

Pecos River Spaniard Soldiers Pictograph (RING BIT SHELTER, 41VV339)

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(photo Johnny Gurley)

Introduction

A large pictographic image on a wall facing the Lower Pecos River, near the Rio Grande River, Texas, is very likely a depiction story of the Lower Pecos Indians as they watched a scouting party from the Gaspar Castaño de Sosa Expedition on their 1590 transit through the area. Although the Castaño de Sosa Expedition was not officially a Conquistador expedition, it was at the end of that period, and his soldiers were dressed and carrying weapons in the same manner as the Conquistador expeditions of only a decade earlier.

Area Description

This pictograph sits along a long line of rock walls and overhangs 50 feet above the Lower Pecos River, approximately 20 miles up from the junction of the Pecos and Rio Grande Rivers. The area is extremely rugged, with barren and rocky hills rising another 350 feet on both sides. Members of the Concho Valley and Iraan Archeological Societies visited this site in 2010 and 2016. The site was archeologically recorded in 1966 and again in 1986. ¹



2010 Archeological Reconnaissance (photos C.A. Maedgen)



Lower Pecos River (photo C.A. Maedgen)

Pictograph Details



(photos Johnny Gurley)

The pictograph appears to be a picture story showing two mounted Spaniard soldiers holding the well-known Spanish pike and looking down. An indication that this depiction is probably the transitional period from Conquistador to Spanish colonization is the hats being worn. The hats are the Spanish Bolero rather than the metal helmet with metal comb on top which were specifically Conquistador period. The namesake for this site (Ring Bit Shelter) also comes from the Spanish ring bits on the horses.

