

# The Search for Hernando De Soto

by John C. Hall

In the spring of 1539, Hernando De Soto and an expedition of seven hundred Spaniards stepped ashore near what is now Tampa Bay, Florida, and began the first major European exploration of North America. A narrative of that expedition reads like a popular adventure novel. For four years De Soto and his men wandered through a strange and hostile landscape inhabited by aboriginal tribes known to us today only through archaeology. They endured starvation, disease, and the continued onslaught of natives. In Alabama, at the town of Mabila, they narrowly won what may have been the largest Indian battle ever fought in North America. After harrowing adventures in the region west of the Mississippi River (and the discovery of the great river itself), De Soto succumbed to a fever, the expedition disintegrated, and the few survivors—approximately one-third of the expedition—escaped to Mexico after a perilous boat trip down the Mississippi River.

Two decades later, in 1560, another Spanish explorer, Tristán de Luna, landed in the Southeast and attempted to retrace De Soto's steps. Although he was accompanied by several survivors of the original expedition, Luna found only a short segment of De Soto's trail. Today, almost four hundred and fifty years after the De Soto *entrada* (march of conquest), the location of his route remains one of the foremost historical mysteries of the Southeastern United States.

Hernando De Soto's *entrada*, perhaps more than other Spanish expeditions into this part of the world, has captured the imagination of scholars and the public alike for a number of reasons: First, several members of the De Soto expedition left chronicles of their journey. If accurately correlated to the landscape, these chronicles would provide a wealth of historical detail. Second, De Soto and his men were among the first Europeans to encounter the Mississippian, or Moundbuilder, Indian culture of the region, some aspects of which are described in the De Soto expedition chronicles. If De Soto's campsites and battlegrounds are ever found and excavated, archaeologists and historians, working with the chronicles, could piece together a picture of Southeastern aboriginal life hitherto unrecorded. Many believe that the discovery of the Mabila battlefield, where the Spanish engaged Chief Tascaluza (Tuscaloosa) and thousands of his men, would be the archaeological find of recent years in the Southeastern United States. Lastly, the public is attracted by the sheer romance of the expedition, its adventures, battles, and tragic end.

Leading the current search for Mabila, as well as for the rest of De

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Soto's Alabama route, is the Alabama De Soto Commission [see box, page 22]. Appointed by Governor George C. Wallace in 1985, the commission is charged with directing "the efforts of researchers relating to early Spanish exploration and colonization of Alabama." With assistance from the Alabama State Museum of Natural History, the Alabama Historical Commission, and the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the centuries-old search for Hernando De Soto is, once again, underway.

After Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492, the Spanish were quick to exploit its possibilities [see "The Spanish Heritage of the Southeast," pp. 2-11]. By 1521, Cortez had conquered Aztec Mexico with its stunning wealth; in a dozen more years Central America had fallen to the Spanish, and Pizarro had begun reaping the treasures of Peru. While these campaigns were fraught with dangers, most survivors—even lowly foot soldiers—were well paid for the risks they took, and many became wondrously rich on the loot of Indian civilizations. Searching for treasures equal to those discovered in tropical America, Spanish adventurers, including Hernando De Soto, turned their attention to the unexplored continent to the north.

De Soto, like many of the *conquistadors*, was the second son of a minor Spanish *hidalgo* family. Like other second sons (who stood to inherit