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ARE THERE DE SOTO RELICS IN FLORIDA?

by JOHN M. GOGGIN

The adventurous trip of Hernando de Soto from his debarkation on the Florida Gulf Coast in 1539, through thousands of miles of wilderness, to his death on the Mississippi River in 1542 has been the subject of many fictional and scholarly studies. Despite the careful attention given to his journey many questions arise in the minds of the students. One is the puzzling problem of why no material objects have ever been found which can be derived from the De Soto expedition. It is hard to believe a party of more than five hundred well-equipped men would leave or lose nothing along their line of march.

It seems most probable that many objects were lost or left behind; perhaps some have been found, but none are recognized. Until recently neither archeologists nor historians have had more than casual interest in Spanish objects found in the Southeast. In general, a European origin is recognized for them and one of two alternatives accepted. Either they are dated early to suit a writer's interpretation of historical events in the area, or it is thought that such things cannot be precisely dated and thus are of little value in historical studies.

However, recent work in the field of Spanish ceramics has indicated how restricted certain art forms are in time, thus being useful for dating. Work of this writer has led into other fields of Spanish material culture; and here, too, significant temporal patterns in styles can be seen. There is reason to believe that further study will enable us to recognize most objects dating from the various Spanish periods, and thus to obtain clues to various of the early explorers as well as later Spanish occupation.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This study represents a contribution from the research program of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Florida, aided by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. I am grateful to Stephen V. Grancsay, Curator of Arms and Armor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for examining one of the specimens discussed and to the various institutions where I examined material considered in this paper.

As indicative of the situation we can discuss in this paper a number of objects from Florida (or its borders) of Spanish and Portuguese origin, which were found in or near Indian sites, and which can be dated from the first half or middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it will be seen that the most significant concentration of these objects is in the Tampa Bay area. This is one of the regions often associated with the landings of Hernando de Soto and Narvaez. While there is no direct evidence that these objects can be associated with either exploring party, they do represent the first identified Iberian objects from that region which date from the general period of De Soto's landing.

#### SPANISH POTTERY

The writer has been devoting a part of his research time in recent years to the problem of identifying and dating Spanish and Spanish Colonial ceramics. Majolica, or tin-enameled earthenware, has proven most suitable for analysis. As a result it is now possible to identify most of the forms, and place each within various, but relatively short, periods of time.

A single, but good sized, sherd of a very distinct type of majolica called Yayal Blue on White was washed out on the beach at the Safety Harbor site, north of St. Petersburg, on Old Tampa Bay.<sup>3</sup> Studies in the West Indies indicate that this type appeared by 1500 and reached its maximum popularity in the middle of the sixteenth century (Goggin, n.d. *see Bibliography, post*).

Nearby at the Seven Oaks site four fragments of the early

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2. Excepted from this discussion are various copper, silver, and gold ornaments found in South Florida Indian mounds. Some are of European origin but are not datable as yet; other, certainly pre-1500 in date, were made by Mexican, Colombian, Ecuadorian or other Indians, and represent Spanish loot lost from the treasure fleets in wrecks on the Florida coast. Glass beads, too, are omitted from this discussion although many in Florida must date from a very early date. They will be considered in another paper.

3. Found by Glenn Allen and now at the University Museum, Florida State University.

variety of Columbia Plain majolica were found (Florida State Museum, catalog nos. 2989, 2991).<sup>4</sup> These again appear to be typical of the first half and middle of the sixteenth century.

Elsewhere in Florida majolica of the sixteenth century is rare. Known examples include one, early variety, Columbia Plain fragment from Upper Matecumbe Key (Goggin and Sommer, 1949, Pl. 1, E), while one fragment of Isabela Polychrome came from St. Augustine,<sup>5</sup> and a possible sherd of the same type comes from Mound Key in Lee County.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these examples there are numerous other fragments of Spanish pottery from the State; however, all that can be dated range from the end of the sixteenth century to later.

