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Fidalgo de Elvas

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Elvas, Fidalgo de, "Relacam Verdadeira" (1557). *Early Visions Bucket*. 10.
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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Fidalgo de Elvas, *Relaçam Verdadeira*



- De Soto Route, 1539-1544. Adapted from Grace Elizabeth King, *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida* (1898). Courtesy, Library of Congress.

The Gentleman of Elvas, as he is semi-anonymously referred to, wrote an account of the de Soto expedition titled True Relation [Relaçam Verdadeira] of the Hardships Suffered by Governor Hernando De Soto & Certain Portuguese Gentlemen During the Discovery of the Providence of Florida. Since its publication in 1557, this narrative has been looked upon with suspicious eyes because of the authorial anonymity. The account's credibility is called into question because it is impossible to prove whether or not the author participated in the expedition or merely elaborated previously published accounts. The Relaçam "has never filled any given research bill all that well," historian Patricia Galloway notes, "be it in area of itinerary reconstruction or in that of ethnohistory." That does not, however, decrease its importance as one of the few written accounts covering the American Southeast in the sixteenth century. The selection below, excerpted from the beginning of the Relation, describes how Hernando de Soto prepared, departed and arrived in Florida and the discoveries that had occurred thus far.

Suggested Reading

Galloway, Patricia (ed.). *The Hernando De Soto Expedition*. U Nebraska P, 1997. Print.

Clayton, Lawrence A., Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore (eds.). *The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543*. Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1993.

“Gentleman from Elvas.” *True Relation of the Hardships Suffered by Governor Hernando de Soto & Certain Portugues Gentlemen during the Discovery of the Province of Florida [Relaçam Verdadeira, 1557]*. Transl. by James Alexander Robertson. From *The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543*.

Chapter Two. How Cabeza De Vaca came to court and gave account of the land of Florida; and of the men who were gathered together at Seville to go with Don Hernando De Soto.

After Don Hernando had obtained the government, a gentleman arrived at court from the Indies, Cabeza de Vaca by name, who had gone with Governor Narváez, who had perished in Florida. He told how Narváez had perished at sea with all his men; and how he and four others had escaped and reached New Spain. He brought also a written relation of what he had seen in Florida. This stated in certain places, “In such a place I saw this. Most of what I saw there I leave for discussion between myself and his Majesty.” He described in general the wretchedness of the land and the hardships he had suffered. To some of his kinsfolk, who were minded to go to the Indies and strongly urged him to tell them whether he had seen any rich land in Florida, he said that he could not tell this, because he and another (by name, Dorantes, who had remained in New Spain with the intention of returning to Florida — for which purpose he [Cabeza de Vaca] came to Spain to beg the government from the emperor) had sworn not to divulge certain things which they had seen, lest some person might beg for it before hand. He gave them to understand that it was the richest land in the world. Don Hernando de Soto wished to take him [i.e., Cabeza de Vaca] with him and made him an advantageous proposal; but after they had come to an agreement, they fell out because Soto would not give him the money which he [Cabeza de Vaca] asked of him to buy a ship. Baltasar de Gallegos and Cristóbal de Espindola, his kinsmen, told him [Cabeza de Vaca] that since they had resolved to go to Florida with Soto because of what he had told them, he should advise them as to what they should do. Cabeza de Vaca told them that if he had given up going with Soto, it was because he expected to ask for another government and did not wish to go under the banner of another. Since Don Hernando de Soto already had the conquest of Florida, which he [Cabeza de Vaca] came to beg, he could not tell them, on account of his oath, what they wished to know. Nevertheless, he advised them to sell their estates and go with him [i.e., Soto], for in so doing they would act wisely. As soon as he had an opportunity, he spoke with the emperor and related to him all he had suffered and seen and the other things he had succeeded in learning. Of this relation, made orally to the emperor by Cabeza de Vaca, the marqués de Astorga was informed. He determined at once to send his brother, Don Antonio Osorio, with Don Hernando de Soto, and two of his kinsmen made ready to go with him, namely, Francisco Osorio and Garcia Osorio. Don Antonio disposed of an income of six hundred thousand reales which he received

