The conquest of Mexico, carried out between 1519 and 1521, perhaps more than Balboa’s momentous discovery of the Pacific Ocean or Magellan’s courageous voyage around the world, stands first in the direct chain of events that led to the discovery and settlement of California. The gold, silver, and jewels of the Aztec empire naturally led the Spaniards to believe that other areas of Indian wealth must lie to the south and north of the Mexican capital of Tenochtitlán. The two decades following the initial Aztec defeat witnessed a series of forays into the Pacific that culminated with the voyage of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and the European discovery of what became known as the Bay of San Diego de Alcalá on 28 September 1542.

Cabrillo joins the Conquest of Mexico

Some details of the background and early life of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo have come to light in recent years, but his exact age and place of birth are still unknown. Often

The statue of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, honoring the first European presence along our western coast and offshore islands, stands atop Point Loma, San Diego, at the Cabrillo National Monument. 

Courtesy Cabrillo National Monument Foundation
described as “a Portuguese navigator sailing under the flag of Spain,” his career seemed to begin on the California coast. Cabrillo’s original journal of exploration has not been found, but other documents, including a later copy of a journal, are housed in the Archives of the Indies in Seville. Documents in the Royal Audiencia in Guatemala give information about Cabrillo’s service to Spain, family and estates in Guatemala, and activities in California. His surname, which in its correct form would be Rodríguez or Rodríguez Cabrillo, adds confusion to his nationality. If he were Portuguese, his complete name would be João Rodrigues Cabrilho, but he always signed himself Juan Rodríguez in the Spanish way. Cabrilho, a Spanish surname, is unknown as a surname in Portugal, although there are several Portuguese villages called Cabril, from which the name might have been derived, and which claim Juan Cabrilho as their own.

For the past century or so, a few writers have said he was Portuguese, but most historians now think this is an error. The government, his family, his friends, and even his enemies treated him as though he were Spanish. Probably Cabrillo himself did not know who his parents were or exactly where they came from. Certainly he never mentioned their names in any official documents, as men were obliged to do when they gave sworn testimony. Cabrillo’s great grandson later said under oath that his illustrious ancestor came from Spain. Cabrillo’s friend Pedro de Ovid swore that he knew this was true, because he came with him in the army of Pánfilo de Narváez. Even so, many people accept the statement of the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera, who wrote more than half a century after the explorer died. Herrera placed the word or name “Portugues” in his text.

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Cabrillo’s Life in the New World

The record of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo’s life begins in Santo Domingo in 1510 when, at the age of twelve, he landed in the New World. He later reached the Mexican coast as a crossbowman with the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition sent out by Governor Diego de Velásquez of Cuba to arrest and return Cortés to Cuba prior to his march against the Aztecs. The Narváez expedition arrived too late to interfere with the siege of Tenochtitlán. Hearing of the governor’s plan, Cortés left part of his army inside the Mexican capital under his second-in-command Pedro de Alvarado and returned to Vera Cruz to face the threat from his home base. Defeating the newly arrived Spanish force in a surprise move, Cortés won the Narváez soldiers to his side with promises of gold, and prepared them to attack the Aztec island capital.

Cabrillo thus became a part of Cortés’ reinforced army and, because Alvarado had failed to contain the Aztecs, served through the bloodiest battles of the conquest. Cabrillo was placed in charge of building watercraft (bergantines) to cross Lake Texcoco in order to attack the Aztec stronghold. Following the defeat of the Aztecs, Cabrillo accompanied Pedro de Alvarado on the conquest of Guatemala and took up residency there. Bernal Díaz del Castillo recorded that Cabrillo was a good soldier in the Mexican campaign . . . who later, as a resident of Guatemala, was a very honorable person, and was captain and admiral of thirteen ships on Pedro Alvarado’s behalf, and he served his majesty well in everything which presented itself to him . . .