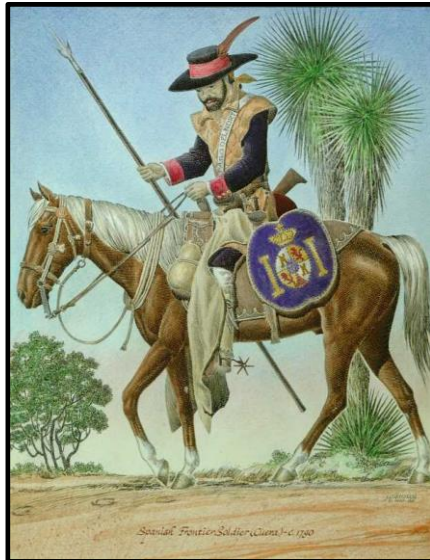




Spanish Bolero

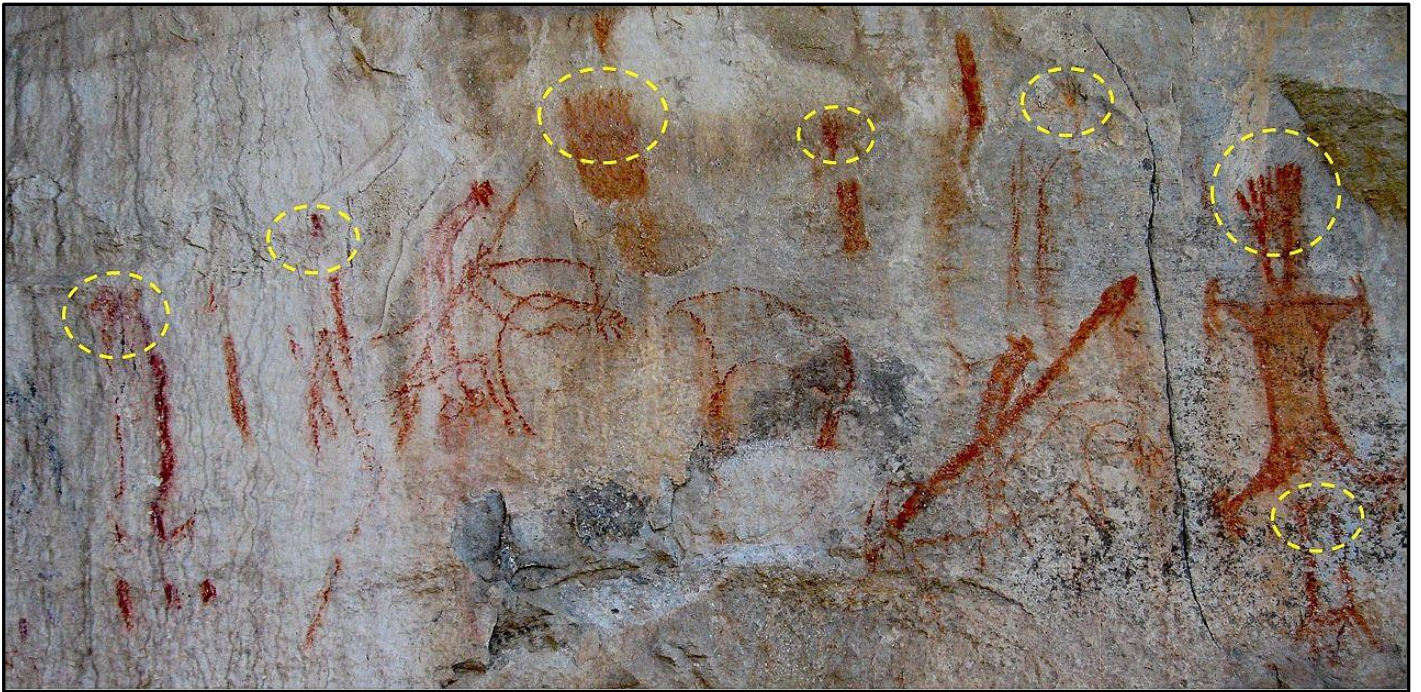


Spanish Ring Bit



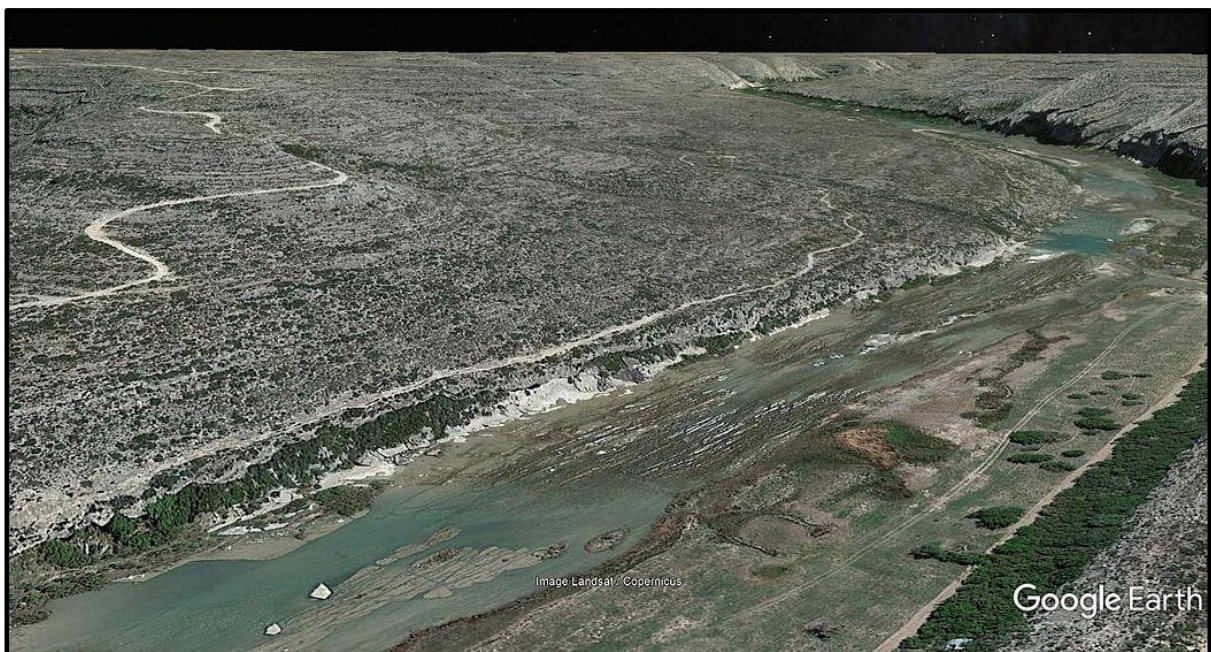
Spanish Cavalry Pike, Harquebus, and Agarda Shield

