FACT AND FICTION IN THE QUEST FOR QUIVIRA

MICHAEL R. C. COULSON

There is within the scope of Historical Geography a very fascinating and little developed approach which considers the evaluation contemporary writers made of their geographic environment. People tend to think, write and explain their situation in terms of the understanding at the time. In course of time, the understanding develops, explanations change and the earlier contributions become outmoded.

One of the areas where we can follow the evolution of geographic concepts is that of the state of Kansas. First opened for American settlement in 1854, Kansas had become part of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, but even prior to that, present-day Kansas was a land well known and well trodden by Europeans. This is not to say that we have an excellent picture of the land at that time, for few explorers and Indian traders left written records or reports, but there were men who were familiar with this part of the continent. The name and concepts of Quivira appeared, evolved and were discarded prior to America's acquisition of the territory.

The earliest penetration into the region of present-day Kansas took place in 1541, with the expedition of Francis Vazquez Coronado. He sought and found the province of Quivira. Although penetration and knowledge of the country was very uneven and uncoordinated prior to the nineteenth century, the subject of Quivira provides a unifying theme. Quivira can be factually defined as the Plains Indian settlements visited by Coronado. Its location has been much debated, but the weight of evidence, textual and archaeological, favors Central Kansas, with villages "scattered north and east of the Great Bend between the Arkansas and Smoky Hill Rivers." In modern terms, this would include such towns as Lindsborg, Lyons and McPherson. The experience of a later explorer, Oñate, indicates that Quivira extended as far south and west as the neighborhood of present-day Wichita.

Quivira was a place, but it was also an idea. From the moment of its first mention to Europeans, there was the suggestion that it might be another Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), rich in gold and other precious metals. Such a possibility excited much speculation, particularly in Europe. We have, therefore, not only the reports by the explorers themselves, or primary documents, but also secondary sources—that is, general histories and trav-
The authors of these may never have visited the New World and had at best reached only the main centers of the continent.

When Coronado moved north from Mexico, in 1539, he had never heard of Quivira and his commission was to discover, claim for Spain and colonize an area called Cibola which is now identified with the Zuni pueblo district in New Mexico and which had been reported as being rich in gold. The tales proved to be unfounded. New hope and purpose appeared, however, when a Plains Indian was encountered who told the Spaniards of a golden city to the east, out across the Plains. Castañeda, who accompanied the expedition, records the story:

...he told them so many and such great things about the wealth of gold and silver in his country...6

...he also said that everyone had their ordinary dishes made of wrought plate and the jugs and bowls were of gold.7

On the basis of this information and with their Indian informant as guide, Coronado and his men marched out across the Plains. Several occurrences on the march suggested that all might not be well; their growing fears were confirmed on arrival at Quivira.

Neither gold, nor silver, nor any trace of either was found among these people. Their lord wore a copper plate on his neck and prized it highly.8

Or, in the words of Coronado himself,

...the guides...had described to me houses of stone with many stories: and not only are they not of stone, but of straw, but the people in them are as barbarous as all those I have seen and passed before this.9

Quivira, clearly, was no golden city. This expression of disillusionment reflected the heavy emphasis the Spanish placed on material wealth. Fortunately, disappointment did not dull Coronado's appreciation of the physical environment at Quivira, which impressed him considerably:

The country itself is the best I have ever seen for producing all the products of Spain, for besides the land itself being very fat and black and being very well-watered by the rivulets and springs and rivers, I found prunes like those of Spain and nuts and very good sweet grapes and mulberries.10

In view of the actual character of central Kansas, we may wonder at Coronado's enthusiasm, but we have to remember that he approached from the west, across the High Plains; the cultivated landscape in the more humid environment would contrast sharply with such a flat, dry, treeless expanse.

