



## Five Protagonists of the Early History of the United States

*Beatriz Suñe*

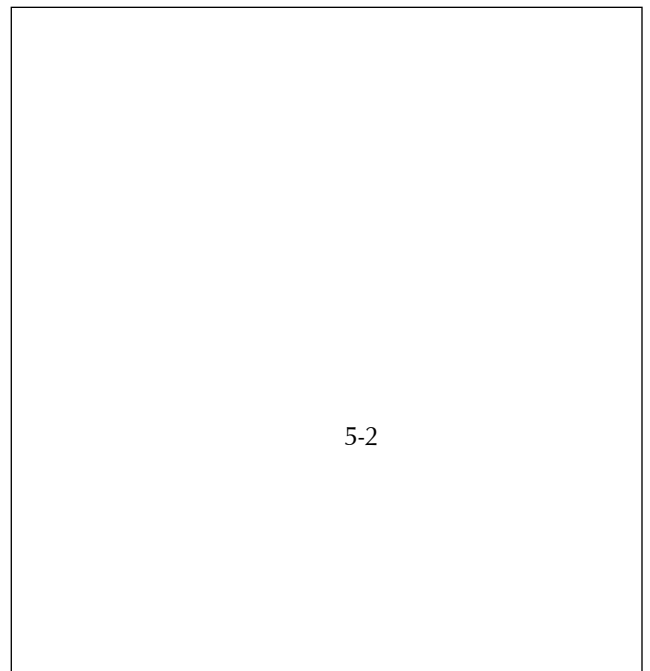
### Man, Myth and Legend

#### Human Profile of the Conquistador

Who were the Spanish conquistadors? Who were those men who accomplished the incorporation of almost an entire continent into the Spanish Crown? In the transition between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the emergence of professional soldiers, the concept of army in Spain underwent a change. America, however, was conquered primarily by men who were more the product of the Middle Ages than the Renaissance. The conquistadors, therefore, constituted a step backward regarding military models operative in Spain. The concept the conquistadors had of their enterprise and its objectives was certainly medieval, for they aspired to become the lords of territories to be conquered and not a mere cog in the imperial structure. The Crown, on the contrary, was very careful in avoiding the reproduction in the New World of a nobility that would threaten the power of the state. Many of these conquistadors were plebeians or hidalgos devoid of wealth. They were to become real hidalgos in the event of their success. A very common dream was to return someday to the native village or city in Andalusia, Extremadura or Castile and build a palace bearing a coat of arms on the facade. Outstanding characteristics attributed to the conquistadors are courage, daring and an irrepressible spirit of adventure, all of which are traits naturally associated with youth. Actually, most of those men were past their youth when they commenced their careers in the Indies. The age of the most celebrated Spanish conquerors ranged between 35 and 45. Others could well be described as elderly if the mean life expectancy at that time is taken into consideration.

There were many conquistadors who participated in more than one enterprise in regions that were distant from one another. Quite a few spent a good amount

of their lives pursuing an ideal they never reached. Most of the time the usual end of an existence devoted to adventure was death on the battlefield, illness or poverty. The tests of the personality, physical endurance and psychological strength of each captain were his capacity for command during an expedition, energy, the ability to deal with the men he commanded, tenacity in the face of difficulties and courage before extreme situations. The other officers and soldiers had to be equal to the circumstances. Nevertheless, many succumbed before the rigors of an inhospitable nature or fighting against the natives. News of great discoveries and of alleged treasures in



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**Francisco Pizarro, Diego de Almagro and Fernando de Luque signing the contract with the Spanish Crown for the journey of exploration and conquest.**

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**The main plaza in Trujillo, Spain, with a statue of native son Francisco Pizarro.**

gold and silver held by the Indians fostered illusions in those exceptional men. The unusual success of some conqueror or reports, which in most cases were more fabulous than true, were an irresistible invitation to join in the adventure. When military experience existed, it had usually been acquired in the European wars; more commonly, training took place on the American scene of action while in the service of some prestigious commander.

The most common procedure in undertaking an expedition of exploration or conquest was the signing of *capitulaciones*, or a contract with the Crown. All the details of the project, respective rights and obligations were stipulated by this document: routes and geographic boundaries to prevent encroaching into regions assigned to other conquerors, titles and positions expected and distribution of economic benefits between the Crown and the head of the expedition and his troops. The explicit motivations of the Crown were always the incorporation of land, subsequently bringing in Spaniards to settle and establish cities, and the evangelization of the natives.

An essential element in the conquistador's behavior was his loyalty to the king. This loyalty applied not only to the fulfillment of commitments established by the *capitulaciones*, but it affected the total relationship between the conquistador and the Crown. Decisions by the monarch or his officials could be criticized, but the legitimacy of royal authority was never questioned. The various commanders of an expedition could become estranged from one another and fight to the

death, but loyalty to the king was always maintained. The conqueror, besides, was deeply religious. He counted on the assistance of God to achieve success, and, according to the principles of justice, he was convinced that God had to reward him because his deeds were for His greater glory. Faith in God and king were, undoubtedly, sources of strength for the conquistadors.

We have outlined the ideal picture of a conquering enterprise and drawn the archetype of the conqueror. Reality was in many respects very different. There were courageous and long-suffering conquistadors who were men of honor, generous and with good intentions besides. There were others who, although courageous and patient while enduring the rigors of the conquest, were petty, cruel towards their men and the Indians, and ambitious to the point of betraying their comrades. All together, both types achieved much less than what they expected in terms of economic benefits, as well as in social prestige. Their human, personal and intimate aspects merit consideration. The figure of the conquistador would not be complete without taking into consideration his personal circumstances. His conquering labors made a reality out of many ideals of those days insofar as courage, physical and moral strength, the glory achieved by the heroes and wealth. In one word, the conquistador was an epic figure closer to classical myths than to common everyday reality. In many respects, the Spanish conquerors of the sixteenth century came close to the representation of heroes of medieval epics. This notwithstanding, it should not be

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**An engraved portrait of Vasco Núñez de Balboa, discoverer of the Pacific Ocean.**

disregarded that behind the imposing figure of each great explorer or conqueror there was no more and no less than a human being.

We have chosen five distinguished figures for this chapter who, to a greater or lesser degree, were endowed with these contradictory attributes. The five traveled on foot or horseback through large areas of what is today part of the South and Southwest United States. They were actually more explorers than conquerors and to them we owe the first news and descriptions of many indigenous groups and of the beautiful and varied landscape of a large portion of North America. They were, besides, five protagonists of the early history of a nation.

### **First Explorations of Florida**

The main incentives for the repeated expeditions through the wide and deep land that the Spaniards named La Florida were legends and myths that, from classical times, stirred the interest and the dreams of Europeans. The belief in the existence of and

alleged reports concerning the Amazons, El Dorado, Cíbola, Chicora and the Fountain of Eternal Youth impelled many captains into undertaking expeditions both in North and South America. The dream of arriving at fabulous places, offering wealth and fame, stimulated and sustained interest for years in spite of repeated failures met by efforts to reach something impossible because unreal. What is important today is that those senseless ventures contributed to a deep penetration of the Americas and to laying the foundations for later settlements.

The exploration and colonization of Florida was an enterprise which, in a special way, contained implicitly all the most significant elements of Spanish operations in the Americas: a legendary basis, the ambition and curiosity of the men who participated in the adventure, their perseverance and superhuman efforts and, undeniably, disappointment and personal failure. The great enterprise of Florida could only succeed as a collective action, accomplished over a long period of time. Florida became, therefore, as much an obsession or more so than any other region in America, an obsession based on legend and myth. During the first decades of the sixteenth century many and very distinguished Spaniards devoted their zeal, their economic resources and even their lives to the conquest of a chimera. Four of the protagonists in this chapter were much involved with this protracted adventure. Because of the additional complexity of the history of Florida, before going on to the biographical profiles of each of these important figures, it is advisable to summarize some of the facts related to the early years.

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The territory known at the beginning of the sixteenth century by the name of Florida encompassed an area from the Palmas River (present day Río Grande del Norte) to Los Bacalaos (Chesapeake Bay). In drawing its boundaries, the Inca Garcilaso in his history of Florida, places Cuba to the south, Los Bacalaos to the east and, to the west, the Seven Cities of Cíbola. As we can see, a very vast territory—with all the open spaces north of Mexico—consumed the energies of many Spanish explorers. There were two reasons drawn from legends that spurred an interest in the “Northeast.” There was besides a scientific motivation which, were it to succeed, could have had tremendous economic repercussions for Europe. The two legends spoke of Bimini (where the Fountain of Eternal Youth was located) and Chicora, the country of the giants, of pearls and the mountain of gold. The scientific reason was the discovery of the northwest straits or passage which would open the way to Cipango (Japan) and

Cathay (China). This search placed before the Spanish explorers a geographic space where distances were totally beyond European parameters. The ecological panorama included swampy regions to the driest and most deserted lands. It was so difficult to navigate along coasts that often meant death for many expedition members. Those regions were inhabited by peoples of diverse cultural levels and forms who subsisted by gathering, hunting and fishing or from an incipient form of agriculture. From the beginning of the sixteenth century until 1565, when St. Augustine was founded by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, a series of expeditions were undertaken with no effective results. These expeditions succeeded in charting the geography of this territory and reporting on the people that inhabited it. In a matter of fifty years Europe was able to learn from the accounts of Spanish explorers and chroniclers about the territory and inhabitants of Florida.

Chicora was described as a land populated by Indians that were almost giants and were suited to work. According to historian Pedro Mártir de Anglería, the region was at the same latitude as Andalusia and had equivalent natural resources: oak forests, pines and cypresses, hazelnut and almond trees, grape vines and a great abundance of vegetables. Aside from these alleged agricultural resources, there were pearls and, in the interior, a mountain where the Indians mined precious stones.