In between the two riders is what appears to be a bison. The head is somewhat washed out. To the far right is the quite obvious image of an Indian, probably with head feathers. There are many other images in various stages of weathering. Still, by using the details of the Indian's head, you can see that the weathered images are also Indians, which appear to surround the mounted soldiers. The depiction appears to indicate that the soldiers are not aware of the Indians that are watching them.



Weathered images of additional Indians

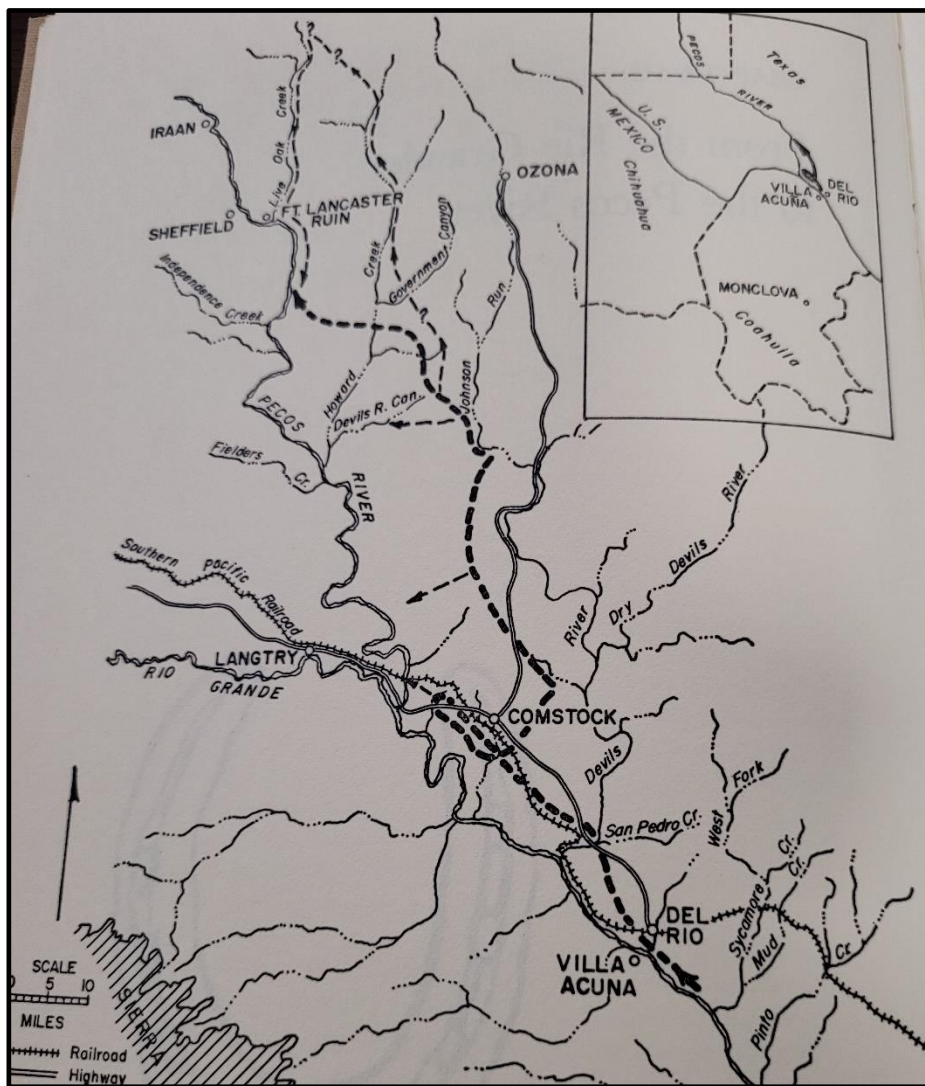
Since the bison would not be between the two mounted soldiers looking down, it is likely this is an association image to indicate the soldiers are watching a bison herd far below, probably in the river basin. The Pecos River was known to have been a bison migration route through the Pecos River basin during the 16th Century. ²