Juan Rodríguez, who did not begin to call himself Cabrillo until after 1536, first engaged in farming in Guatemala on the estates granted to him by Alvarado in August 1524. He prospered as a horseman and ranch owner and received permission to look for gold in 1529. He and his friends Diego Sánchez de Ortega and Sancho de Barahona discovered that native Guatemalans in Coban mined gold from the streams within land that Cabrillo controlled. Over the next few years, Cabrillo heard tales of riches to the south in Peru, but in 1532 preferred to sail east across the Atlantic to Spain. In Seville, he courted and married Beatriz Sánchez de Ortega, the sister of his friend Diego and returned to Guatemala with his bride in 1533. The family settled on his vast estates, which by this time were producing corn, beans, and chile in addition to a cash crop of cacao. By 1536, Beatriz gave birth to two sons who were baptized and confirmed in the cathedral church of Santiago. The elder was named Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo while the younger was called Diego Sánchez de Ortega after his uncle. Cabrillo was respected as a man of means—an biddergo— and was involved in considerable business and domestic affairs in Guatemala prior to his association with California.

Prelude to California: Cortés looks toward the Pacific

By 1522 Hernán Cortés had reached the Pacific coast at Michoacán in central Mexico and founded the port city of Zacatula. He ordered construction of four ships for northward exploration, but a lack of supplies and skilled labor slowed progress. Essential European items such as ironwork and rigging had to be transported slowly overland from Vera Cruz. Four ships were nevertheless completed by 1527, just in time to comply with a royal order sending three of them to the Moluccas to strengthen Spanish claims in the East Indies. By that year the crown had established the Royal Audiencia, a judicial body that served as a court of appeals and, in the absence of an executive, as an administrative committee of government. It governed Mexican affairs until 1535, when the Kingdom of New Spain became a viceroyalty and was placed under Antonio de Mendoza, the first Viceroy of New Spain and personal representative of the king. Cortés resented this check on his authority and sought new lands to conquer.

Exploring Baja California

In his exploration of the Pacific, it is thought that Cortés hoped to find both the golden island of the Amazons and the long-sought Strait of Anián, or Northwest Passage to the Atlantic, lying somewhere to the north of the Mexican coast. Cortés outfitted two ventures in 1533 and 1534 that touched on the shores of Baja California. The survivors of the second expedition reported that the natives of their newly discovered island were primitive savages, but had collected an abundance
of pearls. Pearls alone gave Cortés sufficient incentive to plan his own expedition. He was joined by a rush of volunteers who knew the captain’s reputation for finding wealth.

Three vessels reached the Bay of La Paz on 3 May 1535. Cortés named the “island” Santa Cruz and founded its first settlement on the dry, rocky coast. Native hostility and a lack of food made it necessary for two ships to return to the mainland for supplies – one of these was wrecked in the Gulf of California – then called the “Red Sea of Cortés.” On a second attempt to obtain supplies, only the ship that Cortés himself commanded made it back across the treacherous, stormy waters to La Paz. In the meantime, twenty-three of his men died of starvation on Baja California’s inhospitable shore. Cortés took the one remaining vessel and returned to Mexico to get further relief. Finally, toward the end of 1536, prospects of success seemed so remote that Cortés sent ships to pick up the surviving colonists. Thus ended the first in a long succession of attempts to settle California.9

The Ulloa Expedition

In 1539 Cortés issued instructions to the final expedition that, under his direction, would pierce the mysteries of the north. His plans to return to Spain to solidify his territorial claims, however, kept Cortés from accompanying the voyage. Three vessels commanded by Francisco de Ulloa sailed from the port of Acapulco in July of that year; one, the tiny Santo Tomás was wrecked in the stormy waters of the Gulf of California before reaching La Paz. Ulloa’s fleet, reduced to the 120-ton Santa Águeda and its flagship, the Trinidad, a 35- to 40-ton vessel not more than forty feet in length, left La Paz and headed across the choppy Red Sea of Cortés to the

Above: This distinctive map titled ‘T Gebiedt van Guadalajara Niew Mexico en Californie enz (ca 1656-1665), by French cartographer Nicolas Sanson, supported the myth that California was an island – a misconception which continued well into the 1700s. MMSD Maps and Charts Collections

mainland shore. Ulloa cruised northward to the port of Guaymas, which he named Puerto de los Puertos (the Port of Ports), and further on expected to find a passage around the “island” of California. Instead, the ships encountered violent tides caused by the Colorado River descending into the sea at the head of the narrow Gulf. The bleak shoreline, a lonely desert broken by stark mountains, offered few prospects for golden cities, so Ulloa turned southward, the first Spaniard to know that Baja California was not an island.

