



Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo

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dred years ago, the manuscript has been translated and republished many times since then.³

The man himself is as mysterious as that piece of broken stone found on Santa Rosa Island. Few are aware of his role as soldier, sailor, shipbuilder, slaveowner, miner, and author, the first secular author published in the New World.

At the time of his death in 1543, the estate of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was one of the richest in Central America, destined to be fought over by his heirs and his enemies for another three-quarters of a century. The legal cases arising from these disputes have produced thousands of pages of documents⁴ that now make it possible to know more about Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo than ever before, though not nearly enough to satisfy all our curiosity.

No one knows with certainty the place of his birth or the names of his parents, whether he came from a noble line or from poor but honest parents. He was probably not a *hidalgo* nor even descended from respectable lineage, or he would have said so. And if he had neglected to mention the fact, his heirs would not have been so shy.

Hidalguia was acquired by performing some great service for the crown. *Hidalgos* maintained horses and arms, supported a retinue of relatives and servants, and compiled a record of military service.⁵ Almost any noble work was possible for a *hidalgo*, but such a man could not perform manual labor or engage in a trade. Instead, he had to be ready at a moment's notice to defend the realm or otherwise to enhance the royal estate.

Once acquired, *hidalguia* could be handed on from one generation to the next.⁶ Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo achieved this status by his own merits, as his descendants successfully claimed. His unknown parents apparently had no such claim to honor or wealth.⁷

For centuries historians have maintained that Cabrillo was Portuguese. In fact, that is one reason he is known by the final surname, Cabrillo, as the Portuguese would call him, rather than Rodríguez, which modern Spanish usage demands. Today many

American historians who have studied the matter are convinced he was a Spaniard.

The present confusion grew out of a brief reference in Antonio de Herrera's multi-volume history of the Spanish conquests in the New World. Writing in the last part of the sixteenth century, with a mass of original reports and documents at his disposal, Herrera compiled a summary of Spanish achievement that is still considered authoritative after nearly four centuries. Usually meticulous in details, Herrera was nevertheless careless with some of his facts. His reference to the nationality of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo is one of these errors.

In his brief account of the voyage to California, Herrera said that Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza⁸

named as their captain Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, Portuguese, a person very skilled in seamanship. One ship was named *San Salvador*, and it was the flagship. The other was the *Victoria*. Bartolomé Ferrer went as chief pilot, while Bartolome Fernández was also a pilot. The masters were Antonio Carrera and S. Remo.

Herrera called Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo a Portuguese, which no one had ever claimed before, but he missed the well-known Portuguese origins of the captain and pilot Antonio Correa (Carrera).⁹

Portuguese pilots were in great repute at the time. Such a man would be mentioned in dispatches. His name and nationality would be important information for any book on seafaring. It is not difficult to imagine Herrera as a weary author, revising his manuscript for the second or third time, deciding that it was important to say one of the men was a *portugués*, but carelessly placing that word next to the wrong name. Even easier to imagine is that a thoughtless printer allowed his attention to wander just long enough for the word *portugués* to fall into line behind the name Cabrillo instead of Correa.

American historians have been able to recognize such an error, but the historians of Portugal remain unconvinced. Chief among these writers was the Visconde de Lagoa, who consulted archival

sources in Portugal and Spain without finding real evidence that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo came from Portugal. Lagoa did find a number of Portuguese soldiers and seamen in New Spain named Juan Rodríguez, but that name was as common as is John Jones in the United States. Lagoa also found dozens of Spaniards named Juan Rodríguez in the same lists, but he decided not to mention this.¹⁰

Instead, he compiled a series of genuine and supposed references to Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, then substituted the Portuguese spelling of the name for the Spanish in all his references to these old manuscripts. He made it appear that João Rodrigues Cabrilho was a name well documented in Spanish archives, though no one has ever yet found a sixteenth-century source with this spelling in it. If Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was indeed Portuguese, neither the man himself nor his friends nor his relatives nor even his enemies seem to have mentioned the fact in the hundreds of pages of testimony that document the family's *calidad* (quality) and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood).