Lower Pecos River Basin

The Gaspar Castaño de Sosa Expedition And The Lower Pecos River

Gaspar Castaño de Sosa was a Lieutenant Governor of a small area in northern Mexico. Unable to obtain official permission for the expedition and fearing he would be arrested for corruption as his predecessor was, he departed without permission on July 27, 1590, from Almadén (now Monclova, Coahuila), intending to settle in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Thus, his journey had characteristics of both a flight from prosecution and exploration. Accompanying de Sosa were the 170 Spanish inhabitants of the town, presumably including most or all of the converted settlers and his soldiers. The prospective settlers took with them all their livestock and carried their possessions in a slow-moving wagon train. Unlike most Conquistador expeditions, no Catholic priests accompanied this expedition. De Sosa crossed the Rio Grande River in the current Del Rio area in October and proceeded to move north up the Pecos River on the east side.³



Route Of Gaspar Castaño de Sosa (Schroeder and Matson)

The route and reported experiences come from a personal journal detailed in the Schroeder, Matson book, 'A Colony On The Move.' The expedition scouts initially found the Pecos River while the caravan was about 8 miles to the east, close to what is now Comstock, Texas. The report from the scouts was that there was no way they could cross. So, from there, they headed northeast toward the Pecos River. It is reasonable that this massive caravan of some 200 personnel and many carts, wagons, and livestock would have been known to all the Indians of the area.

After finding the Devils River also inaccessible to reach water due to its sheer cliffs the expedition turned northwest and after a few days the scouts were once again ordered to find the Pecos River, which they did. They again reported that it was not only inaccessible, but the wagons could never get there. So they continued in a north-northwest direction, trying to find the easiest way possible and always searching for water. The scouts were again ordered to find the Pecos for a third time, but this time, they could not find it. They were probably close, but a bend in the river likely kept them from finding it. So, the caravan continued in a northwesterly direction. On the fourth attempt, the scouts found the river north of the junction of Independence Creek, and this time, there was reasonable access to the river. They then went along the river on the east side and continued heading north. The next place they found for respite was in the area of Oak Creek, now the area of old Fort Lancaster. (Schroeder, Matson)

The pictograph location is about 10 miles above the generalized location the scouts reported they found the river for the second time. This is based on the caravan movement analysis by the authors Schroeder and Matson, and our own analysis concurs with these possible scouting routes. This is not the only pictograph wall in the area; the archeology groups saw many others amongst the overhangs all along the river. But this was the only one of this type. The many pictographs indicate there was a substantial population of Indians that were using the river and its side canyons as their semi-permanent hunting and gathering area. Just north of the pictograph is a small canyon with a still active spring-fed stream, an oasis area. These Indians were undoubtedly watching the expedition and its scouting parties the entire time. In fact, at one point, while in the area of the Devils River, the caravan came across a large pool of water with what they identified as Indian trails. The scouts were ordered to follow them to see if they could find the Indians to act as guides. The authors comment that they believe the Indians in question were likely the "Coahuiltecan group," which were known to travel into the area for their hunting and gathering. There is no further account of ever finding these Indians.