And what was Bimini? Where had the news of the Fountain of Eternal Youth come from? There was a legend among the Indians concerning a fountain with waters that turned the elderly into youths and that this fountain was located towards the north, on a paradisiacal island. On the other hand, among Christopher Columbus' favorite reading material was the work of Juan de Mandevilla, *El libro de las maravillas del mundo* (The Book of the Wonders of the World). Juan Mandevilla (John Mandeville) was an English gentleman from the early years of the fourteenth century. At the age of twenty-five, he decided to make a long journey to exotic lands. Upon returning home, he gave an account of his travel experiences, adding facts gathered from his readings which included writings from Pliny, the Roman, to Marco Polo, the Venetian. This work met overwhelming success in its day, and more than three hundred manuscripts of the same are in existence. Mandeville spoke of a fountain that smells and tastes like the various spices, its taste and color changing every hour. Those who drank from its waters while fasting were cured from any illness, and those who lived there drank so often from its waters that they suffered from no diseases and appeared to be always young. For this reason some called it "the Foun-

tain of Youth" and said that it came from Paradise and was therefore miraculous. Two cultural traditions—the indigenous American and the European—are superposed in the legends of Bimini and the miraculous fountain. This is not surprising since many myths and legends come from universal cultural archetypes and do not require the phenomenon of cultural diffusion but of mere parallelism.

The search for a northwest passage also gave reason to the exploration of Florida. This period of discovery began in 1524 with the Italian Giovanni Verrazano under the sponsorship of France. This navigator arrived on the coasts of America at a 34 degree latitude, and, from there, he sailed about fifty leagues south. He then returned to his point of arrival and continued north until he sighted the passage that opened between the continental coast of Canada and Newfoundland. Verrazano believed that through that sea one could reach Japan, China and India. He did not make an attempt to continue such a journey, returning to France instead. About that same time (1524-1525), Esteban Gómez sailed along the North American coast from Florida to Maine. John Cabot, under the flag of England, and other Spaniards, years before, toured the coasts of Newfoundland and the mainland at those latitudes. In time, Verrazano's journey had important political consequences because it set off the rivalry between France and Spain in what is the United States today. The presence of French Huguenots in northern Florida was precisely what incited the expedition of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and the foundation of the first Spanish settlements in the region.

Juan Ponce de León's expedition of 1513 was the first that was directly related to Florida. The most important result of this attempt was the discovery of the Gulf Stream by Ponce de León, February 4, 1513. In 1516, after many vicissitudes, pilot Miruelos managed to reach the Bay of Apalache. Hernando de Córdoba and Pilot Alaminos with a total of four ships sailed for Florida in 1517, but the winds carried them to Yucatán. From here, they veered to the north again and arrived in Tampa. They were attacked by the natives; Alaminos lost his life and Hernando de Córdoba was seriously wounded. The next expedition was led by Alvarez Pineda. He sailed along the western Coast of Florida, made contact with the Apalache Indians and sailed along the mouth of the Mississippi. After Pineda's voyage, it was established that Florida was not an island but a peninsula. In 1520, an expedition led by Vázquez de Ayllón was sent. Several *entradas* or expeditions to the north were organized to search for slaves, there being a lack of Indian labor in the Antilles. In the course of one of these expeditions, they arrived in a land known as Chicora where the

Spaniards seized some Indians. Among the captives there was one known as Francisco El Chicorano who later served as interpreter in a new expedition by Vázquez de Ayllón.

All these expeditions were organized at the initiative of Spanish *particulares* or private individuals and for purely economic purposes. The expeditions that had an impact on the history of Florida were those organized under the procedure of capitulaciones. In these instances, the chief was not a mere adventurer with greater or lesser common sense, but an individual endorsed by his position of *adelantado*, captain general or governor of the lands that might be discovered. The inclusion of a priest in these enterprises is evidence of their missionary and colonizing character. At the same time, this representative of the Church kept in check possible abuses by the *adelantado*.

In June, 1523, agreements were signed between Vázquez de Ayllón and the Crown with relation to the provinces and islands of Duache, Chicora, Pyraitá, Tancal and other places yet to be discovered. While preparations were underway in Santo Domingo (Española), two vessels were sent to Chicora, returning with some gold samples. Finally, in 1526, Ayllón's expedition left with 500 men and some Dominican friars. They disembarked near Cape Fear, at the mouth of a river they called Jordan. They founded San Miguel de Guadalupe with no success. Cold and hunger were killing the expedition members and Ayllón himself died on September 18, 1526. Of the 500 men who had left shortly before, only 150 returned and even the captain's body was lost at sea during a storm.

In 1527 the awesome expedition commanded by Pánfilo de Narváez, governor of Cuba and *adelantado* of Florida, left the Spanish port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The incidents of this disastrous voyage are known to us thanks to the writings of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. From his *Shipwrecks*, we learn of the tragic end of this expedition, the details of which will be discussed in the section devoted to this explorer. The cycle of the Florida explorations closed with Hernando de Soto's saga and his discovery of the Mississippi. In the last third of the sixteenth century, with Pedro Menéndez de Avilés a new stage began the hallmark of which were colonization and defending the territory from the French.

## Juan Ponce de León

The Spanish exploration and settlement of what is today the Southeast United States cost many lives and vast sums of money. In spite of it all, the project was never abandoned. Human difficulties seem to have increased the allure of the enterprise, spurred on dur-

ing the first decades by the illusion of making myths and legends a reality. Those lands with the paradisiacal reputation were difficult to explore and their coasts were not easy for navigation. Between the Island of Cuba and the Florida peninsula there is a series of cays. One of the areas was known by the name of Cabeza de los Mártires (Martyrs' Head) because of the many misfortunes that had occurred in its vicinity. The Gulf stream ruffles these waters and hurricanes make navigation very dangerous. Juan Ponce de León went towards this region thus beginning the exploration of Florida. Bartolomé Columbus, brother of the Admiral, had requested that the king sign a capitulación allowing him to explore those coasts. King Ferdinand did not grant this authorization, not wanting to increase the power of the Columbus family in the Indies. In 1512 he signed an agreement with Ponce de León for an expedition to the "islands of Bimini."

## His Experiences in the Antilles

Ponce de León's origins are obscure. There is no certainty as to his place and date of birth. Some scholars of this historical figure make him a native of Santhervas, Valladolid, and he must have been born around 1460. The surname Ponce appears among the most distinguished families of Andalusia and for this reason some biographers try to set his place of birth in this region. Friar Bartolomé de las Casas states that he went to the Indies as a "peón," in other words, without a horse. He was a poor hidalgo with good qualities. According to the chronicler Fernández de Oviedo, he enlisted for Columbus' second voyage (1493), but his name does not appear until 1504 in connection with the campaign against the Indian village of Higuey in Hispaniola. Prior to that date, there is no authentic documentary data about Ponce de León. As a reward for his actions in Hispaniola, Governor Ovando gave him the lieutenantship of Salvaleón. In this village of Spaniards, Ponce de León settled and built a stone house for the purpose of colonizing and defending the land. Three fundamental elements of Spanish colonization are gathered here: building, populating and defending.

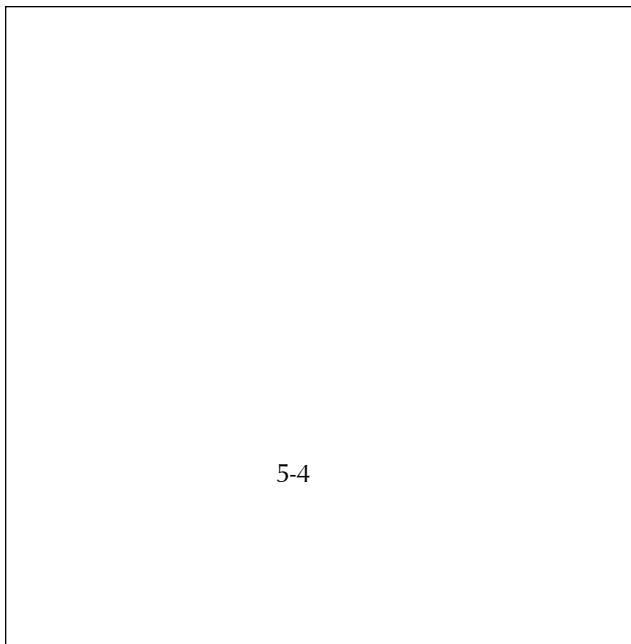
In a report Ponce de León wrote to Ovando in 1509, he renders a detailed accounting of the work of exploration and settlement he performed on the island of San Juan with the backing of the Crown. The king granted him the post of governor of San Juan for his efficiency, ability and fidelity.

Ferdinand of Aragón did no more than bolster the power of a trusted person in the face of the aspirations and demands of the Columbus family. The uprising of the Indians of Borinquen was an event that put to test

Ponce de León's ability as negotiator. In his policies towards the Indian population, he had always conducted himself with moderation and respect towards their lives and properties, but some settlers coveted more lands and Indians than the Crown usually granted. In 1511 he was removed from his duties, that is, as governor, administrator of royal revenues and head of the army. By the end of that same year, the royal officials wrote the king that the change of command was carried out in peace and harmony. Wrong policies applied to the Indians in San Juan, however, made Ponce de León decide to return to Spain in 1512.

### The Search for What Never Existed

It was King Ferdinand himself who suggested to him the possibility of setting down capitulaciones for some new territories, namely, Bimini. According to these agreements, Ponce de León agreed to realize the enterprise in a maximum of three years. He had to cover the expenses of the expedition and could choose its members. He was entrusted with the government and administration of justice in the new territories. He was granted ten percent of all royal revenues, the gold and other benefits, taking the portion that was the Crown's share. He was named adelantado of Bimini. In these agreements, the prohibition that prevented foreigners, Moriscos, Jews and new Christians from joining the expedition was included. Finally, Ponce de León was under obligation to report in great detail on the land, its inhabitants and natural conditions.