from the Church, and Francisco Osorio of a village of vassals he owned in the district of Campos. They joined the adelantado at Seville, as did also Nuño de Tobar, Luis de Moscoso, and Juan Rodriguez Lobillo, with the wealth, amounting to fourteen or fifteen thousand cruzados, which each one had brought from Peru. Luis de Moscoso took two brothers with him. Don Carlos, who had married the governor's niece, went also and took his wife. From Badajóz went Pedro Calderón and three kinsmen of the adelantado, namely, Arias Tinoco, Alonso Romo, and Diego Tinoco. As Luis de Moscoso passed through Elvas, André de Vasconcelos spoke with him, and requested him to speak to Don Hernando de Soto in his behalf, and gave him patents issued by the marqués de Vilareal, conferring on him the captaincy of Ceuta, so that he might exhibit them. The adelantado saw these and found out who he [Vasconcelos] was and wrote him promising that he would favor him in every way and would give him men to command in Florida. From Elvas went André de Vasconcelos, Fernan Pegado, Antonio Martinez Segurado, Mem Royz Pereyra, Joan Cordeiro, Estevan Pegado, Bento Fernandez, and Alvaro Fernandez; and from Salamanca, Jaen, Valencia, Albuquerque, and other parts of Spain many persons of noble family gathered in Seville; so much so that many men of good condition, who had sold their estates, remained behind in San Lúcar because there was no ship for them; although for other known and rich countries it was usual to lack men. The cause of this was what Cabeza de Vaca had told the emperor and given persons who conversed with him to understand respecting that land. Soto made him [i.e., Cabeza de Vaca] fine proposals but Cabeza de Vaca, having agreed to go with him as mentioned above, because Soto would not give him money to pay for a ship which he had bought, they disagreed, and Cabeza de Vaca went as governor to Rio de la Plata

Chapter Nine. How that Christian went to the land of Florida, who he was, and what took place with the governor.

That Christian was called Juan Ortiz and was a native of Seville, of a noble family. For twelve years he had been in the hands of the Indians. He had gone to that land with Governor Narváez and had returned in the ships to the island of Cuba, where the wife of Governor Pánfilo de Narváez had remained. At her order, with twenty or thirty others he returned to Florida in a brigantine. Arriving at the port, within sight of the town, they saw on land a cane sticking in the ground with its top split and holding a letter. They believed that the governor had left it in order to give news of himself when he resolved to go inland. They asked four or five Indians who were walking on the beach for it, but the latter told them by signs to come ashore for it, which Juan Ortiz and another did contrary to the wish of the others. As soon as they reached land, many Indians came out of the houses of the town and surrounded them and seized them so that they could not escape. The other man who tried to defend himself they killed immediately in that place, and Juan Ortiz they seized by the hands and led to their chief, Ucita. The men in the brigantine refused to land and made for the open sea and returned to the island of Cuba. Ucita ordered Juan Ortiz to be bound hand and foot on a grill laid on top of four stakes [*barra*]. He ordered a fire to be kindled under him in order to burn him there. The chief's daughter asked him not to kill him [Ortiz], saying that a single Christian could not do him any ill or good, and that it would be more to his [the cacique's] honor to hold him captive. Ucita granted this and ordered him taken care of; and as soon as he was well, gave him charge of the guarding of the temple, for at night wolves would carry off the corpses from inside it. He commended himself to God and watched over their temple. One night the wolves carried off from him the corpse of a child, the son of one of the principal Indians. Going after it, he threw a club, which struck the wolf carrying the body, which, finding itself

