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THE ROUTE OF THE CORONADO EXPEDITION IN
TEXAS

DAVID DONOGHUE in the January *Southwestern Quarterly*.

A casual reading of "The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542," by George Parker Winship,¹ led me to suspect that this first Spanish army that marched on the great western plains of America explored an area much less in extent than has been heretofore ascribed to it by historians. I am convinced by their own statements that the explorers never left the flat Llano Estacado, that they never traversed the rolling plains of Oklahoma, Kansas or Nebraska. It is the purpose of this discussion to correlate the various accounts of this eastern portion of Coronado's journey as set forth in the narratives of Castañeda, Jaramillo and Coronado, the *Relación del Suceso*, and the *Relación Postrera de Sívola*, and to check them with the actual topography of the southern part of the Great Plains. I shall undertake to show that the routes proposed by previous historians are clearly impossible, and that it is highly probable and reasonable that the route of the expedition at this point never left the Llano Estacado.

The crux of the problem is fixing the correct situation of Quivira, the settlement at which the explorer turned and started back. In locating the site of Quivira, modern writers put much stress on the distances, directions, and number of days' march given in the narratives, and especially on Coronado's statement that Quivira was in the 40th degree of latitude. My own experience in becoming acquainted with

1. Winship, George Parker, *The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542*. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Part 1, pages 329 to 637*, Washington, 1896.

the geography and geology of Texas during the past twenty years prompts me to make the assertion that directions are seldom accurate, that distances are usually over-estimated, and that the length of a day's march too often represents the best day's march. Quivira is generally placed by historians in the state of Kansas upon the Arkansas, the Kansas, or the Missouri river. All descriptions of the country traversed are thereby ignored in order to put Quivira on a river running to the northeast in the 40th degree of latitude!

It is a well defined principle of law that boundaries are more certainly established by descriptions and references to natural objects or features than by calls for distance and direction. It is this more certain method that I shall use to prove that the expedition never left the Llano Estacado, and that Quivira was within the present limits of the Texas Panhandle.

The principal accounts of Coronado's route are the narratives of Castañeda and Jaramillo, the letters of Coronado, the *Relación del Suceso*, and the *Relación Postrera de Sivola*. These narratives vary widely as to the distances, directions, and the number of days that the expedition spent in traveling from place to place. However they all agree on one important point, that the eastern part of the journey was entirely upon plains, "so level that men became lost when they went off half a league."

Upon Winship's translations of these narratives as given in the *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, I have based the following summary:

In May, 1541, Coronado's army, with "1000 horses and 500 of our cows and more than 5000 rams and ewes and more than 1500 friendly Indians and servants"² left Cicuye, with a treacherous Indian guide known as the Turk. After a three or four days' march a bridge was built across

2. *Ibid.*, 542.

the Rio Cicuye. The march continued to the plains, passing a village of Querechos, and in about 35 days the army reached a "ravine like those of Colima."³ Here Coronado with 30 horsemen (and 6 men on foot?) left for Quivira and the army returned to the Rio Cicuye.

Coronado went north or northeast from the ravines, keeping on the plains, and on Saint Peter and Paul's day reached the river "below Quivira," crossed, and up the north bank to Quivira. Coronado returned by way of the river crossing where he left the road by which he had come, and took the "right hand" back to the Querecho village and into Cicuye.

The army under Tristan de Arellano returned directly to the Rio Cicuye from the ravines, passing some salt lakes on the way and striking the Rio Cicuye "30 leagues or more" below the bridge, marched up the river to this structure and into Cicuye.

Routes Proposed by Simpson and Winship

Simpson⁴ assumes the route of Coronado's expedition out of Cicuye to have been to the northeast over the mountains, crossing the New Mexico-Colorado state line at about Raton, thence east, keeping south of the Arkansas, until a point near Kingman, Kansas, was reached, where Coronado left the army and proceeded northeast to Quivira on the Missouri River in northeastern Kansas and southeastern Nebraska. Coronado's return to Cicuye is not traced on Simpson's map. The return of the army was in a southwestern direction by the Salt Plains near Cherokee, Oklahoma, across the Texas Panhandle, to the Rio Cicuye at about Fort Sumner and thence up the river to Cicuye.

