HERNANDO DE SOTO

Hernando de Soto was a Spanish conquistador who participated in the conquest of Panama, Nicaragua, and Peru. He was the first European to explore Florida and the southeastern United States.

De Soto was born around 1500 in Spain’s Extremadura region. The region was poor, and many young men entered military service as a means to get out and earn a living. Other famous conquistadors from the Extremadura include Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

In 1514, de Soto left Spain for Peru. In 1516, he accompanied Francisco Hernández de Córdova on the latter’s exploration and colonization of Nicaragua and Honduras. De Soto earned a reputation for military skill, but also for brutality towards the indigenous population.

De Soto became wealthy through the slave trade, but he was not content with this. In 1532, he accompanied Francisco Pizarro to Peru. De Soto was the first European to speak to the Incan king Atahualpa. De Soto returned to Spain in 1536, a rich man thanks to his Incan gold. He was at the height of his success. He settled in Seville.

In 1538, he returned to the New World, in search of greater wealth. The Spanish king made him governor of Cuba and gave him the right to explore and colonize Florida. In May 1539, he landed on the west coast of Florida with about 700 men and 220 horses. Coronado was exploring the Pacific Coast and California at the same time, and de Soto wanted to be the first to discover gold, so he was under pressure.

They crossed the area that is now Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Their cruel treatment of the Native Americans made enemies of them. They fought battles with the Choctaw (in what is now Alabama) and Chickasaw tribes, losing most of their equipment and many Spanish men and horses. De Soto and his men were demoralized, but they continued their exploration. In 1541, they crossed the Mississippi River on rafts. They explored territory in what is now Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

They returned to the Mississippi after a hard winter. De Soto’s expedition had failed to find gold. He died on the banks of the Mississippi of a fever on May 21st, 1542. Of the 700 men who started the trip with de Soto, fewer than 350 made it back to Mexico.

The expedition had a lasting impact. It provided information about the region’s geography and inhabitants. The Spanish horses contributed to what became mustang herds in North America. Diseases brought by the explorers decimated local populations and changed local societies forever.
Answer the questions about HERNANDO DE SOTO

1. When was Hernando de Soto born?
   a. around 1400
   b. around 1500
   c. around 1515
   d. in 1542

2. What is he famous for?
   a. exploring Florida and the southeastern United States
   b. conquering the Aztec empire
   c. losing horses that became mustang herds
   d. befriending Incan king Atahualpa

3. When was de Soto at the height of his success?
   a. after his arrival in Peru in 1514
   b. after trading slaves
   c. after the conquest of Peru
   d. when he discovered the Mississippi in 1541

4. Why was de Soto in a hurry to explore Florida and the southeastern United States?
   a. He was greedy.
   b. The weather was humid.
   c. Native Americans were attacking his expedition.
   d. He wanted to find gold before Coronado.

De Soto and his men considered their expedition a failure because they found no gold. What were the actual results of the expedition? Would you call it a failure? Why or why not?

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Use complete sentences to answer the questions below.

1. Describe an experience or situation in your life that is similar to de Soto becoming wealthy, but still not being satisfied.

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2. From the way it is used in the article what do you think is the meaning of “demoralized”?

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3. What do you believe was the impact or result of de Soto’s greed for gold?

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4. Imagine yourself a soldier in de Soto’s failed expedition, looking for gold but not finding any. Describe what you would feel.

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5. What do you understand differently after reading about de Soto? In what situation might this new knowledge be useful?

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Answers to HERNANDO DE SOTO

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. d
5. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.

Short-answer:

1. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.
2. demoralized = downhearted, dejected, discouraged
3. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.
   Possible answer: it gave him ambition, motivated him to explore, made him brutal.
4. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.
5. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.