wounded, abandoned it and went off to die nearby. He [Ortiz], not knowing what he had done as it was night, returned to the temple. At daybreak, when he found the body of the child gone, he became very sad. As soon as Ucita learned of it, he determined to have him killed. He sent [men] along the trail where he [Ortiz] said the wolves had gone, and they found the boy's corpse and farther on the dead wolf. Whereupon, Ucita was greatly pleased with the Christian and at the watch he had kept in the temple, and thenceforward showed him great honor. After being in captivity to him for three years, another chief named Mococo, who lived two days' journey from the port, came and burned the town. Ucita went in flight to another town he had in another seaport. Juan Ortiz lost his post and the favor he enjoyed from him. And since they [the Indians] are servants of the devil, they are accustomed to offer him souls and blood of their Indians or of any other people they can get. They say that when he [the devil] desires that sacrifice be made to him, he talks with them and tells them he is thirsty and that they should offer a sacrifice to him. Juan Ortiz learned from the girl who had saved him from the fire that her father had determined to sacrifice him the next day; and she told him that he should go to Mococo, that she knew he would show him honor for she had heard him say that he would ask for him; and she said he would be glad to see him. At night, since he did not know the way, the Indian woman went a half league from the town and put him on it, and in order that this might not be perceived, returned [to the town]. Juan Ortiz traveled that night and in the morning came to a river which was already within the boundary of Mococo and there he saw two Indians fishing. And since they were hostile to those of Ucita and their languages were different, and he did not know that of Mococo, he feared lest, inasmuch as he did not know how to say who he was and how he came nor how to give an explanation concerning himself, they would kill him thinking him to be an Indian of Ucita. Before they saw him, he came to where they had their weapons, and as soon as they saw him, they ran along the road to the town. And although he told them to wait, that he would do them no harm, they did not understand him and ran away as fast as they could. And when they reached the town, shouting, many Indians came out toward him and began to surround him in order to shoot him with arrows. Juan Ortiz, seeing himself in so great an emergency, hid behind some trees and began to call out very loudly and to cry out and to say that he was a Christian who was fleeing from Ucita and came to see and serve Mococo, their chief. It was God's will that an Indian who knew the language came up at that time and understood him and made the other Indians keep still, telling them what he [Ortiz] said to him. Three or four Indians were dispatched from there who went to report to their chief, who came out to welcome him a quarter league from the town and was very glad to see him. He immediately made him swear according to his custom as a Christian that he would not run off to any other chief, and promised him that he would show him much honor and that, if at any time, Christians should come to that land, he would release him freely and give him permission to go to them. And so he swore according to his custom as an Indian. Three years after that, some Indians who were fishing in the sea two leagues from the town came to inform Mococo that they had seen some ships. He called Juan Ortiz and gave him permission to go, who having bade him farewell reached the sea as soon as he could. But not finding the ships, he thought he had been deceived and that the cacique had done that to ascertain his desire. So he remained with Mococo for nine years, now with little expectation of seeing Christians. As soon as the governor reached Florida, it was known by Mococo. He immediately told Juan Ortiz that Christians were lodging in the town of Ucita. It seemed to the latter that he [Mococo] was jesting with him as on the other occasion and told him that the Christians did not come to his mind nor anything else than to serve him. He [Mococo] assured him of it and gave him permission to go to them, telling him that if he refused to do it, and the Christians returned, he must not hold him guilty, for he was

accomplishing what he had promised him. So great was Juan Ortiz's joy that he could not believe it to be true. However, he thanked [Mococo] and took his leave of him. Mococo gave him ten or twelve of the principal Indians to go in his company. On his way to the port where the governor was, he met Baltasar de Gallegos, as I have said above. As soon as he reached the camp, the governor ordered some clothes to be given him and some good arms and a beautiful horse. He asked him if he had heard of any land where there was gold or silver. He said no, he had never gone more than ten leagues roundabout from where he was, and that thirty leagues from there resided an Indian chief called Paracoxi, to whom Mococo and Ucita and all those of that coast paid tribute; that perhaps he might have some information of any good land; and that his land was indeed better than that of the coast and more fertile and abounding in maize. At this the governor was greatly pleased and said that he wished only to find provisions in order that he might go inland; that the land of Florida was so vast that there could not but be rich land at one end or the other. The cacique of Mococo came to the port to visit the governor and made him the following talk:

“Very lofty and very mighty lord: In my own estimation, to obey you, least of all those whom you hold under your command but greatest in my desire to perform greater services for you, I appear before your Lordship with as much confidence of receiving favor as if, in fact, this my good will were manifest to you by deeds (not for the small service which I did you of the Christian whom I hold in my possession, by giving him his liberty freely, for I was obliged to do that in order to keep my honor and what I had promised him), but because it belongs to the great to exercise their office with great magnificence; and I hold that you precede all those of the land both in bodily perfections and in ruling good men, as well as in the perfections of the mind with which you can boast of the liberality of nature. The favor which I await from your Lordship is that you consider me as your own, and feel free to command me in whatever I may serve you.”

The governor answered him saying that, although in freeing and sending him the Christian, he had kept his honor and his promise, he thanked him and appreciated him so much that there was no comparison and that he would always consider him as a brother and that he would protect him in every way. He ordered a shirt and other clothing to be given him, with which the cacique very happy bade him farewell and went to his town.

Chapter Ten. How the governor sent the ships to Cuba and left one hundred men in the port while he and the rest of the men marched inland.

From the port of Espiritu Santo, where the governor was, he sent the chief constable, Baltasar de Gallegos, with fifty horse and thirty or forty foot to the province of Paracoxi, in order to note the disposition of the land and gather information of the land that lay beyond and to send him word of what he found. He sent the ships to the island of Cuba with orders to return with provisions at a certain time. Since the principal intent of Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, who came with the governor as captain general, was to send slaves from Florida to the island of Cuba where he had his lands and his mines, and since he had made some forays and found that he could not capture any Indians because of the dense thickets and vast swamps in that land, upon seeing the character of the land, he determined to return to Cuba. And although there was some difference between him and the governor so that they did not willingly hold any communication or conversation with each other, he asked him [De Soto] courteously to leave and took his departure from him. Baltasar de

Gallegos reached Paracoxi and thirty Indians came to him on the part of the cacique who was absent from his town, one of whom spoke as follows: "King Paracoxi, lord of this province, whose vassals we are, sent us to your grace to learn what you seek in this his land and in what he can serve you." Baltasar de Gallegos answered them saying that he thanked him [the cacique] heartily for his offer and that they should tell their lord that he should come to his town and that there they could converse and make peace and friendship which he very greatly desired. The Indians went and returned next day saying that their lord was ill and on that account could not come; and that they came before him [Gallegos] to see what he ordered. He asked them if they knew or had information of any rich land where there was gold or silver. They said yes, that there was a province toward the west called Cale, and that the people of that land were hostile to others living in other lands where it was summer most of the year. That land had gold in abundance and when those people came to make war on the people of Cale, they wore hats of gold resembling helmets. When Baltasar de Gallegos perceived that the cacique did not come, as it seemed to him that all these messages were pretense, in order that he [the cacique] might meanwhile getaway safely, and fearing lest if he allowed the thirty Indians to go, they would never return, he ordered them put in chains and had the governor informed by eight horse of what was happening. At this the governor and all those in the port with him received great joy, for they believed that what the Indians said might be true. The governor left Captain Calderon in the port with thirty horse and seventy foot with food for two years. He and all the rest of the men marched inland and reached Paracoxi where Baltasar de Gallegos was, and from there, with all the men of the latter, he took the road toward Cale. He passed through a small town, Acela by name, and reached another town called Tocaste. Thence, with thirty horse and fifty foot, he went on toward Cale. As they passed through a town which had been depopulated, they saw some Indians of that town in a shallow lake, to whom the interpreter spoke. They came and gave an Indian to act as guide. He [the governor] came to a river with a swift current and on a tree in the middle of it, a foot bridge was made on which the men crossed. The horses crossed by swimming by means of a tackle which was drawn by those on the other side, for the first horse they drove in without it was drowned. From there, the governor sent two horsemen to the men who had stayed behind, ordering them to hurry for the road was long and provisions were lacking. He reached Cale and found the town without people. He seized three Indians who were spies. There he awaited the men who were coming behind, who were experiencing great hardship from hunger and bad roads, as the land was very poor in maize, low, and very wet, swampy, and covered with dense forests, and the provisions brought from the port were finished. Wherever any village was found, there were some blites [*bredos*], and he who came first gathered them and, having stewed them with water and salt, ate them without anything else. Those who could not get any of them, gathered the stalks from the maize fields which being still young had no maize, and ate them. Having reached the river which the governor had crossed, they found palm cabbages in low palm trees like those of Andalusia. There came two horsemen whom the governor had sent, who told them that there was maize in abundance in Cale; at which all were rejoiced. As soon as they reached Cale, the governor ordered all the maize which was ripe in the fields to be taken, which was enough for three months. When they were gathering this, the Indians killed three Christians, and one of two Indians who were captured told the governor that seven days' journey farther on was a very large province with maize in abundance, called Apalache. He immediately set out from Cale with fifty horse and sixty foot, leaving the *maestre de campo*, Luis de Moscoso, with all the rest of the men and ordering him not to move thence until getting word from him. Inasmuch as there was no one to serve them, the bread each one had to eat, be ground in a mortar cannon or mortar made of a log, with a

