

The Lady of Cofitachequi

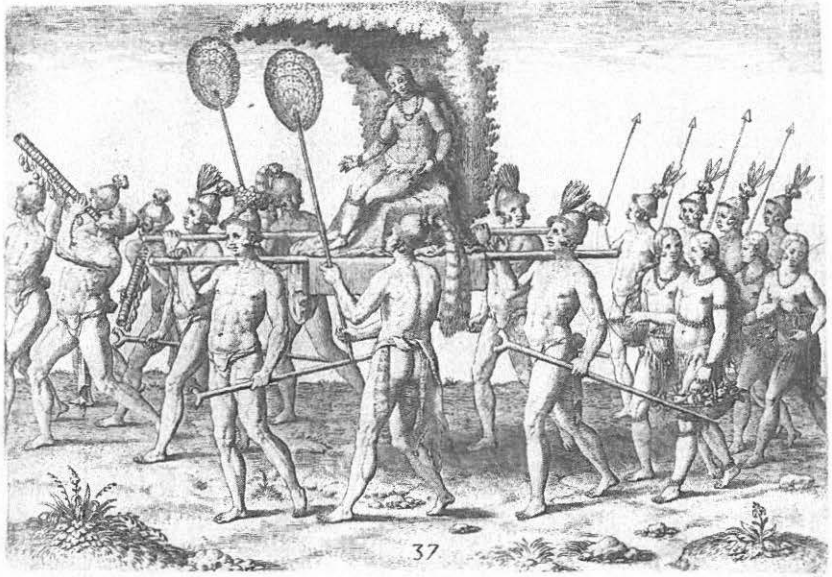
Gender and Political Power among Native Southerners

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On May 1, 1540, Hernando de Soto and his army approached the first major town of Cofitachequi, one of the South's wealthiest and most storied Native chiefdoms. The Spaniards had conceived of this journey many months earlier when Native Floridians told them of a chiefdom rich in silver and gold and ruled by a powerful woman. Such riches were the expedition's *raison d'être*; conquistador Hernando de Soto, veteran of Pizarro's ruthless campaign against the Incas, was willing to go to any length to secure even greater wealth and fame. Marching northeast from peninsular Florida, the expedition had endured arduous travel, intense hunger, and bellicose Native warriors. After traversing an uninhabited area that stretched from the Oconee River in modern central Georgia to the Congaree River in South Carolina, the expedition reached Hymahi, the first village subject to Cofitachequi. Perhaps seeking to protect their chief, the people of Hymahi refused to tell the Spaniards the way to Cofitachequi, so de Soto's men captured several of them. De Soto ordered his soldiers to burn the captives alive one by one until someone disclosed Cofitachequi's location. Finally, a villager relented, and others informed the Spaniards that the chief was aware of their presence and awaited their arrival.¹

The conquistador and his army went to the principal town of Cofitachequi—the Mulberry site—which lay at the confluence of Pine Tree Creek and the Wateree River, near present-day Camden, South Carolina.² From across the river, some of Cofitachequi's principal citizens, including a female relative of the chief, spotted the Spaniards and rowed out in dugout canoes to greet them. Through an interpreter, the Cofitachequis questioned the Spaniards' intentions and then



LADY OF COFITACHEQUI

There are no extant illustrations of the Lady of Cofitachequi, but this engraving of an elite Timucuan woman provides an image of a similarly privileged woman who was a contemporary of the Lady. Theodor de Bry engraving after an original drawing by Jacques LeMoyne de Morgues, *Brevis narratio eorum quae in Florida Americae provinci Gallis acciderunt* (Frankfurt, Germany, 1591), vol. 2, plate 37. Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, Manuscripts Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

reported that their ruler would soon greet the newcomers. Within moments, the Cofitachequis carried their chief, known to history as the Lady of Cofitachequi, from the town to the water's edge on a litter draped in white cloth.³ Never did her feet touch the ground. The Lady's subjects then placed her in a fine canoe that had an awning to shade her from the sun and ample cushions to make her comfortable. When the Lady approached the Spaniards, they noticed she wore a finely woven white shawl. They described her as beautiful, graceful, and self-assured.