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Portrait of Juan Ponce de León on a coin.

The shipping of livestock, a clear sign of the colonizing purpose of the expedition, was also taken into account along with other material considerations concerning ships, men and supplies. The troops were composed of Andalusians, Galicians, Basques, Leonese and some Aragonese. They left on March 4, 1513, and, on April 3, they came upon flat land. The result of this trip was merely an examination of the coasts of Florida which Ponce de León thought were islands.

He returned to Spain to report to the Consejo de Indias. He was certain that there were some lands to the north, of which there was no information. Ponce de León was the first explorer who communicated directly with the Crown in explaining his discovery and making new proposals for his project. The result of these interviews were concessions concerning Florida and the appointment as captain general of the armada against the Carib Indians. At that point Ponce de León found his position regarding the new explorations strengthened. A very important element in the agreements concerning the armada against the Caribs were the rules covering settlement which encompassed Ponce de León's fundamental approach in favor of the population. In his plans against the Caribs, the hopes of obtaining slaves, generally shared by the other Spaniards of the islands, were not included. Ponce de León was trying to eradicate the dangerous hostility of these Indians in so far as the repercussions their attacks could have on territories that he was attempting to incorporate. Bartolomé de las Casas considered Ponce de León more of a liberator of slaves than an enslaver of the same. But Fernando, the Catholic King, was dying and Ponce de León's prerogatives were in danger. Faced with this situation, he decided to return to Spain in 1516. Meanwhile, the village of Caparra—founded by Ponce de León during his first voyage—was growing with the arrival of new colonists. This small island settlement was moved somewhat later to what is now San Juan de Puerto Rico.

In 1520 Ponce de León set out on his last journey to Florida. As it was necessary to organize a new fleet of exploration and make effective his appointment as adelantado, he traveled to Española to be refitted. The accounts of his expedition to Florida are few and unclear. What can be stated with certainty is that his intentions were not to discover lands but to take possession of the lands agreed upon with the king. As the chronicler Fernández de Oviedo explains, however,

. . . he returned from there broken up and with an arrow wound, and on account of that wound he died on the Island of Cuba. And it was not only him who lost his life and possessions in this quest, but many others, because

they who followed him died during the journey, and once they arrived, some at the hands of the Indians and others from diseases. And so the adelantado and his prospective province came to an end. (Fernández de Oviedo, II, 106)

## Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

Cabeza de Vaca's odyssey through a large area of the present-day United States is one of the great feats in the history of explorations. This man—and three other shipwrecked men from the same Florida expedition—endured all sorts of experiences and sufferings as he wandered along the coasts or the interior of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. A journey of more than 10,000 kilometers through totally strange lands might appear an impossible accomplishment, and yet, it did occur. It is unavoidable to want to compare the equipment and techniques of any modern exploration with the total lack of means of those first European travelers to North America who were not aware of the most convenient route to Mexico.

Cabeza de Vaca's survival was due to courage, endurance and in total trust in divine assistance. Because of his strong will, Cabeza de Vaca rapidly forgot the adversities he encountered. Furthermore, the adventure he was living never ceased to excite him. After his shipwreck on the Gulf coast and his trek through North American lands, he still had strength to travel to South America, to the Río de la Plata. Here again destiny truncated his hopes and thirst for glory since he returned to Spain in chains to be judged by the Council of the Indies. The figure of Cabeza de Vaca embraces the best attributes of the Spanish conquistadors. He was devoid of the ambition or cruelty that was the norm for most of the explorers and conquerors of the Americas.

## Childhood and Youth

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was born in Jerez de la Frontera around 1490. According to period chroniclers, he cut a rather imposing figure: tall and strong, with vigorous features and a heavy beard that covered a somewhat prominent chin. He was serious in character with a tendency towards melancholy, but friendly and easy to deal with. He was a faithful believer in God, and throughout his lengthy written works the trust he placed on divine mercy is evident. During the hardest moments of his years as a wanderer, he availed himself of his religious faith as reflected in the following passage:

When I was afflicted in this way, my only comfort and consolation was to think about the suffering of our redeemer Jesus Christ and the blood he shed for me, and to consider how much greater was the torment he suffered from the thorns than what I was suffering at that time. (82)

In the existing documentation in the Archivo de Protocolos de Jerez de la Frontera, there is abundant information on Cabeza de Vaca's family. It is revealed that some of its members belonged to the city council. His grandfather, Pedro de Vera, was a conqueror in the Canary Islands. His father, Francisco de Vera, was a soldier, connected with the powerful family of Medina-Sidonia. Our hero and his brothers, consequently, were born surrounded by a military and political atmosphere. After his parents' premature death, Doña Beatriz Figueroa, an aunt married to Don Pedro de Estopinán, took charge of the children. They had to move to nearby Sanlúcar de Barrameda—a port on the mouth of the Guadalquivir River that linked the city of Seville with the sea. Cabeza de Vaca's uncle was administrator for the Dukes of Medina-Sidonia in Sanlúcar. A tutor was engaged for the education of the children, and once they were grown employment was made available to them. In this manner, Cabeza de Vaca became part of a staff that managed the holdings of the duchy. The discharge of these duties was very useful to him during the expedition to Florida as treasurer for the armada and as *alguacil mayor*.

At that time, during the transition between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, relatively prosperous families received high positions in villages or cities in exchange for services rendered the Crown or the high nobility. Maintaining a certain social status was so economically costly that they were forced to engage to a certain degree in duties, such as commerce and agriculture, not considered very honorable at that time. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca grew up in two worlds, one, a world of ideals and the other real and commonplace. The ideal led him to exaggerate the deeds of his ancestors and to assume a pretentiousness that put him at odds with the Council of the Indies. Reality was harder for this exceptional man and none of his efforts bore fruit.

The move of young Alvar Núñez to Sanlúcar de Barrameda had great influence on his future life. The activities in this port, which served as a point of departure for the Americas, was a constant incentive for his dreams and aspirations. From the port of Sanlúcar, he witnessed the weighing of anchor of Magellan's fleet which had departed from Seville. He held the memory of the splendor he saw at the port beginning with

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**Stamp of Alvar Núñez on a coin.**

August 10, 1519—date of the arrival of the five ships of the expedition that made the first trip around the world—until September, when the fleet crossed the sand bar out into the open sea. Undoubtedly this and other great events of the period strongly impressed young Cabeza de Vaca. He was probably saddened on September 6, 1522, by the battered condition presented by the vessel *Victoria*. This heroic ship was the only one that survived the historic expedition, which, after three years, returned from the first trip around the world with Juan Sebastián Elcano now in command. It was pitiful to see how few of the sailors were returning home. In spite of their condition and the misfortunes they had suffered, they bore good news of the conquest of a great empire in the Mexican plateau. Cortés' deeds in Mexico became from that date forward a point of attraction and a model for those who would attempt a career in the Indies. Cabeza de Vaca's decision to travel to the New World was firm and its feasibility possible with the opportunities for enlistment that opened in Seville. Pánfilo de Narváez, the governor of Cuba, was organizing an expedition to explore a new and marvelous territory known by the name of Florida.

Cabeza de Vaca's interview with Narváez was supported by his years of work in management for the ducal house of Medina-Sidonia. He was able to present letters of recommendation from the Cádiz nobility. His proofs of purity of blood and the services rendered by his family were sufficient guarantees for Narváez who appointed him head treasurer and *alguacil* or constable. These positions involved a variety of duties regarding

the supplies and furnishings for the armada and the dealings with the Casa de Contratación of Seville as well. The fleet sailed for Sanlúcar at the beginning of June, 1527. The days spent in this port must have brought Cabeza de Vaca memories of his youth and he must have carried with him the visual memory of the ducal palace in the highest part of the city. This was probably the last image he had of his home before entering the open seas to undertake an adventure several years long. It was the end of June, 1527.

It is difficult to comprehend the motivations and dreams of these men who, abandoning a comfortable and normal everyday life, ventured into the unknown. They were headed towards a strange land with no knowledge of its conditions for life or of its inhabitants. Furthermore, they had no knowledge even of the geographic boundaries agreed upon between the Crown and Pánfilo de Narváez, a wide space stretching from Florida to the river Pánuco in Mexico.

**Florida Bound**

The crossing from Spain to the Caribbean was uneventful. The journey was only interrupted by a stopover of a few days in the Canaries, days filled again with memories for Cabeza de Vaca because of his grandfather Pedro de Vera's deeds in the islands. The fleet finally arrived in Santo Domingo, remaining there forty days. During this time more than 140 men deserted, enticed by more positive promises and offers by Spaniards already settled on Hispaniola. A very strong hurricane hit part of the expedition in the port of Trinidad threatening the lives of most of the hands. Finally, on April 12, 1528, after some other incidents, they entered Tampa Bay on the western coast of Florida. The governor took possession of the land in the name of his sovereign on Good Friday. Soon the men were disillusioned. They had already lost more than half the horses and the lack of an interpreter made communication with the few Indians they encountered on their journey very difficult. There were differing opinions among the members of the group regarding the route to follow, whether by land or by sea. Cabeza de Vaca was of the opinion that they should not leave the ships behind with a few men because the coasts were hazardous and the provisions scarce. The governor's opinion prevailed and a long and disastrous march towards Apalache, at the mouth of the Apalachicola, got underway. They managed to pitch camp near the St. Martin Keys, the land of the Timucua Indians. The natives were hostile but the Spaniards managed to obtain some food to supplement the pound of hardtack and the half pound of bacon they had received for rations. The governor

decided to return to the coast by way of the village of Aute, near the Apalachicola River. They were forced to consume roots, palm nuts and oysters for sustenance. The Aute Indians gave them a good amount of corn and, by the time they left the village, only 200 of the 600 men who began the expedition were left. The march became increasingly difficult. Men and horses were steadily dying. The men were only thinking of deserting and finding a solution to the situation, each one on his own. They could not find the open sea in order to abandon such an inhospitable and swampy terrain. Again, a miracle seemed to spur these defeated men. It was necessary to build some vessels to escape that labyrinth of lagoons and inlets. Improvisation served as stimulus, and with only one carpenter they began building several boats. There were no tools, iron, forge, sails, ropes, or so many other necessary things. Between August 4 and September 20, they made five barges, each 22 feet in length with a capacity of about 40 men. Water containers were made from horse hides, sails from shirts, the tails and manes of the horses were used for making rigging and cordage. The area was so uninviting that Cabeza de Vaca in his despair wrote the following:

