



Discovering Cabrillo

by HARRY KELSEY



*Reconstruction of Cabrillo's flagship, the San Salvador.
Photo by Jerry Soto, courtesy of the Maritime Museum of San Diego.*

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo brought the first European explorers to the west coast of the United States 475 years ago. This compact book traces Cabrillo's historic voyage north from Mexico in 1542, sent into unknown and unmapped waters in search of the Spice Islands and a fabled river said to flow from the Rocky Mountains into the Pacific Ocean. He failed to reach his goals, but in the process he and his crew became the first Europeans to encounter the peoples and lands of present day California, from San Diego and the Channel Islands north as far as Point Reyes and Point Arena.

In this updated edition, historian Harry Kelsey cuts through the myths that have shrouded Cabrillo and his voyage, and presents the truth of his discoveries. The story culminates with his death due to a tragic accident while his fleet was wintering in California, cutting his life short before he could return to Spain and report on the new lands he had encountered.

Written in an accessible style suited to all readers, this short book will appeal to anyone interested in European explorers or California history. The text is complemented by twenty maps and illustrations, which bring the story to life.

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Determined to end these nuisance attacks, Captain Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo ordered a boatload of soldiers to row ashore, with the captain himself in command. Disaster struck just as the boat touched the beach. Before the men had even shipped their oars, the captain leapt from the boat, but the footing was treacherous. He slipped on the rocks, fell, and splintered his shinbone. The men were easily rescued, but the commander had a ghastly wound. Back on board, the surgeon made an attempt at treatment, but the wound quickly became morbid. Within a few days Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was dead. He was buried on the island where he fell. The Spanish seamen had been calling the place *capitana*, which was a general name for a flagship. Now the island was renamed Capitana, because that was the place the *capitan-general* had died.

The origins of this great Spanish conquistador have been a matter of dispute. During the past century or so, several writers have said that Cabrillo was Portuguese, basing their claim on a remark by the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas. Writing more than half a century after the explorer's death, Herrera referred to him as Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo Portugues. Most historians now accept that this was an error.

Cabrillo's family and friends always insisted that he was from Spain. Members of his family swore this under oath, as did his friends. Most recently Dr. Wendy Kramer discovered documents in the Archivo General de Indias that establish the explorer's birthplace as Palma de Micer Gilio, a town on the Rio Guadalquivir about half way between Seville and Cordoba.

Lo primero como el sico general Juan Rodriguez
 Cabrillo mi abuelo Paterno paso delos Reynos
 de España a estas partes en compañía de Panfilo
 de Narvaez primero descubridor de las Yndias
 La del Marques Hernando Cortes el qual descubrio

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo de Aldana: "General Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, my paternal great-grandfather, came to these parts from the kingdoms of Spain."

Regardless of his origins, very early in life Juan Rodríguez seems to have found himself in Seville, as nearly everyone did who sailed to the New World in those days. Juan Rodríguez may have come to the New World in the armada of Pedro de Arias that sailed from Seville in 1514. He served in Cuba and by 1520 was part of the army of Pánfilo de Narváez. Tough and self-reliant as a boy, Juan Rodríguez soon learned to shoot a crossbow, and he joined in the conquest of Mexico both as a soldier and a merchant adventurer. Along the way he learned to read, to write, to keep accounts, and to trade goods for a profit. He also acquired new military skills: how to ride a horse, and how to build and sail a ship.

In 1520 Rodríguez went to the mainland with Narváez, joined the army of Hernán Cortés, and served in the second attack on the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. The city was situated in the middle of a lake, and Cortés decided it was vulnerable to attack by water. Consequently, he sent troops to the mountains to cut timber and build a fleet. A story told