#### COINS

A University of Florida student, Robert Elder, found a small copper coin washed out on the beach at the Safety Harbor site. It has been identified as a *ceitel* of John III of Portugal who reigned from 1521 to 1577.<sup>7</sup>

Andrew Douglass (1885:143) found five silver Spanish coins in the Spruce Creek Mound (Vo 99) along with typical South Florida type ornaments.<sup>8</sup> He comments that these were stamped with a 4. This material apparently went to the U. S. National Museum. At the present time, although other material is there, the coins seem to have been misplaced, but the catalog does refer to at least one of them (U.S.N.M. 11003) as a pistareen (2 reales) of Carlos and Joana who reigned from 1516 to 1556.

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4. The Seven Oaks Site (Pi 7) represented in the Florida State Museum by an extensive collection of Indian and Spanish objects, mainly glass beads, was apparently a burial mound about 1/2 mile southwest of Safety Harbor. The site has not been relocated.
  5. Material excavated by the St. Augustine Restoration project and now in the collections of the St. Augustine Historical Society. It is in mixed association with material dating into the 19th century or later.
  6. Anthropology Laboratory, University of Florida. Other historical material may be contemporaneous, but some is certainly much later.
  7. Through the kindness of Albert Mauncy and Harley Freeman the coin was sent to the American Numismatic Society and identified by its curator, Sydney P. Noe.
  8. These include copper and silver disks (Goggin, 1952, Pl. 8, A-B, E, I). An unusual European object is an iron horseshoe.

The others may have included a 4 real coin of the same rulers for they were sometimes marked with a very large and distinct Arabic 4.

Another coin of the same general period was found by Clarence B. Moore in the Bear Point Mound, Baldwin County, Alabama, just across from Florida. Of several found he remarks that one was a “. . . silver coin of Spanish-Mexico, which, we were informed at the United States mint, was struck by Charles and Joanna between 1521 and 1550” (Moore, 1901:426).

The last coin to mention is a 1/2 real silver coin of Ferdinand and Isabela (1474-1504) found in St. Augustine while construction excavations were being made some years ago in the Indian village site area at the Fountain of Youth Park. The reign of these monarchs predates any known Spanish occupation in Florida but it easily could have been lost by later peoples.<sup>9</sup> Moreover coins of this kind were also minted by later rulers along with their own distinctive forms.

Later coins are not uncommon in Indian and other sites. They are not significant to the discussion here.

#### BRONZE HINGE

An unique openwork bronze object is in the collection from the Seven Oaks site (Florida State Museum, 2881). It appears to have been cast and subsequently the surface was incised to make certain of the junctions of the design stand out. At one end a square notch seems to have been a place of attachment, as reinforcements on the opposite side are pierced and a pin or stud protrudes opposite the hole (Fig. 1, A-B). Overall width is 3 1/4 inches, length is almost 3 inches, with a general thickness of about 1/16 inch.

Objects of this kind have not been reported from any other Florida, Southwestern, or Mexican archeological sites. However,

9. For example at La Vega Vieja, Dominican Republic (1514-1562), coins of Carlos and Juana are most common; but many examples of Ferdinand and Isabela coins, and even those of earlier rulers, are found.

