

Feature



COURTESY OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK MUSEUM COLLECTION

The “Monte Video” inscription at Grand Canyon National Park: Why it’s likely from the Bass tourist era

By Jonathan Upchurch*

“**S**HERLOCK HOLMES WOULD have loved this!” Grand Canyon National Park anthropologist Robert C. Euler was reading from a letter dated 4 February 1982 written by his professional colleague, B. L. Fontana. Euler had shared information with Fontana about a mysterious sandstone inscription in the canyon that reads “MONTE VIDEO.” After supplementing his own investigation with the additional information from colleagues like Fontana, Euler concluded that MONTE VIDEO was late 19th century or early 20th century in origin. Other key findings of Euler’s (1980) site survey:

- The inscription is located near a canyon tourist destination operated by William Wallace Bass from 1885 to 1923.
- “The incised lettering . . . appears to be late 19th century in style.”
- “In a crack in the sandstone adjoining the inscription was a rusted corned beef can” with a “soldered bottom . . . manufactured between 1875 and 1920.”
- Language experts concluded that “monte video” is Latin for “I see the mountains from this place.”¹

Prior to Euler’s site investigation, the only formal documentation of an inscription at the MONTE VIDEO site was a 1975 photograph by Gene Wendt (fig. 1). In the 38 years since then, it is likely that only a small handful of Grand Canyon back-country users have been to the inscription’s remote location. During the past few years the inscription has received more exposure as its origin has become a topic of scholarly debate. Geologist Ray Kenny proposed, in an article published in *Park Science* in 2010, the hypothesis that the inscription was made in 1540 by Spanish explorers (Kenny 2010). This article presents the case that the inscription was likely created between 1885 and 1918 and also critiques the Spanish-origin hypothesis.

Tourism operations

William Wallace Bass arrived to live on the South Rim of Grand Canyon in 1884 and began advertising for the tourist trade a year later (Maurer 1983, p. 1). By 1891 Bass had completed the South Bass Trail from the rim to the Colorado River and had developed improvements for tourist

Abstract

The MONTE VIDEO rock inscription at Grand Canyon was likely created between 1885 and 1920 when there was substantial human activity in the immediate area. This conclusion is supported by previous archeological site investigation and recent study of human history that demonstrates that this area was frequently visited during the Bass tourist era. A photographic comparison of the inscription in 1975 and 2011 reveals substantial deterioration in 36 years and casts doubt on the possibility of the inscription originating in the 16th century. An interpretation of Spanish accounts of the Coronado expedition questions whether the inscription site is likely a location the Spanish would have visited.

Key words

Colorado River, Coronado, engraving, Grand Canyon, human history, inscription, Spanish exploration

1 Personal correspondence of Paul H. Ezell; Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, San Diego State University, forwarding the opinion of Sister Catherine Louise La Coste, a

Latin scholar at the Diocese of San Diego, as to the language and translation of the inscription; 28 January 1982. Ezell also provided his opinion that “video” is Latin and means “I see.”

Figure 1 (left). The MONTE VIDEO inscription as photographed in November 1975, by Gene Wendt.

the river. The Esplanade does not exist in the eastern one-third of the canyon.

From 1885 to 1923, 3,000 to 5,000 tourists visited Bass Camp on the South Rim (Murbarger 1958, pp. 5–9; Madsen 1980, p. 55). Anderson (1998, pp. 44–45) describes that “early visitors to the rim who spent one and sometimes two days in uncomfortable buckboards or stagecoaches were not about to glance into the scenic abyss then turn for home. They often stayed a week and sometimes lingered for a month or more to justify the round-trip effort.” Most visitors ventured into the canyon (fig. 3), and documentary accounts of trips to the Esplanade emphasize the popularity of Mystic Spring as a destination (Martin 1982, pp. 5–14; Madsen 1980, pp. 32,34; James 1901, pp. 147–159):

With a water supply at Mystic Spring, tourists could stay [t]here overnight enjoying day trips exploring and marveling at the magnificent views. . . . Comfortable overnight conditions were found at Mystic Spring, and unless someone had a specific reason, few people desired to go farther, even after Bass improved the section of the trail continuing below the Supai Plateau [the Esplanade] to the river. (Madsen 1980, p. 25)

For a time, it [Mystic Spring] became the center of all activities on the plateau [the Esplanade]. (Madsen 1980, p. 27)

COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NORTHERN ARIZONA DIVISION, BASS COLLECTION, PC 181 BOX 3 FOLDER 35 #376



Figure 2. Desmond tourist party at Bass Camp, George Wharton James at far left and William Wallace Bass third from right.

COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NORTHERN ARIZONA DIVISION, BASS COLLECTION, PC 181 BOX 3 FOLDER 38 #376



Figure 3. The Grand Canyon of Arizona, in camp along the Mystic Spring Trail. Maine lumbermen camp on the Esplanade. Frederick H. Maude photograph, 1898.

Referring to conditions after 1905, “Although trips to Mystic Spring were not as frequent, it remained a favorite day trip for visitors staying at Bass Camp.” (Madsen 1980, p. 55)

Ada Bass diary entry: “Numerous trips were made to this spring by tourists traveling on horse or mule back. They spent the night at Mystic Spring, returning the next day to the Rim Camp.” (Garrison 1952)

The popularity of Mystic Spring is important for addressing questions about the origin of the MONTE VIDEO inscription because its location is not far from the spring and the South Bass Trail.

Mystic Spring was also popular with noted landscape photographers, and the presence of visitors near the inscription is underscored by their work. Frederick H. Maude took a photo in about 1896 at a location only 800 feet from MONTE VIDEO.² Henry Peabody published photos in 1902 (Peabody 1901) taken from the Mystic Spring Trail; one photo was captured only 1 mile (1.6 km) away from the inscription. Madsen (1980, p. 23) reports that “Maude returned often to spend long

² The source of this photo, and the photo itself, are not disclosed here in order to conceal the exact location of the inscription.

periods of time at the Canyon taking and developing photographs.” Photographers G. L. Rose, Henry Peabody (Madsen 1980, p. 23), James Putnam, and C. C. Valentine (Garrison 1952) are all known to have used Bass’s darkroom at Bass Camp.

With large numbers of visitors venturing into nearby parts of the canyon from Bass Camp, there were ample opportunities for many people between 1885 and 1920 to have made the MONTE VIDEO inscription. Bass worked hard to attract customers, and he thoroughly knew the Esplanade area around South Bass Trail. If the MONTE VIDEO inscription had existed before the tourist era, Bass certainly would have seen it, understood its significance, and exploited the opportunity to advertise and market it as a tourist attraction.

A new hypothesis

While Robert Euler concluded in 1980 that the MONTE VIDEO inscription was created around 1900, a new hypothesis was advanced in 2010 by geologist Ray Kenny, who postulates that the engraving was made in 1540 by members of the Cárdenas expedition. Coronado had sent the Cárdenas party in search of a large river reported by Native Americans and they became the first Europeans to see the Grand Canyon. The idea that the Spanish carved “MONTE VIDEO” in 1540 is very romantic and tantalizing; however, the following discussion raises several questions that cast doubt on the Spanish hypothesis.

The Spanish account

Most information that is known about the 1540 Spanish expedition to Grand Canyon comes from an account written by Pedro de Castañeda in 1560.³ Though he was one

of the common soldiers on the Coronado expedition (Bartlett 1940, p. 41; Winship 1969, p. v), de Castañeda is not believed to have been one of the 13 men on the Cárdenas trip to Grand Canyon (Bartlett 1940, p. 41). Additionally, his account was not written until about 20 years after the expedition took place (Bartlett 1940, p. 41; Winship 1969, p. xxx). Therefore, it is likely that de Castañeda simply recorded what he had heard from one or more of the Cárdenas expedition participants about 20 years earlier (Bartlett 1940, p. 41).

Admittedly, the description of the Cárdenas expedition is very sketchy. In addition, two different translations of de Castañeda’s account from Spanish to English have rendered the story differently. For example, the 1922 version translated by historian George Parker Winship (1969) includes the passage “they came to the banks of the river. It seemed to be more than three or four leagues in an air line across to the other bank of the stream which flowed between them.” In this translation “bank” apparently refers to the rim of the canyon. The version printed in (Winship) 1896 reads, “they came to the banks of the river, which seemed to be more than three or four leagues *above* the stream which flowed between them [emphasis added].” Any historical interpretation of de Castañeda’s account needs to understand and acknowledge the limitations of the original source documents and the translations. Similarly, readers of the interpretations are better able to judge the historical interpretations if they understand the limitations.

Likely location for a Spanish descent?