And that land to which we had been brought by our sins was such that it was very difficult to find stones for ballast and anchors. Nowhere in it had we seen any. We skinned the legs of the horses in one piece and cured the hides to make skins for carrying water. (47)

To these scarcities and difficulties, attacks by Indian archers must be added. In the course of their coastal navigation, they passed along the Bay of Santa Cruz (Mobile). For a month, they could not supply themselves with water. They found several canoes with Indians who helped them with water and fish, but when the Spaniards felt more confident, the Indians attacked them fiercely. They arrived at the mouth of a very large river which apparently they named San Miguel or Palmas. They did not realize that they were on the delta of the river that a few years later Hernando de Soto's expedition would discover upstream. This was September, 1528.

## The Long Trek

The barges were moving away from the coast. Our protagonist's barge was thrust on the beach by a gigantic wave. After burying the barge and while exploring the area, they encountered some Indians who took them to their village and gave them shelter. About this

time they had news of other Spaniards that were in another village nearby. They were Andrés Dorante and Alonso del Castillo, also members of the unfortunate expedition. They met on the banks of the Guadalupe River. By the winter of 1528, there were only fifteen survivors left from the group. Because the death of the Spaniards—probably from hunger and dysentery—coincided with the outbreak of a disease among the Indians, they believed that it was the Spaniards who were killing them. In this place, named Isla del Malhado (Island of Misfortune), our men endured new experiences and had to surrender to strong pressures in order to survive. At the request of the Indians, they were forced to become “healers” or physicians. Cabeza de Vaca, the narrator, recounted the healing procedures followed by those whom we would call today in anthropological terms shamans:

On that island I have spoken of, they wanted to make us physicians, without testing us or asking for any degrees, because they cure illnesses by blowing on the sick person and cast out the illness with their breath and their hands. So they told us to be useful and do the same. We laughed at the idea, saying they were mocking us and that we did not know how to heal. They in turn deprived us of our food until we did as they ordered. Seeing our reluctance, an Indian told me that I did not know what I was talking about when I said that all that was useless. He knew that even rocks and other things found in the fields have beneficial properties, for he healed and took away pain by passing a hot rock across the stomach. And since, he said, we were powerful men, we were certain to have greater powers and properties. In brief, we were in such need that we had to do it, putting aside our fear that anyone would be punished for it.

Their manner of healing is as follows: when they are sick, they call a medicine man, and after they are cured they give him not only all their possessions, but also seek things from their relatives to give him. What the medicine man does is to make a cut where the pain is and suck around it. They cauterize with fire, a practice they consider very beneficial. I tried it and found that it gave good results. Afterwards they blow on the painful area, believing that their illness goes away in this manner.

We did our healing by making the sign of the cross on the sick persons, breathing on

them, saying the Lord's Prayer and a Hail Mary over them, and asking God our Lord, as best we could, to heal them and inspire them to treat us well. God our Lord in his mercy deigned to heal all those for whom we prayed. Once we made the sign of the cross on them, they told the others that they were well and healthy. For this reason they treated us well, and refrained from eating to give us food. They also gave us hides and other small things. (62)

Another experience for Cabeza de Vaca during the years he spent in this region were his activities as a merchant which he exercised to the best of his abilities. He achieved the respect of the Indians with his transactions and provided himself with sustenance.

I could not bear the kind of life I had with them [the Charrucos]. Among many other afflictions, in order to eat I had to pull the roots from the ground under the water among the canes where they grew. My fingers were so worn by this that a light brush with a piece of straw would cause them to bleed. . . . For this reason I went over to the other Indians and fared a bit better with them. I became a trader and tried to ply my trade the best I could. Because of this they fed me and treated me well, asking me to go from one place to another for things they needed, since people do not travel or trade much in that land because of the continuous warfare that goes on.

With my trading and wares I went as far inland as I wanted and I would travel the coast for a distance of forty or fifty leagues. The main items of my trade were pieces of sea snails and their insides, and seashells which they use to cut a certain fruit that looks like a bean, used by them for medicinal purposes and for dances and festivals (and this is the thing they value most), sea beads and other things. These are what I carried inland, and in exchange and barter I received hides and red ochre, which they rub on their faces and hair to dye them, flints for arrowheads, paste and stiff canes to make arrows, and some tassels made from deer hair, which the dye red. I liked this trade, because it gave me the freedom to go wherever I wanted. I was obligated to nothing and was not a slave. Wherever I went they treated me well and fed me because I was a trader. Most of all I

liked it because it gave me the opportunity to search for an escape route. (64-65)

Cabeza de Vaca remained in this area for six long years, but the idea of going towards New Spain did not abandon him for a minute. Cabeza de Vaca began to draw his plans to leave that region, counting on Andrés Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo and the "Blackamoor" Estebanico, a native of Morocco. These other members of Narváez's expedition lived in nearby villages. By now it was 1534 and the escape preparations abounded in difficulties. The four men met in September of that year and with a modest supply of food they began their long march west, crossing very difficult terrain and areas as inhospitable as what would later be called the "Llano Estacado" (Staked Plains) in the border region between Texas and New Mexico. The knowledge of the six Indian languages Cabeza de Vaca had acquired, with a few words from many others, facilitated communication with almost all the ethnic groups they encountered. They crossed the land of the Caddos who helped them and who are called *avavares* in Cabeza de Vaca's chronicle. These Indians asked them to heal their sick and in exchange they fed them deer meat.

The four men traveled from one tribe to another, and were much in demand because of their healing abilities. Through this means they harbored the hope that they were on their way to freedom. They found more civilized Indians in the basins of the Sabine and Colorado rivers and they continued their endless march in the hope of arriving at New Spain. For the first time they encountered larger and more compact villages in their path. They were in the environs of the Colorado River where the Indians were of better standing. The natives told them that, if they continued up stream, they would find villagers that raised corn and that, although these Indians were their enemies, they could help the Spaniards. Continuing their endless march, they went deep into the Pueblo Indian region. They wandered aimlessly so that their march became longer and eventually they reached New Mexico. The chronicler referred to this period of their incredible journey as "El camino del maíz" (The Corn Road). At the beginning of 1536, they were in the village of the "Corazones de Venado" (Deer Hearts), near Ures, on the Sonora River. The Indians believed that these Christians had come from heaven. This was the territory of the Pimas and the Opatas. As they traveled from village to village, they were followed by a large number of Indians who spread the news of the miraculous healings performed by Cabeza de Vaca and his companions along the way. As they marched in a southerly direction this time, they heard that there were Spaniards close by.

Finally they encountered Captain Alcaraz who informed them that they were already within the jurisdiction of Nueva Galicia and that the closest Spanish village was San Miguel. In Compostela, the capital of Nueva Galicia, they were received by Governor Nuño Guzmán. Afterwards, they set off for the capital of New Spain in a virtually triumphant march. Here they were received by Viceroy Mendoza. After resting in Mexico City for several months, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca departed for Spain in April, 1537. This was the culmination of an amazing ten-year-long adventure during which adversity was unable to defeat the determination and will to survive of the protagonists.

### The First United States Ethnographer

Cabeza de Vaca's account is valuable—aside from constituting a profound human testimony—because of the number or reports of territories not incorporated until centuries later. Descriptions of native cultures, data on many populations, today extinct, allow us to reconstruct the life, behavior and material culture of these North American Indians. The location of tribes such as the Calusas, Muscogges, Seminoles, Tunicas, Caddos, Shosones, Comanches, Apaches, Navajos, Pueblos, etc., are invaluable in gaining an understanding of a series of migratory movements in great expanses of the present-day United States. Cabeza de Vaca was the first ethnographer of these territories and, even if by force, he practiced the methods of modern field ethnography by living for years with indigenous populations, learning their languages and acting within their social and cultural systems. He managed all of this without doing anyone damage; but, on the contrary, was admired and respected by the aborigines who imagined that the explorer possessed supernatural faculties and found in him exceptional human qualities almost impossible to maintain under harsh living conditions. Cabeza de Vaca's written work abounds in ethnographic information that not only singles out isolated peculiarities, but also offers comparative analysis. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was a good observer and knew how to transmit data of the material culture on which he depended for years for sustenance and shelter. The author additionally performed the most difficult task of reporting the value system, beliefs and political and social behaviors of many native groups in the south and southwest United States.

As a soldier under the command of Governor Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca traveled through the present states of Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. As a tireless wanderer or pilgrim, he roamed Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, a journey of more than 10,000 kilometers

under the most difficult circumstances, sustained exclusively by faith and hope. Thanks to his work, Europe, by the middle of the sixteenth century, had information on the wide territories which from that date forward are part of the history of the United States.