pestle like a window bar. Some sifted the meal through their coats of mail. The bread was baked in some flat pieces of earthen vessels which they set on the fire, in the same way as I have already said was done in Cuba. It is so difficult to grind that many, who would not formerly eat it unless it was ground, ate the maize parched and sodden.

Twelve. How the governor arrived at Apalache and was informed that gold existed in abundance in the interior of the land.

On September the 23rd, the governor left Napetaca [*sic*] and went to sleep at a river where two Indians brought him a stag on the part of the cacique of Uzachil. Next day he passed through a large town called Hapaluya and went to sleep at Uzachil. He found no people there, for because of the news which the Indians had of the massacre of Napetaca they dared not remain. In the town he found an abundance of maize, beans, and pumpkins, of which their food consists, and on which the Christians lived there. Maize is like coarse millet and the pumpkins are better and more savory than those of Spain. From there the governor sent two captains, each one in a different direction, in search of the Indians. They captured a hundred head, among Indian men and women. Of the latter, there, as well as in any other part where forays were made, the captain selected one or two for the governor and the others were divided among themselves and those who went with them. These Indians they took along in chains with collars about their necks and they were used for carrying the baggage and grinding the maize and for other services which so fastened in this manner they could perform. Sometimes it happened that when they went with them for firewood or maize they would kill the Christian who was leading them and would escape with the chain. Others at night would file the chain off with a bit of stone which they have in place of iron tools, and with which they cut it. Those who were caught at it paid for themselves and for those others, so that on another day they might not dare do likewise. As soon as the women and young children were a hundred leagues from their land, having become unmindful, they were taken along unbound, and served in that way, and in a very short time learned the language of the Christians. The governor left Uzachil for Apalache and, in a march of two days, reached a town called Axille. And because the Indians had not heard of the Christians, they were careless, [but] most of them escaped because the town was surrounded by a forest. On the morning of the next day, October first, the governor left there and ordered a bridge to be built over a river where he had to cross. It was necessary to swim for a stone's throw where the bridge was built, and beyond that a crossbow-shot's distance the water came up to the waist. And there was a very high, thick wood through which the Indians would come to see if they could prevent the passage and those who were building the bridge. The crossbowmen came to their aid and made the Indians take to flight. Some timbers were put in over which some men passed which assured the crossing. The governor crossed over on Wednesday, the day of St. Francis. He went to sleep at a town called Vitachuco which was subject to Palache. He found it burning, for the Indians had set fire to it. Beyond that place, the land was very populous and maize abounded. He passed through many open districts like villages. On Sunday, October 25, he arrived at a town called Uzela, and on Monday, at Anhaica Apalache where the lord of all that land and province lived. In that town, the maestre de campo, whose office it is to allot and provide lodgings, lodged them all. Within a league and a half league about that town were other towns where there was abundance of maize, pumpkins, beans, and dried plums native to the land, which are better than those of Spain and grow wild in the fields without being planted. Food which seemed sufficient to last over the winter was gathered together from those towns on into Anhaica Apalache. The governor was informed that the sea was ten