A good question to ask in order to help determine the route of the attempted Spanish descent to the Colorado River is, “From where on the rim did the Spanish view the Canyon?” The traditional belief of historians is that Cárdenas likely observed the canyon between Desert View and Moran Point, though supporting evidence is weak. As Ray Kenny points out,

there is a considerable length of the South Rim that is “full of low twisted pines” (de Castañeda’s words). Low twisted pines (likely referring to juniper) exist on the South Rim today from Desert View to 50 or more miles (80 km) to the west. By this clue there are many different places from which the Spanish could have viewed the canyon.

Another clue is that de Castañeda suggests that the explorers were very interested in the river. Coronado sent scouts under the leadership of Don Pedro de Tovar to one of the seven villages of Cibola (at or near the present-day Orabi, Arizona), and de Tovar “obtained information about a large river” in the arid lands to the west (Winship 1969, p. 35). Upon learning this news Coronado then “dispatched Don Garcia Lopez de Cárdenas with about 12 companions to go see this river. . . . After they had gone twenty days they came to the banks of the river. . . . [Cárdenas’s men] spent three days on this bank [the rim of the Canyon] looking for a passage down to the river” (Winship 1969, p. 35).

As a source of water, the river was clearly of great interest to the expedition. As a general route of navigation or exploration the river also would have been of interest to the explorers. Every river eventually leads to an ocean, and this was a fairly large river. In addition, Coronado’s explorers knew that two ships led by Don Pedro de Alarcón had been sent north in the Gulf of California to resupply Coronado (Winship 1896, pp. 385–386). The river could be a pathway to the expedition’s resupply (Lavender 1984, p. 42).

Although de Castañeda’s party had no direct communication with Alarcón, the actual situation is intriguing. Winship (1896) reports that Alarcón discovered the mouth of the Colorado River and made two trips upstream on the river. His second trip began on 14 September 1540 and he travelled 85 leagues (roughly 250 miles or

³ In addition to Castañeda’s account, a second account is given in *The Journey of Coronado* by Winship entitled “Translation of the Relacion del Suceso: Account of What Happened on the Journey which Francisco Vasquez Made to Discover Cibola.”

COPYRIGHT JONATHAN UPCHURCH



Figure 4. View of Grand Canyon from South Bass Trailhead on 24 April 2011. Note that the Colorado River is not visible from this location.

402 km) upstream. This would have been about as far as Lake Havasu City (Winship 1896, pp. 403–408). Thus, Alarcón was up the Colorado River within days of the date that Cárdenas was exploring along the rim of the Grand Canyon.

Thus with major interest in reaching the river, it makes sense that the Spanish would have sought locations on the rim from which the river could be seen to plan their descent. It is also sensible that they would have wanted to keep the river in sight during descent. Does the route leading from the South Rim to the MONTE VIDEO inscription support these ideas? No. The most easily traversable route from the rim to the MONTE VIDEO inscription would have generally followed today's South Bass Trail for initial descent. However, the river is not visible from the rim at this location (fig. 4). In fact, there are several miles of rim in this vicinity from which the river is not visible. In spending three days on the South Rim looking for a passage to the river, the Spanish probably would have gone to a location where the river was more visible from the rim. Furthermore, in descending from the South

Bass trailhead and walking to the location of MONTE VIDEO, there is no location from which the river is visible until shortly before arriving at the inscription. Even from the inscription site itself, there is only one very short section of the Colorado River—perhaps a few hundred feet long—that is visible. Thus, it is unlikely that the Spanish explorers would have gone to the location of the inscription, because their goal was to reach the river.

If the Spanish were focused on the river, and the river could not be seen during nearly all of the trek from the rim to the inscription site, but the river was visible from that site, why would they carve words that mean “I see the mountains from this place?” Would it not be much more logical that they would carve “I see the river”? A second account of the Cárdenas expedition states that “this river comes from the northeast and turns toward the south-southwest at the place where they found it” (Winship 1969, p. 203). In the portion of the canyon where MONTE VIDEO is located the river comes from the southeast, not the northeast.

Probability?

We know that three Spaniards (Captain Melgosa, Juan Galeras, and their unnamed companion) descended into Grand Canyon in 1540 from a location on the South Rim that was “full of low twisted pines,” and that around 50 miles (80 km) of rim meet this description. We also know that from 1885 to 1923, 3,000 to 5,000 tourists visited Bass Camp on the South Rim. Most of these visitors ventured into the canyon where Bass had developed the trail and other facilities for tourists. What is the probability that three Spaniards in 1540 happened to go to this particular place in a 50-mile-long stretch of the South Rim? Compare this with the probability that 1,000 or more tourists were likely within a few miles of the inscription site from 1885 to 1923.

