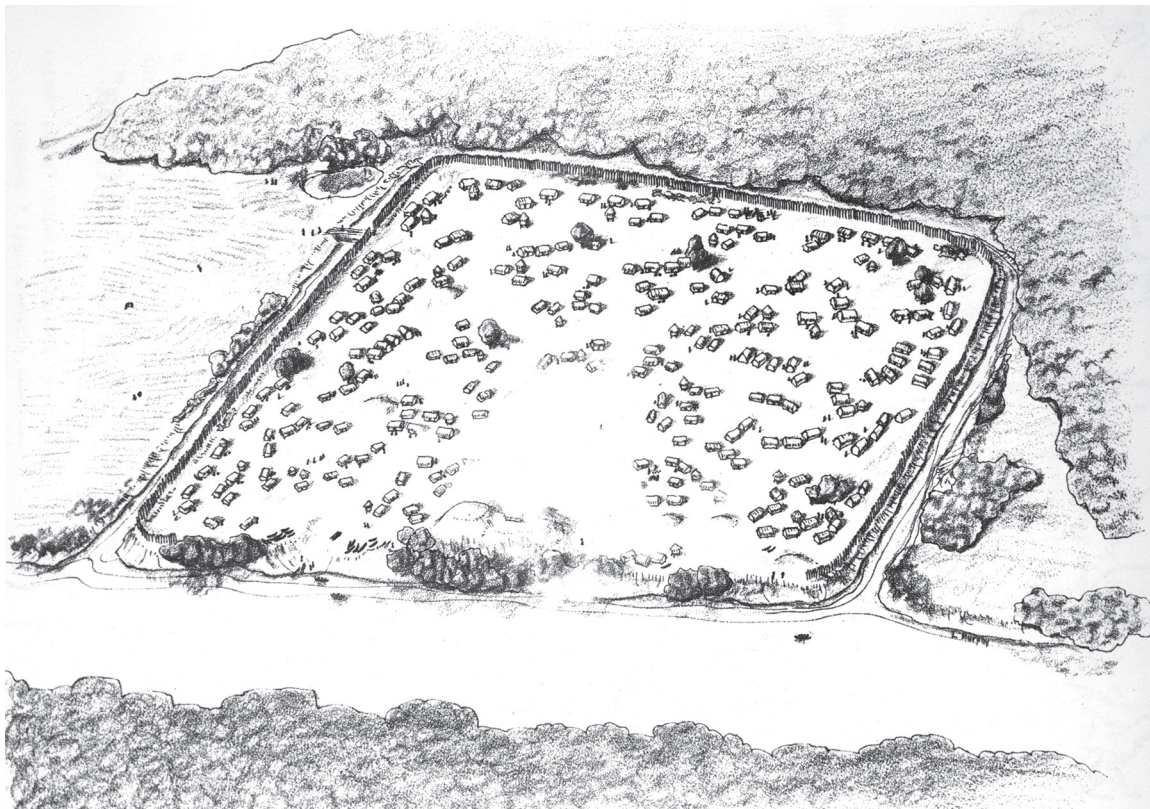


The Parkin Site

Hernando de Soto in Cross County, Arkansas

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Artist's reconstruction of how the Parkin site may have looked, ca. A.D. 1500. Drawing by Linda Murphy.

Archeologists and historians have long been interested in the route of the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto, who traveled through the southern United States for four years in the middle 1500s. After landing in Florida with a force of around 600 soldiers, the expedition traveled over a large area in the southern states, eventually reaching Arkansas in 1541.

Four chronicles of the expedition survive, and they include interesting details about the Native American groups encountered by the Spaniards. These accounts are incomplete, and researchers disagree about the exact route of the expedition. We do know

that the expedition crossed the Mississippi River in June of 1541. The crossing place has long been debated, and several possible locations have been proposed.

Archeology: A Tool for Learning about Arkansas's Past

Archeology can be used to fill in some of the gaps in the chronicles. Research in other southern states, especially Florida, has demonstrated that archeology can locate clues that help us understand where the expedition traveled and what effects the Spanish presence had on the Native American inhabitants.



Very little evidence of the de Soto expedition has been found in Arkansas. The most convincing evidence so far is at the Parkin site, an Indian village site near the present town of Parkin, beside the St. Francis River. It is now located in Parkin Archeological State Park. In the 1960s, a small bead made of several layers of glass was found at the site. We know from archeological work on other de



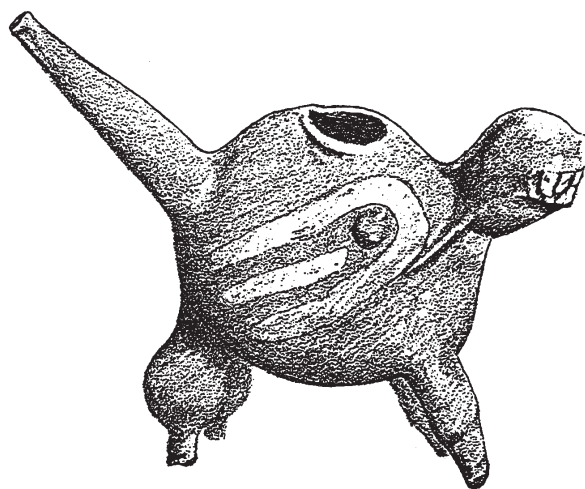
Clarksdale bell from Parkin.

logical work on other de Soto contact sites that this type of bead (called a chevron bead) was carried by the expedition for giving or trading to the Indians. In addition, a brass bell was dug up at Parkin in the 1960s. A little over an inch in diameter, it was an example of what is sometimes

called a hawk bell or a Clarksdale bell. Bells of this distinctive style were also carried by the expedition.

