of the social geography of the interior during Luna's time, as described above, combined with what is known about the documented circumstances of both the Soto and Luna expeditions, my sense is that the greatest likelihood is that the brass candlesticks and bucket are unlikely to have come from the Luna expedition, but instead are most likely part of the plunder taken from the Mabila battlefield. In fact, three of the Soto chronicles specifically mention that the expedition's liturgical ornaments were part of the many losses suffered by Soto's army at Mabila,³⁹ and it does not seem a stretch to suggest that these and other trophies recovered by the native survivors became part of the chiefly exotica that was not buried until years or even decades after the event, perhaps even well after the Luna expedition. In this light, the final location of most of these artifacts in the immediate vicinity of the region where the remnants of the Mabila-Piachi province seem to have congregated is not unexpected, nor is the discovery of one of the candlesticks in a burial far upriver at a site that has previously been proposed as a possible location for Soto's Piachi. While this is not much more than an educated guess, it

³⁶ Stowe (1982).

³⁷ Jenkins and Sheldon (2016:111).

³⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms by which 16th-century European goods entered native hands in the Southeast, see Smith and Hally (n.d.).

³⁹ Clayton et al. (1993).

certainly bears consideration as the scholarly community continues to study the changing indigenous landscape of this region during the 16th century.

In sum, I view this paper more as a starting point than an ending point. Even though the newly identified documents that I have been fortunate enough to work with provide important and detailed new information regarding the indigenous landscape into which Luna's expedition penetrated, and even though the Luna settlement site is still only just beginning to reveal crucial details about the material culture of both the expedition members and the native groups whose supplies they plundered, the most important research tasks still remain, as does any broader synthesis that takes all available evidence into account. Integrating the new documentary and archaeological data into existing data and interpretations will require continued effort and collaboration among a wide range of scholars who have studied this region and era over many decades, and it is my hope that the brief and preliminary insights I have been able to offer here will provide useful fodder for this broader effort.