In recent years a number of scholars tried to locate Cabrillo descendants in Portugal, or a Cabrillo birthplace, or even a family named Cabrillo, but without notable results. A Portuguese historian, Celestino Soares, finally admitted that "the name Cabrillo is not known in Portugal." Nevertheless, Soares continued to insist this great explorer was Portuguese.¹²

In 1955 Maurice Holmes tried without success to locate "material relating to Cabrillo" in the Portuguese national archives. He found none and concluded that there was no proof for the assertion that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was Portuguese.¹³

Many surnames of the sixteenth century were derived from the name of a town, a province, or a region. The practice was particularly common among people of humble or rural origin, who often had no surname at all until they left their native villages and emigrated to America. Some historians, Portuguese and others, have guessed that Cabrillo was such a name.¹⁴

The problem for Portuguese historians is that there is no province or region in Portugal named Cabrillo. ~~There are several Portuguese villages named Cabril and a few Spanish places with similar names.~~ In both countries there are mountains and rivers named Cabril or something like it, as well as towns and other geographic locations named Cabrilla, Cabrillanes, and Cabrillas.¹⁵ But not Cabrillo.

In an effort to solve the problem Joan M. Jensen traveled through Portugal in 1966 for the Cabrillo Historical Association of San Diego. She visited every village named Cabril, and she failed to discover any valid evidence about the origin of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. But so strong was the Portuguese tradition that she came home "much more convinced that Cabrillo was Portuguese and that he indeed came from one of these villages."¹⁶

More recently, in 1973, W. Michael Mathes checked pertinent historical and genealogical sources, reviewing arguments presented by writers who insist that Juan Rodríguez was Portuguese. Mathes found listings for 124 persons named Juan Rodríguez who immigrated to the New World before 1542, none of them named Cabrillo or Cabrilho.¹⁷ Looking at the claims of Portuguese historians, Mathes found that they often misrepresented the facts in "a desperate attempt to prove a thesis rather than present objective evidence." After weighing all the evidence he could find, Mathes concluded that "there exists considerable doubt as to the nationality of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and, in fact, there is much to indicate he was not Portuguese but Castilian."¹⁸

Portuguese scholars for the most part have ignored Mathes' argument. When they discuss the very many skilled Portuguese navigators who served the Spanish crown, they still include Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in that group.¹⁹

Government bodies have joined individual scholars in the dispute, but with even less success. Both the United States government and the state of California have asserted that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo is Portuguese.²⁰ The government of Portugal, of course, agrees, but Portuguese agreement stops short of total harmony. Not one but

two villages in Portugal named Cabril claim to be the birthplace of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo.

The Camara Municipal de Montalegre insists that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was born in the nearby village of Cabril.²¹ Further south, near the city of Castro Daire, citizens in another village named Cabril point to one of the oldest buildings in town as the very spot where Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was born.²² Obviously, at least one of these groups is wrong.

Convinced of the justice of their cause, the members of the Montalegre city council ceremoniously issued a proclamation in 1978, saying that "Joao Rodrigues Cabrillo" was born in Lapela, a barrio of their own village of Cabril. What is the evidence? Well, "in Lapela there exists a 'house of Galego' a name attributed to João Rodrigues Cabrillo."²³

This is an obscure but not insignificant point. Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo discovered a port called Navidad on the Colima coast of Mexico. For years it was thought that Navidad was also called "el puerto de Juan Gallego", presumably another name for the discoverer. As it turns out, the port of Juan Gallego is some distance up the coast from Navidad, and Juan Gallego is clearly not Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo.²⁴

The word *Gallego* means a native of Galicia, the region of Spain just north of the Portuguese border. Supposing for the sake of argument that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was also called Juan Gallego, would a man who called himself Juan Gallego be Portuguese? In apparent response to this and other queries the Montalegre city councilmen declared that "João Rodrigues Cabrillo" must have "emigrated to Galicia where is married and became related to Spanish nobility, then departed to join the seafaring expeditions that explored the coast of America."²⁵ This is the wildest of all the stories. It has no basis in fact.

