DEADLY PIGS

In 1539, a few years after the fall of the Incan empire, a Spanish adventurer named Hernando de Soto landed in Florida with 600 soldiers, 200 horses, and 300 pigs. For four years, his forces wandered through what is now the American South, from the Carolinas to Texas. The Spanish were looking for gold. They didn't find any, and they wrecked everything they touched.

During their wanderings, de Soto and his followers tortured, enslaved, and killed countless Indians. However, the worst thing they did, some researchers say, was to bring those pigs.

Pigs were completely new to the Americas, but they were as important to the Spanish conquistadors as horses. Lean, hungry pigs circled the traveling troops, who fed them garbage and then killed them for meat. Pigs carry diseases, including anthrax, tuberculosis, and trichinosis, which can attack humans. Pigs can also infect other animals, such as the deer and turkey that roamed the American forests. Only a few of de Soto's pigs would have had to wander off to infect the whole forest with disease, putting Native American hunters at risk.

When de Soto crossed the Mississippi River, he found the area “thickly set with great towns” built by the Indians. More than a century later, when French explorers passed through the same region, they found only a few villages scattered along the riverbank. What had happened? One possibility is that de Soto's pigs let loose epidemics of disease that wiped out thriving cultures.

One of these cultures was the Caddo, who lived on what is now the border between Arkansas and Texas. Before de Soto, the Caddo built large public monuments such as plazas and platforms. Afterward, the survivors dug community cemeteries.

They needed those cemeteries because they were dying in great numbers. One archaeologist has estimated that there were some 200,000 Caddo before de Soto's disastrous journey through the South. A century or so later, there were about 8,500. The Caddoan population had dropped by almost 96 percent.