

from *La Relación*

Report by ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA

(äl'vär nōō'nyēs kā-bě'sä dē vä'kä)

Connect to Your Life

Conquistadors—Popular Images Lured by the prospect of vast lands filled with gold and silver, Spanish explorers known as conquistadors (conquerors) took to the seas to claim new colonies for Spain. What image do you have of conquistadors? What did they look like? How did they act? Share your ideas with classmates.

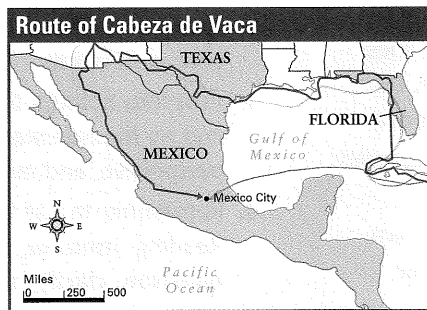
Build Background

A Doomed Expedition In 1527, Pánfilo de Narváez, a Spanish conquistador, led a five-ship, 600-man expedition to Florida. His second in command was Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The expedition was a disaster from the moment the Spaniards entered the Caribbean. After the loss of two ships in a hurricane and over 200 men by drowning and desertion, the Narváez expedition finally made its way to the west coast of Florida. Against the advice of Cabeza de Vaca, Narváez separated 300 of his men from the ships and marched these forces overland. Narváez intended for the ships to meet the land forces at a Spanish settlement on the coast of central Mexico, but he had grossly underestimated the vastness of the territory and the difficulty of crossing it. Eventually, overwhelmed by hunger, disease, and Indian attacks, the land forces decided to build five crude barges to get them to Mexico more quickly. These barges, each carrying about 50 men, soon drifted apart, and the one commanded by Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked on Galveston Island, off the coast of what is now Texas.

Ultimately, Cabeza de Vaca and three companions were the only survivors of the Narváez expedition. They wandered for more than eight years before reaching Mexico City and thus became the first Europeans to cross North America. After returning to Spain in 1537, Cabeza de Vaca wrote *La Relación*, a report addressed to the king of Spain.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

beseech	ingratiate
cauterize	inundate
comply	placate
embody	lament
infirmity	scoff



Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS AUDIENCE

The **audience** for a piece of writing is the person or persons intended to read it. Cabeza de Vaca wrote *La Relación* for a specific audience—the king of Spain. As you read, notice how Cabeza de Vaca's sense of audience determined the content, format, and organization of his report.

ACTIVE READING USING TEXT ORGANIZERS

Aids—such as italics, boldfaced headings, and colored type—that help emphasize, clarify, or structure ideas in a piece of writing are called **text organizers**. For example, in *La Relación* the italicized paragraphs on pages 73 and 76 provide important background information and introduce the excerpts. The boldfaced headings organize the report by breaking it down into topics. Each heading announces what the section is about.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read this report, turn each boldfaced heading into a question. Then take notes, searching for the key details that answer the question and jotting them down.

from

La Relación

At this point in the account, Narvaez's barge has abandoned the rest, and Cabeza de Vaca's barge has joined one commanded by two other officers. The next three chapters describe the crew's shipwreck on Galveston Island and their encounter with the Karankawa Indians who lived there.

A Sinking and a Landing

Our two barges continued in company for four days, each man eating a ration of half a handful of raw corn a day. Then the other barge was lost in a storm. Nothing but God's great mercy kept us from going down, too.

It was winter and bitterly cold, and we had suffered hunger and the heavy beating of the waves for many days. Next day, the men began to collapse. By sunset, all in my barge had fallen over on one another, close to death. Few were any longer conscious. Not five could stand. When night fell, only the navigator and I remained able to tend the barge. Two hours after dark he told me I must take over; he believed he was going to die that night.

So I took the tiller.¹ After midnight I moved over to see if he were dead. He said no, in fact was better, and would steer till daylight. In that hour I would have welcomed death rather than see so many around me in such a condition. When I had returned the helm² to the navigator, I lay down to rest—but without much rest, for nothing was farther from my mind than sleep.

Near dawn I seemed to hear breakers³ resounding; the coast lying low, they roared louder. Surprised at this, I called to the navigator, who said he thought we were coming close to land. We sounded⁴ and found ourselves in seven fathoms.⁵ The navigator felt we should stay clear of the shore till daylight; so I took an oar and pulled it on the shore side, wheeling the stern to seaward about a league⁶ out.