All that we know with certainty comes from a brief statement by the grandson of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. In sworn testimony given on December 4, 1617, Gerónimo Cabrillo de Aldana said:

"My paternal grandfather, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo came [to the New World] from the Kingdoms of Spain in company with Pánfilo de Narváez."²⁶

Narváez himself is something of a mystery man, even though he was a hidalgo—well known and well connected. Uncertainty cloaks his birthplace and early life. Is it not inconsistent to expect a man of humble origins to mention his place of birth, when men like Narváez, who had reason to be proud of their families failed to do so? In any case, poor men never did.²⁷

Narváez was a good friend of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdez, official historian of the Indies. Oviedo called Narváez a "hidalgo who came to these parts with only a sword and a cape, searching for adventure." Oviedo thought it unnecessary to name the man's birthplace.²⁸

Bartolomé de las Casas, who knew the explorer well, said Narváez came from Valladolid.²⁹ Herrera, the historian of the Conquest, writing decades afterwards, wrote snappishly that Narváez came from Tierra de Cuéllar and "not as some say from Valladolid." The argument seems unimportant now, but Herrera thought it offered an explanation for the eagerness of Narváez to serve in Cuba with Diego Velázquez, who came from Cuéllar.³⁰ That is a little ahead of the Cabrillo story, and anyway, as Las Casas said, Valladolid is very close to Cuéllar.³¹

Narváez first appears in the record in Jamaica in 1509 with Juan de Esquivel.³² Testimony given by the wife of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1552 confirms the fact that her husband was in the Indies about the time Narváez was serving in Jamaica: "He came to these Indies more than forty years ago."³³

During these early years Narváez and Velázquez became close friends. In 1511, when Velázquez was sent to pacify Cuba, he invited Narváez to organize a cuadrilla of thirty skilled crossbowmen to go along. Narváez obliged.³⁴

Possibly both Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and Diego Sánchez de Ortega, his close friend and future brother-in-law, were part of the

West Coast of North America in 1542." in *Report of United States Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian*, vol. 7, *Archaeology* (Washington: G. P. O., 1879), 293-314. This was edited and republished by George C. Davidson as "Voyages of Discovery and Exploration," in *U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Annual Report for 1886*, Appendix Number 7 (Washington: G. P. O., 1887) 222-34. The same text was translated and published anew by Herbert E. Bolton in *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 13-39. Two recent authors used Navarrete's original manuscript copy, and their text differs in many respects from the one printed by Buckingham Smith. See James R. Moriarty and Mary Keistman trans. and eds., "Cabrillo's Log, 1542-43, a Voyage of Discovery: A Summary by Juan Páez, *The Western Explorer* 17 (September 1968): 5-42. Henry R. Wagner's translation of the original manuscript was first published in the *California Historical Society Quarterly* 7 (March 1928): 20-54, along with a facsimile of the original manuscript. It was published again without the facsimile in his *Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1941), 35-61. Wagner's facsimile reproductions of the original document did not include the title or cover page, which was first seen reproduced in Richard E. Pourade, *The History of San Diego: The Explorers* (San Diego, CA: The Union Tribune Publ. Co., 1960), 44.