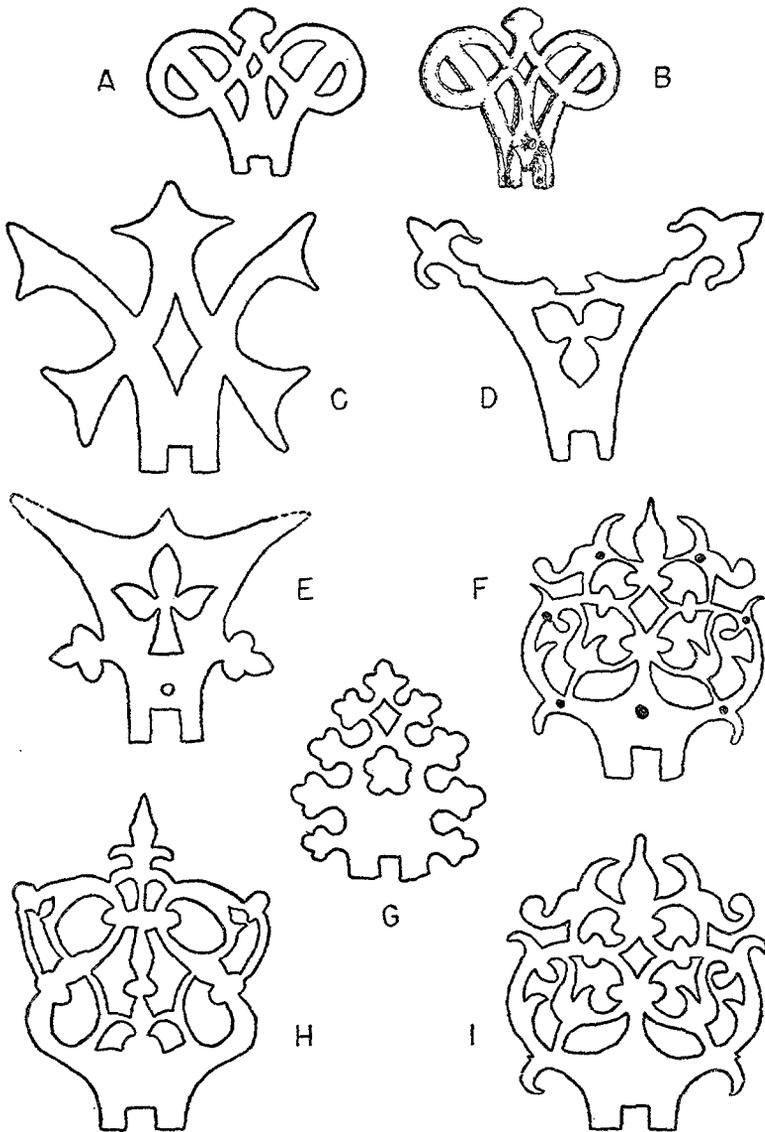


Figure 1. - Bronze hinges from Florida and de West Indies. A-B, Seven Oaks Mound, Florida; C and I, Caparra, Puerto Rico; D-H, La Vega Vieja, Dominican Republic. (Scale one-third.)

several examples are known from the West Indies. These can be described to show their similarity to the Florida specimen because they may be used to date our example.

Two similar specimens, apparently of bronze, were excavated at the site of Caparra in Puerto Rico. The first has a simple design "suggesting a monogram, the ends of whose letters are terminated in the gross caligraphic style varying from the manuscript style of the 16th century" (De Hostos, 1938:98). It measures  $4 \frac{11}{16}$  inches in greatest width (Fig. 1, C).

The second Caparra specimen (Fig. 1, I) has been described as "a typical design of the Plateresque style of the Spanish Renaissance" (De Hostos, 1938:98).<sup>10</sup> It measures  $4 \frac{3}{4}$  inches long and  $4 \frac{3}{16}$  inches wide.

A third group of five complete and two fragmentary specimens comes from La Vega Vieja, Dominican Republic.<sup>11</sup> The first of these is of special interest in two respects. It is the most complete of all specimens and is very similar to example no. 2 from Caparra. At first glance they appear identical, but a more careful study shows very minor differences (Fig. 1, F). It measures  $4 \frac{3}{8}$  inches long,  $3 \frac{13}{16}$  inches wide, and  $\frac{1}{16}$  to  $\frac{3}{32}$  inches thick. Cast in the back, behind the basal opening, is a heavy stud, and six pointed pins variously distributed. These are bent but measure over  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in length. Swung on an iron pin across the basal opening is a bar.

Specimen two, from the same site, is another in a Renaissance style, although not so elaborate in detail (Fig. 1, G). It measures  $3 \frac{1}{2}$  inches long,  $3 \frac{1}{8}$  inches wide and  $\frac{3}{32}$  inches thick. It has the usual basal opening with the side pieces, stud ( $\frac{3}{4}$  inches long), and three pointed pins almost 1 inch in length.