The two vessels rounded Cabo San Lucas by the end of January 1540, and then sailed up the western shore as far north as the Isla de Cedros (Island of Cedars) so named because . . . on the tops of the mountains therein, there grows a wood of these Cedars being very tall, as the nature of them is to be.10
After three months, Ulloa sent the larger Santa Agueda home and continued his explorations northward in the Trinidad to perhaps Point San Antonio, just south of latitude 30 degrees. Ulloa's revelation that Baja California was a peninsula aroused little attention and the "island" of California persisted on maps as late as 1784. His expedition, the last with which Cortés had any official connection, nevertheless, faced severe storms to explore both the eastern and western coasts of the peninsula. Their discovery of an island of cedars compensated little for expected cities of gold. Disappointment was great and Cortés, angered at his lack of authority and frustrated by Viceroy Mendoza's constant opposition, had sailed for Spain in 1540. Cortés argued his claims before the royal court, but his lawsuits dragged on before an unmoved officialdom. Years of effort gave him little satisfaction and finally, in 1547, death claimed the unhappy Cortés, first of the Spanish explorers to open the way to California.

The Coronado Expedition

While Ulloa's voyage was still in progress, Viceroy Mendoza organized an ambitious, two-pronged land and sea expedition to find the fabulous Cibola,
a city of gold somewhere in the interior of the continent. 
His intentions was to claim the area for Spain. Led by
the able Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, the land procession
was launched in February 1540 from Compostela, near Tepic,
with some 200 horsemen, seventy foot soldiers and nearly
1,000 Indian allies and servants.
For the sea detachment,
three vessels commanded by Hernando de Alarcón left
Mexico in May 1540 with instructions to explore the
upper part of the Sea of Cortés and make overland contact with
Coronado’s soldiers. During August and September, Alarcón
explored the lower Colorado River, but a narrow canyon forced him to return downstream at a point south
of Yuma, just short of touching California soil. Coronado’s expedition returned
from its journey across the southwest without finding the alleged golden cities
or other signs of Native American wealth.  

Viceroy Mendoza, disillusioned by the meager results of Coronado’s
effort, resolutely turned to the sea with yet another plan to find the
elusive Strait of Anián. Pedro de Alvarado, Governor and Captain-
General of Guatemala, appeared at the port of Acapulco in 1540 with a
fleet of thirteen vessels and offered his services to the crown for Pacific
exploration. Close to Alvarado’s right hand during the conquest of Guatemala
stood Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, navigator, horseman, captain of crossbowmen,
and shipbuilder. When Alvarado became captain-general of the province
stretching from southern Mexico to the boundary of Panama, he named
Cabrillo to construct a fleet of ships that he could sail across the Pacific to the
Spice Islands.

Building a Shipyard

About fifteen leagues (35 miles) due south of Santiago, where the river
Michatoya meanders into the Pacific Ocean, lay the sixteenth-century
Guatemalan fishing village of Iztapa. Little more than an open roadstead and
partially blocked by a huge sand bar, it was still the best seaport on the coast
of New Spain. The shoreline was steep, the tides fast and strong, and the
channel in a state of constant change during flood season. The anchorage was
so hazardous that two ships from Alvarado’s first fleet were lost there during
the winter storms of 1533.  The evidence indicates that the main shipyard
was located at Girabaltique, a short distance up the river from Iztapa. There was an abundance of good timber nearby, as well as pita fiber for making cables and rigging. Neighboring villages could provide food at low cost.16 Further down the coast in present-day El Salvador was another port, equally open to the weather. This was Acajutla, seaport for the cities of Trinidad and San Salvador. Acajutla featured a dangerous reef across the entrance to the bay, and ships stopped there only with great risk. Yet, interior roads to the coast were so poor that Acajutla was the only port where Salvadoran cacao and other produce could be loaded for shipment to Peru and New Spain. In fact, this was the port where Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo rigged and loaded his ship *Santiago* in 1534, just before Alvarado seized the vessel for his own use.17 Some additional outfitting of the ships bound for the northwest seems to have been made there.