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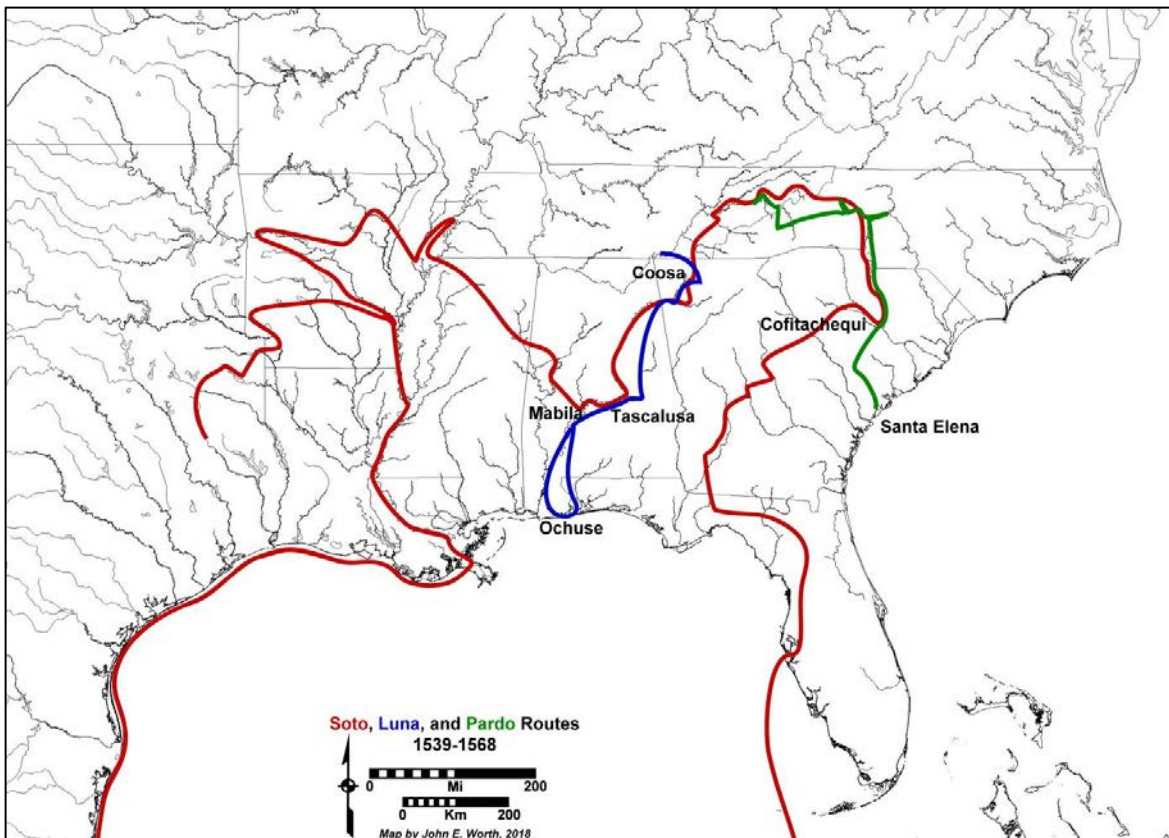
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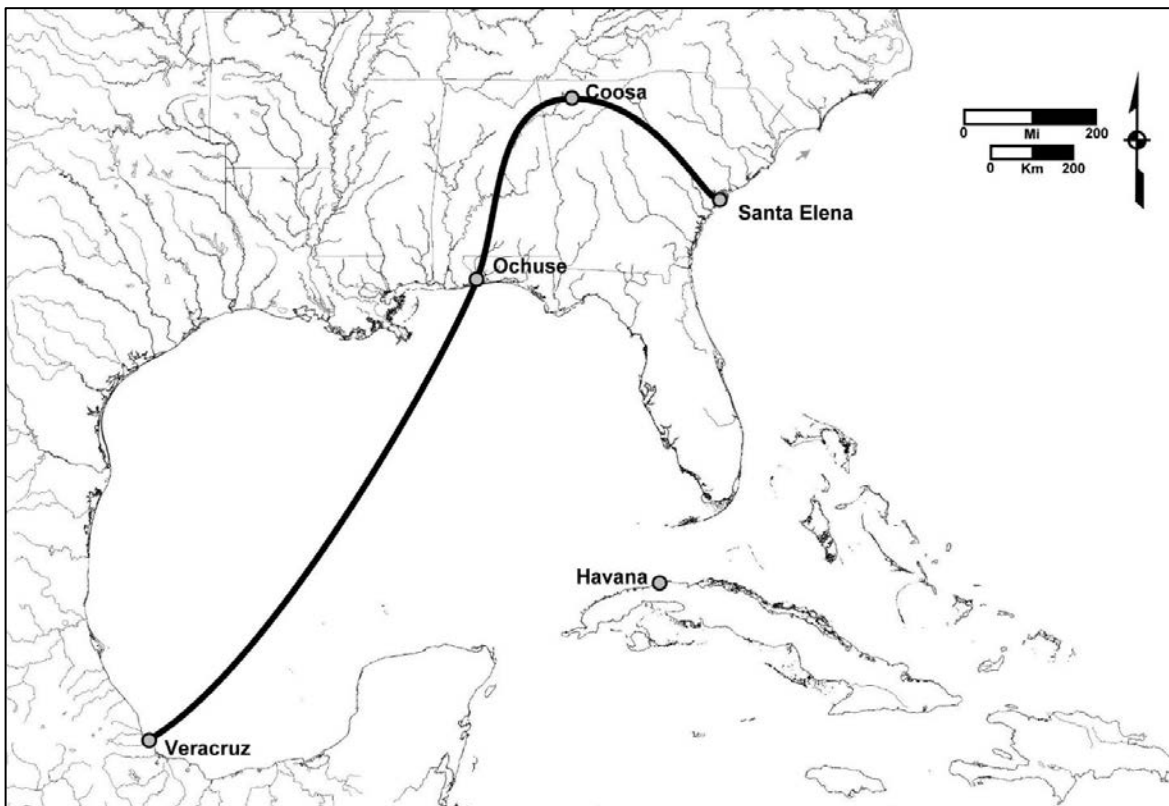
1564 Audit of the accounts of Pedro de Yebra, Deputy Treasurer of Veracruz, November 4, 1559 – August 31, 1563. Legajo 877, Contaduría, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. Translation by R. Wayne Childers, September 5, 1999, manuscript on file, Archaeology Institute, University of West Florida.