leagues from there. He immediately sent a captain and some horse and foot, and after going six leagues the captain found a town called Ochete. He reached the sea and found a large tree which had been cut down and made into troughs [*couchos*] fixed with some posts which were used as mangers and saw skulls of horses. With this message he came and what they said of Narváez was considered true, namely, that he had there built the boats with which he left that land and in which he was lost at sea. The governor immediately sent Juan de Añasco with thirty horses to the port of Espiritu Santo, where Calderón was, ordering them to abandon that port and all to go to Apalache. He [Añasco] set out on Friday, November 17. In Uzachil and at other towns on the way, he [Añasco] found many people already careless. He would not capture Indians in order not to be detained, for it did not suit him to give the Indians time to assemble. He passed through the towns at night and rested for three or four hours at a distance from habitation. In ten days he reached the port, brought twenty Indian women whom he captured in Utara and Potano near Cale, sent them to Doña Isabel in two caravels which he sent from the port to Cuba, and brought all the men of foot in the brigantines, coasting along toward Palache. Calderón with the men of horse and some foot crossbowmen went by land. In some places, the Indians attacked him and wounded some of his men. As soon as they reached Apalache, the governor immediately ordered planks hewn and spikes taken to the sea, with which was built a piragua large enough to hold thirty well-armed men who went by way of the bay to the sea and coasted about waiting for the brigantines. Several times they fought with Indians who were going along the keys in canoes. On Saturday, November 29, an Indian came through the sentinels without being seen and set fire to the town; and because of the high wind blowing, two-thirds of it were quickly burned. On Sunday, the 28th of December, Juan de Añasco arrived with the brigantines. The governor sent Francisco Maldonado, captain of the foot soldiers, with fifty men to coast along toward the west and look for a port, for he had decided to go by land in order to explore in that direction. On that day, eight horse, by order of the governor, went out into the open country for two leagues about the town to look for Indians; for now the latter had become so daring that they would come within two crossbow-shots of the camp to kill the men. They found two Indians and one Indian woman gathering beans. Although the men could have escaped, in order not to abandon the Indian woman who was the wife of one of them, they resolved to die fighting. Before being killed they wounded three horses, one of which died a few days afterward. Calderón with his men marched along the seacoast. From a wood close to the sea some Indians came out to attack him and forced him to leave the road, and many of those with him to abandon some necessary food they were carrying. Three or four days after the time limit set by the governor to Maldonado for going and coming (although he had planned and determined not to await him longer if he did not come within a week from that time), he [Maldonado] came and brought an Indian from a province called Ochus, sixty leagues from Apalache, where he had found a port of good depth and sheltered. And because he hoped to find farther on a good land, the governor was very happy and sent Maldonado to Havana for provisions with orders to wait at the port of Ochus which he [Maldonado] had discovered; and that he [the governor] would go overland in search of it; and that if he [the governor] were delayed and should not go [to that port] that summer he [Maldonado] should return to the Havana, and the next summer return to wait at the port, for he [the governor] would do nothing else than go in search of Ochus. Francisco Maldonado went and Juan de Guzmán remained in his stead as captain of the foot soldiers of his company. From among the Indians captured at Napetuca, the treasurer, Juan de Gaytán, brought along a youth who said that he was not of that land, but that he was from another very distant one lying in the direction of the sunrise, and that some time ago he had come in order to visit [other] lands; that his land was called Yupaha and a woman ruled it; that the town where she lived was of wonderful

size; and that the chieftainess collected tribute from many of her neighboring chiefs, some of whom gave her clothing and others gold in abundance. He told how it was taken from the mines, melted, and refined, just as if he had seen it done, or else the devil taught him; so that all who knew anything of this said it was impossible to give so good an account of it unless one had seen it; and all when they saw the signs he made believed whatever he said to be true.