

## The Environmental History of De Vaca's Wonderous Journey

By Dan Flores

Putting Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* aside after what is perhaps my fourth reading of it over the years, I am struck (as I know I have been before, judging by the margin notes in my 15 year-old copy) by the conviction that none of the better-known journeys of "exploration" in North American history quite takes the measure of this one. As a true American adventure, no other story - none of the Coronado accounts, certainly not the epics of Westering exploration by Lewis and Clark or John Charles Fremont, or even by John Wesley Powell - can come close to it. Those later explorer/adventurers all remained far more in control of their circumstances than Cabeza de Vaca and his companions. They never were forced by the fates into as Conradesque a world of "the Other" - the many and literally indecipherable nations of the interior of the continent of 450 years ago. And no one else in early American letters enacted the classic shaman's journey from the known to the unknown and back the way Cabeza de Vaca did - maybe no Euroamerican, period, had written as compellingly about the shaman/healer until Carlos Arana Castaneda submitted *Journey to Ixtlan* to his doctoral committee at UCLA in the middle 1960s. Along with the tantalizing small amount of information the *Relación* gives us about pre-Contact environmental history in the Southwest, these, to me, are the most powerful elements of this amazing window into the Southwestern world of five centuries ago.

The story up to the time De Vaca and fewer than two-dozen survivors began to make their way to the Texas mainland in 1529 need interest us primarily as it serves to establish the character and situation of the narrator, although some of the environmental history is of minimalist interest. Narvaez had petitioned for a grant and without consulting the mainland tribes, in one of those acts of arrogance that is more than passing astonishing to us, the King gave him North America between Florida and the Rio de las Palmas, near Tampico, Mexico. The colonizing party set out in five vessels from San Lucar de Barrameda in June, 1527, 600-strong but reduced to 300 after a storm and desertions in Santo Domingo. When finally shipwrecked for the last time on the Texas coast in November, 1528, only 80 men remained, disease reducing these to 15 by the spring of 1529.

Hodge describes de Vaca, whose portentous name for Southwestern popular culture came from an ancestor who'd guided a Spanish army through a mountain pass he'd marked with the head of a cow, as "an honest, modest, and humane man, who underestimated rather than exaggerated the many strange things that came under his notice, if we accept the account of his marvellous healings . . ." And De Vaca himself tells us that "Better than to exaggerate, I have lessened in all things." That makes what follows even more extraordinary. I note as an aside that much attention is paid to horses in the *Relación*, a reminder to us of how significant live horses were on a continent where the

animals had become extinct 100 centuries before. Narvaez remained 45 days in Santa Domingo primarily to supply horses for the expedition, then took on more in Cuba before the hurricane wrecked them, killing 60 people and 20 horses, the numbers of both equally noted. They then set sail with 400 men and 80 horses, but only 42 horses were still alive when they landed on the coast of Florida. Horse mortuary and horse consumption take up several more passages in the Relación.

On the Florida mainland the Indians "made many signs and menaces, and appeared to say we must go away from the country." This sub-Chamber of Commerce reception wasn't smoothed when they went ashore and observed mortuary customs among a local tribe (the dead displayed in boxes covered with painted deer-skins) that led their commissary to conclude that the natives were idolatrous. His action? He burned the cases and the bodies!

These Indians tried a common ruse to deflect the Spaniards elsewhere, mentioning a province called Apalachen "where was much gold." I take this comment along with the New World welcoming party to be certain evidence that the continental communications lines had already prepared the tribes of North America for what Europeans wanted, and what their arrival meant. We now understand the tragedy inherent in Narváez's decision to penetrate the interior while the ships sailed along the coast, to which De Vaca seems to have been the only one to object strongly - if we can believe this suspicious claim. A compromise plan was to march along the coast, paralleling the ships, which the overland contingent at least proceeded to ignore. For 15 days they traveled without seeing a single Indian or finding a house, and when they did meet natives intercultural relations continued to unfold badly. Who knows what these Indians intended or how the Spaniards interpreted their body language; John White, painting the Roanoke tribes half a century later, consciously struggled to convey a set of gestures he found without analogue among the English. Whatever, this tribe "by signs . . . so insulted us with their gestures, that we were forced to break with them. We seized five or six."