In 1542, the disappointed Coronado and his men returned to Mexico, having exposed the mythical quality of two "golden cities." Quivira was not revisited by the Spanish for sixty years. It might be expected that such unpromising reports would be followed by a lack of literary interest. This was far from the case, however, and a scant eight years later, we find reference...
Figure One: A map by Zaltieri, 1566. Quivira is placed far to the north and west of Coronado's discoveries, near, but not quite on, the west coast and the Strait of Anian. Zaltieri was the first cartographer to show a sea passage between America and Asia.

to Coronado's exploration in a general work on discoveries by Ramusio. Moreover, the year following, 1551, Gomara produced a more extended account, quoting accurately from Coronado's descriptions. These authors, however, were more adept at finding information than at interpreting it and from this time we date a very significant misconception about Quivira. Quoting from the work of Gomara:

Quivira is in fortie degrees;...they saw shippes on the sea coast, which bare Alcatrarzes or Pelicanes of golde and silver in their prowes and were laden with merchandises and they thought them to be of Cathaya and China....

Not all of the primary documents would have been available to these early writers; Gomara appears to have relied almost entirely upon the "Relacion postrera de Sivola" which omits any directional information for the route to Quivira: Gomara followed Ramusio in assigning that province a west coast
Fact and Fiction in the Quest for Quivira

Figure Two: A map by Martínez, 1602. Martínez apparently accompanied Juan de Oñate's expedition; this untitled manuscript sketch map records his route east from Santa Fe. Some equivalents for modern terms are: Rio Salado = Pecos River; Rio de la Madalena = Canadian River; Rio del Robradal = Arkansas River; Peublo del nuevo descubrimiento = Quivira.

position. The most reasonable explanation of the west coast position was first advanced by Fray Jose Antonio Pichardo. He noted that Coronado sent an expedition to the west coast at about the same time that he led one to the eastern plains. Apparently the two were confused in the absence of those primary documents explicitly stating an interior location. This translation of Quivira to the west coast was unfortunate and one would have expected later writers to have rectified the error. In fact the very reverse
was true, for Ramusio's interpretation was accepted as correct and repeated, not only by Gomara, but by other authors generally and also by cartographers.

The adoption of a west coast position for Quivira by cartographers began with a map in the third volume of Ramusio's work (1556) and persisted, virtually unchallenged, until the mid-seventeenth century, when maps by Sanson (1650) and Dudley (1661) brought Quivira back to the Plains. During this period of about one hundred years when Quivira was popularly thought to be on the west coast, the concept was further elaborated; Quivira was linked with the Strait of Anian and was so portrayed on most maps. This strait was believed to comprise a water route across the north of the North American continent, although it was very uncertain how far north it lay and whether it rounded or crossed the continent.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Francis Drake was leading the very active English naval exploration in the New World with the particular goal of discovering the Strait of Anian. Spanish feeling naturally ran very high against Drake's activities and provoked sufficient pressure to launch a major land expedition, north from Mexico. This expedition, under Juan de Oñate, reached Quivira in 1601.

Oñate's expedition illustrates the conflicting schools of thought in the late sixteenth century concerning the location of Quivira. Spain and Europe generally accepted a west coast position, based on the secondary sources; the people in Mexico, who were more familiar with the primary documents emanating from the expedition, believed that Quivira was on the Plains. Thus, Oñate was commissioned on the basis of European feelings but acted on information current in Mexico. As a result, he moved north from Mexico towards the northern limit of the continent, and then east across the Plains, because Quivira, associated in their minds with the strait, was known to lie in that direction.

Oñate penetrated the southeastern part of the province of Quivira, somewhere in the neighborhood of present-day Wichita. He found there a type and level of culture similar to that reported by the Coronado expedition.

...we came to a settlement containing more than twelve hundred houses... they were all round, built of forked poles and bound with rods and on the outside covered to the ground with dry grass. Within, on the sides, they had frameworks or platforms which served them as beds on which they slept. Most of them were large enough to hold eight or ten persons. They were two lance-heights high and all had graneries or platforms....