This flourish of chiefly power deeply impressed the Spaniards, just as the Cofitachequis had intended. The Cofitachequis were participants in what archaeologists have dubbed "Mississippian culture," a tradition that thrived from roughly A.D. 1000 to 1600. Although Mississippian culture was less pronounced in certain areas (including portions of what is now South Carolina), the tradition dominated much of the Southeast, changing the lifestyle of nearly all its inhabitants. Before the Mississippian era, Native southerners lived in smaller tribal societies and relied on a wide variety of gathered and cultivated plants as well as deer, fish, and small game for their subsistence. With the dawn of the Mississippian era came a new sort of political and social organization—chiefdoms. These regional, hierarchically structured polities emerged at the same time that southern Indians began to rely on a single crop, corn, for up to 70 percent of their caloric needs, on a large scale. Clearly, the trends toward political centralization and agricultural production were linked, and lineages likely rose to power through securing access to surplus foodstuffs.⁴

Atop Mississippians' social and political order were chiefs, who reigned by virtue of their birth into the highest-ranking lineage. These lineages were closely associated with the sacred, which gave their members a sort of divine right to rule. Evidence from throughout the region suggests that Mississippians believed their chiefs to be descendants of the Sun, a deity of great importance to these agricultural people. A French chronicler described the following ritual linking chiefs to celestial power.

The Sun is the principal object of veneration to these people; as they cannot conceive of anything which can be above this heavenly body, nothing else appears to them more worthy of their homage. It is for the same reason that the great Chief of this Nation, who knows nothing on earth more dignified than himself, takes the title of brother of the Sun. . . . To enable them better to converse together, they raise a mound of artificial soil, on which they build his cabin, which is of the same construction as the Temple. The door fronts the East, and every morning the great Chief honors by his presence the rising of his elder brother [the Sun], and

salutes him with many howlings as soon as he appears above the horizon. Then he gives orders that they shall light his calumet; he makes him an offering of the first three puffs which he draws; afterward raising his hand above his head, and turning from the East to the West, he shows him the direction which he must take in his course.⁵

As this account reveals, Mississippian chiefs used monumental architecture, including large earthen mounds, as well as esoteric rituals to confirm their relationship to the sacred. Additionally, by controlling external trade, chiefs secured access to rare and beautiful things—finely crafted jewelry, ornamental weapons, and valuable raw materials. Chiefs either displayed these goods or gave them away to allies and supporters to further their own social and political capital. Sumptuary rules also set Mississippian chiefs apart from nonelites; when the Cofitachequis carried their chief on a litter, they literally elevated her above all others.⁶

Early historical records indicate that Mississippian chiefs were usually men, and, as already mentioned, Mississippian chiefs were born rather than made. Significantly, Native southerners traced their ancestry exclusively through their mothers' bloodlines. In contrast to Europeans, who emphasized paternity rather than maternity, southern Indians did not count their fathers as blood relatives. Their matrilineal kinship system made women rather than men central figures in reckoning descent. Native southern women traditionally controlled agricultural production, farming family plots with other female relatives. Matrilineal descent and agricultural production empowered southern Indian women, who dominated the household and provided most of its sustenance. Still, although Native southern women may have used their power as creators and sustainers of life to influence the political decisions of their male relatives, they rarely enjoyed direct rule. Usually, the office of chief passed from uncle to maternal nephew.⁷

The Lady of Cofitachequi's rule demonstrates, however, that manhood was not requisite for Mississippian chiefs. She commanded great power across the Carolinas and dominated subordinate chiefdoms controlled by men. Neither historical nor archaeological data offer any explanation of how she rose to power. It may be that the Lady was the only legitimate heir in her generation. In fact, the de Soto chroniclers documented a recent pestilence in the province that had carried off a great many souls; perhaps male heirs were among the dead. Other evidence suggests that women chiefs were more prevalent among chiefdoms in the Carolinas than elsewhere in the Southeast. Juan Pardo, a Spaniard who explored the area from 1566 to 1568, met with a number of women chiefs. From a town near modern Salisbury, North Carolina, a woman

ruled Guatari, maintaining control over thirty-nine lesser chiefs. At Guatari, Pardo also encountered a woman *orata*—ruler of a village. Not far away, at Joara, just north of modern Morganton, North Carolina, Pardo dealt with not only a male ruler but also an older woman whom he also called a *cacica*, meaning “woman chief.”⁸

When the Lady of Cofitachequi met de Soto, she greeted him through an interpreter, saying she hoped he had come in goodwill. The Lady’s warm greeting suggests that she thought of de Soto as an important visiting dignitary. As de Soto traveled throughout the American South, Mississippian chiefs adopted a number of strategies for dealing with the unexpected arrival of six hundred armed Spaniards: some fled their towns; others tried to use threats or force to keep the soldiers away; still others, including the Lady, attempted to use their considerable political power and material resources to seal a friendly alliance with de Soto. Native southerners in general did not believe that the Spaniards possessed godlike power, and the Lady was no exception. But she clearly saw that they were militarily strong, and she had probably already heard that de Soto was quite willing to use force to secure his demands. Thus, she no doubt concluded that peace was the wisest course.