3. *Ibid.*, 505.

4. *Ibid.*, 508.

5. Simpson, J. H., "Coronado's March in the Search of the 'Seven Cities of Cibola,' and Discussion of their Probable Location." *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for the year 1869*, pages 309-340. Washington, 1871.

Winship,^{5a} in his account of the route in the American Explorers Series presents a map showing the path of the expedition from Cicuye down the Pecos, over the Llano Estacado in the southern part, the region of the salt lakes, down the Colorado to a point south of the town of Coleman, Texas, thence north across the Brazos, the Pease, the Red, the Canadian, and the North Canadian, into Kansas, where he locates Quivira on the Arkansas and Kansas Rivers. Coronado's return from Quivira was in a southwesterly direction along the old Santa Fé trail, through southwestern Kansas and the extreme western part of the Oklahoma Panhandle, into New Mexico at about Clayton, and to Cicuye. The return of the army to Cicuye is shown on this map to have been along the route followed in the outward march until about midway between the headwaters of the Brazos and the Texas-New Mexico state line, where the army took a more direct road and marched in a northwesterly direction to the Rio Pecos, where at about Fort Sumner the outward route is again joined.

These routes are clearly impossible. As one may easily discern by looking at a geologic or topographic map, the character of the country over which Winship and Simpson assume the expedition to have passed is entirely different from that described by Coronado and his fellow explorers.

Coronado's statement that the "plains were so vast that I did not find their limit anywhere I went"⁶ obviously applies neither to the rolling plains of Kansas nor to the typical Permian topography of western Oklahoma and west central Texas but to the flat barren region of eastern New Mexico and western Texas, extending from about the 32nd parallel of latitude north to the Canadian River, and from the Rio Pecos east to about the 101st meridian, and known as the Llano Estacado or Staked Plains. Furthermore the

5a. Winship, George Parker, *The Journey of Coronado*, American Explorers Series, New York, 1922.

6. Winship, George Parker, *The Coronado Expedition*, 1540-1542, p. 580.

Salt Plains on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas near Cherokee, Alfalfa County, Oklahoma, and the salt plains at other points in western Oklahoma, are not salt lakes but salt springs or salt marshes in the midst of rolling or rough, broken country.

Winship's route would take Coronado close to the Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma, and across all the rivers of north central Texas and western Oklahoma; yet in all the narratives it is said that no mountains were seen and only two rivers, the Cicuye, and the one "below Quivira," are mentioned as having been crossed.

And where, in these proposed routes, may we ask, are the ravines?

Very slow progress should be credited to an expedition of 1500 men, more or less, or of 30 men for that matter, on foot and on horseback, during the hot months of May, June, July, August and September of the year 1541, when we consider the difficulties under which they labored, dressed in armor, with cumbersome equipment, the men having only meat for food, the horses eating only grass, with bad water, and a guide who hoped to lead them astray in a country where they could see only "cows and sky." It is doubtful that the expedition marched more than one day out of two or three and when it did move forward it probably averaged less than ten miles per day, instead of six or seven leagues, as stated by Castañeda.⁷ The map measurements of Winship's proposed route indicate a journey of about 2000 miles, and of Simpson's route about 1600 miles, from Cicuye to Quivira and return. While the Spaniards have said little of their troubles and hardships, let us be assured that they had them and that only under the most favorable circumstances could the expedition have penetrated to Kansas.

7. *Ibid.*, 507.

Identifiable Natural Features

Simpson and Winship put Quivira on the 40th parallel of latitude, and then attempted to construct a road from Cicuye to that province. I propose to follow along the road described by the explorers to see where it will lead.

The starting point is Cicuye, now known as the Pueblo of Pecos, the ruins of which are about 25 miles southeast of Santa Fé, on the west side of the Rio Pecos in San Miguel County, New Mexico.

The remaining natural features along Coronado's route to be identified are the Rio Cicuye, the plains, the salt lakes, the ravines, the river "below Quivira," and Quivira.

From the narratives of Coronado, Castañeda and Jaramillo, the *Relación del Suceso*, and the *Relación Postrera de Sívola*, I have selected quotations describing these objects. I will identify them, and, using them as landmarks, will trace the route out over the plains to Quivira and then back to Cicuye.

