

## **New Insights into Spanish-Native Relations during the Luna Expedition, 1559-1561**

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### Abstract

Long-term research by the University of West Florida into the 1559-1561 expedition of Tristán de Luna y Arellano to Pensacola Bay has only accelerated following the 2015 discovery of Luna's terrestrial settlement and the 2016 discovery of a third shipwreck from Luna's fleet that wrecked just offshore. In addition to ongoing archaeological investigations in the field and lab, concurrent syntheses and analysis of both previously-known and several newly-discovered documentary sources relating to the expedition have provided important clues regarding Spanish-Native relations both in the Florida panhandle and southern Alabama. This paper presents preliminary analysis and insights from these documentary sources.

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The 1559-1560 expedition of don Tristán de Luna y Arellano to Florida was at the time the largest and most ambitious attempt by Spain to establish a colonial foothold on the mainland of southeastern North America.<sup>1</sup> Organized and staged out of New Spain, the Luna expedition's ultimate goal was to establish a Spanish colony on the lower Atlantic coast of present-day South Carolina at the Punta de Santa Elena. However, the plan adopted by Viceroy Luis de Velasco centered on the establishment of a first colony on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico at the bay named Ochuse at modern Pensacola, and the creation of an overland route to Santa Elena via the Native chiefdom of Coosa located west of the Appalachian highlands. In retrospect, this route was far longer and more difficult than it needed to be, but Spanish perceptions of the geography of interior North America were both limited and flawed, and in this case were based exclusively on the 1540 peregrinations of Hernando de Soto's army as they traversed the Appalachian summit on their way to Coosa from the central South Carolina chiefdom of Cofitachequi. Luna's planned route to the Atlantic Ocean was in fact precisely the route used by Soto's army two decades earlier, and in part for this very reason, two of Luna's company captains (Alvaro Nieto and Juan de Porras) were veterans of the Soto expedition, as were the royal factor Luis Daza and head bailiff Rodrigo Vazquez.<sup>2</sup>

Representing the sixth formal attempt to explore and colonize Florida, the Luna expedition built upon much of what had been learned in previous failed expeditions, including not just that of Soto, but also those of Pánfilo de Narváez in 1528 and Luis Cancer in 1549. The Cancer expedition in particular represented a tragic object lesson in the consequences of abusive treatment of the Florida Indians, since even though this unusual Dominican effort to initiate a purely non-military settlement was a purposeful Spanish attempt to correct the wrongs of the Soto expedition

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<sup>1</sup> Priestley 2010; Hudson et al. 1989; Worth 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Avellaneda 1990.

a decade previously, Cancer and several companions were still brutally murdered at Tampa Bay by Indians whose people had experienced first contact with both Narváez and Soto.<sup>3</sup> Planning for the Luna expedition included not just Velasco and Luna and presumably at least some of the Soto expedition veterans, and also the Dominican friars of New Spain to whom the accompanying missionary effort had been granted, as well as four Indian women who had been brought out of Florida by Spaniards, and who were brought along on the expedition as advisors.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most significant result of these consultations was the stipulation that the Spaniards on the Luna expedition should be fully supplied with food and other provisions so as not to provide either an excuse or need to solicit or take them from the Florida Indians, since their evangelization was one explicit goal of the entire expedition, and of course in order to avoid the hostilities that characterized previous expeditions. Moreover, Luna and his followers were explicitly directed to conduct themselves in a manner that would encourage and facilitate friendly relations with their Native neighbors, and there is good evidence that they generally acted in accordance with this dictate during the expedition.

For some 90 years, researchers attempting to reconstruct the details of how the Luna expedition actually unfolded have had relatively easy access to a wide range of documentation generated just before, during, and shortly after the Luna expedition within Herbert Priestley's 1928 publication of *The Luna Papers*, supplemented by the published eyewitness narrative originally published in 1596 by Agustín Dávila Padilla.<sup>5</sup> And based on these primary sources, the general impression that has always prevailed in recent decades regarding relations between Spaniards and Native Americans during the Luna expedition was one of either neutrality and

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<sup>3</sup> Worth 2014:23-28, 154-189.