### In South America

Cabeza de Vaca's adventures and misadventures did not end after his ten years in North American territories. After Don Antonio de Mendoza, the first adelantado of Río de la Plata, died, Cabeza de Vaca succeeded in signing agreements to govern those territories. He sailed for South America in November, 1540. The city of Buenos Aires had been abandoned and its population had moved to Asunción del Paraguay where the Spaniards exploited the Indians and led a life of promiscuity with the Indian women. Cabeza de Vaca tried to correct this situation, earning for himself the enmity of Irala, the acting governor. Cabeza de Vaca confronted the royal officials and the citizens who saw the services they received from the Indians threatened. Upon returning from an expedition to Amazonia and El Dorado, he was arrested and accused of abuse of power. During this expedition the Iguazú waterfalls, one of the great natural marvels of America, were discovered. He was at the mercy of Irala and his men for a year, and in March, 1545, he left for Spain. The Council of the Indies condemned him to eight years of banishment from the court. After serving the sentence, he was appointed judge in Seville and in this city he sat down to write his *experiencias*. He died around 1557, far from the settings of his adventures, distant also from the fame and the glory he so tenaciously and deservedly pursued.

### Hernando de Soto

Hernando de Soto's expedition was the first to bring news of the existence of the Mississippi River. To it we owe the first description of the largest fluvial system in North America, named by de Soto the Río Grande de la Florida. Previous expeditions, such as Cabeza de Vaca's unfortunate one, had passed by its delta, but until 1541 no one knew that, in comparison, this immense volume of water made any Spanish river and most of the European rivers modest tributaries. The impressions of Hernando de Soto and his men are easy to imagine. The Portuguese Fidalgo de Elvas (or hidalgo from the Portuguese city of Elvas) gave this accounting in his chronicle:

The river was about half a league wide; a man standing on one bank could not deter-

mine if a man standing still on the other bank was a man or something else. It was very deep and its current very swift; its water was always muddy; the force of the current was continuously carrying many trees and logs downstream. It had a large variety of fish, most of them different from fresh water fish found in Spain.

At the moment of his discovery, Hernando de Soto could not imagine that shortly afterwards he would die on the banks of the river. Before coming to this tragic end, however, he was to lead an impassioned life with both sunny and dark days. In the works of the Inca Garcilaso, the personality of this explorer is revealed as that of a true hero endowed with attributes proper to those few men in which human virtues are united to physical abilities:

He was of medium height and good appearance, whether on foot or on horseback. He had a cheerful expression, dark skinned, skilled in both styles of horsemanship and more skilled with the short stirrup saddle than with the bridle saddle. He was very patient in his travails and needs, so much so that the greatest relief for his soldiers was to behold the patience and sufferings of their captain general.

He was severe in punishing the misdeeds of the militia, the others he easily forgave. He praised the soldiers generously, those who were virtuous and courageous. He had great personal valor, to such a degree that when he entered into battle he made way for ten of his men to follow, and all of them declared that ten lances from his army could not accomplish what he could.

This courageous captain had an outstanding quality in war that was worth remembering and it was that in the daytime attacks by the enemy upon his camp he was always the first or the second to engage in battle and never the third; and in the nighttime attacks, he was never the second, but the first. . . . In conclusion, he was one of the best lancers that have come to the New World and few measure up to him and none was better. (1: 462)

The extant portraits of Hernando de Soto depict him in a beautiful suit or armor, of the type used in tournaments, or wearing a commander's band. His face was peaceful, dark, with a thick beard and a melancholic expression. He was a man of action who,

rather than plan his campaigns beforehand, left his work to intuition, adapting it to the new geographic setting he encountered. His genius in improvisation was the best weapon for waging war. The men who conquered the Americas had to be intuitive and political as well as soldiers.

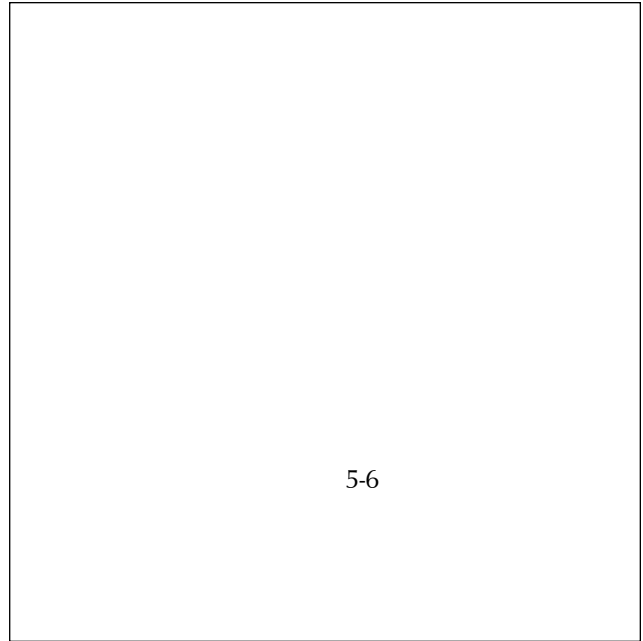
According to the Fidalgo de Elvas, Hernando de Soto was born around 1500 in Jerez de los Caballeros (Extremadura), to Francisco Méndez de Soto and Leonor Arias Tinoco, the latter of Portuguese ancestry. His biography is one of the most fabulous of his era. He was fourteen years old when he sailed to America with Pedrarias Avila who was going to assume the position of governor of Castilla del Oro (Panamá). He participated in the conquest and pacification of Nicaragua and in the foundation of León, its capital. He was a member of the cabildo or ayuntamiento (city council) of that city. Soon he was named captain, acquired a horse and a black slave. His campaigns in Central America netted him good economic benefits, and his position in the city government allowed him to become a farmer, alternating this occupation with soldiering. A frequent occurrence is the multiplicity of activities in which the main protagonists of the American conquest participated. For example, Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto himself invested money in mercantile operations involved in shipbuilding. During his stay in Nicaragua, Hernando de Soto's private life was not devoid of affections. He had a relationship with an Indian woman who bore him two children, Doña María de Soto and Andrés. Both were included in his will. Later he established a union with Juana Hernández, but no issue was born from the same. Having learned of Francisco Pizarro's preparations for an expedition to Perú, Hernando de Soto's good economic standing allowed him to contribute four ships and 100 men. Pizarro, who had observed de Soto's military career and loyalty to his superiors, decided to grant him the rank of captain of mounted troops. De Soto's skilled horsemanship must have influenced this decision. In 1531 they departed for Perú and throughout the conquest Hernando de Soto showed his capacity as soldier and tactician. His courage resolved many difficult moments; additionally, his human values asserted themselves in the treatment offered the vanquished. Pizarro ordered him to meet with Atahualpa, the Inca ruler. From their first meeting, Atahualpa was impressed by Hernando de Soto's horsemanship, his congeniality and social behavior. During the eight months that Atahualpa spent detained in his own camp, he had long conversations with Hernando de Soto, and the latter taught him how to play chess. The Inca knew that de Soto was his most ardent defender. When the Spaniard returned from an inspection tour of

the highlands ordered by Pizarro, he learned that his friend had been executed.

The booty Hernando de Soto obtained in Perú, according to Peruvian chroniclers, was of 80 kilos of gold and 160 kilos of silver. Yet de Soto was not greedy; his ultimate goal was not wealth. He later participated in the battle of Jauja and he entered Cuzco, the capital of the empire. Among the captives was one of Atahualpa's widows. This woman was baptized with the name of Doña Leonor. De Soto established a union with this woman throughout his stay in Perú, where they lodged in the palace of the former sovereign Huayna Capac where Doña Leonor had spent her childhood. From this union a girl was born. Continuous rivalries among the conquerors of Perú, in which De Soto refused to participate, compelled him to leave for Spain.

The arrival in Seville of some leading figures of the Peruvian conquest and the news of fabulous treasures created a feeling of expectancy in the city. Hernando de Soto was already a famous and wealthy man, and an individual of such standing would be expected to establish a proper household. Curiously, he did not return to his native land, Extremadura, but settled in Seville, perhaps because it was the center for news from the Americas. He hired a staff suitable for a gentleman's household: steward, chamberlain, pages, lackeys and grooms. All he lacked was a family since his former paramours and his children remained in America. His household and furnishings, silverware, and tapestries of fine Peruvian fabrics ornamented with gold and feathers caused the admiration of the people of Seville. He always kept his field bed which was made in Perú and to which he was particularly attached. Rodrigo Rangel, an old comrade at arms, acted as his secretary, and with him he engaged in long conversations about future enterprises in the New World.

During a visit to court, he met Doña Isabel de Bobadilla, the widow of Pedrarias Dávila, with whom he made his first journey to America. The widow was accompanied by her daughter Isabel, already past the marriageable age. And who better than the loyal Hernando de Soto as a husband for a daughter who was already difficult to get married off? On November 14, 1536, the matrimonial agreement was signed which attested to the solvency of the conquistador. While he was preparing his house for the wedding, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca arrived. He was trying to obtain information about Florida. Each man probably talked about his experiences, successes and failures. Cabeza de Vaca told him that Florida was a land that anyone with eyes would have to admire. He did not want to give precise information, however, since he wished to withhold it for himself and the king.



**Stamp of Hernando de Soto on a coin.**

## The Florida Expedition

Hernando de Soto held a series of conversations with the Real y Supremo Consejo de Indias (Council of the Indies) which granted him permission for the expedition and the titles he would obtain with the conquest of Florida. He was named, likewise, adelantado and governor of Cuba. He had been promised entry to the military-religious order of Santiago and even the title of marquis. Obviously, the prestige of his political family and his personal qualities weighed sufficiently in this promise and the rewards.

The incentives for his journey to Florida were the news that, beginning in 1512, various explorers had transmitted with regard to the region. Bimini (lands where the Fountain of Eternal Youth were located) and the site of the Silver Mountains were decoys that had dazzled many expeditionaries. Finally, they began to organize the expedition. People from Seville, Badajoz, Salamanca, Jaén, Valencia, Alburquerque and even Elvas (Portugal) would participate. So many people gathered in Seville that many men of the crew from Sanlúcar, and who had already sold their properties, were not able to board. The departure to the sound of trumpets and fusillades of harquebuses was truly an apotheosis. Selecting the men as well as the preparations for supplying victuals for the ships were very important. Hernando de Soto and his family were aboard the San Cristóbal, the mother ship. The expedition made a stop in the Canary island of La Gomera and subsequently headed for Cuba where Hernando

de Soto, as governor of the island, remained for several months devoted to affairs connected with his position. On May 13, 1539, he drafted his last will. Before the end of the month the ships weighed anchor and de Soto's wife remained in Cuba as governor.