As we drifted into shore, a wave caught us and heaved the barge a horseshoe-throw [about 42 feet] out of the water. The jolt when it hit brought the dead-looking men to. Seeing land at hand, they crawled through the surf to some rocks. Here we made a fire and parched some of our corn. We also found rain water. The men began to regain their senses, their locomotion, and their hope.

This day of our landing was November 6.

What Befell Oviedo with the Indians

After we ate, I ordered Lope de Oviedo, our strongest man, to climb one of the trees not far off and ascertain the lay of the land. He complied and found out from the treetop that we were on

1. **tiller**: a lever used to turn a rudder and steer a boat.
2. **helm**: the steering gear of a boat.
3. **breakers**: waves breaking against a shoreline.
4. **sounded**: measured the depth of the water.
5. **fathoms** (*fāth'əmz*): units used in measuring the depth of water; a fathom is equal to 6 feet (1.83 meters).
6. **league**: a unit of distance; Cabeza de Vaca probably used the Spanish league, equal to 3.1 miles (5 kilometers).

WORDS
TO
KNOW

comply (kəm-plī') v. to obey another's command, request, rule, or wish



Indians forced to carry baggage and supplies of the Spanish invaders (1590), Theodor de Bry. Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

not half a dozen of us could even stand up.

The Inspector [Solís] and I walked out and greeted them. They advanced, and we did our best to placate and ingratiate. We gave them beads and bells, and each one of them gave us an arrow in pledge of friendship. They told us by signs that they would return at sunrise and bring food, having none then.

an island. [This was Galveston Island.] He also said that the ground looked as if cattle had trampled it and therefore that this must be a country of Christians.

I sent him back for a closer look, to see if he could find any worn trails, but warned him not to risk going too far. He went and came upon a path which he followed for half a league to some empty huts. The Indians were gone to shoal-flats⁷ [to dig roots]. He took an earthen pot, a little dog, and a few mullets⁸ and started back.

We had begun to worry what might have happened to him, so I detailed another two men to check. They met him shortly and saw three Indians with bows and arrows following him. The Indians were calling to him and he was gesturing them to keep coming. When he reached us, the Indians held back and sat down on the shore.

Half an hour later a hundred bowmen reinforced the first three individuals. Whatever their stature, they looked like giants to us in our fright. We could not hope to defend ourselves;

The Indians' Hospitality Before and After a New Calamity

As the sun rose next morning, the Indians appeared as they promised, bringing an abundance of fish and of certain roots which taste like nuts, some bigger than walnuts, some smaller, mostly grubbed from the water with great labor.

That evening they came again with more fish and roots and brought their women and children to look at us. They thought themselves rich with the little bells and beads we gave them, and they repeated their visits on other days.

Being provided with what we needed, we thought to embark again. It was a struggle to dig our barge out of the sand it had sunk in, and another struggle to launch her. For the work in the water while launching, we stripped and stowed our clothes in the craft.

7. **shoal-flats:** stretches of level ground under shallow water.

8. **mulletts** (mŭl'īts): a kind of edible fish.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

placate (plā'kāt') *v.* to soothe another's feelings; appease
ingratiate (ĩn-grā'shē-āt') *v.* to gain another's favor by deliberate effort

Quickly clambering in and grabbing our oars, we had rowed two crossbow shots from shore when a wave inundated us. Being naked and the cold intense, we let our oars go. The next big wave capsized the barge. The Inspector and two others held fast, but that only carried them more certainly underneath, where they drowned.

A single roll of the sea tossed the rest of the men into the rushing surf and back onto shore half-drowned.