We remained here for one day in this pleasant spot surrounded on all sides by fields of maize and crops of the Indians.... The land was so rich that having harvested the maize, a new growth of a span in height had sprung up over a large portion of the
same ground, without any cultivation other than the removal of the weeds and the making of holes where they planted the maize.... The crops were not irrigated, but were dependent upon the rains, which as we have noted, must be very regular in that land because in the month of October, it rained as it does in August in New Spain. It was thought certain that it had a warm climate, for the people we saw went about naked, although they wore skins. Like other settled Indians they utilize cattle in large numbers....

The report of Oñate is the last of the primary sources and with it active Spanish interest in the Plains ceased. The authors of secondary sources, however, now had a second expedition to describe and to adapt to the accepted associations of Quivira with the west coast and the Strait of Anian. Consequently, with the passage of time, Quivira acquired more and more mythological qualities and all sense of a factual area was lost. For example, in 1625, *Purchase, His Pilgrims*, was published in England, containing an account of Oñate's expedition as received in a letter from one Tabletus, at Valadolid.

...leaving his fellows there [San Gabriel], Oñate undertook a new Discoverie toward that most famous river of the North. 

... At length he came to the water whereof long since have gone many reports. This is the lake of Conibas, on the brinke whereof hee beheld a farre off a citie seven leagues long and about two leagues broad. The houses of this citie were separated the one from the other and trimly and artificially builded, adorned with many trees and most Goodly gardens; and often divided with streams running betweene them.... after they had ridden by a certaine space through certaine faire streets of the Citie and could see none of the citizens, at length came to an exceeding great company of men, fortified with Rampiers and other fortifications in manner of a fortress.

A perplexing account, Tabletus' letter contains the essence of Oñate's experiences, but also much extra material. The references to "lake" and "river of the North" seem to stem from the association of Quivira with the Strait of Anian, as made by Gomara. Then again, "Fortress" suggests a pueblo type village, and in particular recalls Coronado's experiences at the pueblo of Tigeux, which he besieged. The description of the city itself seems to owe something to the Coronado reports, but not everything can be blamed on confusion of the two expeditions. It is probable that there were many current reports, of varying veracity, which no longer survive.

The work of Fray Geronimo Salmeron, published in 1626, almost confirms the existence of many versions of the expedition reports, for he uses much new material. Historians have dismissed Salmeron as an unreliable secondary source and it is true that he pays considerable attention to popular concepts of the day. We are concerned, however, with the dissemination of
geographic concepts, and as Salmeron's work was a commercial publication, its importance for our purposes is undiminished. It gives a more complete story of Quivira than any before, but completeness and accuracy are in no way synonymous. For example, Salmeron would have us believe that Coronado was not in the party which reached Quivira—a direct contradiction of the primary documents. Neither Coronado nor Oñate had described Quivira as a walled city. Nor are walls mentioned in the early secondary sources. Walls seem to have been an early seventeenth century development, for Salmeron included them in his description. He was probably victim of the same confusion with the pueblos as was Tabletus.

A contribution unique to Salmeron is an intriguing story reputed to have come from the Governor of New Galicia (Northern Mexico).

In confirmation of this great city of Quivira... As two vessels of the Spanish were fishing for Codfish off Newfoundland, so great a storm hit them that it pocketed them in the Strait of Anian... She reached a very populous city girt with gates and walls... They were three days, being given many fowls, tortillas of cornmeal, various fruits, chestnuts and many other things... The king desired to see these strangers... So great a multitude came forth that they filled those fields and last of all they brought the King, borne upon a litter of a yellow metal, the king wearing his crown and clothed in some skins of animals... The incident in question is at best a highly garbled shipwreck tale. Its plausibility lies in the popular contemporary concept associating a golden city, Quivira, with the Strait of Anian. Implication is the art of this storyteller, for his sailors never entered the city to evaluate its size and wealth; gold is never so named and unfortunately none of them survived to lead back an expedition. Salmeron backs the veracity of the story with his own conviction that this was the same city as that reached by Coronado.

