

CABRILLO'S BONES

Alleged Discovery of the Skeleton
of the Spanish Adventurer



THE MYSTERIOUS OF SANTA CATALINA.

For years an interesting dispute has been going on between Santa Barbara and Santa Catalina, Cal., as to which belonged the honor of furnishing the last resting place for the bones of Juan Cabrillo, the Spanish adventurer who discovered the island and harbor of Santa Catalina three hundred or so years ago.

A recent event, however, seems to throw the burden of proof on Santa Barbara. The matter has been kept secret for some time, says the San Francisco Examiner, but the facts are that a grave was found on the island of Santa Catalina that was so evidently that of some person of importance that the discoverer notified the owners of the island and the remains were taken out almost complete. The body was evidently buried with as much pomp as circumstance would permit. The head was laid to the north, and in it was a heap of shells, beads cut with great labor from the shells found on the beach, several beads of abalone being among them. Near by was a fine stone mortar and pestle, an Indian paint pot and various objects which it was customary to bury with the dead as a part of the ceremony. There was also an ax of Spanish design or shape, with the broad blade common 300 years ago; also a knife. These has been carefully wrapped in cloth which has long since disappeared, as had also the wodenhandle [sic], but the texture of the cloth was still to be seen on the ax. Near one of the hands was a round copper button, similar to those used by the Spanish gallants, and various articles common to the Spanish of long ago. From the care evidently taken at the burial it would appear that the deceased was a person of distinction.

It is believed by the advocates of the Cabrillo theory that the body was buried there by the crew of the vessel, and that the friendly natives, wishing to show their respect, deposited in the grave a number of objects according to their custom.

their return and began a series of running battles with them. Vargas recalled that **all the time the armada was on the Isla Capitana the Indians there never stopped fighting us.** Some time toward the end of December, Cabrillo sent a party ashore for water, and the Indians attacked. The soldiers, outnumbered, called out to the ship for help. Cabrillo himself decided to rescue them; he quickly gathered a relief party and rowed ashore in one of the launches. **As he began to jump out of the boat, one foot struck a rocky ledge, and he splintered a shinbone.**

Later, in 1560, Cabrillo's son said that his father had a broken leg, while another narrative (that of Urdaneta) reported that he broke his arm close to the shoulder. It is possible that he broke both his arm and leg in the fall.⁴⁴

Wherever the site of the injury, gangrene had severely complicated Cabrillo's injury by the end of December, finally causing the captain's death on 3 January 1543. The crew buried their leader on the barren, windswept island of La Posesión, also called La Capitana. **Because he died here,** wrote Cárdenas, **the island retained the name Capitana,** although some referred to it as the **Isla de Juan Rodríguez.**⁴⁵

Shifting winds and sands have covered all traces of the grave. An archeological expedition on Catalina Island in 1894 proved fruitless. Other digs on San Miguel, Santa Rosa and elsewhere have revealed no evidence of Cabrillo's burial place. Cabrillo's final words reflected the spirit of the early Spanish explorers. He instructed his chief pilot, Bartolomé Ferrer, not to give up their projected reconnaissance of the northern coast. The two ships again sailed into the open sea and made their way northward against heavy gales. Finally, driven dangerously near the shore at a point somewhere near the Oregon boundary, they prayed for protection and were saved by a sudden change of wind. The expedition's journal describes few recognizable landmarks, making their exact course difficult to follow, but leaves no doubt about their courage in facing the perils of unknown waters.⁴⁶

Cabrillo's crew, weakened from exposure and scurvy, responded gratefully to Ferrer's order to return home. Separated in storms, the crew on each ship feared that the others were lost, but they finally reunited off Cedros Island. They reached the port of Navidad on 14 April 1543, carrying with them the sad news of Cabrillo's death and the discouraging results of their discoveries. They had found no Strait of Anián, no fabulous Indian civilization, no weapons of gold from an island of Amazons—nothing to enrich or even excite the expectant viceroy of New Spain. And they had not reached the Spice Islands.⁴⁷ 