Rio Cicuye. Castañeda, Part 1, Chapter 21: "On its return the army reached the Cicuye more than 30 leagues below . . . the bridge they had made when they crossed it, and they followed it up to that place. . . . The guides said this river joined that of Tiguez more than 20 days from here and that its course turned towards the east. . . . As I said, the army followed the river up as far as Cicuye. . . ."*

I identify the Rio Cicuye as the Pecos which joins the Rio Grande (Tiguez) about 400 miles southeast of Pecos, and its course is to the southeast. This fits Castañeda's description. The location of the Rio Pecos at the western edge of the Llano Estacado is another point that serves this identification.

The Plains. Coronado's letter of October 20, 1541, to the King: "After 9 days march I reached some plains,

8. *Ibid.*, 510.

so vast that I did not find their limit anywhere I went, although I travelled over them for more than 300 leagues. . . I travelled 5 days more as the guides wished to lead me, until I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than if we had been swallowed up in the sea, where they [the guides] strayed about, because there was not a stone, nor a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by.”

Castañeda, Part 2, Chapter 7: “In traversing 250 leagues, the other mountain range was not seen, nor a hill nor a hillock which was three times as high as a man. Several lakes were found at intervals; they were round as plates, a stone’s throw or more across, some fresh and some salt. . . . The country is like a bowl, so that when a man sits down, the horizon surrounds him all around at the distance of a musket shot.”⁹

Castañeda, Part 3, Chapter 8: “The country they [the cows] travelled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs. . . . When one was near them [the cows], it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. The reason for all this was that the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure, and could see the sky at the edge of it, about a crossbow shot from him, and even if a man only lay down on his back he lost sight of the ground.”¹⁰

Relación Postrera de Sivola: “The country is so level that men became lost when they went off half a league.”¹¹

Relación del Suceso: “It was so dangerous to travel or to go away from the camp in these plains, that it is as if one was traveling on the sea, . . . and they are so level

9. *Ibid.*, 580, 581.

10. *Ibid.*, 527.

11. *Ibid.*, 543.

12. *Ibid.*, 571.

and have no mountain or prominent landmark, that if one went out of sight of it [the camp] he was lost. . . .¹³

To prove that the plains thus described by the explorers were the Llano Estacado, we can do no better than quote R. T. Hill:

"The Llano Estacado is a vast region so nearly level that it has no relief perceptible to the eye. Its extreme northwestern corner (in New Mexico) has an approximate altitude of 5000 feet, and its slope is about 8.6 feet per mile eastward. The general flatness, which continues up to the very brink of its surrounding escarpments, is marked only by long swales, like the faintest troughs of the gentler swells of the ocean, and the depressions are so slight that their shallowness has been appropriately described by Castañeda, the historian of the Coronado expedition, as being like a bowl, so that when a man sits down the horizon surrounds him on all sides at the distance of a musket shot.'"¹⁴

Salt Lakes. Castañeda, Part 1, Chapter 21: "They found many salt lakes on this road and there was a great quantity of salt."¹⁵ (Referring to the return of the army from the ravines to the Rio Cicuye.)

Castañeda, Part 2, Chapter 7: "Several lakes were found at intervals; they were round as plates, a stone's throw or more across, some fresh and some salt."¹⁶

Castañeda, Part 3, Chapter 8: "Another thing was a heap of cow bones . . . which was found on the edge of a salt lake in the southern part, and this in a region where there are no people who could have made it. The only explanation of this which could be suggested was that the waves which the north winds must make in the lake had

13. *Ibid.*, 578.

14. Hill, R. T., *Physical Geography of the Texas Region. United States Geological Survey Topographic Atlas of the United States*, Folio No. 3, Washington, 1900, p. 6.

15. Winship, George Parker, *The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542*, p. 510.

16. *Ibid.*, 527.

piled up the bones of the cattle which had died in the lake. . . .”¹⁷

The southern part of the Llano Estacado contains many salt lakes, the most northerly of these lakes being in bottom of which he found a large settlement of people.”¹⁸ Bailey and Lamb Counties, Texas, and in Roosevelt County, New Mexico. Therefore the army in returning to the Rio Cicuye (Rio Pecos) must have marched at least as far south as the salt lakes in these counties.