Salmeron encountered difficulties when he dealt with the Oñate documents because of his conception of Quivira as a large fortified town containing considerable wealth. In his resolution of such problems, we find that the straw houses described by Oñate are now "hovels of straw" and ascribed to the buffalo-hunting tribes to the east of Quivira.

Likewise they [Oñate's party] learned that near there were seven hills in a plain, whence the captives "adopted" by the Indians could get out the gold which they work... As that country appeared very well settled as the innumerable smokes showed, the adelantado sent some soldiers to the interior. They marched all of one day and returned to say that they had not come to the end of the settlements. The Indians had said that it was very large and that more to the north were other larger ones... If they had examined the clothing they had found two
golden blades of the lances with which they fight and the por­ringers of gold from which they drink. Nothing of this was seen.30

Faced with a clear lack of corroborating data, Salmeron reverts to implication, reminiscent of the preceding sea-story. Nothing actually done by the expedition showed a golden treasure, he says, but there were many things that they might have done which could have revealed the gold.

Early secondary sources, following Coronado, had not stressed the gold­en qualities of Quivira, but with Salmeron this became a prominent theme. Further it was not restricted to writers far away in Europe. It was a belief held also by Spaniards living in the colonized part of New Mexico (around present-day Santa Fe) and it is reflected in the writings of Fray Alonso de Benavides. Custodia de la Conversion at San Pablo, 1621–9, Benavides wrote two Memorials in support of increasing missionary activity in the area.

...we know from evidence and personal inspection that there is in this kingdom [Quivira] and in that of Aixaos, which bor­ders on it, a very large quantity of gold. Every day we see Indians from there who trade with ours and testify to this fact.31

It is probable that Benavides' belief in gold at Quivira was based on the tales of the Indians he himself mentions. He had certainly never been to Quivira, and since he accepted the existence of straw houses there,32 an Indian source is favored. The Indians had a tendency to tell the Spaniards what they wanted to hear--tales of gold. They would not, however, glamorize the minor details.

Whereas Benavides wrote his Memorial at the end of his duties in New Mexico, his Revised Memorial (1634) was written after four years back in Europe. After a long acquaintance with the New World thoughts about Qui­vira, he thereafter became familiar with the European theory of a west coast position. The conflict is reflected in his later work and he makes an attempt to resolve it.

Here in the west the kingdom has the name Quivira and there is another of the same name in the east, unless it should be that it is so large that, as I am inclined to think, that it reach­es from one place to the other. The riches which nature pro­duces in this land, both in minerals and in fruits are unbeliev­able.33

Undoubtedly the strangest document we have to consider is the Relacion del Descubrimiento de Pais y cuidad de Quivira, by Fray Nicholas de Freytas. It describes a fictitious expedition by one Don Diego de Peñalosa, to Quivira in 1662; de Freytas is now accepted as pseudonym for Peñalosa himself. The background to the work is complex and it is sufficient to say that Peñalosa was a Spanish official, at one time Governor of New Mexico,
who had fallen from favor and sought to be revenged upon Spain. He prepared this narrative to support his case in the French court, where he was seeking to stimulate interest in an expedition to Quivira. Peñalosa was able to draw upon his knowledge of expedition reports, Indian tales and European concepts.

...they said that first city which we saw was so large and of so great a population that we could not reach the end in two days and from that elevated range, wonderful for its length and height which displayed itself to our sight, many rivers, large and small descended, on the banks of which are towns of countless tribes of his nation....

...and all these provinces and lands which we have seen are fertile, abundant fresh and with great fruit trees... and very full of cibolas [buffalo] and a great lake surrounded by great cities and villages of splendid rich and warlike people.

The shape of the buildings for the most part is round, two, three, or four stories, covered with straw, with wonderful skill....

Peñalosa's art was to blend material from his various sources and then add a little attractive embellishment of his own. For example, if we follow his whole journey, we find that his route was that of Oñate, although he arrived in that part of Quivira visited by Coronado—a very unlikely occurrence. In connection with the Coronado account we read,

...the country is level as far as Quivira and there they began to see mountain chains....