Shipbuilding in the sixteenth century was more an art than a science. The outcome of any construction project depended as much on the skill and experience of the shipwrights and the availability of materials as on the wishes of the owner or designer. One ship captain complained that “some ships start in the yards as small ones and end as large ones, while others start as large ones and end up small.”18 Ships were seldom built according to plan, and no two ships ever came out looking exactly alike. In Alvarado’s first fleet, one ship was a huge three hundred toneles, while the others were only half that size or less.19

**Building a Fleet**

In order for Cabrillo to carry out his plans to build a new fleet, Indian cuadrillas, or work parties, were pressed into service, providing timber, iron, sails, cable, tar and pitch, and huge quantities of food for the shipwrights and those Africans and Indians engaged in producing raw materials.20 It was difficult to keep the work running smoothly. Mayordomo (foreman) Alvaro de Paz found it to be nearly a full-time job locating and shipping the materials Cabrillo ordered for the project. Much of the timber was close at hand, but other supplies had to be brought from the interior provinces. Native workers were used to cut and trim timber, make pitch and rope, and work long hours to build the ships and galleys.21

This woodblock sketch shows the method used by Guatemalan shipwrights to compute the proportions of a ship’s hull. The illustration is from the *Instrucción náutica* of Diego García de Palacio, who spent several years in Guatemala after the mid-sixteenth century.
Of the thirteen ships that eventually made up the armada, only a part actually belonged to Alvarado. Several of the vessels were owned by other Spaniards who hoped to make money carrying supplies for the expedition and selling trade goods up and down the coast. Cabrillo had built and owned his own vessel, named San Salvador, but usually called Juan Rodríguez. There is abundant evidence that sixteenth-century ships flew the banners and ensigns of their owners and their religious patrons. Cabrillo’s new ship “flew the banner of an almirante from the fore-topmast as almirantes of the sea are accustomed to do.” The vessel also flew the arms of Alvarado and later those of Viceroy Mendoza. The religious banner probably showed a crucifix and perhaps the words San Salvador.

When Alvarado returned from a trip to Spain in 1539, he brought with him a royal commission as well as huge supplies of sails, rigging, ironwork, anchors and other materials for the fleet. These were landed at Puerto de Caballos on the Atlantic coast, and thousands of Indians were forced to build a road and carry supplies overland from the Atlantic to the Pacific. On his way home Alvarado stopped in San Salvador and reported to the historian Oviedo that he had built seven or eight ships on the Mar del Sur for a trip to the Spice Islands. The entire fleet eventually consisted of thirteen vessels, of which seven or eight were built by Cabrillo between 1536 and 1540.

Although information is lacking on the exact details of the rigging, there is additional evidence about the rigging of the San Salvador. Luis González, a pilot on one of Alvarado’s vessels, later testified as follows: Johan R’ Cabrillo went in his own ship which flew the banner of an almirante from its foretopmast . . . and this witness spoke with his pilot and knew it to be his ship. Various references taken together generally meant that each of the ships, large and small alike, was square rigged. The foremast was rigged with a topmast. The mainmast, therefore, had to have a similar rig, and there must also have been a mizzenmast, perhaps with a lateen rig. The two-hundred ton San Salvador was therefore the almiranta, and then designated by the viceroy and probably by Alvarado as flagship of the armada that was to go up the Pacific Coast. Later it would be La Capitana because it was commanded by Cabrillo as Captain General.

Before the new armada left to sail up the coast of New Spain, Cabrillo took the San Salvador on a trading voyage to Peru. Depending upon the cargo that the ship carried, which may have included valuable horses, Cabrillo could have earned enough to offset the cost of building the ship, which amounted to four thousand ducados. The trip to Peru also gave Cabrillo a chance to train his crew and prepare himself for a longer voyage of exploration to the north.