The Ravines. Castañeda, Part 1, Chapter 19: [Maldonado] “reached a large ravine like those of Colima, in the

Castañeda, Part 1, Chapter 20: “The ravine which the army had now reached was a league wide from one side to the other, with a little bit of a river at the bottom, and there were many groves of mulberry trees near it. . . .”¹⁹

Castañeda, Part 1, Chapter 21: “Many fellows were lost at this time who went hunting and did not get back to the army for two or three days, wandering about the country as if they were crazy, in one direction or another, not knowing how to get back where they started from, although this ravine extended in either direction so that they could find it. Every night they took account of who was missing, fired guns and blew trumpets and beat drums and built great fires, but yet some of them went off so far and wandered about so much that all this did not give them any help, although it helped others. The only way was to go back where they had killed an animal and start from there in one direction and another until they struck the ravine or fell in with somebody who could put them on the right road. It is worth nothing that the country there is so level that at midday, after one has wandered about in one direction and another in pursuit of game, the only thing to do is to stay near the game quietly until sunset, so as to see where

17. *Ibid.*, 542.

18. *Ibid.*, 505.

19. *Ibid.*, 507.

it goes down, and even then they have to be men who are practiced to do it. Those who are not, had to trust themselves to others."²⁰

Castañeda, Part 2, Chapter 7: "There are no groves of trees except at the rivers, which flow at the bottom of some ravines where the trees grow so thick that they were not noticed until one was right on the edge of them."²¹

Jaramillo: "We all went forward one day to a river which was down in a ravine in the midst of good meadows."²²

Palo Duro Cañon and its various branches, at the head of the Red River, in Briscoe, Armstrong, Randall and Swisher Counties, Texas, are the "ravines" described above. Palo Duro Cañon and Tule Cañon stretch out to the northwest and to the southwest into the Llano Estacado forming a large V. It is not surprising that Coronado wandered into it, for among other reasons, the creeks in the cañons were the first running water that he encountered after leaving the tributaries of the Pecos, at the western edge of the Llano.

Geologists, who have been in the State of Colima, Mexico, describe the "ravines" there as deep *barrancas*, or steep-sided cañons, eroded down through the volcanic rocks that compose the high plateaus.

Palo Duro Cañon is about 70 miles in length, has a maximum depth of about 1000 feet, and varies in width from a half mile to fifteen miles. Its sides are precipitous, and its appearance in this regard caused Castañeda to say it was like the *barrancas* of Colima. One is at its brink before the chasm is noticed. Palo Duro Cañon is the gem of the plains. Its rocks are much more variegated in color than those of the Grand Cañon of the Colorado. In its deeper parts the walls of Palo Duro are composed of brick red clays with lenses of dazzling white gypsum, maroon,

20. *Ibid.*, 508, 509.

21. *Ibid.*, 527.

22. *Ibid.*, 539.

yellow and violet shales and grey sands, with a rim of white caliche, the Cap Rock.

The River "below Quivira" and Quivira. Castañeda, Part 2, Chapter 8: "Quivira is to the west of those ravines, in the midst of the country . . . for the country is level as far as Quivira, and there they began to see some mountain chains."²³

Relación del Suceso: . . . "after 30 days' march we found the river Quivira which is 30 leagues below the settlements. While going up the valley, we found people who were going hunting, who were natives of Quivira. . . . Francisco Vasquez went 25 leagues through these settlements, to where he obtained an account of what was beyond and they said that the plains come to an end, and that down the river there are people who do not plant, but live wholly by hunting."²⁴

Jaramillo: . . . "on Saint Peter and Paul's day we reached a river which we found to be there below Quivira. . . . We crossed it there and went up the other side on the north, the direction being towards the northeast."²⁵

"The country is level as far as Quivira" indicates that Quivira was on the edge of the Llano Estacado.

Apparently Coronado marched north or northeast from the ravines (Palo Duro Cañon). Only one river is mentioned as being crossed, that "below Quivira." This can be none other than the Canadian. If Coronado had gone to the Arkansas, he would have crossed the Canadian, the North Canadian and the Cimarron, an experience which I believe no explorer would have forgotten.

The March to Quivira

With the principal landmarks located I now give a sketch of the route. It must be remembered that the Turk

23. *Ibid.*, 528.