Enough time?

Would the Spanish explorers have had enough time to carve the MONTE VIDEO inscription? The size of the inscription (35 × 4 inches [89 × 10 cm]), the depth of the engraving (as much as ¼ inch [6 mm]), and the feature's quality suggest that several hours, or more likely multiple days, would have been required to create it. As Ray Kenny (2010, p. 61) wrote, “the inscriber(s) took great care and pride in making the inscription. . . . Engraving serifs takes patience, time, and attention to detail.” Did the Spanish have time to do this? Today, a hiker in good shape requires at least four hours to make the round-trip from the rim to the MONTE VIDEO site. But that hiker would be taking advantage of a constructed trail and would know what route to follow. In 1540 there was no constructed trail. Although there was a Native American route, it was not as easily traversed as Bass's constructed South Bass Trail (Anderson 1991, pp. 1, 6, 32). The Spanish were also likely doing their own route finding. The round-trip would therefore have taken much longer. The Spanish account says “[the three Spaniards] returned [to the rim] about 4 o'clock in the afternoon” (Winship 1969, p. 36). Even if they

(5A, 6A, AND 7A) GENE WENDT, COURTESY OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK MUSEUM COLLECTION
(5B, 6B, AND 7B) COPYRIGHT JONATHAN UPCHURCH

had started their descent at dawn, it is very unlikely they would have had enough time to do an engraving of this caliber. It is also worth contemplating that if their superiors had directed them to find a way to the river, would they have stopped and spent hours making an engraving?

Age and deterioration rate

The MONTE VIDEO inscription is carved in sandstone, a rock type of medium hardness. The rock surface in which the engraving appears is slightly inclined from horizontal. There are no nearby cliffs or overhangs. As a result, the inscription is fully exposed to the elements. It is subject to freezing and thawing of water that collects on the engraved surfaces. Kenny (2010, p. 62) states that “the inscription does exhibit some degree of enhanced weathering” and he refers in particular to the “DEO” in “VIDEO.” Is the weathering the result of 471 years of exposure or possibly that of just 110 years?

Photographs of the inscription taken in 1975, 1980, 2000, 2010, and 2011 are deposited in the Grand Canyon National Park archeological site file and the Grand Canyon Museum Collection. The November 1975 photo taken by Gene Wendt is a good, detailed close-up (fig. 1).

On a May 2011 visit to the MONTE VIDEO inscription site, I made a side-by-side comparison of the 1975 photo with the current condition of the engraving. That comparison revealed 14 places that have experienced noticeable exfoliation of the rock or other weathering deterioration in a period of just 36 years. The largest affected area is about 2 × 3 inches (5 × 8 cm) located below the letters *N* and *T* (figs. 5A and 5B).

Another large weathered area is the upper interior portion of the letter *D* (figs. 6A and 6B). A part of this area, the size of a quarter, appeared to be a very recent exfoliation. The individual sand crystals in this fracture were sharp and angular, whereas



Figures 5A and 5B: Comparison of the inscription in November 1975 (left) and on 22 May 2011. Note the major exfoliation between *N* and *T* below the letters.



Figures 6A and 6B: Comparison of the inscription in November 1975 (left) and on 22 May 2011. Note the major exfoliation in the top center of letter *D*.



Figures 7A and 7B: Comparison of the inscription in November 1975 (top) and on 22 May 2011. The more recent image shows 14 locations that experienced noticeable exfoliation of the rock or other weathering deterioration over 36 years.

crystals in the remainder of the inscription surface (including the other areas of exfoliation since 1975) were rounded, probably because of continuing exposure to the elements and blowing sand.

The inscription clearly has experienced a significant level of deterioration in the 36 years from 1975 to 2011 (figs. 7A and 7B). If a similar rate of deterioration had occurred over a period of 471 years, would this engraving be in as good condition as it is today? The intuitive answer is probably no. From this evidence the inscription

is much more likely to be one century instead of five centuries old.

