The Life of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo

When Pedro de Alvarado returns from a trip to Spain in 1539, he brings with him huge supplies of sails, rigging, ironwork, anchors and other materials that were carried overland by Indians to outfit a fleet at the shipyard located on the Pacific shore spanning Guatemala and El Salvador. Cabrillo spends much of the next few years supervising the construction of thirteen vessels including his own ship San Salvador, which he takes on a trading voyage to Peru to train his crew and prepare himself for a longer voyage of exploration to the North Pacific. Cabrillo is also sent to scout for a new port on the Mexican coast, which he finds and calls Navidad (Nativity) since Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza had landed there on December 25, 1540. Cabrillo's fleet of three ships—San Salvador, La Victoria, and San Miguel—departs to explore the northern coast on June 27, 1542.

Recent documents show that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo's life began in Palma de Micer Gillo (Palma del Río), a small town located between Córdoba and Seville on the Guadalquivir River, in Southern Spain. Born in 1489 or 1500, the record of his time in the New World begins in Panama, where he arrives with Pedro de Arias (Pedrarias) in 1514, one year after Vasco Núñez de Balboa sighted the Pacific Ocean. From there, Cabrillo travels to Cuba and later to Mexico with Pánfilo de Návarez as part of an expedition to arrest and return Hernán Cortés to Cuba. The expedition arrives too late to interfere with the siege of Tenochtitlán. Cortés wins the Návarez soldiers to his side with promises of gold, and enlists their aid in attacking the Aztec capital. Cabrillo is placed in charge of building the watercraft that allows the Spaniards to attack and overtake the Aztec island stronghold in the middle of Lake Texcoco.

Cabrillo accompanies Pedro de Alvarado on the conquest of Guatemala and takes up residence there. He first engaged in farming on estates granted to him by Alvarado in 1524, making it possible for him to prosper as a ranch owner. He also mined gold from streams within his land. In 1532 he returns to Seville, Spain, to marry Beatriz Sánchez de Ortega and the couple sail for Guatemala in 1533. Cabrillo's estates were by then producing corn, beans, chile, and cacao. By 1536 Beatriz has given birth to two sons who were baptized and confirmed in the cathedral church of Santiago.

After visiting the present-day ports of Ensenada and San Diego, Catalina Island, and other locations farther to the north in the fall, the expedition turned southward in late November 1542. Evidence indicates that Cabrillo returns his fleet to the island of San Salvador (Catalina), which was also called La Capitana. Santa Catalina was the logical place to spend the winter since the harbor was protected and the Spaniards had previously established good relations with the Indians. Unfortunately this had apparently changed and Cabrillo decided to go ashore, but one foot strikes a rocky ledge. Accounts vary among whether he splinters a shinbone, breaks a shoulder, or injures another arm and a leg. Nevertheless, the wound worsens and as a result of his injuries, Cabrillo dies on January 3, 1543, and is buried on the barren, windswept shore. Because he dies there, it was called the Island of Juan Rodríguez. No remains have yet been found.