4. The main sources in the Archivo General de Indias (hereafter A. G. I.) are: Patronato 87, "Información de los servicios del general Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo"; Patronato 182, "Escritura de renuncia otorgada a favor de S. M. por Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo"; Justicia 280, "Beatriz Sánchez de Ortega, vecina de Guatemala, con Don Francisco de la Cueba, vecino de dicha ciudad sobre ciertos indios"; Justicia 286, "Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, vecino de la provincia de Guatemala con Don Francisco de la Cueba y otros consortes sobre los pueblos de los yndios de Jumaytepeque y Tacuba"; Justicia 290, "Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, vecino de la ciudad de Santiago de Guatemala, con el fiscal de S. M. sobre los yndios de los pueblos de Cobán y Acatenango." These and other Guatemalan manuscripts (a total of seventy thousand pages) were micro-filmed in 1967 and succeeding years by Dr. Rubén E. Reina of the University of Pennsylvania and the staff of his Hispanic-Latin American Research Project. His staff also prepared a file of twenty-seven thousand pages of typed extracts and transcripts of this material, which he very graciously made available for my use. The microfilm is in the permanent custody of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, where it is available for scholarly use under certain restrictions. There is a much smaller collection of similarly pertinent manuscripts in the Archivo General de Centro America (hereafter A. G. C. A.), the most useful of which are *signatura* A1.29, *legajo* 4672, *expediente* 401312, "Meritos y servicios de Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo"; and *sig.* A3.2, *leg.* 1539, *exp.* 22569, "Merecimientos y servicios de los ascendientes de doña Isabel y de doña Jerónima de Solórzano y Mazariegos . . . bisnietos de Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo."

5. Pilar Sanchíz Ochoa, *Los hidalgos de Guatemala: realidad y apariencia en un sistema de valores*, vol. 13 of *Publicaciones del Seminario de Antropología Americana* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1976), 37-50.

6. *Ibid.*

7. A. G. C. A., sig. A1.29, leg. 2033, exp. 14084, fol. 96v-97v, "Libro de los pareceres de la Real Audiencia de Guatemala," and A. G. C. A., sig. A3.2, leg. 1539, exp. 22569, fol. 7ff.

8. Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Descripción de las Indias Occidentales* (Madrid: Nicolás Rodríguez Franco, 1730), década 7, libro 5, capítulo 3, p. 89, Huntington Library rare book 48448.

9. Correa made no secret of his Portuguese origins. His statement is summarized in Francisco A. de Icaza, *Diccionario autobiográfico de conquistadores y pobladores de Nueva España* (Madrid: Imprenta de "El Adelantado de Segovia," 1923), 2: 342-43. See also the testimony of Lázaro de Cárdenas, 26 April 1560, in A. G. I., *Justicia* 290.

10. *João Rodrigues Cabrilho, achegas para a sua biografia* (Lisbon: Agencia Geral do Ultramar, 1958), 32-33.

11. See note 4. Lagoa and his Portuguese compatriots follow a long tradition in translating this name. One of the earliest to do so was Joannes Laet, a seventeenth-century writer who wrote in Latin and called the explorer Joannes Rodericus Cabrillus. *Novis orbis seu descriptionis Indiae occidentalis* (Leyden: Ludovicus Elgevirus, 1633), 306-07, Huntington Library rare book 139796.

12. Celestino Soares, *California and the Portuguese* (Lisbon: SPN Books, 1939), 39. Apparently the name exists—or nearly so—among Portuguese in the United States. A "Portuguese fisherman" named Juan Cabrill took the part of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in San Diego's Cabrillo Celebration in 1894. *Los Angeles Evening Express*, 26 September 1894, 3.

13. Maurice Holmes, *From New Spain by Sea to the Californias*, vol. 9 of the Spain in the West series (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1963), 269-71.

14. Lagoa, *João Rodrigues Cabrilho*, 33. Joan M. Jensen, "Notes from a Western Explorer," *The Western Explorer: Journal of the Cabrillo Historical Association*, 4 (March 1967): 3-5. Euclides Goulart da Costa, *Portugal Descubridor: Apontamentos respeitantes á descoberta de California* (Lisbon: Tipografia de Manutenção Militar, 1928), 28. Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Patterns of Spanish Immigration to the New World (1493-1580)* (Buffalo: State University of New York, Special Studies, 1973), 15.