This somewhat exaggerated description of the Smoky Hills can be rationalized, at least in part, by considering the extremely flat land over which the expedition had been passing. For Peñalosa, however, they are magnified to "an insuperable ridge." Acceptance of some European ideas appears in the mention of a "great lake," reminding one of Purchas' Lake Conibas. By the 1670's, the idea of a west coast Quivira had been abandoned, but the possibility of an association with the Strait of Anian persisted.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, historical and geographic concepts of Quivira became even more confused. Quivira became a great capital in New Mexico, Le Gran Quivira, with, "an opulent Indian mission and its vessels of gold and silver...but where Quivira was located was forgotten." For example, a dictionary published in 1694 by Lewis Morery preserved some basis in fact, but made no mention of Oñate's expedition and gave Quivira a west coast position. These points agree with the general writing, which is very reminiscent of Gomara. Rather than adding anything, therefore, Morery actually reverted to a very early secondary source. Morery's work would have small significance were it not that it had Portuguese and French translations.

The tenor of Morery's description was followed by that of Torquemada, the Spanish historian (1723), who pointedly rejected the association of gold
with Quivira and continued with a very likely explanation of the enormous cities ascribed to Quivira, particularly in Oñate's account.

Many pretend to say that the Quiviras consist of many cities ...and that all are rich in gold or silver. On this point it seems that the information is more liberal than truthful, since neither our Spaniards nor any of the Indians who border upon that nation affirm to have seen any metal that comes from that country.... And as for the cities which they represent as being so populous and some of them so extensive as to cover leagues, while it is certain that there are many people, they are scattered in the manner following: Every Indian has his dwelling and adjacent to this a garden plot and field on which he raises and harvests his crops. Thus the settled expanses appear very large, without containing, however, the population attributed to them....

Torquemada and other early eighteenth century Spanish authors had abandoned hopes for a "golden city" of Quivira. In France, the concept persisted longer, for there Quivira was a purely mythical concept, lacking any precise location. With reference to present-day central Kansas, however, we never encounter any mention of Quivira, for the French approached the Plains from the east and never associated a golden city with them. French exploration was notorious for its free enterprise and lack of reports. In view of this, we are fortunate in that our area of interest is covered by one of the better French journals.

François de Bourgmond marched west from St. Louis in 1724, to negotiate treaties with and between the Indian tribes on the Plains. His journey ended and the parley was held, at the Padoucah Indian settlements, "in or very near the Smoky Hill valley in the vicinity of Lindsborg or Salina," in the heart of Coronado's Quivira.

We sometimes march two leagues without seeing a tree, but we find some along the rivers and creeks; at certain places large prairies, little hills. ...we crossed two little rivers and several small creeks which were dry. ...they [Padoucahs] live completely from their hunting in winter as well as in summer. However, they are not entirely nomads, because they have large villages where they have large lodges.... they find buffaloes with buffalo cows in great numbers and kill as many as they need.

This nation plants hardly any maize. However, they plant a little of it and a few pumpkins. They do not grow tobacco yet they all smoke when they have some. The Spaniards bring it to them when they come to trade with them, at which time they bring them horses also. The Padoucah sell them
tanned buffalo hides, or other buffalo hides undressed, with their wool, which they use as a blanket. Coronado had been impressed by the relative luxuriance of Quivira: de Bourgmond's party was by no means impressed. In fact, this was his first mention of intermittent streams. The key lies in the direction of approach. Coronado, moving from the west, was moving into a progressively more humid environment; de Bourgmond, coming from the east, was passing into areas of ever-lessening precipitation.

Although we have identified the area visited by de Bourgmond with Coronado's Quivira, it would be difficult to equate the Padoucah Indians with the Quivirans. A comparison of the primary sources shows that a decline in agriculture must have taken place since Coronado's visit. At that time agriculture was the basis of the food supply; in 1724, hunting clearly filled this role. The explanation is, almost certainly, to be found in the tribal movements which archaeology has shown were continually taking place in the Plains, according to the relative strengths of the tribes. In this particular case, it would seem that a hunting tribe had replaced the Quivirans. This is not a simple case of replacement, however, for we find the Padoucabs using permanent lodges and engaging in a little agriculture, activities which are atypical of hunting tribes. They form relics of the Quiviran culture, from which the Padoucabs acquired them.