When the new fleet was ready to sail from Acajutla, Alvarado and Mendoza agreed that a new harbor was needed to serve as home port for the fleet. Consequently, they sent Cabrillo to look for a new site, and within a week or two, he discovered a fine port. For a few days the place remained nameless, being called simply “the port of Colima.” Finally, Viceroy Mendoza landed there with his own vessels on 25 December 1540, so the port was called Navidad in honor of the Nativity of Our Lord.
Once there, plans for the destination of the armada were changed. Construction of Alvarado’s fleet had proceeded slowly as tools were scarce and Cabrillo, as master shipwright, insisted upon high standards of quality. When the thirteen ships were finally completed in 1540, Alvarado asked Cabrillo to join the expedition in his own San Salvador as admiral of the entire fleet.

By this time, however, Viceroy Mendoza and Pedro Alvarado had entered into a partnership, agreeing to share profits from the viceroy’s overland expeditions and Alvarado’s own expeditions to the Spice Islands. They planned to divide the fleet into two parts, one to
investigate islands as far west as the East Indies, and the other to explore the North American Pacific coast “until its end and secret were sighted.” Just before departure, however, Alvarado left his ships in charge of Cabrillo while he helped the viceroy put down an Indian uprising known as the Mixton War. This battle, in 1541, ironically cost Alvarado his life—he was crushed to death under a falling horse.33

The untimely death of Alvarado created new problems and delays. Cabrillo returned to Guatemala, taking some of the ships with him. On the morning of 11 September 1541, only a few days after he had arrived, a devastating earthquake hit Santiago. Rain had drenched the land for days, and the earthquake sent tons of mud streaming down the side of a volcano overlooking the town. Cabrillo hurried to Santiago from Acajutla to find his home destroyed but his family unharmed. He spent the next several months building a home in the new capital, now called Antigua, and getting his family settled in their new surroundings. Cabrillo later wrote an account of the earthquake and the damage it had caused, signing it as Juan Rodríguez, Escribano (Notary Public).34

In the meantime, Viceroy Mendoza took possession of Alvarado’s fleet and, showing high regard for Cabrillo, commissioned the Guatemalan captain general to continue the voyage northward along the Pacific Coast in search of the Strait of Anián. His fleet would consist of his own San Salvador, a galleon of about 125 by 25 feet, and La Victoria, a cargo ship of about 80 feet in length. The San Miguel, a small 30-foot vessel (fragata) suited for coastal duties, seems also to have been destined to accompany the expedition.

Cabrillo’s expedition did not set sail from the Port of Navidad until 27 June 1542, with two and probably three of the vessels of Alvarado’s former fleet to explore the remote, uncharted areas of the North Pacific. The remaining vessels were dispatched to the Philippines under the viceroy’s cousin Ruy López de Villalobos.35 Cabrillo’s goal, one that had inspired Cortés before him, was to find the Northwest Passage and a shortcut to Oriental riches. The potential rewards propelled Cabrillo and his fellow adventurers into unknown waters further to the north than any yet sailed by European ships.

Sources for the Name of California

The San Salvador and La Victoria cruised northward along the west coast of Mexico, crossed the Sea of Cortés, and proceeded up the Pacific side of what Cabrillo knew as the California peninsula. The name California was already in use by 1542, but its first application, and by whom, remains a mystery. It came into existence about the time of Ulloa’s expedition of 1539, but the exact time and, indeed, the exact reason for its appearance are still speculative. Most likely, the name was taken from the fictitious island of California featured by García Ordóñez de Montalvo in his novel Las Sergas de Esplandián.
published in 1508, which featured the beautiful Queen Calafia who ruled over her Island of California where Amazon women carried weapons made only of gold.\textsuperscript{36}