10. This and other quotations from De Hostos (1938) are translated. These specimens were seen in the Museum of Anthropology, University of Puerto Rico.

11. The first three specimens are on exhibit in the Museo Nacional, Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic. They were studied there by the writer through the courtesy of Ing. Emil De Boyrie Moya and Prof. Felix Maria Perez Sanchez.

The third specimen is simple in design although in the same style. Three points are bent or broken off but have been indicated in the drawing (Fig. 1, E). Overall length is  $4 \frac{7}{8}$  inches, width (restored)  $4 \frac{7}{8}$  inches, and the approximate thickness is  $\frac{3}{32}$  inches. The basal opening is somewhat wider than usual and the back has only a stud (approximately  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches long) with no pointed pins.

The fourth example from La Vega Vieja, like the first, is an elaborate openwork piece in a Renaissance style (Fig. 1, H).<sup>12</sup> It measures  $5 \frac{5}{8}$  inches long,  $4 \frac{1}{8}$  inches wide, and averages about  $\frac{3}{32}$  inch in thickness. It has the usual stud and five long (now bent) pins on the back.

Specimen five (Fig. 1, D) is one in the simpler style, like the first Caparra specimen and the third La Vega Vieja example. It is  $4 \frac{1}{4}$  inches long,  $5 \frac{3}{4}$  inches wide, and  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch thick. One stud and two pins are on the back.

Of the two fragmentary specimens, one is identical with specimen four while the other, in the same style, is different from any seen.

Although the functions of the objects we have been discussing are not quite certain we will call them hinges. Stephen V. Grancsay, who has examined one of the specimens suggests their use on leather covered chests.<sup>13</sup> Other suggested uses were as harness trappings. Several show evidence of attachment, presumably to leather by means of pointed pins or rivets on the back. These are now bent over. All have a slot which served to connect with another part but only one example has the connecting piece and it is not clear how this functioned. No example of the other half of the unit has been found unless it was another similar or identical piece.

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12. The fourth and fifth specimens and the two fragmentary pieces from La Vega Vieja are in the Anthropology Laboratory, University of Florida.

13. Communication, Nov. 10, 1953.

The general characteristics of all specimens may be summarized as follows. The metal appears in all cases to be brass or more likely bronze, and the objects are cast. The pierced work design was probably formed in the casting process but the edges have been finished. An open slot at the base served to attach this to another half (?) or other piece. A heavy stud just behind the opening and several pointed pins, variously distributed, were cast on the back of the object. Overall sizes range from approximately 3 to over 5 inches. The Seven Oaks specimen is distinct in having the surface incising or engraving. It may be later work of Indians.

#### DATING THE HINGES

Since the hinges considered bear no marks, dates, or inscriptions which can be used for dating, they must be examined in terms of their associations and then they should be dated if possible.

Caparra lies about 6 kilometers from San Juan on the road to Bayamon, Puerto Rico. Excavations made here in 1935 by Adolfo de Hostos (1938) yielded considerable material and the remains of a major edifice. This has been identified by De Hostos as the house of Juan Ponce de Leon and the site of the first settlement on the island of Puerto Rico. It is believed to have been founded in 1508 and abandoned sometime after 1521 when the present city of San Juan was founded. Archeological materials, with the exception of superficial modern objects, do not conflict with an early 16th century date. Caparra, then, and the two hinges from there can be dated early in the first half of the 16th century.

La Vega Vieja, lying in the world famous valley of La Vega Real, in the present Dominican Republic, was founded in its present ruined location before 1514. It was a thriving colonial city until destroyed by an earthquake in 1562. The rebuilt city was located some distance away, and the ruined town gradually became little more than mounds of debris now occupied by

small farms. The first three specimens studied were found, according to museum data, in the ruins of the church. The others are reported only from the general site area. Surface collecting here by the writer on three trips in 1952 and 1953 yielded some 19th and 20th century material but the great majority of objects found, mainly ceramics, are early 16th century styles that fit well within the time range of the site's occupation. Thus it is clear that the La Vega Vieja occupation, and the hinges considered, can be reasonably placed in the first 60 years of the 16th century.