Hernando de Soto's Florida enterprise was one more attempt to "increase the land," as campaigns for incorporating new territories were described in those days. Hernando de Soto's personal actions, however, could not be considered a failure since only death put an end to the adelantado's efforts and determination. His means were scarce in comparison to the territories covered. A thousand men collapsed on the road. Three centuries later, the United States needed an army of 9,000 men, well supplied with modern artillery, and seven years of relentless fighting with the Indian population to conquer a portion of the space explored by de Soto. The Spanish conqueror's expedition went through the present states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas and Louisiana. From 1539 to 1542, a veritable odyssey, the Spanish explorers marched through an unknown land inhabited by aboriginal groups from diverse linguistic families who placed any number of obstacles in their way. The accounts of Fidalgo de Elvas and of the Inca Garcilaso allow us to identify most of the places through which Hernando de Soto passed, incorporating this data to Europe's geographical body of knowledge and to the earliest history of the central area of the United States.

Hernando de Soto disembarked in Tampa Bay, near Brandenton (Indian Ucita). From there he traveled through the region of Osceola to Tallahassee where the first Christmas was celebrated in North America. He followed the course of the Tennessee River to the river Coasa. He went down the Alabama River on the banks of which the bloody battle of Mavila took place. In May, 1541, he arrived at the Mississippi, perhaps at a place presently known as Sunflower Landing. It was the largest river the amazed Spaniards had ever seen. De Soto named it Río Grande de la Florida. He established his camp at the confluence of this river with the Saint Francis. In March, 1542, he followed the course of the Ouachita to the Great River. He crossed it near Natchez and in May he became ill.

### The Death of a Knight

Hernando de Soto's physical energies were failing but his determination remained firm. He died a few days after falling ill, when he was only 42 years old, perhaps not long enough for a man who could have lived lavishly and comfortably in his Seville mansion; perhaps too long for a hero whom death tends to call

early. He died at sunset and his men waited for nightfall to bury him beneath a tree. His death was kept secret from the Indians for fear of an uprising if they found out that the courageous captain had died. Later his body was placed in a canoe that was cast into the Mississippi where it sank slowly. There could have been no more suitable tomb for the man who discovered this river for the Europeans.

Hernando de Soto's human qualities were again reaffirmed in the chronicle of Fidalgo de Elvas who witnessed his last hours and was able to hear the exhortations and recommendations he made to his fellow expeditionaries:

The Governor, conscious that the hour approached in which he should depart this life, commanded that all the King's officers should be called before him, the captains and the principal personages, to whom he made a speech. He said that he was about to go into the presence of God, to give account of all his past life; and since He had been pleased to take him away at such a time, and when he could recognize the moment of his death, he, His most unworthy servant, rendered Him hearty thanks. He confessed his deep obligations to them all, whether present or absent, for their great qualities, their love and loyalty to his person, well tried in the sufferance of hardship, which he ever wished to honor, and had designed to reward, when the Almighty should be pleased to give him repose from labor with greater prosperity to his fortune. He begged that they would pray for him, that through mercy he might be pardoned of his sins, and his soul be received in glory. He asked that they relieve him of the charge he held over them, as well of the indebtedness he was under to them all, as to forgive him any wrongs they might have received at his hands. To prevent any divisions that might arise, as to who should command, he asked that they would be pleased to elect a principal and able person to be governor, one with whom they should all be satisfied, and being chosen, they would swear before him to obey: that this would greatly satisfy him, abate somewhat the pains he suffered and moderate the anxiety of leaving them in a country, they knew not where.

The next day, the twenty-first of May, departed this life the magnanimous, the virtuous, the intrepid captain, Don Hernando de

Soto, Governor of Cuba and Adelantado of Florida. He was advanced by fortune, in the way she is wont to lead others, that he might fall the greater depth. He died in a land, and at a time, that could afford him little comfort in his illness. (230-233)

## Pedro Menéndez de Avilés

According to France's policy of colonization and her interest in the American territories a series of *entradas* were organized, beginning in 1562. Jean Ribaut arrived in the Florida territory in the area of Port Royal where he left about 30 colonists before leaving for France. Shortly afterwards, the colonists perished, thus removing the threat the French constituted for the Spaniards. Later, René de Laudonniere entered Florida through the Johns River up to the banks of the Mayo River. The proximity of the French settlement to Spanish possessions was a serious threat to navigation. Consequently, great interest arose in exploring and establishing permanent Spanish settlements that would guarantee the rights the papacy had granted the Crown of Spain. It was at this point that Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, adelantado of Florida and governor of Cuba, appeared upon the American scene. Avilés was one of the most able sailors in the sixteenth century. His skills had been tested on the Spanish coasts which he had defended against attacks by the French.

### The Restlessness of a Young Sailor

Avilés belonged to a distinguished family from Asturias. He was born in 1519 in the city and port of Avilés to Juan Alfonso de Avilés and his first wife María Alonso de Arango. The position and importance of his family can be verified by a *probanza* (document of proof) concerning his merits and services rendered, prepared by the knights of the Orden de Santiago before investing Don Pedro with the order's habit. His ancestors were all *hidalgos*, old Christians with no Moorish, Jewish or plebeian blood. In the city of Avilés, they had held positions as justices, normally assigned to well-known *hidalgos*.

When he was barely fourteen, Menéndez de Avilés ran away from home and enlisted as a cabin boy in Santander. Here he saw his first action against French pirates. After two years he returned home. Having seen in him a spirit of adventure and fearing that he would flee again, his family decided to marry him off to Ana María de Solís who was only ten years old and a distant relative of the groom. A few weeks after signing the marriage contract, he fled again. Once free of

his family, he organized his first enterprise at sea. He bought a ship and managed to get some relatives to enlist in fighting against the French. Menéndez de Avilés' purpose was to expel the Huguenots (French Protestants) from Spanish territories.

At the end of a long life in service to the Crown, the monarch found Menéndez de Avilés the ideal person to execute his plans in Florida. He named him governor and captain general of this territory with hereditary rights. Later he was also appointed governor of Cuba. Finally, in January, 1574, Philip II named him captain of a powerful armada that was being organized to fight in European waters and which has come down in history under the ironic name, considering it was destroyed by a terrible storm off the coasts of England, of "the Invincible Armada."

Menéndez de Avilés enjoyed this last appointment briefly because he died on September 17 of that same year of 1574 at the age of 55. It was an irreplaceable loss for the Spanish navy because of his outstanding qualities as a sailor and his scientific knowledge. He was so poor when he died—according to one of his biographers—that the stipulations of his will could not be executed for lack of funds. In his zeal to serve the king, he lost not only his property, but also his life, consumed by the harsh and strenuous enterprises that began in his youth. He also endured the tragic deaths of his only son, two of his brothers and many relatives and friends who had accompanied him in his American adventures. His remains are buried today in the church of San Francisco in Avilés. He faithfully served the Crown and his deep Christian convictions for 32 years.

### Menéndez de Avilés and Florida

Relying on Menéndez de Avilés' dexterity in all actions entrusted to him, Philip II determined to appoint him captain general of the *Carrera de las Indias*. The Crown's needs in Europe and the proliferation of French privateers on the Spanish coasts held back Menéndez de Avilés' progress. Before setting off on his career as a conqueror, however, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés had made several journeys to the Americas to protect the fleet, saving part of the merchandise from the Indies for the benefit of the Real Hacienda (Royal Treasury). The future Florida *adelantado* had only one son who served the king in the New Spain fleet, together with other relatives and friends from northern Spain. Near the islands of Bermuda, the ship on which Menéndez de Avilés' son was traveling foundered. The father decided to purchase two small vessels to search for his son and the others cast on the Florida coast. Having news that a great armada was

being organized to expel the French Huguenots from Florida, he offered himself to the monarch as commander of this operation. The clauses of the agreement are very unusual and informative. Their more relevant aspect is, perhaps, the colonizing intentions of the enterprise. For a period of three years, from the time anchor was weighed—June 26, 1565—Menéndez de Avilés committed himself to introducing 500 settlers to Florida, of these between 100 and 200 had to be married. The Crown wanted these men to be farmers and masters of different trades and, of course, “gente limpia” (clean people). We believe that the meaning of this expression does not refer exclusively to religious or ethnic origins, but also to moral qualities, social behavior, good deportment, etc.

Menéndez de Avilés committed himself to building three villages, each containing a big, stone house with moat and draw bridge that would serve as a shelter for the citizens in case of need. He was also committed to taking two to twelve religious order priests and four Jesuit priests—the first Jesuits to arrive in America—for the religious instruction of the Indians and the spiritual welfare of the citizens. The introduction of livestock was beneficial to the region and it would be of significance in the seventeenth century. In fact, the agreement ordered that the expedition include 100 horses and mares, 200 heifers, 400 pigs and an equivalent number of sheep. We assume that Castile hens were included.

The conqueror was granted the titles of governor, adelantado and captain general of Florida. If within three years he rendered a good accounting of the enterprise, he would receive the title of marquis. Economic benefits were excellent, although Menéndez de Avilés was investing everything he received to pay and feed his soldiers and replace the artillery. In September, 1565, Menéndez de Avilés wrote the king: “If I had a million, more or less, I would spend it all in this enterprise in the service of God Our Lord so that all that in this life I receive, possess, earn and acquire will be utilized to introduce the Gospel on this earth and enlighten the inhabitants of them. This I promise Your Majesty.”

