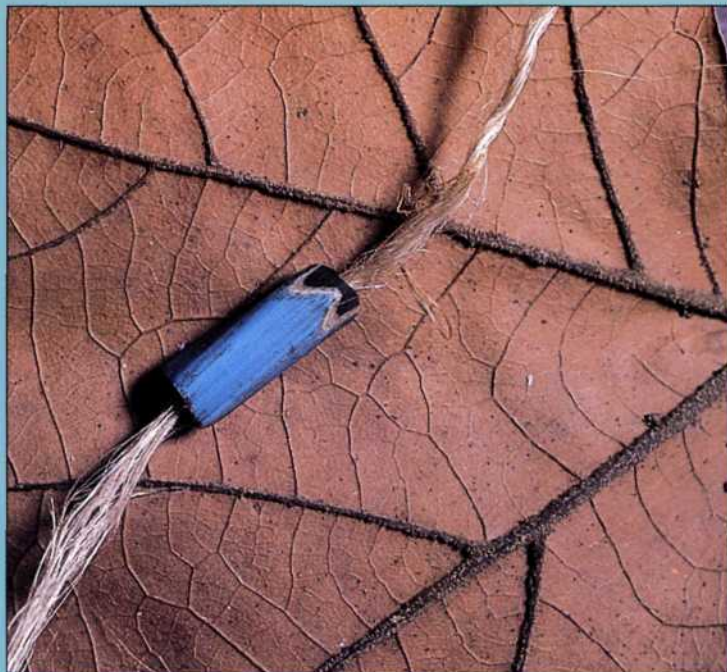


De Soto-era Archaeological Sites

What will they look like?



Scientific understanding of what a De Soto-era archaeological site should look like has increased significantly in recent years. For decades the public has hoped for helmets and halberds and skeletons with arrow or musket-ball holes in their breasts. This kind of dramatic evidence has not yet appeared, and with the possible exception of the Mabila battlefield, may not appear. But new knowledge about De Soto-era trade goods—those distinctive items that only the De Soto expedition brought to the Southeast—may well prove decisive in identifying a De Soto-era site (1540), as opposed to, say, a Luna-era site (1560). Two trade items are particularly useful in identifying a site: a type of blue glass “Nueva Cadiz” trade bead (*left*) and a distinctive style of brass bell (*right*), called Clarksdale bells after their discovery site in Clarksdale, Mississippi. These items, now thought to have been brought by De Soto and not by later European explorers, would have accompanied their owners to the grave and would be archaeologically recoverable.

New knowledge of sixteenth-century trade goods also allows archaeologists to reject sites that may have been incorrectly identified previously, such as Childersburg (once thought to be near the Indian town of Coosa) and McKee Island (once identified as the site of the village of Tali.)

As the list of possible sites is narrowed, the De Soto chronicles are providing important information as to the geographical layout of a given De Soto locality. Based on the chronicles, many scholars now believe that the mound site at Little Egypt, Georgia, may be the long-sought Coosa. Recent excavations at Sylacauga’s Hightower Village site, sponsored by the University of Alabama and the Sylacauga Museum, reveal evidence attributed to Tristán de Luna’s exploration party near what may be the De Soto site of Talisi.

Trade goods, however, are necessarily portable, and geographic and historical evidence can be equivocal. In order to be absolutely certain a locality is correctly identified, archaeologists must find authentic De Soto materials put in place by the expedition. The Alabama De Soto Commission, in consultation with leading De Soto scholars, has concluded that the Mabila battlefield is the state’s most likely site for positive archaeological identification. If, in fact, archaeologists uncover *in situ* military artifacts (such as crossbow bolts or tips and arquebus balls), along with Spanish burials and remnants of destroyed Spanish supplies, Mabila would be the single most identifiable De Soto site on the entire route.

Clarksdale bell courtesy Florida State Museum; Nueva Cadiz bead courtesy Alabama State Museum of Natural History. Photos by Chip Cooper.