The name California has also been attributed to other possible origins. It may have been a combination or derivation of Spanish or other European words. \textit{Cálida} meaning hot or \textit{cal} meaning limestone, may have been joined with \textit{forno} (an old Castilian or Catalan form of \textit{horno}) meaning oven, because the burning, desert lands of the peninsula resembled a hot oven, or the abundance of limestone suggested a lime-kiln. Further possibilities are \textit{kalifon}, Hispano-Arabic for large province; \textit{Calafia} a female form of Caliph; \textit{cala} (Spanish for cove) and \textit{fornix} (Latin for vault or arch); and finally, the name may have been chosen “because an Irishman, who was traveling, said that the island looked like the one where Calpurnius (Californio), the father of Saint Patrick was born.” \textsuperscript{37} Until more definite proof of the word's origin is found, all these choices have merit. Nevertheless, the name selected by Ordoñez for his island of Amazons located very near the Garden of Eden still holds the most widespread support.
Cabrillo’s ships entered the Bay of Ensenada, Baja California, on 17 September 1542. The expedition remained in port five days and then continued on, covering from fifteen to twenty miles daily. Within three days they sighted the three Coronado Islands, called by Cabrillo Las Islas Desiertas (Deserted Islands) and placed at 34 degrees latitude (about 2 degrees too far north). From these waters the Spanish seamen noticed the smoke of coastal Indian fires and, as they approached the mainland, saw a promising green valley backed by high mountains. On 28 September 1542, the feast day of San Miguel, Cabrillo headed the San Salvador and La Victoria into San Diego Bay, dropped anchor on the lee side of Point Loma, and formally discovered Alta (Upper) California – as distinguished from Baja (Lower) California.

Cabrillo’s San Miguel

The Spaniards stepped ashore and were greeted by friendly Indians whom Cabrillo described as “well built” and clothed in animal skins. The admiral bestowed the name of San Miguel Arcángel (St. Michael Archangel) upon his newly discovered “closed and very good port,” but it was changed sixty years later by Sebastián Vizcaíno, the Spanish navigator who chose to honor San Diego de Alcalá instead. Canonized as St. Didacus in 1588, Franciscan Brother Diego’s name had become popular in naming ships, forts, and ports during the early seventeenth century. Vizcaíno entered the bay in his flagship San Diego on 12 November 1602, the feast day of San Diego de Alcalá.

Three Indians timidly approached Cabrillo’s ship, indicating by signs that they knew of other similarly dressed white men, carrying crossbows and swords, traveling far inland. Cabrillo understood from their gestures that these strangers (probably a detachment from Coronado’s expedition) wielded lances from horseback and had killed many Indians. For this reason the California natives were afraid, but the Spaniards gave them presents and calmed their fears. When Indians wounded three seamen on a night fishing party near the shore, Cabrillo ordered his crew not to fire on them but to win their confidence. Spain’s first visitors to San Diego, called “Guacamal” by the natives, set a precedent of friendly treatment that was followed with few exceptions during the entire Spanish occupation of the territory.

Sailing from San Diego after six days’ rest, the expedition sighted the Channel Islands of San Clemente and Santa Catalina. Since the harbor at San Miguel had inadvertently been given the name of the smallest ship in the fleet, these two islands were named La Victoria and San Salvador, after the other two ships.

Off Catalina the Spaniards saw numerous Indians dancing and shouting on the shore, making signs for them to land and sending a canoe to approach the ships. When the sailors went ashore, some of the women ran away, though they quickly returned. After this, as the report has it, “They felt very secure, the Spaniards, the Indian women, and everyone.” Though Cabrillo named the Island San Salvador and took formal possession in the name of the king, the men of the fleet called the place Isla Capitana or Juan Rodríguez.
The Voyage Continues

The ships then headed toward the mainland and Cabrillo sighted the bay of San Pedro (his “Bay of Smokes”); they continued a course along the coast and visited the Indian fishing village that Cabrillo called Pueblo de Canoas. Despite winter storms and adverse winds, they reached an area near San Francisco Bay by mid-November. After exploring the coast and islands, Cabrillo returned southward and by Thursday, 23 November 1542, reached the Islas de San Lucas, at one of those called Posesión. This was no doubt the one now called San Miguel, where there is a small harbor (Guyler’s Harbor) with a narrow entrance. The fragata San Miguel was leaking badly so the sailors on board hauled the small vessel ashore and began to repair the damage. Because the small harbor opens to the north, and the heavy swells that accompany the prevailing northwest winds at that time made it a treacherous anchorage, the two other ships probably did not remain long but sought shelter further south.

