

Hernando de Soto Visits Cofitachequi

The Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto reaped the benefits from the riches taken from the Incan empire after its fall in 1533. After returning home to Spain De Soto decided that there were even greater riches to gain in the Americas.

In 1537 de Soto was appointed governor of Cuba. Along with this position came the right to explore and conquer regions in North America. In 1539, de Soto began his movement into North America to search for gold with about 600 men and numerous horses. De Soto embarked on this journey off Florida's coast near Tampa Bay. Hernando de Soto and his group continued through Georgia and finally into South Carolina.

The motivation for this continuous northward movement was based on information de Soto received from Indian informants about Mississippian cities. One young Indian youth told about the land from which he came. He claimed this land was ruled by a woman who "collected tribute from many of her neighboring chiefs" (Clayton et al.1994, 74). The youth led de Soto to believe that this tribute included gold that was taken from mines. de Soto pushed forward but still there was no gold in sight. After crossing two rivers, the Indian youth confessed that he himself was lost. By this time weariness and hunger began settling in, and de Soto and a smaller party went out to find a road or other assistance but to no avail. De Soto then sends out another party of men who eventually come back with news of food in a nearby town. Some Indians were also captured shortly after this and brought back to the camp. When later asked to give directions for this town (Cofitachequi) they refused to cooperate and were burned alive.

One of de Soto's men, Gallegos, arrives the next day with a woman who is willing to give directions to Cofitachequi. De Soto then heads north to another river, which is believed today to be the Wateree River (Hudson 1997, 172). De Soto finally meets this ruler of Cofitachequi who does turn out to be a woman. She presents him with blankets, skins, and a long string of pearl beads. She makes provision for de Soto and his men so that they may lodge there. As de Soto and his men observed the various gifts, they also noticed that the land appeared to be fertile and produced a variety of trees; however, some nearby towns had been deserted and were in need of care. The queen of Cofitachequi explained that the people from these areas were victims of some type of plague, and that in turn had an impact on the quantity of available food. There was food for de Soto and his men to enjoy but the amount in the storehouses wasn't a surplus.

While De Soto continued his stay in Cofitachequi, he wondered if more pearls or riches were stored elsewhere. More pearls were brought out to de Soto, but the other riches only turned out to be copper and mica. Even the search for riches in the temples only yielded more disappointments. What appeared at first to be an emerald that was found in the temple, only turned out to be a green glass bead. Even the quality of the pearls from the temple wouldn't be as great once they were discolored by decaying flesh.

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De Soto's findings so far certainly did not compare to those found in the Incan empire. It was now time for him to decide if Cofitachequi was a place that he and his men should stay and begin establishing a Spanish settlement. Although the food supply wasn't overflowing, the amount could change if the planting season wasn't interrupted by plagues. In spite of the potential of Cofitachequi, de Soto decided that this wasn't the type or amount of wealth he expected to find and that his search would continue beyond this area, with the understanding that if nothing better was found beyond that point, he and his men could always return to Cofitachequi.

Unit 2: Settlement (European Exploration)

Hernando de Soto is known as the first European to explore the interior (inside) of South Carolina. Today you all will be reading an article on Hernando de Soto and his time at Cofitachequi, an Indian province in present-day South Carolina. As you read "Hernando de Soto Visits Cofitachequi" answer the following questions.

1. (Paragraph 1) What was DeSoto's motivation for coming to America?
2. (Paragraph 2) In 1539, Hernando de Soto began his movement into North America for what purpose? What areas in the southeast portion of North America did de Soto explore?
3. (Paragraph 3) Why did Hernando de Soto want to reach the land of Cofitachequi?
4. (Paragraph 3) Hernando de Soto's quest for gold required the assistance of local Natives; however, not all Natives cooperated with de Soto. What punishment did they receive from the hands of de Soto?
5. (Paragraph 4) In order to reach the Indian town of Cofitachequi, what river is it believed that Hernando de Soto crossed?

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6. (Paragraph 4) The leader of Cofitachequi, a woman, presented Hernando de Soto with a variety of gifts. What were the gifts she gave him?

7. (Paragraph 4) What observations did Hernando de Soto make about the land? What explanation did the leader of Cofitachequi provide?

8. (Paragraph 5) Hernando de Soto was determined to find more pearls and riches in Cofitachequi. He even went so far as to search the temples. What observation did de Soto make about the quality of pearls found in the temples?

9. (Paragraph 6) Why did Hernando de Soto decide NOT to stay in Cofitachequi?

10. Based on the account that you just read, how would you summarize Hernando de Soto's motives for exploration and his treatment of the Natives?