The fleet that Menéndez de Avilés put together with the help of his relatives and compatriots was composed of more than 25 ships and 2,646 persons, 26 of whom were men traveling with their wives and relatives. They left Sanlúcar de Barrameda June 29, 1565. Later Cristóbal Alas from Avilés and Pedro Menéndez Márquez from Gijón joined them.

When Menéndez de Avilés found out that Jean Ribaut had sailed from La Rochelle, France, with three large ships and more than 600 pirates, he tried to head immediately for Florida. After many mishaps and a stopover in Puerto Rico, they arrived on the coasts of

5-7

### **Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, founder of St. Augustine, Florida.**

Florida on August 28, 1565. After disembarking, they explored a natural port which they named San Agustín.

The French Huguenots had settled in Fort Caroline, at the mouth of the Saint Johns River. Ribau organized an army of 400 men and 200 sailors, leaving Laudonniere with another 200 sailors at the fort. The Spanish fleet was very inferior to the French, and Menéndez de Avilés—thanks to a strong wind—had time to organize an attack on the French fort by land. After a four-day march through swamps and marshes, the Spaniards attacked the fort at the cry of “Santiago y cierra España.” The fort was conquered and renamed San Mateo.

A few days later, some Indians warned that there were more than 200 French castaways less than 20 kilometers from Fort Carolina. Their situation was very precarious, aggravated by news of the disaster and Laudonniere’s flight. Under these circumstances, the French surrendered and only those who promised to convert were saved. Because of this event, the island was later known as Matanzas (Massacres). In 1569 a fort with a garrison of 50 soldiers was built on

this island. Later, a stone fort, the walls of which are still standing, was built (present-day Rattlesnake Island). Menéndez de Avilés has been judged severely by history for these events, but circumstances demanded this sacrifice which put an end to the French presence in Florida. It should be noted that the French were not only political enemies, but, as Huguenots (Calvinists), they were a serious obstacle to the evangelization of the Indians. On the other hand, the colonization model executed by the French in Florida had decimated the Indian population and provoked bloody fights among the different tribes. Meanwhile, the citizens who remained in the recently found villages of St. Augustine and San Mateo were in need of provisions. Four ships commanded by Sancho de Aciniaga and with abundant supplies saved them from starvation.

In October, 1565, the adelantado informed the king of the need to establish more forts for the purpose of keeping up the defense of the coasts. The objectives were to settle Santa Elena and the Bay of Santa María, and to erect a fort on the Bay of Juan Ponce. Navigation to Cuba was totally secured by these means. A short time later, news was received that the French intended to settle Cape Cañaveral. When the French sighted Menéndez de Avilés' ships, they ran away. They named Cape Cañaveral Puerto del Socorro because of the providential help that arrived from Hispaniola. Menéndez de Avilés returned to this area after learning in Havana of his officials' unwillingness to cooperate with the people in Florida. In the land of the Calusas, he discovered that some Spanish castaways were being held captive. He engaged in negotiations with their chieftain, Carlos, who received him peacefully and subsequently freed eight Spanish men and two women. Menéndez de Avilés' son, however, was not among them. As proof of his friendship, the chieftain gave the adelantado his sister who was baptized with the name of Antonia. She was sent to Havana to live at the house of a prominent citizen and receive a Christian education. Meanwhile, in San Agustín and San Mateo, some of the citizens revolted. Conditions were terrible because of the scarcity of food and the poverty of the region. At this time, Menéndez de Avilés was covering the coast of Georgia and southern Carolina, exploring the territories of Gaule and Arista. At point Elena, a wooden fort, the San Felipe, was erected and Captain Esteban de las Olas was left in command.

Menéndez de Avilés traveled continuously to Cuba to obtain food and clothing for the colonists, never finding effective support from the authorities. The settlers had to go into the forest looking for food and risking their lives in continuous Indian attacks. Chieftain

Sutiriba, a friend of the French, was constantly harassing the Spaniards. Menéndez de Avilés tried by all means to make peace with them by sending envoys and gifts. The adelantado's approach was always peaceful; his objective was to reach an understanding with the Indians and try to put an end to intertribal hostilities. He succeeded in having the Calusas end their war with Chieftain Tequesta—South of Florida—and with Tocobab who controlled the region of Tampa Bay.

Between 1567 and 1571, Menéndez de Avilés wrote His Majesty several letters presenting the necessities of Florida: soldiers' pay, lack of clothing and food for the settlers and supplies for the garrisons. He accused the officials from the Casa de la Contratación of raising obstacles to his work, and for this reason he decided to return to Spain to speak with the monarch. The sovereign named him governor of Cuba in 1568. Menéndez de Avilés devoted himself at this time to inspecting the Florida defenses. He had established in Cuba a seminary for the education of the Florida Indians. Having learned of the assassination of the Jesuits in Axacan (Chesapeake Bay, Virginia), he traveled there to take revenge against the Indians of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and the Bahamas Canal.

His appointment as captain general of the armada that Philip II was preparing against Flanders and England took him away from the American scene. In a letter to his nephew, Pero Menéndez Márquez, dated September 8, 1574, ten days before his death, he tells him he was given the command of His Majesty's armada, an impressive fleet of 150 vessels and 12,000 men, which he accepts with pleasure, but he regrets deeply to be separated from Florida, a land that will be his concern until death. He adds that he has searched already for a large number of farmers, officers, carpenters, and masons, so necessary in that land. Finally, he expresses his desire to return to Florida and remain there the rest of his life.

Menéndez de Avilés' epic is outside the general framework of other conquerors' actions. He always thought in terms of a peaceful penetration, and of an understanding based on an exchange of views between conquerors and conquered. He was a just arbitrator in the hostilities among the different Indian tribes in this territory. The colonization and permanent settlement of Spanish colonists were his chief objective. His actions and his way of governing were the envy of other settlements in the colony. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés was a cultured man as well as a soldier and a sailor. His scientific knowledge is evident in the comments he made in his correspondence. He was a good friend of St. Francis Borja, which explains the early presence of Jesuit missions in Florida where so many priests were killed.

## Francisco Vázquez de Coronado

### First News and First Attempts

The legend of the Seven Cities of Cíbola and Quivira were the basis of a series of expeditions to the far north, to the mythical lands that promised to be richer than the famous Tenochtitlan. An Indian who arrived in the capital of New Spain reported that to the north there was a very wealthy country with large fields and incalculable treasure. He was asked what that excellent country was, and the Indian answered Cíbola. This nation or kingdom was so important that it had seven cities, all larger than Tenochtitlan. From Nueva Galicia to Cíbola there were forty days of march, as measured by the Indians.

The first attempt to reach this new promised land was made by Nuño Guzmán, one of the most nefarious conquerors of the Americas. During the final years of 1530s he established San Miguel and continued north. The reality was so distant from those dreams derived from the idea of a mythical, rich land, that these men, who went as far as the Yaquí river, were frustrated. Where was Cathay or the kingdom of the Mangi with their Great Khan? They encountered Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions who had come to the end of their adventure of several years through unknown lands. The basic topic of their conversations was questions about Cíbola and Quivira.

Cabeza de Vaca's account to viceroy Mendoza when he finally arrived at the Mexican capital opened a new gamut of possibilities for all Spanish captains, now idle in the capital of the viceroyalty after the conquest of Mexico. Cabeza de Vaca reported how the Indians said that the gold was to the north, in the regions where one shivers from the cold. The viceroy became enthusiastic from the news of these men from Pánfilo de Narváez's expedition to Florida, and he planned to organize some penetration through the northern area to test the veracity of the reports received to that moment. Friar Marcos de Niza was charged with making a first incursion towards the north. Accompanied by Estebanico—Cabeza de Vaca's companion in his incredible walk through Texas and the Southwest—by Honorato, a lay brother and a few Indian assistants, the friar left Compostela (Nueva Galicia) going towards Culiacán and Petatlán. They crossed the rivers Yaquí and Sangre, always in a northerly direction. Friar Marcos took possession of the land in His Majesty's name. He saw in the distance a city made totally of silver but, prudently, he did not enter it. Upon his return to Mexico City, his fantasies increased and he told the Indians he found along the way that the lands to the north were very distant and

all ruled by golden kings or chieftains. He told the viceroy with great enthusiasm that it was not merely one city but seven, scattered on the slopes of a distant mountain.

After the arrival of Friar Marcos de Niza in the capital of the viceroyalty, it is easy to imagine how the fever for explorations to the northern frontier increased. In contrast with the already known poverty of Chihuahua and neighboring areas, the new region promised large returns. The good friar gathered in his *relación* (account) the report of an Indian sent to him by his companion Estebanico. The said Indian spoke of seven large cities, made of stone and limestone, and ruled by a lord. The smallest had houses with attics and flat roofs. At his command, the houses were all built together, and, on the facades of the more prominent dwellings, there were turquoise ornaments. The Indian said that besides these seven cities there were other kingdoms, and, when the friar asked him what were he and his companions doing so far from home, the Indian responded that they were going after turquoise, cow hides and other things.

Soon the Viceroy and Hernán Cortés, who wanted the enterprise for himself, got involved in an argument. In 1538, the viceroy pondered who would be the ideal person to be entrusted with this exploration. All of the captains that had participated in the conquest of Mexico aspired to the glory of Cíbola, but the viceroy did not want Cortés' power to increase and he decided, as a matter of principle, on Don Pedro de Alvarado. Finally, he chose the young governor of Nueva Galicia, Don Francisco Vázquez de Coronado.