15. *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada Europeo-Americana* (Barcelona: Hijos de J. Espasa, 1905-1930), 10:218-19.

16. Jensen, "Notes," 3-5.

17. W. Michael Mathes, "The Discoverer of Alta California: João Rodrigues Cabrilho or Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo," *Journal of San Diego History* 19 (Summer 1973):1

18. *Ibid.*, 7.

19. D. R. Luis Mendoca Albuquerque, "An Aspect of the Political Application of the Tordesillas Treaty," *Cabrillo and His Era*, Sixth Annual Cabrillo Festival Historic Seminar 1 (September 1978): 1-7. A. Teixeira da Mota, "The Teaching of Navigation in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Cabrillo," *ibid.*, 9-18.

20. U. S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Cabrillo National Monument, California*, leaflet (Washington: G. P. O., 1974). California, Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 15, *Statutes of 1935*, 2409., contains the text of a resolution declaring in part that "John Rodriguez Cabrillo, a native of Portugal, discovered

California on Thursday, September 28, 1542, while in the service of Spain by entering the harbor of San Diego." The original resolution, as introduced by Senator Walter McGovern of San Francisco, used the form "John Rodríguez Cabrillo." See California Senate *Journal*, 51st sess., 21 January 1935, 142. Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 44, *Statutes of 1935*, 2693-94, had the name spelled as "John Rodríguez Cabrillo," which says something about the then-prevailing Anglo attitudes toward Hispanic names.

21. João Goncalves da Costa, *Montalegre e terras de Barroso, notas historicas sobre Montalegre freguesias de concelho e região de Barroso* (Braga, Portugal: Edição da Câmara Municipal de Montalegre, 1968).

22. Câmara Municipal de Montalegre, unanimous resolution of 2 September 1978, addressed to the City Council of San Diego, California.

23. *Ibid.*

24. The identification of the ports is covered at length in chapter 5 below.

25. Câmara Municipal de Montalegre to City Council of San Diego, 2 September 1978.

26. A. G. I., *Patronato* 87, fol. 36v.

27. Cleve Hallenbeck, *Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: The Journey and Route of the First European to Cross the Continent of North America, 1534-1536* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1940), 15.

28. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia general y natural de las Indias, islas, y Tierra-Firme del Mar Océano* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Real Academia de la Historia, 1853), 3:580. He described Alvarado the same way: *ibid.*, 4:25.

29. Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. by Agustín Millares Carlo, intro. by Lewis Hanke (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1951), tomo 4, libro 3, cap. 26, pp. 524-25.

30. Herrera, *Descripción de las Indias occidentales*, tomo 1, decada 1, libro 9, pp. 242-43.

31. Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, tomo 4, libro 3, cap. 26, pp. 524-25.

32. Herrera, *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos*, intro. and notes by Antonio Ballesteros-Beretta (Madrid: n. n., 1934-1955), 1:33. Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Gran Enciclopedia Rialp* (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1973), 6:580.

33. A. G. I., *Justicia* 286, fol. 196v, 311v-312.

34. Herrera, *Descripción de las Indias occidentales*, tomo 4, libro 3, cap. 26, p. 5.

35. A. G. I. *Audiencia de Guatemala* 110, fol.2, "Probanza e petición de Diego Sánchez de Ortega," 28 July 1531. A. G. I., *Justicia* 290, testimony of Diego López de Villanueva, fol. 113v, and testimony of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, fol. 114v, 29 May 1564. A. G. I., *Patronato* 87, fol. 34, testimony of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, 30 January 1561.

36. Beatriz Sánchez de Ortega said in a power of attorney dated 9 December 1545 that her father lived in Seville. A. G. I., *Justicia* 280, fol. 9v. A certain Juan Rodríguez, native of Valladolid, went to the Indies in 1513, but there is no evidence he was our man. Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Indice geobiográfico de cuarenta mil pobladores Españoles de America en el siglo XVI*, vol. 1, 1493-1519 (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1964), 154.