<sup>4</sup> Feria 1559; Feria et al. 1559; Velasco 1558, 1559a; Yugoyen 1569.

<sup>5</sup> Priestley 2010; Dávila Padilla 1625.

passive withdrawal by native groups along the coast and interior coastal plain, or support and active cooperation in the case of the Coosa chiefdom in the deep interior.<sup>6</sup> In particular, available documents portray the coastal zone around Pensacola and Mobile Bays as being very sparsely inhabited by people whose diet was dominated by fish, shellfish, and wild plant foods only occasionally supplemented by corn agriculture, and these people are indicated to have been believed incapable of supporting the Spanish expeditionaries with surplus food, and likely to flee if pressured.<sup>7</sup> Groups of the interior coastal plain, however, were found to be more densely populated in farming villages along the Alabama River, but nonetheless withdrew from their settlements, taking their food and supplies with them and cutting down their crops in an apparent effort to implement a “scorched earth” policy against the Spanish interlopers.<sup>8</sup>

In recent months, however, new documentary accounts have come to light that provide important information regarding Spanish-Native relations during the Luna expedition, casting a somewhat different light on these interactions. The most significant new documents that have come to light are *probanzas*, or military service records, including a handful of transcripts of original correspondence and orders issued during the Luna expedition, as well as long lists of questions about specific details of the expedition, and corresponding answers by a number of other veterans who also were eyewitnesses. The two most important for our purposes here relate to one of Luna’s company captains, Baltasar de Sotelo, and to a Portuguese infantryman named Domingo Velloso de Bouro, who served as a pathfinder and guide during the overland treks between Ochuse

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<sup>6</sup> Hudson 1988; Hudson et al. 1989; Worth 2018; apart from the widely-accepted expedition routes and locations proposed by Hudson et al. 1989, see also alternative expedition routes and locations including Jenkins and Sheldon 2016, and substantially different reconstructions proposed by Curren et al. 1989 and Galloway 1995:143-160.

<sup>7</sup> Velasco 1560.

<sup>8</sup> Velasco 1560; Dávila Padilla 1625:199-200; Married Soldiers 1560; Acuña et al. 1560; Cerón Saavedra 1560; Montalván 1561; Velázquez 1561; Sánchez Serrano 1561.

and Nanipacana.<sup>9</sup> Among many other things, the transcripts of internal documentation and accompanying testimony in these service records reveals that the native inhabitants of the coast and coastal plain regions of Alabama and the Florida panhandle were not as neutral or passive toward the Spanish as previously believed, and that they apparently mounted active military resistance to the members of the Luna expedition on several occasions. Importantly, this new evidence may ultimately prove pivotal in understanding the extent to which the recently-discovered main Luna settlement at Ochuse on Pensacola Bay remained largely isolated from surrounding native populations throughout most of the expedition, which in turn may explain the strategies that they ultimately relied upon for survival after the 1559 hurricane destroyed most of their provisions, as I will discuss below.

One revelation based on recently-identified documents is the fact that Luna's soldiers encountered at least some armed resistance along the coast from the very beginning of the expedition. Domingo Velloso reported that he accompanied Captain Alvaro Nieto in the frigate that made the initial reconnaissance of Pensacola Bay while the rest of Luna's fleet was still in Mobile Bay to the west, and that during their explorations he was forced to defend himself from Indians after having disembarked in water up to his chest and neck.<sup>10</sup> His question detailed that "the Indians who were in the said port...defended against the entrance and discovery that they were going to do in the said frigate," and this account was confirmed by three other eyewitnesses, including Captain Nieto himself. Not surprisingly, however, Luna's glowing initial report to Viceroy Luis de Velasco did not mention such resistance, specifically asserting to the contrary that

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<sup>9</sup> Sotelo 1566; Velloso de Bouro 1582. I am extremely grateful to Michael Francis (USFSP) for sharing the Velloso *probanza* with me.

<sup>10</sup> Velloso de Bouro 1582.