### Biographical Notes

Coronado was born in Salamanca around 1510 to Juan Vázquez de Coronado and Isabel Luján. He set out to study humanities but soon he abandoned his studies and left for the Indies. He arrived in Mexico around 1535 with its first viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza, and through the latter's sponsorship he found a position in that court. Coronado's prestige and influence increased considerably with his marriage, two years after his arrival, to Doña Beatriz de Estrada, daughter and heir of Alonso de Estrada. Don Alonso was the bastard son of Ferdinand, the Catholic monarch, and his economic and political influence within the Mexican viceroyalty were so extensive that it is hard to imagine. Thanks to these circumstances, once Nuño de Guzmán was deposed as governor, Coronado was granted the governorship of Nueva Galicia. He acted as coordinator of Friar Marcos de Niza's expedition and spent five years in the northern frontier before being put in charge of the expedition to Cíbola.

When Coronado arrived in Compostela, the first capital of New Galicia, he found that recruitment of the expeditionary troops was almost completed and the expedition was practically ready to set off for the North. The armed men were very excited by Father Niza's fabulous accounts. Coronado, once in Compostela, moved into a stone and adobe house, suitable to his rank and his wife's noble blood. What a poor land and what a monotonous way of spending the days! As an adventurer and man of action he needed to be busy with deeds that would increase his prestige and the conquest of Cíbola fulfilled his aspirations.

### **The Expedition on the March**

On June 6, 1539, the viceroy's orders that they depart arrived. Mendoza and the wealthy wife of Coronado's bore the expenses of the expedition. This enterprise included several hundred Spaniards, most of them young, carrying their campaign equipment and great illusions. Several hundred Indian allies, all of them volunteers, were also part of the expedition. As in other expeditions of the period, the large number of domestic animals, which would enter for the first time the northern territories, proved that the intention was not to merely conquer territory, but to colonize. According to some sources, a great number of horses, hundreds of mules, 5,000 sheep and many heads of cattle went along with the Spaniards and Indians. Hernando de Alvarado, brother of Don Pedro de Alvarado, the conqueror of Guatemala, was Coronado's lieutenant. Francisco de Ovando, Pedro de Tovar, García López de Cárdenas, Rodrigo and Pedro Maldonado were the captains. The priests were Fray Marcos de Niza, Luis de Escalona, Juan de la Cruz and Juan de Padilla. At the same time, two ships commanded by Hernando Alarcón, left the port of Navidad on the Pacific with the purpose of meeting Coronado in the interior and supplying the expedition.

They departed in the spring of 1540 from Compostela, with Melchor Díaz and Juan de Zaldívar marching ahead. They waited for the rest of the expedition in Chamantla. Here they received the first discouraging news: the land was poor and rough, and the gold and silver they were dreaming about was nowhere to be seen. A first meeting of captains was held and the decision to continue forward to Cíbola made. Coronado encouraged his men, saying that anyone who seeks glory has to undertake risks even if it meant losing one's own life.

Following Friar Marcos' route, they set eyes upon the white Sierra Madre and followed in the direction of Culiacán, Petatlán and Sinaloa. They crossed the Yaqui and Sangre rivers until they reached Chichilticalli, the

place that Friar Marcos had described as having luxurious palaces and countless inhabitants. The Franciscan answered the soldiers' questions concerning why the hustle and bustle and wealth of a year before had become ruin and poverty. One of the captains, López de Cárdenas, reasoned that the enterprise could not be abandoned because of the 70,000 gold pesos that the viceroy had invested in the expedition to win Cíbola and place the cross on its highest tower. Coronado seconded these arguments and decided to continue even if it meant crossing 100 deserts.

They followed the course of the Balsas river until they reached the little Colorado or Bermejo, a tributary of the Colorado. They saw cultivated fields, small parcels planted with pumpkin, beans and cotton, fenced with small adobe walls. Cíbola stood out in the distance.

But, what was Cíbola? A small village with not many houses, clustered together vertically, forming a truncated pyramid. The Zuni river flowed at the foot of the hamlet. They arrived at Hawikuh, one of the seven cities of gold, which had to be conquered terrace by terrace. Coronado's attitude to the vanquished was one of respect and he threatened with hanging whoever raped a woman. The captain had in mind that this conquest was the hope for better things. He set up the civil organization of the village and the lodging of the soldiers, and measures were taken to provide for the security and tranquility of the citizens. The rewards of this conquest resided in the salvation of the souls of the Indians and the supply of new vassals to the Crown. The "cacique" or chieftain, a very old man, spoke to the conquerors of a country of sages and gold temples that was located where the sun set but not very far.

Coronado gathered his captains and decided to make incursions in different directions. Tovar marched west and thought he had sighted the seven mountains with their cities. He discovered the river Tizón, a place endowed with every beauty. Cárdenas left with twelve men, searching for him and marching northwest. He reached the Grand Canyon, one of the most grandiose natural marvels. The Canyon is more than a kilometer and a half deep, its bottom glows in red, black and, at times, silver tones. This new offering to the Old World dates from August 25, 1540.

In June, 1776—more than two centuries after the discovery of the Grand Canyon of Colorado—other Spaniards would pass by it. Fathers Vélez de Escalante and Atanasio Domínguez left Santa Fe in 1776 looking for a new route that would link New Mexico and Monterey (California). On their way they found a pass in the Colorado River and they set eyes on the Canyon. The priests returned to Santa Fe in January, 1777, after traveling 2,500 kilometers. Because the Franciscans

used this route so frequently, it came to be known as the "Vado de los Padres" (The Priests' Ford).

Let us return to the sixteenth century and to Coronado's expedition. Hernando de Alvarado in September took an easterly route and Tristán de Arellano followed him. The route he followed is today the road that links Santa Fe and Albuquerque. They named the present Río Grande river Nuestra Señora (Our Lady). Later they continued their journey to Taos. In Alcanfor, near present-day Bernalillo, they pitched camp and from here they made several incursions in their quest for Quivira. They were all impressed by the emptiness of the remote places they were traversing. The immensity of the territory was great and the achievements few. The most dazzling of these experiences was seeing the Grand Canyon, but this achievement was simply geographic and esthetic.

Captain Alarcón, who was navigating up the coast also arrived at the Canyon. From the Sea of Cortés and proceeding north, he found a river that turned out to be the Gila. He placed a great wooden cross with the inscription "Alarcón arrived here." Melchor Díaz, in an incursion precisely to find Alarcón's men, encountered the sign. Coronado continued to Zuni which he named Granada in gratitude to Viceroy Mendoza, a native of that city. Near Granada was the Cicuye pueblo (Pecos), whose chieftain appeared before Coronado with gifts of turquoise, weapons and buffalo hides. The Spaniards named the chieftain Bigotes (Moustache) and at the latter's invitation that they go to his pueblo, Coronado decided to send Hernando Alvarado. After five days of travel, they arrived at a village atop a crag which the chieftain called Acuco—Acoma for the Spaniards. In Cicuye there was an Indian prisoner from Florida who offered news of Quivira on the banks of the Great River. The Indian had brought with him some jewels but the chieftain of Tiguex (Tiwa) had taken them from him. Reclaiming these jewels was what provoked the attack and devastation of Tiguex and Cicuye.

After the Indian massacre, Coronado wanted to continue his march, to go on with the activities of a warrior. Crossing the great plains, he had more than 40 days of march to Quivira or the kingdom of Tatarax. The Indians he found on his way told the Spaniards that four white men—Cabeza de Vaca and his companions—had stayed among them. Quivira was only a camp with a few "bohíos" or palm-thatched huts. Tatarax, their "king," was but a poorly dressed old man who did not understand why someone so impressively attired would be asking him about his vassals and treasures.

Coronado continued his march and arrived in Kansas; probably some of his men reached the border

of the present state of Nebraska. The Indians always spoke of a great river, but the expeditionaries were not willing to advance any further. Coronado wrote to the king that he had already traveled more than 950 leagues through lands poor in metals but rich in livestock and suitable for farming. In spite of everything, Coronado had discovered in a short time more territory than any other conquistador.

On his way back, Coronado arrived in Taos and from there set off on his march to New Spain in 1541. The attempt to definitively incorporate these territories by establishing Spanish settlements had failed. This meant a great disappointment for Viceroy Mendoza, and, although there was discussion about an investigation of Coronado's venture, the viceroy kept him in his post as governor of Nueva Galicia until the audiencia was created. Vázquez de Coronado's letters to the king described the doubts and disillusionment of the conqueror and offered interesting impressions of the explored territories. The Crown wanted tangible accomplishments rather than promises. Coronado's courage and perseverance brought about a better understanding of the aboriginal world and the first geographic descriptions of large regions of the United States. Coronado and his men explored wide spaces in New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, Kansas and Oklahoma.

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado did not participate in any more expeditions and died in 1554 in Mexico City. Before the end of the century, however, there were new Spanish attempts that culminated, in the case of New Mexico, with the founding in 1598 of its capital, the Villa Real de Santa Fe. H. E. Bolton summarizes in a few lines Coronado's human qualities and his abilities at the head of such a difficult and disappointing expedition, one that opened the Spanish routes to the Southwest and Middle West:

If Coronado may appear less efficient than some of his contemporary conquistadores, it is partly due to his finer sense of the rights and dignity of human beings. He was not a swashbuckler. Don Francisco had many unquestionable qualifications for leadership. When he set forth on his great expedition he was only thirty years old. With five years of American experience behind him, he was still in the bloom of early manhood, and had those precious attributes that make youth so competent, so engaging, and so enviable. He was attractive, optimistic, and unsoured by the hard knocks and disappointments that come with sordid worldly contacts. His treatment of the Indians allies whom he took in his train was notably more humane than that

practiced by some of the conquerors of the period. He was so successful in this particular that on the long march of more than four thousand miles, from Mexico City to eastern Kansas and back, and embracing a period of more than two years, including two cold and hungry winters in Tiguex, few Spaniards were lost and not more than thirty Indian allies were sacrificed. No other contemporary record could match this one. (401-402)

Translated by Silvia Novo Pena



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