Given the nature of our current debate over whether North America was a pristine wilderness or a thoroughly anthropogenic setting in the 16th century, de Vaca's description of the Gulf forest of the present southeastern U. S. is quite interesting. A group of Indians "conducted us through a country very difficult to travel and wonderful to look upon. In it are vast forests, the trees being astonishingly high. So many were fallen on the ground as to obstruct our way . . ." The description sounds like bottomlands rather than regularly-burned uplands. Apalachen turned out to be an advance preview of later famous destinations like Cibola and Quivera - it was a Lower Creek town of 40 small houses, where the Indians casually shot arrows at them as the Spaniards walked about the town. De Vaca's description of the natural history of this country as including "fine pastures for herds" does seem to indicate an on-going fire ecology. His natural history particulars aren't especially useful as a time machine for us --nine species of "immense trees", eleven species of birds, deer of three kinds (?), bears and lions and "an animal with a pocket in its belly, in which it carries its young" is not exactly William Bartram, but the very early opossum

reference is reassuring as to the Relación<sup>(1)</sup>s authenticity. That the country round about was "very thinly peopled," and farther inland "were great lakes, dense forests, immense deserts and solitudes" sounds more like a European wilderness pre-conception than the kind of world De Vaca would later describe in the Southwest. On the other hand, "thinly-populated" could indicate that disease epidemics from the Caribbean or Mexico had already penetrated the Gulf Coast.

Coming into St. Marks Bay the Spaniards began to be sick and the nature of the country continued semi-tropical and "embarassing," without a mountain in sight in any direction. A third of the Spaniards were now down with a disease for which they knew no cure, and the number was increasing every hour. So they threw themselves into "one great project extremely difficult to put in operation, and that was to build vessels in which we might go away" despite having no skills, no plans, and virtually no materials. Every third day a horse was killed to feed the shipwrights and the manes and tails made into rigging and the hides into water bottles. In two weeks they had 5 ships, but 40 men had died and all the horses save one had been consumed. One wonders what interpersonal psychology underlay such an intense desire to escape the North American mainland that the Europeans would risk such an expedient. Whatever it was, these were desperate times. Loaded 50 men to a boat, the vessels sank into the water to the gunwales, and even repaired still rode no more than two palms' span above water level! No wonder the Spaniard named Teodoro, near present Pensacola, decided to risk his fate with the Indians, giving us one of our early examples of a tradition that would merit much literary comment over the next centuries—the lure of going native.

Now, at Narvaez's insistence, the expedition collapsed into an every-man-for-himself situation, and at some point during this dark time the tiny ships passed the Mississippi's mouth and finally crashed on the island Malhado ("Misfortune") - perhaps Galveston Island. Now they were among the Capoques and the Hans, two people who were "large and well formed" and whose occupation on the island was seasonal only. Eighty-two Spaniards shipwrecked on this island. At the end of their first winter in the Americas, fifteen were left.

The Spaniards already had been sick, so it is not surprising that "After this, the natives were visited by a disease of the bowels, of which half their number died. They conceived that we had destroyed them." But seeing the Spaniards die, too, they resisted this explanation. The scholars of virgin soil epidemics, Al Crosby, William Denevan, Henry Dobyns, would probably argue that this disease, which sounds like dysentery, probably was not the first European epidemic to rage through these people. But notice, contrary to Calvin Martin's hypothesis in *Keepers of the Game*, that the Texas Indians do not blame animal helpers or broken cosmological contracts with nature for their malady; their instinct is to blame the Europeans.

The ethnohistorian Bruce Trigger, in a provocative article published in the *Journal of American History* recently, has pitted the rationalist position on human behavior -- that behavior "is shaped mainly by calculations of individual self interest that are uniform from one culture to the other" - against romantic

cultural relativism in analyzing the response of Indians to Europeans. Cultural relativists insist in the Boasian tradition that all is relative and contextual, and that ideas "appear to be the starting point for understanding human beings." Trigger argues that while Indians may have viewed Europeans within the context of specific cultural worldviews in the first stage of encounters, they soon recognized them as men like themselves. The Pueblos, for example, already knew what to expect by the time Fray Marcos de Niza and Coronado showed up. When de Vaca writes that soon the Indians "wished to make us physicians without examination or inquiring for diplomas," withholding food until they took up the practice of healing, we see perhaps more clearly than in any other early American account an example of Trigger's first stage of contact, where everyone insists on interpreting everyone else through their own peculiar cultural lenses. The ubiquity of this native reaction to De Vaca and the companions about to strike out across the Southwest with him seems to me to confirm Frederick Turner's arguments about a consistent spiritual worldview among the tribes at the time of De Vaca's passage. "We laughed at what they did, telling them it was folly, that we knew not how to heal," De Vaca insists. Pretty shrewd, given how ephemeral this first stage of reaction often turned out to be. But becoming shamans turned out to be not only a lucrative move in a material sense, it was an acculturative step in the same sense that Richard Harris's Sun Dance ordeal as in *A Man Called Horse*. It made a return to civilization possible. De Vaca also discovered the one other pan-cultural role of Indian America that allowed one riches and the opportunity to travel. Sidestepping the role of shaman for the time, between 1529 and 1533 he became a trader, exchanging cones and sea-shells, conchs for cutting and "fruit like a bean of the highest value among them, which they use as a medicine and employ in their dances and festivities" for skins, ochre for paint, canes for arrows, sinews, tassels of deerskin, and flint for points. The remaining Spaniards meanwhile had suffered various fates, most made into slaves, some having been killed "because they left one house for another" or "in consequence of a dream." The "Quevenes" Indians along the lower Colorado meanwhile warned them that the country inland "was thin of people, who suffered of cold, having no skins."