“there was no resistance” by the “few Indians” who appear along the coast, noting only “a few Indian camps that seem to be of fishermen” and just “one field of corn.”<sup>11</sup>

Once the site for the settlement to be known as Santa María de Ochuse had been chosen, situated on a high, level bluff at Emanuel Point overlooking the heart of Pensacola Bay, some 1,500 soldiers, family members, servants, slaves, and a contingent of Aztec Indians disembarked, and the ships were gradually offloaded over the next few weeks. Shortly thereafter, probably in the first week of September, Luna dispatched his first exploratory detachment north into the

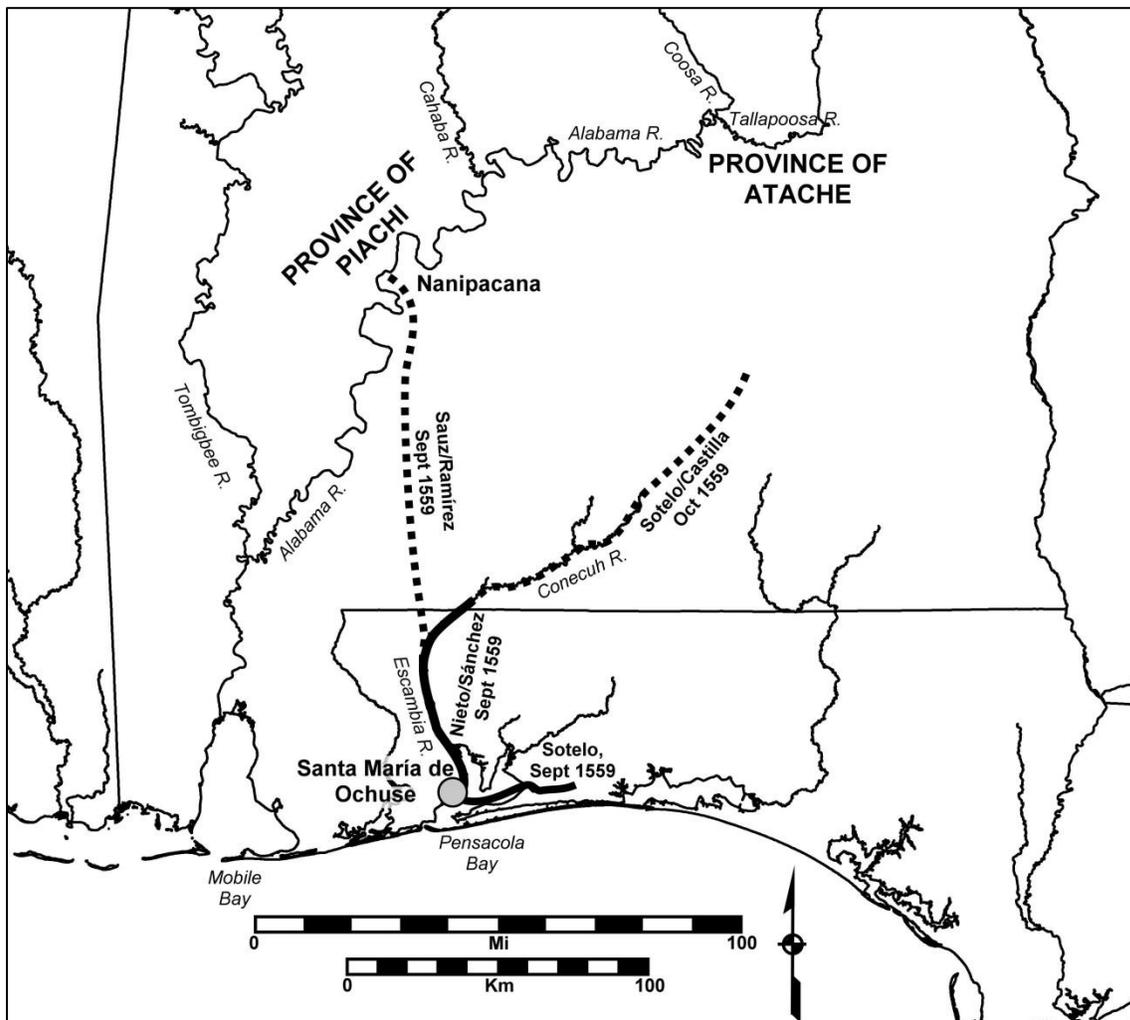


Figure 1: Exploratory Routes, 1559

<sup>11</sup> Velasco 1559b.