After greeting de Soto, the Lady placed a string of pearls around his neck and gave hides, blankets, meat, corn, and salt to his men. Among Native southerners, gift giving was far more than an economic transaction—it was a sign of peaceful intentions. When the Lady of Cofitachequi gave de Soto precious pearls, skins, and large stores of food, she sought to coax him into a peaceful alliance by creating bonds of obligation. Although de Soto and his men must have seemed quite foreign, the Lady attempted to incorporate them into her own world, drawing on long-standing diplomatic traditions.⁹

After this initial meeting, the regal Lady left the Spaniards feeling, as one chronicler recalled, “very gratified and charmed, both with her discretion and with her great beauty, which she had in extreme perfection.”¹⁰ As a woman, the Lady of Cofitachequi may have been a more effective cultural mediator than male chiefs. Among Native southerners, masculinity was intimately linked to warfare. Virtually all male children began to train for war at an early age; those who did not commonly took on women’s roles and occupied a special place in society as a third gender.¹¹ Dualism was (and is) pervasive in southern Indian cultures, especially with respect to gender roles. As such, masculinity was associated with war and femininity with peace. Although women warriors are not unknown in the annals of southern Indian history, they were rare.¹² More typically, Native women served as nonviolent mediators. In the eighteenth century, when Native diplomats made alliances with other nations, they typically

brought along several women as a sign of their peaceful intentions.¹³ Europeans also thought of Native women as less violent and threatening than their male counterparts and eagerly accepted them as translators, guides, and sexual partners. Women such as La Malinche in Mexico, Pocahontas in Virginia, Mary Musgrove in Georgia, and Molly Brant in New York acted as crucial mediators in colonial Euro-Indian relations. Indeed, the Lady of Cofitachequi's femininity disarmed the Spaniards. Several chroniclers mentioned her beauty, while another commented on her wit and intelligence, writing that the Spaniards were amazed "to hear such sensible and well-chosen words," especially from an Indian woman.¹⁴

In addition to her own province on the Wateree, the Lady, as a paramount chief, controlled other chiefdoms from the area near the middle of the Pee Dee River through the Carolina piedmont and into the mountains, perhaps even southward to the Atlantic coast.¹⁵ Of the dozens of rulers the Spaniards met during their four-year entrada across the Southeast, the Lady of Cofitachequi was among the most powerful. Through military conquest or strong-arm diplomacy, the Lady of Cofitachequi had gained control of weaker polities, which, as a result, owed her tribute in the form of food, animal skins, and perhaps even laborers. The Lady's subjects, strewn across the modern Carolinas, numbered in the thousands. Although most Native southerners, including inhabitants of Cofitachequi, broadly shared Mississippian culture, local traditions persisted. The paramount chiefdom of Cofitachequi itself was a multiethnic, multilingual polity. While the Lady's tongue was in the Muskogean language family (the most widespread among Native southerners), her subjects included speakers of Catawban and Cherokee languages.¹⁶

The Spaniards thought the Lady's land beautiful and bounteous. Although de Soto would never find the precious metals he so desperately wanted, Cofitachequi was otherwise an exquisitely rich land, abounding in walnuts, mulberries, deer, and—to the delight of the Spaniards—freshwater pearls. Eyeing the rich bottomlands of the Wateree, de Soto's men also speculated that Cofitachequi was quite an arable land, and some wished to remain behind and found a settlement there.¹⁷ Owing to rich environs and goods received from tributary chiefdoms, the people of Cofitachequi also seemed extraordinarily salubrious and gracious. Rodrigo Rangel, de Soto's personal secretary and one of four chroniclers of the expedition, remembered the Cofitachequis as the most beautiful people in the Southeast. He recalled, "All the Indians walked covered down to the feet with very excellent hides, very well tanned, and blankets of the land, and blankets of sable, and blankets of mountain lions[.] . . . [T]he people are very clean and very polite and naturally well developed."¹⁸ Another chroni-

cler, known simply as the Gentleman from Elvas, wrote, "The people were dark, well set up and proportioned, and more civilized than any who had been seen in the land . . . and all were shod and clothed."¹⁹ By "civilized," the Gentleman from Elvas meant that the Cofitachequis' lifestyle most closely resembled that of his own people; they lived in permanent villages, engaged in agriculture, possessed a centralized government, and respected an entrenched social hierarchy. Although neither Christian nor European, the Cofitachequis and their culture seemed intelligible, perhaps even respectable, to the Spaniards.