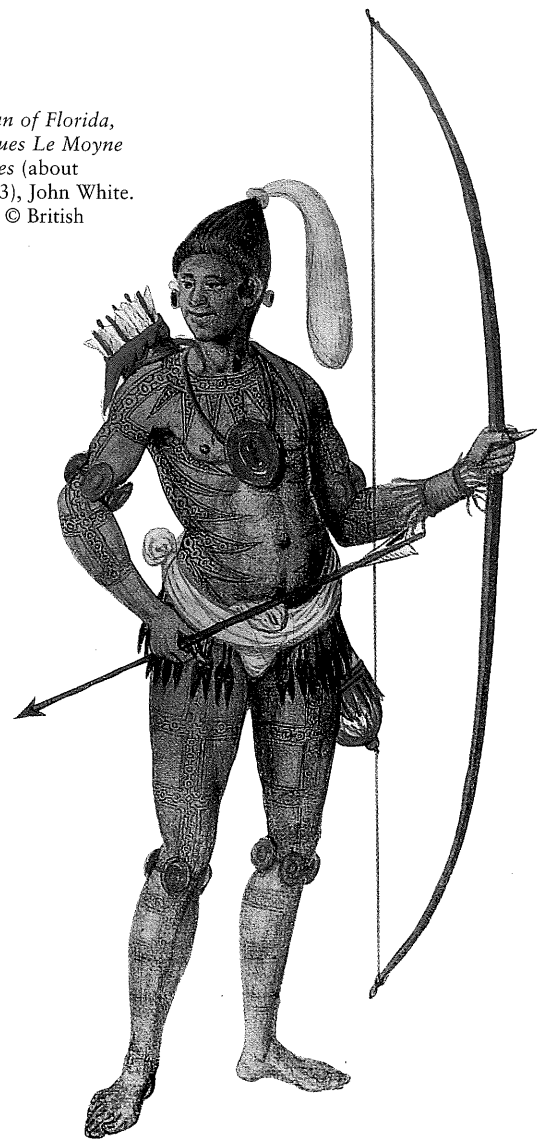
We lost only those the barge took down; but the survivors escaped as naked as they were born, with the loss of everything we had. That was not much, but valuable to us in that bitter November cold, our bodies so emaciated we could easily count every bone and looked the very picture of death. I can say for myself that from the month of May I had eaten nothing but corn, and that sometimes raw. I never could bring myself to eat any of the horse-meat at the time our beasts were slaughtered; and fish I did not taste ten times. On top of everything else, a cruel north wind commenced to complete our killing.

The Lord willed that we should find embers while searching the remnants of our former fire. We found more wood and soon had big fires raging. Before them, with flowing tears, we prayed for mercy and pardon, each filled with pity not only for himself but for all his wretched fellows.

At sunset the Indians, not knowing we had gone, came again with food. When they saw us looking so strangely different, they turned back in alarm. I went after them calling, and they returned, though frightened. I explained to them by signs that our barge had sunk and three of our number drowned. They could see at their feet two of the dead men who had washed ashore. They could also see that the rest of us were not far from joining these two.

The Indians, understanding our full plight, sat down and lamented for half an hour so loudly they could have been heard a long way off. It was amazing to see these wild, untaught savages

Indian man of Florida, after Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues (about 1585–1593), John White. Copyright © British Museum.



howling like brutes in compassion for us. It intensified my own grief at our calamity and had the same effect on the other victims.

When the cries died down, I conferred with the Christians about asking the Indians to take us to their homes. Some of our number who had been to New Spain warned that the Indians would sacrifice us to their idols.⁹ But death being surer and nearer if we stayed where we were, I

9. **New Spain . . . their idols:** New Spain included what is now the southwest United States, Mexico, Central America north of Panama, and some West Indian islands. In Mexico, conquistadors had encountered Aztecs who practiced human sacrifice.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

inundate (ɪn'ʊn-dāt') *v.* to cover with water; overwhelm
lament (lə-měnt') *v.* to grieve; wail

went ahead and beseched the Indians. They were delighted. They told us to tarry a little while, then they would do as we wished.

Presently thirty of them gathered loads of wood and disappeared to their huts, which were a long walk away; while we waited with the remainder until near nightfall. Then, supporting us under our arms, they hurried us from one to another of the four big fires they had built along the path. At each fire, when we regained a little warmth and strength, they took us on so swiftly

our feet hardly touched ground.

Thus we made their village, where we saw they had erected a hut for us with many fires inside. An hour later they began a dance celebration that lasted all night. For us there was no joy, feasting, or sleep, as we waited the hour they should make us victims.

In the morning, when they brought us fish and roots and acted in every way hospitably, we felt reassured and somewhat lost our anxiety of the sacrificial knife.

CABEZA DE VACA learned that men from one of the other barges had also landed on the island, bringing the number of Europeans there to about 90. In a matter of weeks, all but 16 of them died of disease, which spread to the Karankawas and killed half of them as well. Some of the Karankawas wanted to put the remaining Europeans to death but were dissuaded by Cabeza de Vaca's host. Cabeza de Vaca and his men were later forced to act as healers.