With Dorantes and Castillo and their Indian companions they now went to the country where prickly pears were gathered for three months of the year. While reflecting on the meagerness of the Indian diet ("I honestly believe that were there stones in that land they would eat them"), de Vaca incorporated the account of a Spaniard named Figueroa, who had been among the inland tribes. As for the Indians along the lower Colorado, they don't sound attractive by Spanish standards: they marry but separate for the slightest cause; "Some among them are accustomed to sin against nature"; the women are drudges, working 18 hours a day; all are great thieves, great liars, great drunkards - Texans in training. They ran deer down and were a merry people, and the happiest season was when they ate prickly pears.

Figueroa adds much information useful for environmental history. The Indians of the interior regularly fire the prairies in order to encircle deer, drive lizards and other edible creatures into the open, to manipulate bison movements, and to

dry the country from mosquitoes, which hovered in such clouds in southern Texas that the Indians "appear to have the affliction of holy Lazarus." Throughout this region, in fact, they found beautiful plains with good pasturage. As for bison, Figueroa tells us that they ranged all the way to the lower Colorado, and that he had seen them three times.

. . . they are about the size of those in Spain. They have small horns like the cows of Morocco; the hair is very long and flocky like the merino's. Some are tawny, others black. To my judgment the flesh is finer and fatter than that of [the cattle of Spain]. Bison came as far as the coast of Florida, he said, from the north, and "throughout the whole region over which they run, the people who inhabit near, descend and live upon them, distributing a vast many hides into the interior country."

What Figueroa seems to be providing us evidence for is a bison economy that dominated the entire Southern Plains, and with ebbs and flows had done so for 9,000 years. Climate studies along the Pedernales River indicate that about 1000 AD the Hill Country was getting drier; so was the upper Colorado and the upper Brazos. A more xeric climate was a regional event over the Southern Plains during the years 1000 to 1200, and this drying trend had opened up the Hill Country and shortened the grasses, and bison had responded to this favorable situation by spreading their range eastward and southward. Drought conditions peaked about 1300 to 1400 AD, spreading bison even farther south in the century before de Vaca, what one scholar calls a push/pull model, with bison growing beyond the carrying capacity on the High Plains while being drawn eastward by the expansion of favorable habitat. Figueroa's bison account may be a bit more problematic for the "Florida" country.

Adding Oviedo and Esteban the Moor to their group, the Spaniards were now preparing for the first trans-continental crossing of North America by Europeans. The ticket to their overland passage? They had to become shamans. Called upon to cure among the first group of Indians they encountered inland after fleeing the South Texas prickly pear fields, the possibilities for existing off the fat of the land in right-shamanly fashion occurs to them when, along the edge of the Hill Country near present San Antonio or San Marcos, de Vaca brings a man back from the dead. The Indians went wild with this result, and "we all became physicians."

Perhaps predictably, but unfortunately, this time as shaman became something of a blur for de Vaca. They encountered many peoples - Cuthalchuches, Malicones, Coayos, Susolas, Atayos, Arbados. "They are all ignorant of time, either by the sun or the moon, nor do they reckon by the month or year," de Vaca tells us. The knew the seasons well, and how to use them, and they were practiced at knowing the positions of the stars. Men without children were observed to have an endless succession of wives, while those with children stayed with one wife. Disagreements led to fistfights that went on until exhaustion. They were warlike and skilled at tactics, and waylaid their enemies constantly. Women were their diplomats, but were also sometimes the cause of war. Their method of fighting was to leap about, and in battle one could never