The Lady explained to the Spaniards that she did not reside at this town at the Mulberry site but was merely on a visit to discipline her subjects. Apparently, some elite men of the town had refused to pay her tribute, and the Lady had come to chastise them.²⁰ Like other Mississippian chiefs, the Lady's strategy for retaining her authority was to keep subjects in awe of her seemingly sacred power and, if necessary, use threats or force. She demanded her subjects provide her with the first of their harvests, which she then stored in a granary. The Lady could then distribute stores to visiting dignitaries, as she did with de Soto, or dole them out to her subjects during times of famine.

Understanding that the Spaniards sought precious things, the Lady took them to the temple of this principal town. During the Mississippian era, major towns throughout the Southeast included temples, usually built atop raised earthen mounds. These temples contained the remains of former chiefs and other members of ruling families as well as precious ceremonial objects. As the temples were the most sacred places in the towns, access to them was restricted to chiefs, religious officials, and guards. And yet the Lady allowed de Soto and other high-ranking Spanish officials to enter. Although the Lady's motives are unclear, she was probably attempting to impress the Spaniards with her wealth and simultaneously placate them with treasures. Significantly, this was not the Lady's own temple, which was at Talimeco, but rather that of her unruly subjects. Thus, the bones that rested at the Mulberry site's temple were not those of her own ancestors.

As the Lady expected, the temple's treasures greatly impressed de Soto and his men. Strewn across the bodies of the dead, the Spaniards saw many thousands of pearls. Greedily, the men began to seize pearls by the handful; in all, they collected roughly two hundred pounds of them.²¹ Unfazed, the Lady told them that these pearls were few in number compared to the riches of Talimeco.²² Additionally, the Spaniards found glass beads, rosaries, and Spanish axes, which they correctly concluded had come from the failed colony of a fellow Spaniard, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón. In 1526, Ayllón attempted to found a settlement, San Miguel de Gualdape, probably at Sapelo Sound, along the coast of what is now

Georgia.²³ Like many other early colonial ventures on mainland North America, San Miguel de Gualdape was a great disaster. Sapelo Sound offered only sterile soil, and settlers had little or no knowledge of agricultural practices suited for the landscape and climate of the American South. Starvation and disease quickly ensued, killing 450 out of the original 600 settlers. The survivors managed to sail back to Hispanola. The Cofitachequis may have obtained the Ayllón artifacts themselves through direct trade with the Spaniards. It is more likely, however, that Indian groups residing closer to Sapelo Sound obtained the axes, beads, and rosaries and then offered them as gifts or tribute to Cofitachequi. Regardless of how the artifacts came to rest in the Lady's temple, the chief and her people considered these foreign objects to be rare, exotic, and perhaps even powerful.

Beads and steel axes were not the only evidence of contact with Ayllón's failed colony; epidemic disease had also recently visited Cofitachequi. Many settlers at San Miguel de Gualdape had died of a disease or diseases not specified in historical documents. Whether smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, malaria, or some other Old World disease, the pestilence was probably a new one to Native southerners. To make matters worse, waves of several diseases may have hit simultaneously. Europeans and Africans gained a measure of immunity to such diseases through their mothers' antibodies or their own exposure in childhood, but American Indians had no such acquired immunity to these "virgin soil epidemics." Scholars estimate that such epidemics killed up to 90 percent of all American Indians within the first 150 years of exposure.²⁴

The people of Cofitachequi told members of the de Soto expedition that pestilence had recently visited them. According to the Gentleman from Elvas, "Within the compass of a league and a half league were large uninhabited towns, choked with vegetation, which looked as though no people had inhabited them for some time."²⁵ Another chronicler, citing eyewitness Alonso Priego de Carmona, asserted that plague had depopulated Talimeco and that the Spaniards found four charnel houses full of bodies there.²⁶ As debilitating as this pestilence had been, it did not destroy the Cofitachequis, perhaps because they adopted a quarantine strategy, abandoning plague-ravaged towns.²⁷

After a few days of hosting the hungry, demanding Spaniards, the Lady abruptly disappeared. Although initially she had given generously of her food stores, the Lady apparently realized that the Spanish army—over six hundred strong—threatened to rob the chiefdom of all its supplies. Abandoning her former strategy of allying with de Soto, the Lady now attempted to cut ties with him. She correctly surmised that de Soto could only supply his army through securing massive stores of resources, and he could only gain access to such re-

sources through her. Thus, the Lady probably reasoned that without her aid, the Spaniards' hunger would drive them to seek out another chiefdom.