The Catalina Connection

The island called Limu in the narrative is said to contain eight towns (though ten names are given). It is a close neighbor to the islands of Ciquimuymu (or La Posesión) and Nicalque, probably Santa Cruz. Limu is the one now called Santa Catalina, the island that Lázaro de Cárdenas and
Francisco de Vargas referred to as la isla Capitana. They referred to it as the most important island discovered on the expedition and the headquarters for all the fleet. They indicated that Cabrillo brought his fleet back to San Salvador (Catalina), which was also called La Capitana since the San Salvador was the flagship. To further confuse the naming of the island, it was also “one of the islands called la posesión.”

Nevertheless, Santa Catalina was the logical place to spend the winter because the harbor was protected and the Spaniards had previously established good relations with the Indians. Unfortunately the Indians were not happy to see their return and began a series of running battles with them. Vargas recalled that all the time the armada was on the Isla Capitana the Indians there never stopped fighting us. Some time toward the end of December, Cabrillo sent a party ashore for water, and the Indians attacked. The soldiers, outnumbered, called out to the ship for help. Cabrillo himself decided to rescue them, quickly gathered a relief party and rowed ashore in one of the launches. As he began to jump out of the boat, wrote Vargas, one foot struck a rocky ledge, and he splintered a shinbone.

Later, in 1560, Cabrillo’s son said that his father had a broken leg, while another narrative (that of Urdaneta) reported that he broke his arm close to the shoulder. It is possible that he broke both his arm and leg in the fall.

Wherever the site of the injury, gangrene had severely complicated Cabrillo’s injury by the end of December, finally causing the captain’s death on 3 January 1543. The crew buried their leader on the barren, windswept island of La Posesión, also called La Capitana. Because he died here, wrote Cárdenas, the island retained the name Capitana, although some referred to it as the Isla de Juan Rodríguez.

Shifting winds and sands have covered all traces of the grave. An archeological expedition on Catalina Island in 1894 proved fruitless. Other digs on San Miguel, Santa Rosa and elsewhere have revealed no evidence of Cabrillo’s burial place. Cabrillo’s final words reflected the spirit of the early Spanish explorers. He instructed his chief pilot, Bartolomé Ferrer, not to give up their projected reconnaissance of the northern coast. The two ships again sailed into the open sea and made their way northward against heavy gales. Finally, driven dangerously near the shore at a point somewhere near the Oregon boundary, they prayed for protection and were saved by a sudden change of wind. The expedition’s journal describes few recognizable landmarks, making their exact course difficult to follow, but leaves no doubt about their courage in facing the perils of unknown waters.

Cabrillo’s crew, weakened from exposure and scurvy, responded gratefully to Ferrer’s order to return home. Separated in storms, the crew on each ship feared that the others were lost, but they finally reunited off Cedros Island. They reached the port of Navidad on 14 April 1543, carrying with them the sad news of Cabrillo’s death and the discouraging results of their discoveries. They had found no Strait of Anián, no fabulous Indian civilization, no weapons of gold from an island of Amazons – nothing to enrich or even excite the expectant viceroy of New Spain. And they had not reached the Spice Islands.
Notes

1 Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama due south to discover the existence of the Pacific Ocean, which he named the Mar del Sur (South Sea) on 28 September 1513. Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese navigator sailing for Spain, commanded a fleet of five ships with 237 men on a voyage to circumnavigate the globe from 1519 to 1521. Only one ship, La Victoria commanded by a Spaniard, Juan Sebastián de Elcano, with 18 men returned to Spain. Magellan was killed by natives in the Philippines.


4 Sworn testimony of Gerónimo Cabrillo de Aldana, 4 December 1617, stating “My paternal grandfather, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, came to the New World from the Kingdoms of Spain in company with Pánfilo de Narvaz,” AGI, Patronato 87, folio 36v.