How We Became Medicine-Men

The islanders wanted to make physicians of us without examination or a review of diplomas. Their method of cure is to blow on the sick, the breath and the laying-on of hands supposedly casting out the infirmity. They insisted we should do this too and be of some use to them. We scoffed at their cures and at the idea we knew how to heal. But they withheld food from us until we complied. An Indian told me I knew not whereof I spoke in saying their methods had no effect. Stones and other things growing about in the fields, he said, had a virtue whereby passing a pebble along the stomach could take away pain and heal; surely extraordinary men like us embodied such powers over nature. Hunger

forced us to obey, but disclaiming any responsibility for our failure or success.

An Indian, falling sick, would send for a medicine-man, who would apply his cure. The patient would then give the medicine-man all he had and seek more from his relatives to give. The medicine-man makes incisions over the point of the pain, sucks the wound, and cauterizes it. This remedy enjoys high repute among the Indians. I have, as a matter of fact, tried it on myself with good results. The medicine-men blow on the spot they have treated, as a finishing touch, and the patient regards himself relieved.

Our method, however, was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria*,¹⁰ and pray earnestly to God our Lord for their recovery. When we concluded with the sign of the cross, He willed that our patients should directly spread the news that they had been restored to health.

In consequence, the Indians treated us kindly. They deprived themselves of food to give to us, and presented us skins and other tokens of gratitude. ❖

Translated by Cyclone Covey

10. *Pater noster* (pă'tər-nōs'tər) and *Ave Maria* (ä'vā mə-rē'ə): the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, so called from the prayers' opening words in Latin.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

beseech (bĭ-sēch') *v.* to implore; beg
infirmity (ĭn-fūr'mĭ-tē) *n.* a sickness or weakness
scoff (skŏf) *v.* to mock
embody (ēm-bŏd'ē) *v.* to represent in bodily form
cauterize (kŏ'tə-rĭz') *v.* to burn or sear to destroy abnormal tissue

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What event or idea in Cabeza de Vaca's account did you find the most surprising?

Comprehension Check

- What happened when the Spaniards tried to leave Galveston Island on their barge?
- Why were the Spaniards afraid to go to the Karankawa village?
- How did the Native Americans force the Spaniards to be useful to them?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING USING TEXT ORGANIZERS** Share with a classmate the headings that you rewrote as questions in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**, and compare your responses. How did these questions act as guides for reading the text?

3. How closely do Cabeza de Vaca and his men fit your image of conquistadors?

4. What can you **infer** about the feelings of Cabeza de Vaca and his men as they went through their ordeals?

5. How would you say Cabeza de Vaca and his men viewed themselves in relation to the Karankawa Indians they met?

THINK ABOUT

- the reason Lope de Oviedo assumed that the island was a country of Christians
- the terms Cabeza de Vaca uses to describe his men, and those he uses to describe the Karankawas
- Cabeza de Vaca's opinion of the Karankawas' method of healing

6. How do you think the Karankawas viewed Cabeza de Vaca and his men? What parts of the report support your interpretation?

Extend Interpretations

7. **Comparing Texts** Read the excerpt from *The Travels of Marco Polo* on page 77, and compare Cabeza de Vaca's and Marco Polo's encounters with native peoples. What similarities and differences do you see in their attitudes?

8. **Connect to Life** Sixteenth-century conquistadors described, mapped, and claimed territory that was previously unknown to them. They also replaced traditional belief systems with their own. Who are the present-day equivalents of conquistadors, and what do they explore or conquer?

Literary Analysis

AUDIENCE In writing *La Relación*, Cabeza de Vaca was keenly aware of his **audience**—the king of Spain. To gain insight into the relationship between the writer and his audience, imagine that Cabeza de Vaca considered the following questions while he was drafting his report:

- What does the king already know about my situation?
- What more do I want him to know and why?
- What **details** would he find most interesting?
- How can I make the information easy for him to follow?
- What kind of language will be most appropriate?

The form Cabeza de Vaca chose, the details he included, the level of **diction** he used, and the attitude he expressed toward his subject all were determined by his knowledge of who his reader would be.

Paired Activity How might Cabeza de Vaca's account have been changed if he had chosen a different audience? Imagine he had decided to tell about one of his ordeals in a letter to his wife. Choose a brief passage from the selection to rewrite as a personal letter. Exchange your letter with a partner, and discuss the differences between the rewritten passage and the original account.

REVIEW SETTING As you recall, **setting** is the time and place of the action in a literary work. How does the physical setting determine the events that Cabeza de Vaca recounts in this selection?