Opinion of Coronado expedition experts

Richard Flint and Shirley Cushing Flint, research associate professors at the University of New Mexico, are regarded as the foremost authorities on the Coronado expedition. In personal correspondence dated 31 October 2012 to both me and Ray Kenny, the Flints offered the following observations:

- Although the Coronado expedition lasted three years and covered thousands of miles, only two documented inscriptions are known that were created by that expedition. Both of these were inscribed in wood. Coronado's folks simply were not in the habit of creating inscriptions.
- There is no other 16th-century use of the phrase "monte video" or the single word "monte video" in either Spain or the New World.
- Many Spanish colonial inscriptions were made at El Morro in New Mexico, beginning with one by Juan de Oñate in 1604. These reflect the cursive handwriting styles of the day, not rectilinear printing styles like those in the MONTE VIDEO inscription. Even most of Spanish printed matter of the 1530s and 1540s was not rectilinear, but rather of a decidedly gothic appearance. So the Grand Canyon inscription is not consistent with Spanish practice of that time.
- "For these [the above] reasons we can imagine no scenario in which 'MONTE VIDEO' would have been inscribed on a rock face in the Grand Canyon by Spaniards of the 1540s."

Conclusion

For several reasons I find it unlikely that MONTE VIDEO is Spanish in origin:

- This location is unlikely for the Spanish to have chosen to descend to the river because the river is not visible from the point on the rim that provides access to the inscription. Moreover, the river is never visible during descent until just before arrival at the inscription site.
- The number of people who were known to have been in the vicinity of

the inscription was far greater during the Bass tourist era.

- The inscription is exquisitely carved and the Spanish would not have had time to do so.
- Weathering over the last 36 years suggests that the inscription would not be in as good condition if it were 471 years old.

The preponderance of the evidence supports the conclusion that MONTE VIDEO was carved during the Bass tourist era.

References cited

- Anderson, M. F. 1991. North and South Bass Trails historical research study. National Park Service, Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona, USA.
- . 1998. Living at the edge: Explorers, exploiters, and settlers of the Grand Canyon region. Grand Canyon Association, Grand Canyon, Arizona, USA.
- Bartlett, K. 1940. How Don Pedro de Tovar discovered the Hopi and Don Garcia Lopez de Cárdenas saw the Grand Canyon, with notes upon their probable return. *Plateau* 12(3):40.
- Flint, R. 2012. Grand Canyon archaeological site survey record for *Monte Video* inscription. Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona, USA.
- Fontana, B. L. 1980. Grand Canyon archaeological site survey record for Monte Video inscription. Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona, USA.
- Garrison, L. A., compiler. 1952. Notes taken from W. W. Bass material at Wickenburg, Arizona. 30–31 January and 1 February. Grand Canyon Museum Collection, Grand Canyon, Arizona, USA.
- James, G. W. 1901. In and around the Grand Canyon. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.
- Kenny, R. 2010. A 16th century Spanish inscription in Grand Canyon? A hypothesis. *Park Science* 27(2):58–63.

Lavender, D. 1984. *The Southwest*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA.

Madsen, L. D. 1980. The Grand Canyon tourist business of the W. W. Bass Family. Thesis. University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA.

Martin, J. C. 1982. Article describing a trip to the Grand Canyon by stage and horseback in August 1894. Pages 5–14 in S. G. Maurer, editor. *Grand Canyon by stage*. Heritage Associates, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA.

Maurer, S. G. 1983. *Solitude and sunshine*. Pruett Publishing, Boulder, Colorado, USA.

Murbarger, N. 1958. Trail-blazer of the Grand Canyon. *Desert* 21(10):5–9.

Peabody, H. G. 1901. Glimpses of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Fred Harvey, Kansas City, USA.

Winship, G. P. 1896. The Coronado Expedition: 1540–1542. Page 489 in Fourteenth annual report of the Bureau of Ethnology: 1892–1893. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., USA.

Winship, G. P., translator and editor. 1969. The journey of Coronado—1540–1542—from the city of Mexico to Grand Canyon of the Colorado and the Buffalo Plains of Texas, Kansas, and Nebraska. Reprint of the book published originally in 1922 by Allerton Book Company. Greenwood Press, New York, New York, USA.

About the author

Jonathan Upchurch served as a National Park Transportation Scholar from 2004 to 2008, living in Mesa Verde and Grand Canyon National Parks. Currently he is a Volunteer-in-the-Park at Zion National Park and has visited more than 300 units of the National Park System. Since 1961 he has hiked more than 2,300 miles at Grand Canyon. He can be reached at upchurch@ecs.umass.edu.