24. *Ibid.*, 577.

25. *Ibid.*, 589.

hoped to get the expedition lost and then let hunger and thirst take their toll. This object could not be better accomplished than by leading the Spaniards out into the southern part of the Llano Estacado, a barren region without water, except in the occasional salt lakes; a desert at that time.

Leaving Pecos (Cicuye) in western San Miguel County, New Mexico, the expedition proceeded down the west side of the Rio Pecos for three or four days. North of Santa Rosa, in Guadalupe County, the course of the Rio Pecos turns more to the south, but still flows in a southeasterly direction. In the vicinity of Santa Rosa the bridge was built.

An arm of the Llano Estacado extends toward this area and it is the divide between the Canadian and the Pecos. This forms the most direct and convenient road to the plains from Pecos. Crossing the river the expedition made its way to the Llano Estacado, passed through Quay County and northern Curry County, New Mexico, and into Parmer County, Texas, thence across Castro County and Swisher County to the ravines, already identified as Palo Duro Cañon and its tributaries, of which Tule Cañon is the largest, in Briscoe, Swisher, Armstrong, and Randall Counties, Texas.

In Palo Duro Cañon, or in one or more of its several branches, the army camped, and explored the surrounding country. Here Coronado selected 30 horsemen (and six men on foot?) and set out for Quivira.

Jaramillo says Coronado marched to the north;²⁶ the *Relación del Suceso* says the course was "by the needle;"²⁷ and Castañeda states that a detour was made towards Florida.²⁸ Traveling north or northeast across Armstrong and Carson Counties and into Hutchinson County or Pot-

26. *Ibid.*, 589.

27. *Ibid.*, 577.

28. *Ibid.*, 509.

ter County the river "below Quivira" was reached on Saint Peter and Paul's Day.

Jaramillo states that after reaching the river "below Quivira," Coronado followed up the north bank towards the northeast to the settlements.²⁹ In Potter, Hutchinson, and Roberts Counties the Canadian flows in a northeasterly direction.

Here, then, was Quivira, on the Canadian River near the northeastern border of the Llano Estacado in the counties of Hutchinson and Roberts, in the Texas Panhandle.

The return journey was made by way of the river crossing, where Coronado turned west and followed along the Canadian, keeping up out of the rough lands, on the edge of the plains, passing the Querecho village where the Turk first led him astray, and thence on into Cicuye.³⁰ This road is through Potter, Oldham, and Deaf Smith Counties, Texas, into Quay County, New Mexico, where at the edge of the plains it joined the outward path.

Return of the Army

We have left the army under Tristan de Arrellano in camp in Palo Duro Cañon. After Coronado's departure the army obtained Teya guides to lead the way by the most direct practical route to Cicuye. As water and food were the practical considerations the army marched south of west to the Rio Pecos, striking it at about the bend south of Fort Sumner, and then northwest along the river to the bridge into Cicuye.

Salt Lakes were encountered on the march to the Pecos. The most northerly of the salt or alkali lakes of the Llano Estacado are in Bailey and Lamb Counties, Texas, and in Roosevelt County, New Mexico. This would bring the line of march south of Clovis. It should be noted that the

29. *Ibid.*, 589.

30. *Ibid.*, 591, 592. Narrative of Jaramillo.

course of the Rio Pecos south of Fort Sumner in DeBaca County, New Mexico, changes from southeast to slightly west to south. This bend is the nearest point on the river to the "ravines" of Palo Duro and Tule.

The return march of the army, therefore, was through the counties of Swisher, Castro, Lamb, and Bailey in Texas, and Roosevelt, DeBaca, and San Miguel in New Mexico.

I am aware that in outlining this route I may be in error in some of the details. I am not familiar with the country west of the Rio Pecos in New Mexico, and my observations must necessarily be confined to that part of the journey that appears to me to have been made in what is now the Texas Panhandle and in that part of New Mexico east of the Pecos.

Of this much I am certain: The expedition never left the Llano Estacado; Palo Duro Cañon and its tributaries are the only ravines that fit Castañeda's descriptions; the salt lakes are found only in the southern Llano Estacado; Quivira was on the Canadian or on some of its tributary creeks at the edge of the plains.