With the expedition of de Bourgmond, Quivira the fact and the idea pass into history. Quivira had long been a legend: great wealth, a golden city, a key sea passage, the west, trade with China. Such speculation had been equalled by the locations devised to meet these associations. These were the musings in Europe, but Quivira was a fact. The Quivirans were cultivators on the borders of the hunting tribes. The facts were accurately recorded by the two expeditions which penetrated the area. Their members were impressed by the agricultural potential of the land and by the contrast between these agriculturalists and the hunting tribes to the west and by their lack of material possessions. By their very position the Quivirans were susceptible to attack from the hunting tribes and this, apparently, was their fate, at some time prior to 1724. The hunters had destroyed the fact, but the Europeans had long before metamorphosed it into myth.

Footnotes:

2 Herbert E. Bolton, Spanish Explorations in the Southwest (New Haven, 1916), 261.
Quivira was variously described as one town, or a whole "province," with no apparent consistency.


5 All quotations of Coronado documents are taken from a translation by Winship, 476.

6 Winship, 491.

7 Ibid., 493.

8 Ibid., 509.

9 Ibid., 581.

10 Ibid., 582.

11 Ramusio, Navigationi et Viaggi (Zaragosa, Spain, 1550).

12 References are taken from the translation of Richard Hakluyt, The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (1583) (Glasgow, 1904), IX, 165-6. Francisco Lopez de Gomara, Primera y secunde parte de la historia general de las Indias con todo... (Madrid ?, 1551).

13 Hakluyt, IX, 165-6.

14 Mentioned by Fr. Toribio B. o Motolinia, Historia de los Indios de la Nueva Espana (1541); Winship, 413, 619.

15 Charles Wilson Hackett, Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas (Austin, 1931).

16 Winship, 484-7.

17 H. R. Wagner, "Quivira, a Mythical California City," California Historical Society Quarterly, III, 3 (Oct. 1924), 262-7. Wagner cites Gastaldo (1556), Agnese (1560), Gutierrez (1562), Ortelius (1564), John B. Dunbar, The White Man's Foot in Kansas (Topeka, 1908). Dunbar cites Zaltieri (1566), Mercator (1569), Ortelius (1570 and 1589), De Bry (1596), Wytfliet (1597), Quadus (1608), Hondius (1609). Molineus (1592) is given as an exception, using a more easterly position.

18 Copy in the Library of The University of Kansas.

19 Dunbar, 34.

20 Bolton, 260. All quotations of Onate documents are taken from a translation by Bolton.

21 Bolton, 261.

22 Purchase, His Pilgrims, IV, 1565-6 (London, 1625-6).

23 Winship, 498.

24 Quotations are taken from a translation appearing in Land of Sunshine, XI (1899), 336-46; XII (1900), 39-48. No translator's name given.

25 Winship, 508.

26 Land of Sunshine, 339.

27 Ibid., 41-2.

28 Ibid., 42.

29 Ibid., 44.

30 Ibid., 45.


32 Ibid., 71.

35 Ibid., 68.
36 Ibid., 69.
37 Winship, 528.
38 Shea, 58.
40 Lewis Morey, *The Great Historical, Geographical and Political Dictionary...* (London, 1694), QUIVIRA.
41 Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino, Autorizado com exemplos dos melhores escritos Portuguezes e Latinos, 8 volumes (Coimbra and Lisboa, 1712-21).
43 J. Torquemada, *Primera, segunda, tercera parte de los viente i un libros rituales i monarchia indiana con el origin y Guerras...* (Madrid, 1723).
44 Wedel, 30.
46 Ibid., 177.
47 Ibid., 186-8.

Maps reproduced by permission of Carl I. Wheat.