Indeed, after the Lady's departure, de Soto's army was forced to procure food in other ways; officer Baltasar de Gallegos rode to a tributary town and stole its stores of dried corn.²⁸ As he pillaged his way across the Southeast, de Soto also made a practice of pressuring chiefs to give him guides, burden bearers, and sex slaves. The Gentleman from Elvas believed that the Lady ran away to avoid "giving guides or *tamemes* [burden bearers] for carrying because of offenses committed against the Indians by the Christians."²⁹ In any case, the Lady was clearly disgusted with the Spaniards' behavior and wished to rid her chiefdom of them as quickly as possible.

In the Lady's absence, de Soto and his army ranged across her land, looking for food and precious metals. As they did so, according to chronicler Garcilasso de la Vega, the Spaniards found "many Indians native to other provinces who were held in slavery."³⁰ The Cofitachequis lived in a strictly ranked society, at the bottom of which were enslaved Indians from other chiefdoms. During the Mississippian era, in addition to exchanging material goods when making or confirming alliances, chiefs sometimes also made gifts of captives, so subordinate chiefs may have given some of the slaves to the Lady.³¹ Most of the enslaved Indians, however, were probably enemies taken during wartime.

Mississippian chiefs directed warfare, which they used not to conquer territory but to control the material resources and labor of other chiefdoms. Warfare came in two forms: small surprise attacks and large-scale battles. Either way, chiefs sought to inflict great damage in a short amount of time on their enemies, who would then agree to submit to their authority. Archaeological and historical records indicate that the Cofitachequis had fought the Ocutes for at least several generations prior to de Soto's arrival. The chiefdom of Ocute lay in the Oconee River Valley roughly two hundred miles west of Cofitachequi. Since about A.D. 1450, the land between the chiefdoms—including the Savannah, Saluda, and Broad river valleys—had been completely depopulated. War rendered this otherwise quite habitable country a no-man's-land. When de Soto passed through Ocute in the spring of 1540, he demanded that guides show him the way to Cofitachequi, but, as chronicler Luys Hernandez de Biedma recorded,

[t]hey told us that there was no road by which to go, since they had no dealings with one another because they were at war; sometimes when they came to make war on one another, they passed through hidden and secret places where they would not be detected, and they spent twenty or twenty-two days on the road and ate only herbs and some toasted corn that they brought.³²

Doubtless, among the enslaved Indians at Cofitachequi were captured warriors of Ocute who dared to venture too close to the lands of their powerful enemy.

Like other spoils of war, captives fell under the purview of chiefs. These captives endured a variety of fates: torture, adoption, hard labor. One de Soto chronicler reported that enslaved Indians worked the agricultural fields at Cofitachequi: "As a safeguard against their running away, they disabled them in one foot, cutting the nerves above the instep where the foot joins the leg, or just above the heel. They held them in this perpetual and inhuman bondage in the interior of the country away from the frontiers, making use of them to cultivate the soil and in other servile employments." Maiming captives to prevent escape seems to have been fairly widespread among Mississippians, and the practice endured among Native Carolinians until the eighteenth century.³³

In the sixteenth century, shipwrecked Spaniards were among those enslaved by Mississippian elites, and those who lived to tell their tales reported that labor was at times extremely arduous. Juan Ortiz, who had been a member of Panfilo de Narvaéz's failed 1528 expedition, lived for a decade as a captive of two Floridian chiefs, Ozita and Mocozo. Under Ozita, Juan Ortiz fetched wood and water for the townspeople during the day and guarded a charnel house full of decaying bodies at night.³⁴ Fortunately for him and for the de Soto expedition, Ortiz found them soon after their 1539 landing near modern Tampa Bay and thereafter acted as a translator, having mastered two Native languages during his captivity. Chiefs also retained slaves as domestic servants. The Lady of Cofitachequi commanded a retinue of female slaves, who always accompanied her and tended to her personal needs.³⁵ When Mississippian chiefs died, a retinue of dependents, including slaves, typically accompanied them into the afterlife.³⁶