5 Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, Historia General de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano. 4 volumes. (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1601-1615), Chapter 3, Book One, pp. 112-113. Also Descripción de las Indias Occidentales (Madrid: Nicolás Rodríguez Franco, 1730), decada 7, libro 5, capitulo 3, p. 89. The reference reads: “… Named as Captain of those [two ships was] Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo Portugueses, a person well informed about the characteristics of the sea.” Correa, who was a Portuguese mariner, but not so noted, may have commanded the brigantine San Miguel since its crew was headed by a master. Bartolomé Ferrer was from the Levantine (eastern) coast of Spain and as Chief Pilot was second in command.

6 After Cortés had been commissioned to lead an expedition to follow up the previous voyage of Juan de Grijalva along the Yucatan peninsula by Velázquez, the Cuban governor became suspicious of Cortés’s motives given the number of ships and men that he had hired. Believing that Cortés might not return, Velázquez issued an order of arrest and attempted to detain him in Santiago, but Cortés left anyway.

7 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Historia Verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España (Madrid, 1632); reprinted 3 vols. (Mexico, D.F.; Pedro Robredo, 1939).

8 Kelsey, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, pp. 62-63. No birth records exist, but there are several legal documents in the Archivo General de Indias, Justicia, that give evidence of this information.


10 Holmes, From New Spain to California by Sea, 83.


12 The myth persisted to the degree that Ferdinand VI of Spain issued a Royal Decree in 1747 proclaiming: “California is not an Island.” See Polk, Island of California, 326.


15Letter from Diego García de Palacio to the King, 8 March 1576, in E.G. Squier, Collection of Rare and Original Documents and Relations concerning the Discovery and Conquest of America (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1860), 32, 107.

16 There seems to be some uncertainty about the location of Girabaltique. Henry Raup Wagner in Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1929), 571, thought it was another name for the port of Acapulco, but Izapa is probably a better guess.

17 Squier, Rare Documents, 38-40, 108; Juan Rodríguez, statement made ca August 1541, AGI, Justicia 280, fol. 25.

18 Juan Escalante de Mendisa, “Itinerario de navegación de los mares y tierras occidentales,” MS in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, fol. 36. The author lived in Guatemala and Honduras and wrote his manuscript in 1575.

19 Alvarado to the King, 1 September 1532, reprinted in Libro Viejo, 282-83. There is some question about his use of tonel, which he seems to interchange with tonelada. A tonel is equivalent to 2 pipas or casks, each holding about 125 gallons.

Ruy López de Villalobos commanded a fleet of six ships, including the flagship, and headed for the Philippines on 25 October 1542. After extensive exploration of the area and having named several islands Las Islas Filipinas (The Philippine Islands) for Philip II of Spain, López de Villalobos and his men were driven out by hostile natives. They fled to the Moluccas but were imprisoned by the Portuguese. López de Villalobos died in a prison cell on 4 April 1544, although more than one hundred crew members survived and were sent to Lisbon. Some thirty, including Ginés de Mafra who produced a manuscript on Magellan’s circumnavigation, chose to remain. It was published in 1920.

The volume written by García Ordóñez de Montalvo, called Las Sergas de Esplandúan or The Deeds of Esplandian was a fifth volume in the popular stories of chivalry in a series about Espandían’s “father” Amadis of Gaul. Ordóñez edited the first edition of Amadís de Gaul under the name García Rodríguez de Montalvo. In later editions he used Ordóñez. Las Sergas de Esplandúan was published by Jacob Cromberger in Sevilla between 1508 and 1510 and was widely read by seafaring mariners.

Three of the islands called Limu in the narrative of Lazaro de Cardenas and Francisco de Vargas is the one now called Santa Catalina.

There have been attempts to locate any archeological evidence of Cabrillo’s burial place on Catalina, San Miguel, Santa Rosa and at the Isthmus. Personal interview, 20 August 2008.

The lack of information because of Cabrillo’s missing journal is explained by Kelsey, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, pp. 112-115. The first summary account was prepared in 1543, and contains only eight folio pages. For an analysis of authorship of this “log” see ibid., 168-70.

Details of the voyage compiled after 1543. Possible authors include Juan León (1543) and Andrés Urdaneta.