Coahuiltecan Indians

During the Spanish colonial period, hundreds of small, autonomous, distinctively named Indian groups that lived by hunting and gathering were displaced from their traditional territories by Spaniards who were advancing from the south. As the Spaniards arrived, displaced Indians retreated northward, with some moving to the east and west. Mexican linguists designated some Indian groups as Coahuilteco, believing they may have spoken various dialects of a language in Coahuila and Texas. As additional language samples became known for the region, linguists concluded that these were related to Coahuilteco and added them to a Coahuiltecan family. The Coahuiltecan region thus includes southern Texas, northeastern Coahuila, and much of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. ⁴

In 1580, the governor of Nuevo León, near current Laredo, and a gang of "renegades who acknowledged neither God nor King", began conducting regular slave raids to capture Coahuiltecan Indians along the Rio Grande. Conflicts between the Coahuiltecan peoples and the Spaniards continued throughout the 17th century. The Spanish replaced illegal slavery by forcing the Indians to move into the Spanish labor system. ⁵ The Spanish labor system was called the Encomienda System and was established by the Spanish Crown in the 1500s. It rewarded Spanish explorers, conquistadors, and military men with land in the New World. But they didn't just get the land, they got the labor of the people living on the land as well. So, this was essentially a legal form of slavery, sanctioned by the church. ⁶

This is very likely why many Indians along the Rio Grande River moved up into the inaccessible country of the Lower Pecos River. It is also the likely reason the Indians never made contact with the Spaniards passing through the area.

Conclusion

The pictograph is undoubtedly of Spaniard soldiers carrying the well-known pikes. The Gaspar Castaño de Sosa caravan was the only expedition with conquistador-like soldiers to attempt passing through the incredibly difficult Lower Pecos River area. The only reason they chose to pass through this area instead of the typical route up the Rio Grande was that de Sosa was essentially in flight from prosecution.

The large number of pictographs along the Lower Pecos River indicates a substantial number of Indian groups living in the side canyons all along the river. These canyons provided shelters, clean water, plant foods, animals, and fish for hunting. Additionally, this period was when bison were known to still travel up and down the river basin during their migrations. All of these would have been excellent sources for the Indians' survival in such an otherwise desolate area. They likely had a very good situational awareness of any group passing through their territory and watched them closely without revealing themselves. This pictograph is their story of this event drawn in picture and still displayed on a hidden shelter wall far from the modern world.



A Colony On The Move (Schroeder, Matson)

Thank you to James Everett, Former President of the Texas Archeological Society, and to Marybeth Tomka and Lauren Bussiere from TARL for their assistance in locating the trinomial for this site.

ENDNOTES

¹ Texas Archeological Research Laboratory archive database, University Of Texas, Austin, ATLAS Numbers 9465033901, 9465033902, 9465033999

² Turpin, Solveig, ETHNOHISTORIC OBSERVATIONS OF BISON IN THE LOWER PECOS RIVER REGION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE, Plains Anthropologist, Vol. 32, No. 118 (November 1987), pp. 424-429, Taylor & Francis, Ltd. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25668719>

³ Schroeder, Albert H. and Matson, Dan S., 'A Colony On The Move: Gaspar Castano de Sosa's Journal, 1590-1591,' School Of American Research, 1965

Castaño de Sosa, Gaspar, Texas State Historical Association
<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/castano-de-sosa-gaspar>

Temkin, Samuel, Gaspar Castaño de Sosa's "Illegal" Entrada: A Historical Revision, New Mexico Historical Review, Vol 85, 2010 <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol85/iss3/3/>

⁴ Coahuiltecan Indians, Texas State Historical Association Handbook, 2019
<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/coahuiltecan-indians>

⁵ Salinas, Martin. Indigenous people of the Rio Grande Delta. Austin: U of TX Press, 1990, pp. 15-16

⁶ Encomienda System, Apprend website
<https://apprend.io/apush/period-1/encomendia-system-apush/>