While the Lady was in hiding, the Spaniards entered her temple at Talimeco, a Muskogean place-name meaning "chief's town."³⁷ Rodrigo Rangel thought Talimeco beautifully situated: "This town has very good savannahs and a fine river, and forests of walnuts and oak, pines, evergreen oaks and groves of sweetgum, and many cedars."³⁸ Located about four miles upstream from the Mulberry site, Talimeco was clearly a planned town with a central ceremonial center and carefully arranged houses.³⁹ It was, however, depopulated at the time, probably due to the recent wave of epidemic disease.

A number of tall, flat-topped earthen mounds dominated the landscape at Talimeco. Atop the largest mound at Talimeco, the Spaniards saw the great house of the Lady. Her temple crowned the top of another impressive mound. Captain Gonzalo Silvestre, a veteran soldier later stationed in Peru, told an interviewer that this temple "was among the grandest and most wonderful of all

the things that he had seen in the New World." The roof was constructed of cane woven so tightly that it was waterproof; skeins of marine shells and festooned pearls decorated the exterior. Inside, as Silvestre recalled, "it was large being more than a hundred paces long and forty wide; the walls were high in keeping with the size of the room." Six finely carved warrior effigies guarded each side of the temple door. In addition to more shells and pearls, the Spaniards found plumes of colorful feathers, dressed skins and mantles of albino deer, and finely crafted shields made from buffalo hide—rare and beautiful things designed to enhance the prestige of the ruling lineage. The temple also contained the corporal remains of the Lady's ancestors, which rested in chests along the wall. Each chest was accompanied by a wooden statue depicting the individual in life.⁴⁰ When the Spaniards later asked the people of Cofitachequi about the "ostentation and pomp" of the temple they replied, according to Garcilasso de la Vega, that "the lords of that kingdom, especially those of that province and of others that they would see beyond, regarded the ornateness and magnificence of their burial places as the greatest [sign of] their dignity, and thus they endeavored to embellish them with all the arms and wealth they could, as they had seen in that temple."⁴¹

After roughly ten days, de Soto and his men had exhausted the chiefdom's food stores, and they determined to go into the Appalachians, which were rumored to contain gold.⁴² Predictably, de Soto had no intentions of leaving peacefully. He ordered his men to find and capture the Lady of Cofitachequi, which they did. Because de Soto knew that the Lady was a paramount chief who controlled many others, he forced her to join the expedition so that she could order tributaries to provide the Spaniards with food. Against her will, the Lady went along. She did, however, manage to bring a number of enslaved women to serve her as she traveled.

The expedition marched from Cofitachequi's seat on the Wateree due northwest toward the headwaters of the Catawba River. De Soto's strategy worked; as one chronicler noted, "We traversed her lands for a hundred leagues, in which, as we saw, she was very well obeyed, for all the Indians did with great efficiency and diligence what she ordered of them."⁴³

As the expedition left the foothill town of Joara, the Lady hatched a plot to escape. Located on the upper Catawba, just north of modern Morganton, North Carolina, Joara marked the northernmost reaches of the Lady's dominion.⁴⁴ She knew she had to break away from the Spaniards before she reached lands controlled by other chiefs, who might well have been her enemies. A few days into the mountains, near the town of Guasili, the Lady told the Spaniards she needed "to attend to her necessities." She went into the woods, and three

enslaved women followed with her baggage. Together, the women managed to escape back to Joara, where the Lady's subjects gave her succor.⁴⁵ Interestingly, several members of the expedition also deserted around this time. The deserters included several enslaved men of West Indian and African descent, who probably offered to aid the Lady in return for her protection. One who later rejoined the expedition told the others that the Lady had taken one former slave as her lover, and that the two planned to return to her capital.⁴⁶

The Lady's escape from the Spaniards at Guasili marks her final appearance in the historical record. She probably returned to Talimeco and continued to rule her chiefdom. Assuming that the Lady retained power, she would have faced difficult times. The Spaniards had drained much of Cofitachequi's food stores, and a severe drought plagued the area from 1565 to 1575. In 1566, the Spaniards established Santa Elena, the first capital of La Florida, at Port Royal Sound. Goods, people, and germs from throughout the Atlantic World circulated in Santa Elena, which doubtlessly facilitated further spread of Old World diseases among the South's Native peoples.

