Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca
Naufragios (1555)(1)
Cabeza de Vaca's narration of the Spaniards' arrival in La Florida

Trans. William Little©

How We Arrived in La Florida

On this same day (2) our treasurer Alonso Enríquez made a sally onto an island that is the bay itself, and he called to the Indians, who came and spent a good amount of time with him. After some bargaining they gave him fish and some pieces of deer meat. The next day, which was Good Friday, the governor disembarked with as many of the men whom he could load onto the boats, and when we reached the Indians' huts or houses, which we had seen before, we found them abandoned and unguarded, because the people had left in their canoes that night. One of those huts was very large, for more than three hundred people would fit in it. The others were smaller, and there we found among the nets a gold (3) bell. Another day the governor raised Your Majesty's banners and he took possession of the land in your royal name. He presented his credentials, and he was shown obeisance as our governor, according to Your Majesty's command. At the same time, we presented our credentials to him, and he swore obedience to the provisions as stipulated in them. Then he ordered all the other men to disembark including the horses that were still on board, for there were only forty-two of them, because the rest had died due to the huge storms and bad weather we had endured at sea. This small number of horses were so skinny and exhausted that at first we got little work out of them. Another day, the Indians from that town came to us, and even though they spoke to us—since we had no interpreter—we did not understand them. Yet, they made all sorts of signs to us and some threats, and it seemed to us that they were telling us to leave their land, after which they departed without making any trouble, and they left.

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(1) This version is translated from the Spanish version found in Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Naufragios. Ed. Juan Francisco Maura. Madrid, Cátedra, 1989, 84-85.
(2) The day was April 7, 1528. They spotted land north of what is now Tampa Bay, and then they turned south where they looked for a

big harbor their master pilot (Miruelo) was acquainted with. One of their original five ships was disappeared during the first two days of reconnoitering. After finding a shallow bay, the expedition's leader, Pánfilo de Narváez ordered them to pass through a small pass into what is now Boca Ciega Bay north of Tampa Bay proper. They saw buildings on earthen mounds, which they though showed they had found a major culture. They also found water and food in Safety Harbor. The natives belonged to the Tocobaga Culture, which prospered around Tampa Bay roughly from 900 to about 1600. Later, Hernando de Soto came to this area in 1539, and Menéndez de Avilés visited Safety Harbor in 1567.
(3) This is the first mention of gold in Cabeza de Vaca's narrative. This reference is a sign of the Latin American theme of *cupio*.
(4) After leaving Florida, Narváez and all the other men in his charge endured terrible hardships and finally died, that is, all except Cabeza de Vaca and three others: Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and a Berber slave from Morocco named Esteban or Estevanico. In 2015, Laila Lalami publish a fascinating historical novel titled *The Moor's Account* (New York: Vintage Books) about these four survivors from the perspective of the Moorish slave, whom he names Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori.
Here is the Wikipedia passage about their wandering and survival from Florida to the Gulf of California and back to Mexico:

"Two crafts with about 40 survivors each, including Cabeza de Vaca, wrecked on or near Galveston Island (now part of Texas). Out of the 80 or so survivors, only 15 lived past that winter. The explorers called the island Malhado ("Ill fate" in Spanish), or the Island of Doom. They tried to repair the rafts, using what remained of their own clothes as oakum to plug holes, but they lost the rafts to a large wave.

As the number of survivors dwindled rapidly, they were enslaved for a few years by various American Indian tribes of the upper Gulf Coast. Because Cabeza de Vaca survived and prospered from time to time, some scholars argue that he was not enslaved but using a figure of speech. He and other noblemen were accustomed to better living. Their encounters with harsh conditions and weather, and being required to work like native women must have seemed like slavery. The tribes to which Cabeza de Vaca was enslaved included the Hans and the Capoques, and tribes later called the Karankawa and Coahuiultecan. After escaping, only four men, Cabeza de Vaca, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and an enslaved Moroccan Berber named Esteban (later called Estevanico), survived to reach Mexico City.

Traveling mostly with this small group, Cabeza de Vaca explored what is now the U.S. state of Texas, as well as the northeastern Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and Coahuila, and possibly smaller portions of New Mexico and Arizona. He traveled on foot through the then-colonized territories of Texas and the coast. He continued through Coahuila and Nueva Vizcaya; then down the Gulf of California coast to what is now Sinaloa, Mexico, over a period of roughly eight years. Throughout those years, Cabeza de Vaca and the other men adapted to the lives of the indigenous people they stayed with, whom he later described as Roots People, the Fish and Blackberry People, or the Fig People, depending on their principal foods.

During his wanderings, passing from tribe to tribe, Cabeza de Vaca later reported that he developed sympathies for the indigenous peoples. He became a trader and a healer, which gave him some freedom to travel among the tribes. As a healer, Cabeza de Vaca used blowing (like the Native Americans) to heal, but claimed that God and the Christian cross led to his success. His healing of the sick gained him a reputation as a faith healer. His group attracted numerous native followers, who regarded them as "children of the sun", endowed with the power to heal and destroy. As Cabeza de Vaca grew healthier, he decided that he would make his way to Pánuco, supporting himself through trading. He finally decided to try to reach the Spanish colony in Mexico. Many natives were said to accompany the explorers on their journey across what is now known as the American Southwest and northern Mexico.

After finally reaching the colonized lands of New Spain, where he first encountered fellow Spaniards near modern-day Culiacán, Cabeza de Vaca and the three other men reached Mexico City. From there he sailed back to Europe in 1537.”