

ETZANOA: NEW FINDINGS

By Foss Farrar

Introduction

In 1601, Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate led 80 men on an expedition to the fabled “Great Settlement” of Etzanoa, where they met a group of people that archaeologists have since identified as ancestors of the Wichita tribe. The story of that meeting and a battle that took place a few days after the explorers’ arrival has been misinterpreted by scholars until recent years.

First, the location of Etzanoa has been in dispute among scholars for decades. But due to recent evidence, archaeologists today consider the most likely location to be along the banks of the Walnut River near its confluence with the Arkansas River in what is now eastern Arkansas City, Kansas.

Second, the size of the settlement has been underestimated until recent years. But many archaeologists now would agree it is at least the second-largest prehistoric settlement in North America – if not the largest.

A clearer picture of Etzanoa's geographic location and size has been provided in recent years by a re-translation of Spanish documents about the 1601 Oñate expedition, according to Wichita State University archaeology professor Donald J. Blakeslee. The documents were produced from interviews with expedition participants in 1602, just a year after the expedition. Maps also were produced by a few of the participants.

Previous translations of the documents were garbled, resulting in differing interpretations by archaeologists, Blakeslee said. And until recently, archaeologists have misinterpreted the layout of Etzanoa – with its many housing clusters separated by agricultural fields – as being clusters of villages instead of one continuous town.

Blakeslee, a specialist on the Plains Indians, said that when he read the latest translation, he decided to check the expedition members' descriptions of Etzanoa and their encounter with the Wichita against the archaeological record. He organized and led a large-scale archaeological field study of the eastern Arkansas City area in June 2015. He is working on a paper on that study, but said that initial findings add weight to his conviction that present-day Arkansas City is the location of the ancient settlement of Etzanoa.

In several recent presentations to archaeological groups and the media, Blakeslee has noted that historians in the past have undervalued Etzanoa's size and significance. He added that the findings of recent and future archaeological studies will change the history books.

2013 Translation, Background

According to the latest translation, published in May 2013 by language scholars at the University of California at Berkeley, Etzanoa was a five-mile long settlement along the banks of the Walnut River near its confluence with the Arkansas River. An estimated 20,000 ancestors of the Wichita lived there.

Studies have shown that the ancient Wichita people lived in clusters of settlements in Kansas. Etzanoa, the largest of those settlements, was at the south end of what archaeologists call “the Great Bend Aspect.”

That term refers to the bend of the Arkansas River in the Great Bend, Kansas, area. However, Great Bend villages are found in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, according to Blakeslee. In Kansas, they are located in Rice, McPherson, Marion, Butler, and Cowley Counties.