interior (Figure 1). Two companies of 50 men were sent to reconnoiter the land and gather intelligence regarding the route to Coosa, their intermediate goal before pushing east to Santa Elena on the Atlantic coast. One company was led by Captain Nieto, who 19 years before had traversed the interior north of Gulf coast, which the Indians at the time reported was up to 40 leagues to the south.<sup>12</sup> Soto's men had erroneously inferred in 1540 that the river on which the chiefdom of Tascalusa was located emptied into the Bay of Ochuse,<sup>13</sup> and thus when Luna arrived, he was initially operating on the assumption that the Escambia River that empties into Pensacola Bay led directly to Tascalusa and ultimately upriver to Coosa.

This first expedition inland is described in several documents, revealing that the Spaniards spent nearly three weeks with only limited rations in exploring some 20 leagues inland by water and land, finding only a single native village along the river at ten leagues from the port.<sup>14</sup> The new documentation reveals the name of this village to be Halahala, and although details of the encounter are vague, there seems to have been some sort of confrontation there, and a number of Indian men and women were briefly taken prisoner. Later correspondence from the Viceroy speaks of Luna's soldiers having exercised restraint, "firing some arquebuses in the air in response to the arrows from the Indians," and although the Viceroy praised their prudence, he nonetheless affirmed that the Spaniards could defend themselves more directly if necessary "so that they fear more than just the sound."<sup>15</sup> The Viceroy also complained that lead Dominican fray Pedro de Feria had insisted on releasing the prisoners, which meant the Spaniards obtained neither food nor substantial information about the region. One Indian woman named Lacsohe was, however, brought back as their first guide, a fact that evidently proved useful for future explorations.

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<sup>12</sup> Hernández de Biedma 1544:6r.

<sup>13</sup> Hernández de Biedma 1544:5r.

<sup>14</sup> Dávila Padilla 1625:193-194; Velázquez 1561; Velasco 1559c; Velloso de Bouro 1582.

<sup>15</sup> Velasco 1559c.

Before this first entrada returned, on September 19 a massive hurricane destroyed most of the fleet at anchor, including most of their provisions, leaving the remaining inhabitants in the precarious position of having too many people and precious little food. Within days of the hurricane, Luna dispatched some 200 men under four captains back into the interior in search of native populations and food, since he already suspected that he would have to move inland in order to feed his people. One new document reveals that this larger detachment brought two Indian women as guides, named Juana and Cocho, apparently two of the four Indian women who had been brought out during the Soto expedition and returned with Luna. Another of the newly-discovered documents, however, is a concurrent order issued by Luna, directing Captain Sotelo to take a detachment of 20 men in a small boat and travel east along a river where Indians had been seen previously (most likely up the East Bay River), ordering him to make contact with any Indians, offering them gifts and soliciting a guide while attempting to make them understand that Luna “is coming in the name of His Majesty with all this army so that they could be preached to and given to understand the Holy Gospel, and to have them as brothers and friends...and to help them and favor them as vassals and subjects of the King don Phelipe, our lord,” further insisting that Sotelo achieve everything “without division or hostility with them, nor doing any evil or damage to them.”<sup>16</sup>

There is evidence that at least something went awry with Native relations during early October, for on October 7th the possessions of a soldier named Antón Guillén were auctioned off in Ochuse, and he was specifically reported to have been killed by Indians. Even though he was a member of one of the companies that had been sent northward, the circumstances of his death are not described. No word actually reached Luna at Pensacola Bay about the disposition of that 200-

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<sup>16</sup> Sotelo 1566.