Examples of this type of object have not been found in any later sites so it is quite likely that the first half of the 16th century dating, as indicated by the Caparra and La Vega Vieja sites, is valid. Thus it is probable that the Seven Oaks specimen also dates from the first half of the century.<sup>14</sup>

This dating for Seven Oaks site equates well with the Indian data. The complex of material from the Seven Oaks site was placed by Gordon R. Willey (1949:334-5) in the Safety Harbor period which he dated from about 1510 to 1710 (Willey, 1949, Fig. 76). The writer's dating of the Safety Harbor period is from about 1435 to 1750 (Goggin, 1950, Fig. 2).

The presence of European objects and Indian-made objects of European materials indicates a post-1510 or 1515 date. The nature of these objects especially the glass beads further suggests a 16th century or at the latest first half of the 17th century date.

Since nothing is known of the general association of objects within the site it may be assumed that all European materials were contemporaneous. Among the European objects there is nothing to contradict this.

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14. One word of caution must be introduced here. Recent finds, especially that of an ancient Spanish helmet in New Mexico (Lambert, 1952), indicate a great propensity of the Spanish to palm off their antique armor and perhaps other metal pieces on expeditions to the New World. Thus an early specimen could conceivably have been deposited later.

### SUMMARY

The previous presentation covers to the best of my knowledge all of the Florida objects, of these types which, with reasonable certainty, can be dated in the first half of the 16th century. Other types of materials exist in Florida which are undoubtedly of the same period, but our evidence for dating them is weak or nonexistent.

The items discussed fall into two distinct areas, with two other finds widely spread:

Old Tampa Bay area:

Bronze hinge )  
Spanish majolica ) Seven Oaks Site

Portuguese coin )  
Spanish majolica ) Safety Harbor

Upper East Coast area:

Spanish majolica )  
Spanish coin ) St. Augustine

Spanish coins Spruce Creek

The other finds of majolica at Upper Matecumbe Key and coins from the Alabama border are so widespread as to be of relatively much less importance.

### CONCLUSIONS

Out of the great quantity of Spanish and European objects found in Florida archeological and historical sites only a small handful can be identified as dating from the first half or middle of the sixteenth century. This is regrettable because that era was the time of the early explorers, Ponce de Leon, Narvaez, and De Soto as well as others.

Yet, the very fact that we can now date these objects is in itself a sign of progress over the past years when any European object was "bonafide proof" of some early explorer or else

shrugged off as being of little historical significance. Although the primary object of this paper is to point out historic potentials to be derived from the study of material objects by presenting early Spanish material now known, another aspect can be noted.

Two clusters of early Spanish objects are obvious in these data, one on the Upper East Coast and the second on Old Tampa Bay. The former cluster is limited in both variety and numbers of objects. Such items can well be attributed to the extensive contacts Florida Indians had with the Spanish either through early shipwrecks or with explorers just after the middle of the 16th century. The presence of Spanish materials dating from the time of De Soto in the Old Tampa Bay area, a region often associated with De Soto, may be only a coincidence. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that they are actual objects left or lost by that expedition. It is rather improbable, but still within the extreme realm of coincidence that the *ceitil* from Safety Harbor dropped from the pocket of the Gentleman of Elvas as he strolled down the shore. Equally as probable as the De Soto expedition provenience for these items is their possible origin from the Narvaez expedition. Many people perhaps would accept this provenience more readily than the De Soto.

In any case let us not dismiss too lightly this small but greatest concentration of identified early to mid-16th century Spanish objects reported from anywhere along the various postulated routes of the De Soto and Narvaez expeditions. It is probably well to remember that unless a "De Soto Tablet" of some sort is found, the ultimate pinpointing of De Soto's and other explorers' routes will probably have to be done, if not by Spanish pottery, coins, and bronze hinges, at least by very similar things.

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