

The Anthropological Importance of Cabeza de Vaca

Cabeza de Vaca's reports on his journey across the Southwest from 1528-1536 include information about numerous tribal bands—the Karankawas, Caddoes, Atakapans, Jumanos and Conchos, Pimas, Opatas, and the loose bands of hunter-gatherers now called Coahuilteicans. Unlike many other indigenous peoples in much of North America, who were organized into tribes, some quite complex, Cabeza de Vaca encountered small wandering bands of people who congregated seasonally for celebrations called Mitotes. These groups constituted small family groups, which were for the most part, egalitarian, with no chiefs, and usually no more than 25 people.

Donald Chipman in *Spanish Texas 1519-1821* (University of Texas, 1992) points out the importance of Cabeza de Vaca's memoirs to our understanding of native peoples: "The Cabeza de Vaca account . . . is a primary document on the Karankawas as well as inland hunting and gathering cultures, for Cabeza de Vaca lived among those groups and survived to write about the experience. . . . His portrayals of the Mariames and Avavares, with whom he lived for about eighteen months and eight months, respectively, make them the best described Indians of southern Texas; his account is especially revealing of their cultural traditions. . . ."

Thanks to firsthand observations recorded in *La relación*, unique ethnographic information is preserved. In Cabeza de Vaca's narrative and the Joint Report, the observations of three Europeans and an African on early Texas landforms, flora, and fauna are also recorded. A careful reading and interpretation of both sources does much to illuminate the probable course of the castaways across the Texas landscape. No other Spanish province within the present United States was described so early or with such detail. (243-44)

His discussion of these various peoples is the first anthropological record about many of them and for many of the archaic bands, it is the only contemporary observations available.

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