man detachment until early November, but in the meantime, on October 16 he sent Captain Sotelo and Captain Alonso de Castilla with 50 men back upriver along the Escambia, specifically describing it as “the river that is at the end of this bay, which is [the river] of Ulibali,” clearly referring to the Coosa town of Ulibahali visited by the Soto expedition.<sup>17</sup> The newly-discovered order indicates that this expedition was to take the interpreter/guide Lacsohe and travel in a frigate and shallop as far as 80 to 100 leagues upriver, asking the inhabitants of any towns he might discover “if Coosa is near that river, and if that province can be reached by way of it.” Subsequent testimony indicates that Sotelo spent 24 days on the expedition, abandoning the frigate along the way and proceeding upriver with 15 men in the shallop. Even though he was able to return with “four or five Indian guides,” later accounts described the river as “winding and running swiftly, and the land not well populated.”<sup>18</sup> Luna’s order, however, included mention of a message to be buried under a tree on the riverbank where the earlier 200-man detachment had departed from the river, directing Captain Castilla to take his own men and as much food as they could carry and follow the path to join with the others wherever they might be.

This earlier detachment was later revealed to have traversed the uplands between the Escambia and Alabama Rivers and located a province later known to the Spanish as the province of Piachi, the largest village of which was called Nanipacana, containing some 80 houses.<sup>19</sup> The inhabitants of this village initially fled across the river as the Spaniards approached, evidently taking much of their food with them, but with enticements of glass beads and ribbons and other gifts, the Spaniards were able to establish communications and learned that the village had been visited previously by Spaniards, presumably during the Soto expedition, but had declined since

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<sup>17</sup> Sotelo 1566.

<sup>18</sup> Velasco 1560.

<sup>19</sup> Dávila Padilla 1625:199-201; Velasco 1560.

that time. The 200-man detachment settled into the abandoned town, and relations were amicable for a time. A party of 20 men was sent back to Ochuse in November to report the good news, revealing finally that the river that descended from Coosa actually emptied into Mobile Bay, not Pensacola Bay. However, even after the first relief fleet of two ships carrying supplies arrived at Ochuse in December (Bolte 2017), Luna staunchly refused the advice of his officers to carry out the planned relocation inland until provisions once again began to dwindle by the following February of 1560, at which point he divided the camp and sent one group overland following the