Yugoyen, Martin de

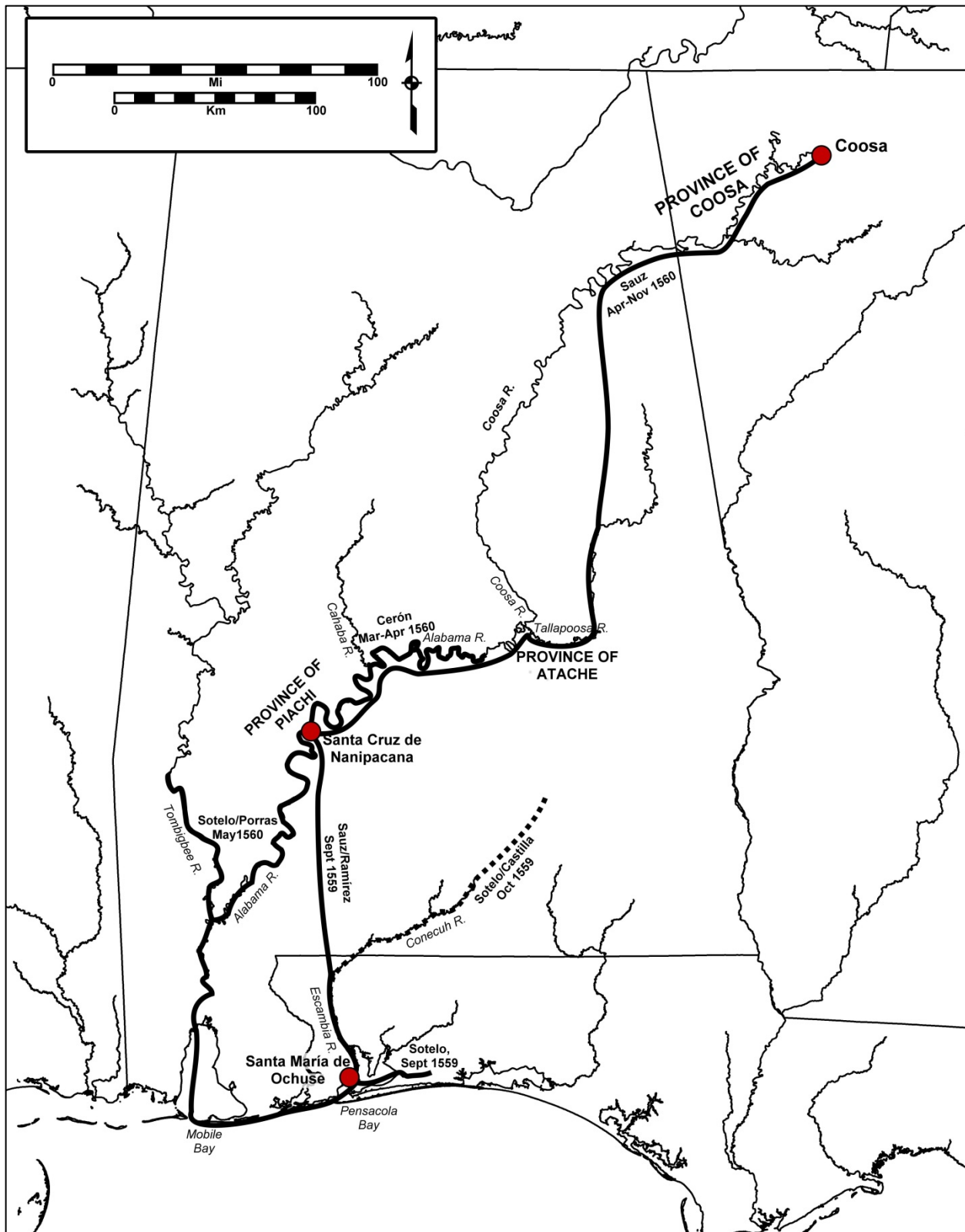
1569 Audit of the March 21, 1554 – January 31, 1559 accounts of Alonso Ortíz de Urrutia, Deputy Treasurer of Veracruz, 1569. Legajo 877, Contaduría, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. Translation available by R. Wayne Childers, October 18, 1999, Archaeology Institute, University of West Florida.