Yet, the chiefdom of Cofitachequi endured. In 1670, the year English colonists founded Charleston (originally called Charles Towne or Charlestown), diplomat Henry Woodward visited Cofitachequi on behalf of the Carolinians. At that time, Cofitachequi still maintained control over a considerable portion of South Carolina's piedmont and coastal plain. A male chief, called "Emperor" by Woodward, had succeeded to Cofitachequi's highest office. Within the next thirty years, however, the chiefdom disintegrated. Like other Mississippian chiefdoms, Cofitachequi could not withstand the disease and dislocation wrought by European colonialism. Fewer inhabitants and decreased agricultural production led to the downfall of the chiefdoms, which were replaced by the more egalitarian Native confederacies of the eighteenth century—the Catawba, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole.⁴⁷

The Lady of Cofitachequi made only a brief appearance in historical records, but her story illustrates the nature of gender relations and political power among Native southerners. Because political power in chiefdoms ultimately flowed from rank, not gender, women could and did succeed to the highest offices of their lands. Though her gender made the Lady of Cofitachequi rather extraordinary among Mississippian chiefs, she clearly wielded political power effectively, for she maintained control of a sprawling paramount chiefdom. However, as chiefdoms crumbled in the seventeenth century and Native societies instead began organizing themselves as confederacies, women no longer joined the ranks of political leaders. Southern Indian women retained their traditional authority within the home and in clan affairs, but they did not hold

government offices. In large part, American Indians formed these confederacies to protect their people from ambitious colonial powers and later the fiercely expansionistic United States. Native confederacies, most notably the Cherokees, self-consciously styled aspects of their governing bodies after Euro-Americans, who maintained an intensely patriarchal social and political culture. The twentieth century, however, saw the return of women chiefs among Native southerners. In 1967, the Seminoles of Florida elected Betty Mae Jumper head of their tribal council. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (whose ancestors had been forcibly removed from the South in the 1830s) voted Wilma Mankiller principal chief in 1985. Ten years later, the Eastern Band of Cherokees chose Joyce Dugan as their chief. Although twentieth-century liberalism accounts for part of these women's rise to leadership, women chiefs are nothing new among Native southerners. Despite centuries of disease, war, and cultural imperialism, the descendants of Mississippian chiefdoms and their distinctive gender relations endure to the present.

NOTES

1. Rodrigo Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest and Discovery of Hernando de Soto by Rodrigo Rangel," trans. John E. Worth, in *The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543*, ed. Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight Jr., Edward C. Moore, 2 vols. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 1:275; Charles M. Hudson, *Knights of Spain, Warriors of the Sun: Hernando de Soto and the South's Ancient Chiefdoms* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 177-78; Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," trans. James Alexander Robertson, in *De Soto Chronicles*, 1:82-83; Garcilasso de la Vega, "La Florida by the Inca, Garcilasso de la Vega," trans. Charmion Shelby, in *De Soto Chronicles*, 2:249.

2. Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 173-74.

3. The four chroniclers of the de Soto expedition disagree on whether the Lady of Cofitachequi was actually the ruler of the chiefdom. Perico, a Native Floridian boy, told them that the Lady's aunt was actually the chiefdom's ruler. However, the Portuguese Gentleman from Elvas and Rodrigo Rangel, de Soto's secretary and the most reliable source for the expedition, assert that the Lady was in fact the chief (Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 278; Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 82; Luys Hernandez de Biedma, "Relation of the Island of Florida," trans. John E. Worth, in *De Soto Chronicles*, 1:231; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 175).

4. A comprehensive discussion of research on the Mississippian era is beyond the scope of this essay, but for more information, see Charles M. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 77-96, 122-68, and John F. Scarry, "The Late Prehistoric Southeast," in *The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South*, ed. Charles M. Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 17-35.

5. Mathurin le Petit to Père d'Avaujour, July 12, 1730, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, vol. 68, ed. Reuben Thwaites Gold (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1900), 127.

6. F. Kent Reilly III, "People of Earth, People of Sky: Visualizing the Sacred in Native American Art of the Mississippian Period," in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 125–37; Susan C. Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians: Feathered Serpents and Winged Beings* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 140; Lewis H. Larson Jr., "The Etowah Site," in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, Artifacts and Analysis: The Cottonlandia Conference*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 139–41; David H. Dye, "Art, Ritual, and Chiefly Warfare in the Mississippian World," in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand*, 196–98; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 17.

7. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, 185–88; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 14–17.

8. Juan de la Bandera, "The 'Long' Juan de la Bandera Relation," April 1, 1569, in *The Juan Pardo Expeditions: Exploration of the Carolinas and Tennessee, 1566–1568*, trans. Paul E. Hoffman, ed. Charles M. Hudson (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 62, 262–63.

9. David J. Hally and Marvin T. Smith, "Chiefly Behavior: Evidence from Sixteenth Century Spanish Accounts," in *Lords of the Southeast: Social Inequality and the Native Elites of Southeastern North America*, ed. Alex W. Barker and Timothy R. Pauketat (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1992), 99–109; David H. Dye, "Feasting with the Enemy: Mississippian Warfare and Prestige-Good Circulation," in *Native American Interactions: Multiscalar Analyses and Interpretations in the Eastern Woodlands*, ed. Michael S. Nassaney and Kenneth E. Sassaman (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 289–316.

10. Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 278; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 177–78; Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 82–83; Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 288.

11. Early French explorers called these people berdache. Native American societies commonly included a third gender or transgender individuals. See, for example, Rene Goulaine de Laudonnière, *Three Voyages*, trans. Charles E. Bennett (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 13.

12. Perhaps the most famous in the Southeast was Nancy Ward, war woman of the Cherokees (Theda Perdue, "Nancy Ward," in *Portraits of American Women*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Ben Barker Benfield [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991], 83–100).

13. Greg O'Brien, "The Conquerer Meets the Unconquered: Negotiating Cultural Boundaries on the Post-Revolutionary Southern Frontier," *Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (2001): 39–72.

14. Quotation from Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 287; Clara Sue Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators," *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 2 (1992): 97–107.

15. Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 182–84.

16. Karen M. Booker, Charles M. Hudson, and Robert L. Rankin, "Place Name Identification and Multilingualism in the Sixteenth-Century Southeast," *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 4 (1992): 399–451.

17. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 83.

18. Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 278–79.

19. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 83.

20. *Ibid.*, 86.

21. Chroniclers' estimates vary, ranging from 6.5 to 9 arrobas (between 160 and 250 pounds) (Biedma, "Relation of the Island of Florida," 231; Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 279).

22. Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 280.

23. *Ibid.*, 279–80. For a discussion of San Miguel de Gualdape's location, see Paul E. Hoffman, "Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón's Discovery and Colony," in *The Forgotten Centuries*, 43–46.

24. Alfred W. Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1976): 289–99; Henry F. Dobyns, *The Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).
25. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 83.
26. Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 306.
27. Paul Kelton, "Avoiding the Smallpox Spirits: Colonial Epidemics and Southeastern Indian Survival," *Ethnohistory* 51, no. 1 (2004): 45–71.
28. Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 280.
29. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 85.
30. Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 312.
31. Dye, "Feasting with the Enemy."
32. Biedma, "Relation of the Island of Florida," 229. See also Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 182–83.
33. Spaniards also saw such captives in the Mississippi River Valley. Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 312, 400. For the eighteenth-century Carolina captives, see John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, ed. Hugh Talmage Lefler (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 59, 208.
34. Hudson provides a more detailed account of Ortiz's captivity in *Knights of Spain*, 78–85.
35. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 87.
36. John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911), 100–105; George R. Milner, *The Cahokia Chiefdom: The Archaeology of a Mississippian Society* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 83–84, 136, 160–61; Thomas E. Emerson, *Cahokia and the Archaeology of Power* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 228; Melvin L. Fowler, Jerome Rose, Barbara Vander Leest, and Steven R. Ahler, *The Mound 72 Area: Dedicated and Sacred Space in Early Cahokia* (Springfield: Illinois State Museum Society, 1999).
37. Booker, Hudson, and Rankin, "Place Name Identification," 418–19; Biedma, "Relation of the Island of Florida," 230–31.
38. Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 280.
39. Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 178; Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 297.
40. Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 298–306; Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 280.
41. Garcilasso, "La Florida by the Inca," 306.
42. Biedma, "Relation of the Island of Florida," 231.
43. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 86.
44. Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 191–92.
45. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 87; *The Juan Pardo Expeditions*, 90.
46. Gentleman from Elvas, "The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas," 87; Rangel, "Account of the Northern Conquest," 282; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 191–92.
47. Chester B. DePratter, "The Chiefdom of Cofitachequi," in *The Forgotten Centuries*, 197–226; Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 417–40.