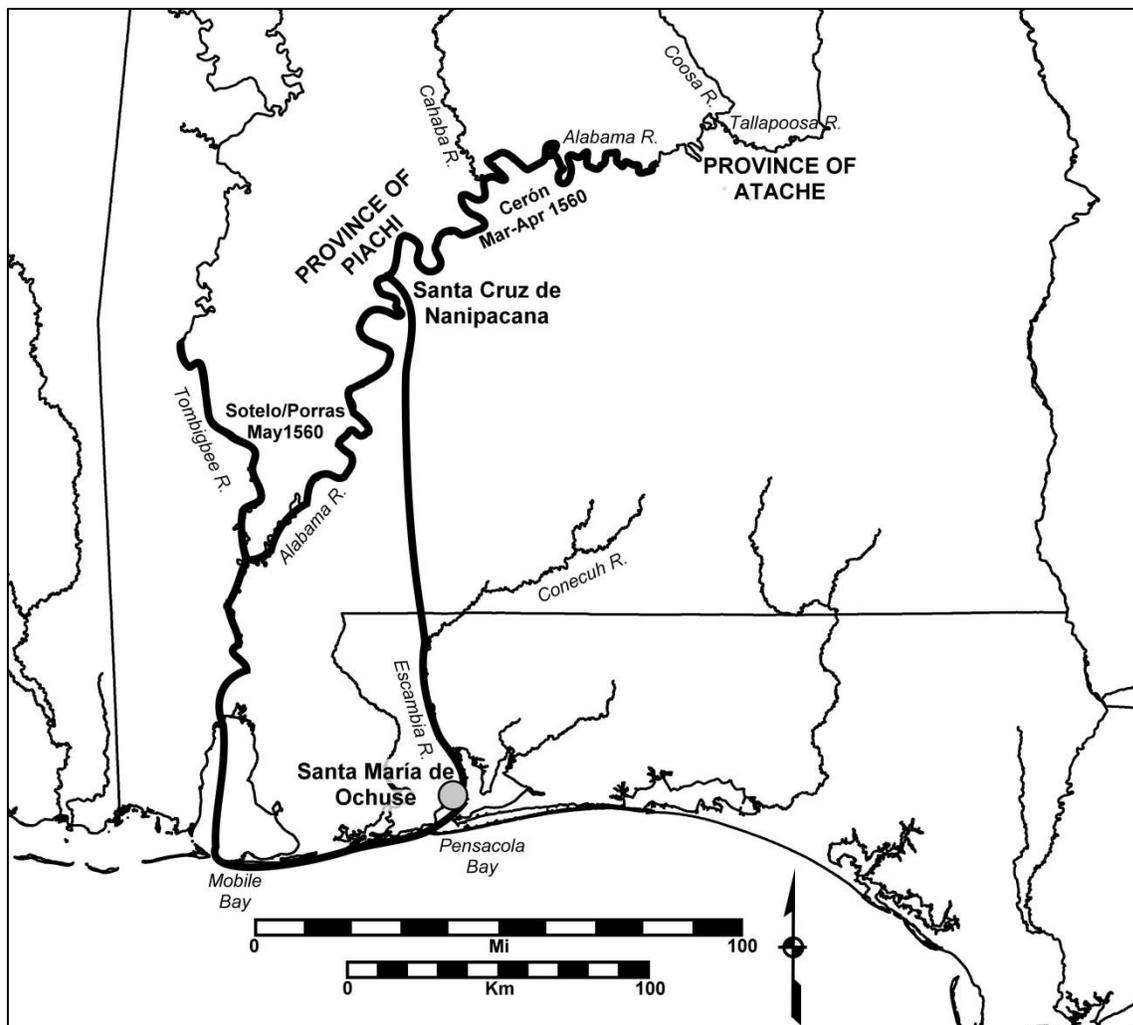


Figure 2: Exploratory Routes, 1560

trail blazed the previous fall, and the rest of the people and supplies by sea and upriver from Mobile Bay using two brigantines his men had constructed in Ochuse from the wreckage of the fleet (Figure 2).

The new documentary sources provide extensive detail regarding the process by which the overland road between Ochuse and Nanipacana was constructed and subsequently used both during the initial move of the colonists and as a route for communication between the two Spanish settlements between February and June of 1560, but for our purposes here, I will focus only on what they tell us about Spanish-Native relations and how they deteriorated during this period. Previous documentation has always been clear on the fact that by the time Luna's colonists arrived in what was christened Santa Cruz de Nanipacana, its inhabitants had withdrawn from the other side of the river, taking their provisions with them and leaving the Spaniards once again without food, a problem that was substantially magnified by the arrival sometime in March of a thousand new mouths to feed.<sup>20</sup> The two 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 new documents also detail that the vessels were once again dispatched, 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.<sup>21</sup> After providing supplies to a small Spanish detachment stationed under Captain Diego Telléz at the mouth of the river on Mobile Bay, they proceeded to the confluence of the Tombigbee River (called the Tomé) and ascending it in search of provisions hidden in the woods and swamps by the Indians. They finally returned to

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<sup>20</sup> Dávila Padilla 1625:199-200; Montalbán 1561.

<sup>21</sup> Sotelo 1566.

Nanipacana six weeks after departing, bearing corn and beans and acorns and other supplies, even specifically mentioning Indian pots.

In mid-April, Luna made a bold move by dispatching a group of some 200 soldiers under Sergeant Major Mateo del Sauz to travel overland upriver and northward to reach the fabled province of Coosa itself. Although the story of this journey is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that this detachment was only able to send a small quantity of food downriver to the main colony at Nanipacana, and thus the starvation only worsened. What the new documents reveal for the first time, however, is that at some point late during the Spaniards' stay at Nanipacana, the Native inhabitants of the region, who had withdrawn from their villages and had been attempting to keep the Spaniards from finding their food stores, finally turned to open hostility, and were described as "risen up" by the Spaniards.<sup>22</sup> Portuguese pathfinder Domingo Velloso and his witnesses detailed a treacherous journey to bring a message to Nanipacana undertaken by only 8 soldiers from Ochuse, since the rest were terrified of being attacked by Indians along the way. Several reportedly said they would rather be hanged than make the journey, and of the 8 that started the trip, one fled outright, and another cut himself in the leg with a knife in order to return back to Pensacola Bay. The remaining six soldiers barely escaped an ambush by Indian warriors as they passed near the provincial capital at Piachi, but arrived in Nanipacana only to find the settlement already in the process of being abandoned. Testimony in the Sotelo *probanza* also describes that even as the Spaniards organized the retreat downriver, Captain Sotelo took a shallop with ten men upriver in search of some news from the 200-man detachment in Coosa, but they were ambushed not far upriver and four men were wounded before