Excavations by the Arkansas Archeological Survey in the 1990s uncovered more artifacts associated with the expedition. Two fragments of Clarksdale bells were discovered, and two lead shot from Spanish matchlock rifles were found. One of these was .61 caliber (the other was too damaged to measure). An intriguing artifact that *might* have come from the de Soto expedition is a bronze coin. It had been hammered and abraded by someone, so no designs or writing are visible. While it may have been a Spanish coin, its weight reveals that it is more likely an Indian Head Cent. It was found in a part of the site that was disturbed in recent times; people were living on the Parkin site in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Can these few artifacts demonstrate that the de Soto expedition actually visited the Parkin site? By themselves, the answer is no, because the artifacts could have been brought to the site by Indian traders. On the other hand, when we combine the presence of these objects with information in the expedition accounts, it may be possible to identify the Parkin site as one of the native towns mentioned by the writers.



An effigy pot (probably a dog) from the 1500s.

Hernando de Soto and the Casqui Indians

After crossing the Mississippi River in June of 1541, the expedition passed through an Indian province called Aquixo. The residents of this region told de Soto of a great chief named Casqui, who lived in a town three days' journey from there. The expedition traveled to Casqui's town, passing through many smaller towns that were ruled by him.

Upon arriving, Casqui himself greeted the Spaniards, and friendly relations were established. After both leaders exchanged gifts, the Spaniards stayed two nights outside the town before proceeding on their journey. While at the town of Casqui, Catholic priests who accompanied the expedition preached to the residents and had a large cross built from two tall trees. This was erected on top of a large mound at the village, the same mound where Casqui's house was located. This was the first Christian religious service in what would become Arkansas.

Parkin, Capital of the Casqui Province?

Archeologists believe that the Parkin archeological site is the main town of the Casqui province, where the chief resided. The native towns in the area



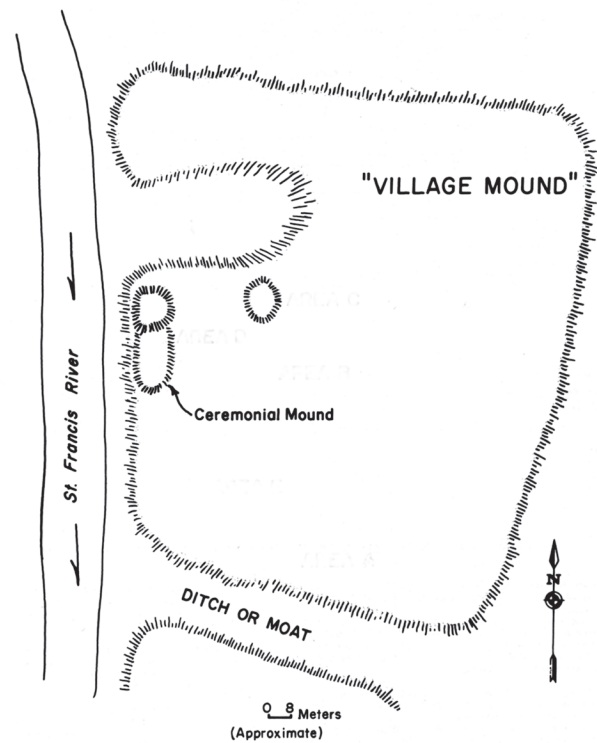
are described in the chronicles as being surrounded by moats and log palisade walls. The Parkin site is surrounded by a moat or ditch, which is still visible today. Excavations in the 1990s located portions of a defensive log palisade or stockade wall at the edge of the village. The site is located on the east bank of the St. Francis River, and a large earthen mound is situated near the river. All of these features of the site agree with the descriptions of Casqui in the expedition accounts.

The Spanish artifacts mentioned earlier support the identification of the Parkin site as the Indian town of Casqui. Similar archeological sites in the region were probably villages under the rule of the chief, Casqui. Unfortunately, most of these other towns have been destroyed or so badly disturbed by recent farming that little information about the original residents is left intact.

Parkin Archeological State Park

The Parkin site is preserved and is now part of Parkin Archeological State Park. Many researchers believe that Parkin is the most intact archeological site of this period in all of northeast Arkansas. An ongoing program of archeological research is being conducted at the site by the Arkansas Archeological Survey, and visitors can see the results of careful excavations and laboratory research as we learn more about the original residents of this part of Arkansas.

Not only does archeology promise to tell us more about the de Soto expedition, but we will be able to learn much about the everyday life of the Casqui people. Since Arkansas Archeological Survey archeologists began working at Parkin in 1990, we have learned a great deal about the kinds of houses they built and the foods that they ate. Painstaking excavations of house floors and trash pits, and analysis of animal bones and plant remains by specialists have taught us much about the day-to-day existence of the original Arkansans at the time of their first contact with Europeans. One ultimate aim of research at the site is to learn the fate of the Casqui people after the de Soto expedition left the area.



Sketch map of the Parkin site.



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Copper gorget (neck ornament) engraved with spider design found at the Parkin site in the 1960s. Private collection. This drawing is in the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

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