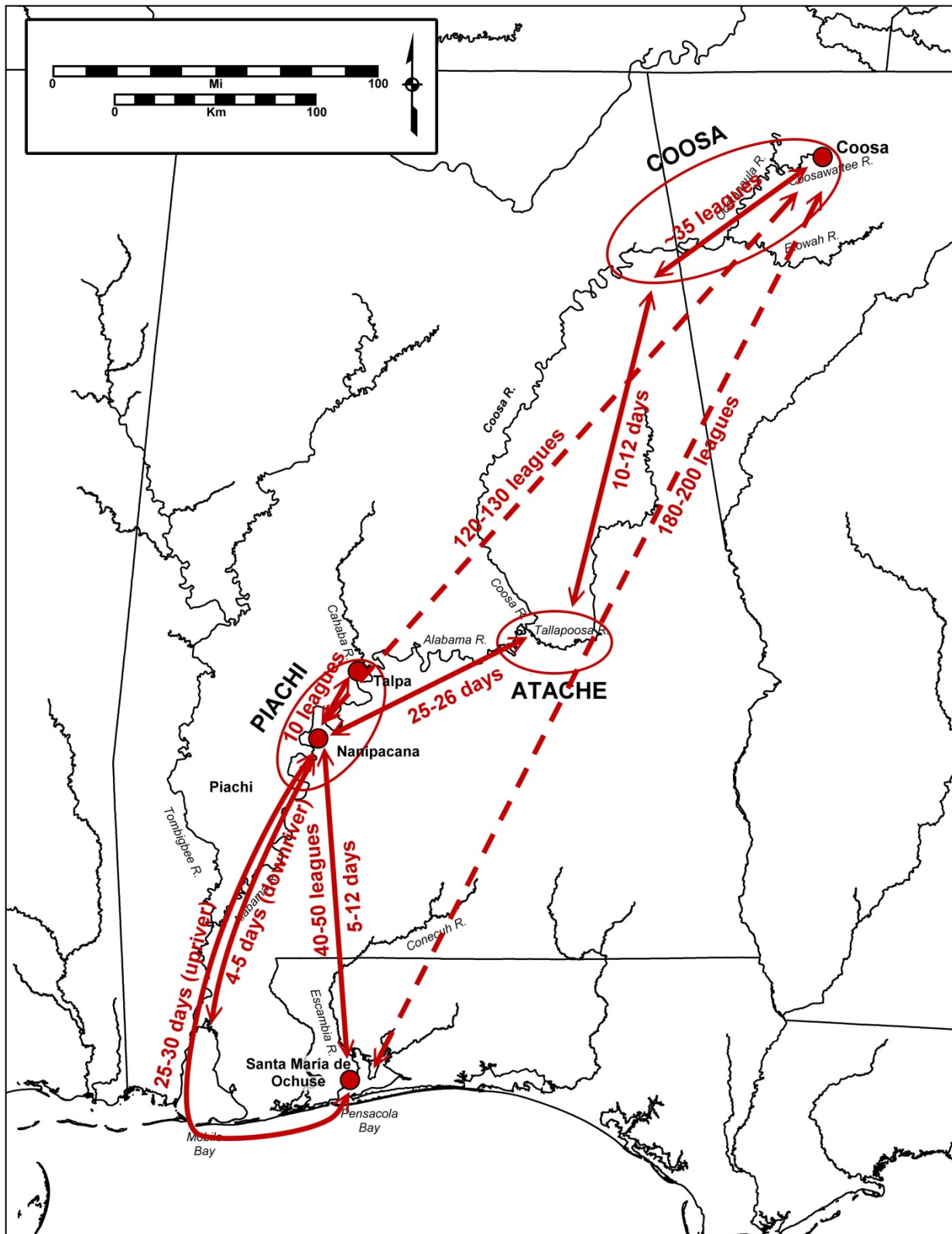
Soto, Luna, and Pardo Routes, 1539-1568



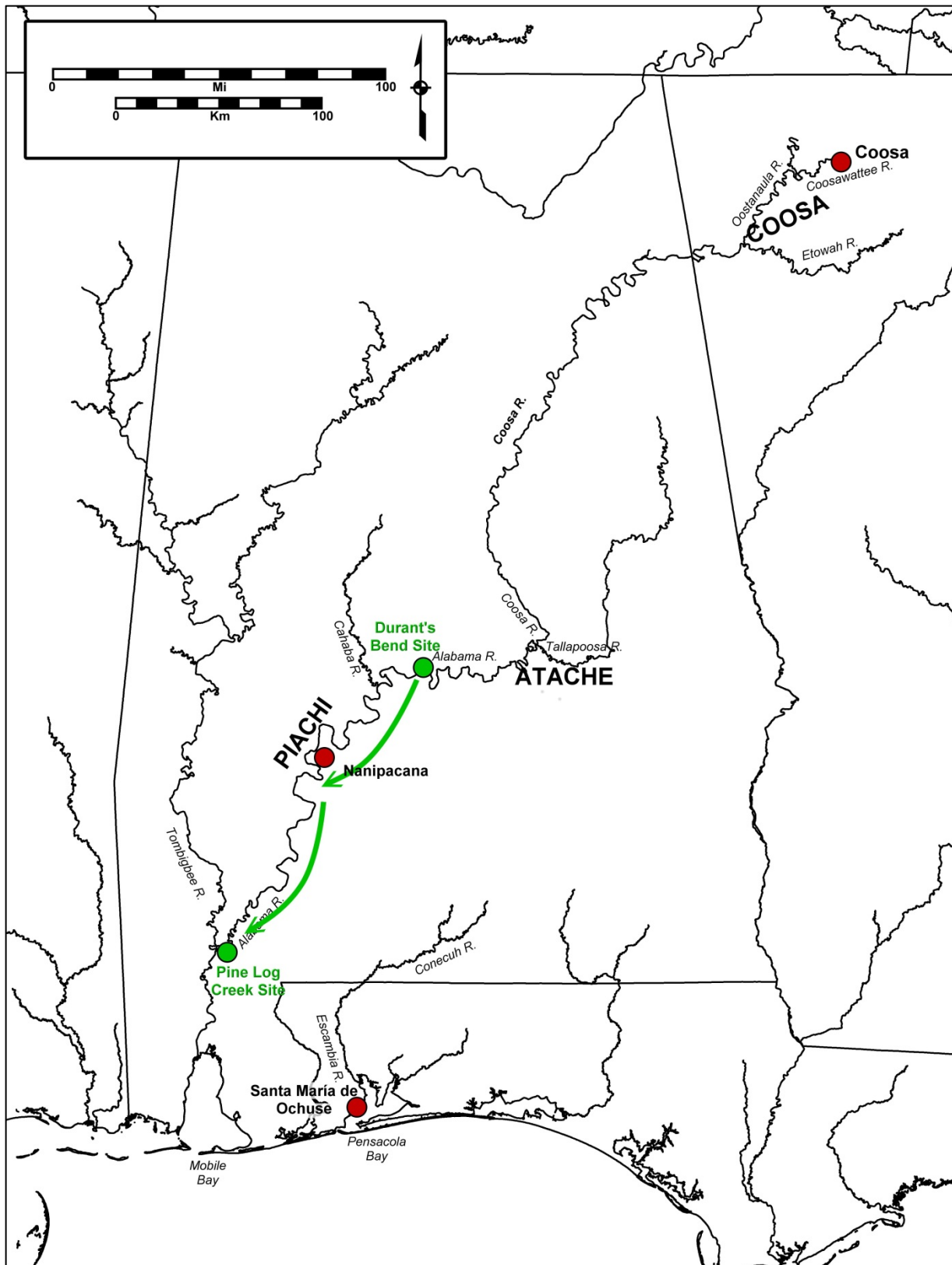
The Luna Expeditions as Envisioned



Routes of the Luna expedition.



Schematic of reported distances and travel times during the Luna expedition.



Selected 16th-century European archaeological assemblages, and prospective 16th-century population movements within Piachi/Mabila province.