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<sup>22</sup> Sotelo 1566; Velloso 1582.

they abandoned the effort and returned.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as the final flotilla of vessels descended the Alabama River from Nanipacana during late June, Indians were reported to have attacked them from the riverbanks, shooting arrows at the boats and rafts as they passed, a scene somewhat reminiscent of some of the tactics employed by Indian warriors during the 1543 passage of the Soto expedition through the Quiqualtam chiefdom along the Mississippi River.<sup>24</sup> At some point during all these hostilities Captain Sotelo and his witnesses confirmed that a black slave of his was killed by the Indians, and three of his horses as well.<sup>25</sup>

Even after the Spaniards had returned to their original settlement at Ochuse on Pensacola Bay, and had finally received word of the survival of the Coosa detachment in the deep interior, when a detachment of 25 soldiers was sent back to Coosa in early September to recall the soldiers back to the coast, pathfinder Domingo Velloso was seriously wounded with an arrow that traversed his thigh during yet another ambush in a village called Talpa, described as 10 leagues upriver from Nanipacana.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding his wound, he continued the journey to Coosa and accompanied the withdrawal of all remaining soldiers to Ochuse by early November, having traveled several hundred leagues despite his injury. Once the remaining Spaniards had completely withdrawn from the interior, less than 500 soldiers and colonists consolidated in the settlement overlooking Pensacola Bay. Their number was reduced by several hundred with the arrival of the third relief fleet in December, which evacuated the Aztecs and presumably others, and by April of 1561, most of the less than 200 still left at Ochuse sailed to Havana with Luna's replacement Angel de Villafañe, leaving only a detachment of 50-60 men to guard Pensacola Bay for the next four months before they were withdrawn in August. There is presently no evidence for any

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<sup>23</sup> Sotelo 1566.

<sup>24</sup> Hudson 1997:390-394.

<sup>25</sup> Sotelo 1566.

<sup>26</sup> Velloso de Bouro 1582.

additional contact or interaction with the hostile Indians of the region to the north during this period.

So exactly how does this revised portrait of Spanish-Native relations gained from the extensive new information in these recently-discovered documents assist us with regard to understanding the archaeological site of Luna's main settlement at Ochuse on Pensacola Bay? For one thing, it tells us that the Luna settlers had more to be afraid of than just starvation. There is now clear evidence that not only were their Native neighbors reluctant to interact with the Spaniards and provide them food, they were in many instances openly hostile. They seem to have offered active resistance to the Spanish literally from first contact along the coast and nearby rivers, and starting no later than the late spring or early summer of 1560, the entire inland region seems to have risen up, staging a number of small-scale ambushes against isolated parties of Spaniards both on land and during riverine travel. As noted by the expedition's royal officials at the time, "when they want, they appear and shoot four arrows at us, and upon searching for them, not an Indian appears."<sup>27</sup> This was by no means conquest or siege warfare, but the fact that small groups of Spaniards were apparently unable to travel far from the Luna settlement during at least the last half of the two-year expedition must have seriously limited their ability to obtain local food. Despite the fact that yet another newly-discovered document reveals that Captain Pedro de Acuña routinely led hunting parties of three or four men that obtained deer meat for the settlement, and made nets to obtain fish,<sup>28</sup> the fact that the Luna settlement was surrounded by a region with actively hostile Indians definitely influences our understanding of how its inhabitants survived while living on Pensacola Bay, and how dependent they therefore must have been on the sporadic relief fleets sent from New Spain. As we continue our archaeological investigation of the traces of

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<sup>27</sup> Velázquez Rodríguez and Pérez 1560.

<sup>28</sup> Acuña 1562.

this first multi-year European settlement in the continental United States, we hope to learn more about how this apparent failure in Spanish-Native relations affected the daily lives of its struggling inhabitants.

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