show fear or they would bore in on it. "I believe these people see and hear better, and have keener senses than any other in the world," de Vaca says. He also observed men living with other men who acted as wives but had been emasculated, and noted that these latter were "more muscular than other men, and taller." This is our earliest ethnography of Southwestern Indians. Five Spaniards, including Oviedo, struck inland in 1534, but Oviedo deserted them, leaving Dorantes, Castillo, Estevan, and de Vaca to continue the journey. Given the paucity of landmarks in the *Relación*, and in this region of Texas, knowing anything exact about the route they took seems to me impossible until they approach the Big Bend country. But I tend to endorse the Hodge and Cleve Hallenbeck version of their route, which has them crossing the Hill Country between the Colorado and the Llano, then westward along the Balcones Escarpment on the southern edge of the plains to the Pecos, southwest to the Rio Grande above the Conchos, then across Chihuahua and Sonora to the Rio Sonora. De Vaca's description of the country as "broken and thickset" with thorns and shrubs that tore at a man, could describe everything from the Red River southward, of course. And I'm a bit disturbed for the northern route about his references to the "medicine gourds" (almost certainly buffalo gourds, *Cucurbita foetidissima*) only being available when floodwaters brought them down. Buffalo gourds would have been common in the Hill Country. On the other hand, I'm compelled to note that a positive connection for the northern route lies in de Vaca's mention of "galena" (silver in the first edition). The western edge of the Hill Country is the same region where, almost three centuries later, several parties of Anglo-American traders would bargain for masses of meteoric iron that the Indians shaped into fetishes. And meteorites, I have argued, were the source stories of Southwestern "silver" among the tribes, beginning with de Vaca and continuing through Coronado and Jim Bowie.

The scenes that are evoked at this juncture in the *Relación* ought to have been the subjects of some of America's greatest historic art; had they taken place in New England they probably would be. Surrounded by great and ever-growing throngs numbering in the thousands, the four Euro-shamans now headed inland where, de Vaca says, the people were better fed, more kind, and more populous. The impression, indeed, confirms recent speculations about a dense pre-Contact Indian population in the Americas; de Vaca and his companions seem to have spent virtually every night in a town, and "traveled through so many sorts of people of such diverse languages, the memory fails to recall them." Indeed, the *Relación* conveys an idea of a holy pilgrimage traversing the continent, emanating waves of disease that afflicted followers as well as inhabitants of the towns that lay before them, and attracting hordes of those sickened. While their followers extorted and plundered everyone they met, telling them the Europeans were children of the sun, de Vaca and his companions perfected the airs of godlike healers, granting dispensations, breathing on the food. One is reminded of nothing so much as Kipling's "The Man Who Would be King."

How were these Euro-shamans able to heal? De Vaca presents various theories, among them that God caused the treated to tell others that they were healthy, that the Indians "have belief in dreams," and most unsympathetic of all, that "these people are all very fond of romance, and are great liars, particularly so

where they have any interest." The answer, I rather think, can be found in reconstructions of the worldviews of the native peoples themselves.

Now passing a great river coming from the north - evidently the Pecos -- they traveled for 50 leagues through desert and rough dry mountains and came to yet another big river. Apparently they were now among the Jumanoes, a group of which was already making the buffalo adaptation that has led some scholars to speculate that these bison-hunting Pueblos of the 1530s are the core of the people who would later enter history as the Kiowas. De Vaca considered these Pueblos the finest and most intelligent groups they had encountered. Because of their interest in bison hunting he called them the "Cow Nation," noting that the Europeans got many cowhides as gifts for cures, and again that all the country was "very populous."

As they neared Christians in present Sonora, the European influence was immediately noticeable. For one thing, the lands became vacant, and where they were not, Spanish slave-hunters rode the Indians down. Finally, de Vaca concludes his *Relación* with the wonderful evocation of the shaman returning groggily from his journey to the other world: The Spaniards "were astonished at the sight of me, so strangely habited as I was, and in company with Indians. They stood staring at me a length of time, so confounded that they neither hailed me nor drew near to make an inquiry."

As reward for his tribulations Cabeza de Vaca was appointed Governor of the Rio de la Plata in Brazil, but removed and arrested in 1543. He died in 1557, after his *Relación* had gone through two editions. Castillo and Dorantes settled down and married in Mexico. Estevan, demonstrating how truly fleeting were those initial worldview constructions that had carried them across the continent, was put to death playing the role of a shaman in Hawikuh, the first Zuni village, as he led Fray Marcos de Niza northward in 1539.

#### Footnotes

A word about my source: I rely on Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, "Relation that Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca gave of what befell the armament in the Indies whither Panfilo de Narvaez went for Governor from the year 1527 to the year 1536 [1537] when with three comrades he returned and came to Sevilla," in *Spanish Explorers In The Southern United States, 1528-1543* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1982), edited by Frederick Webb Hodge and a reproduction of the 1555 edition, which appeared 13 years after the *Relacion* was first published in Zamora, Spain.

*Ibid.*, 7.

. "Relation," p. 13.

. *Ibid.*, 20.

. *Ibid.*, 21.

. *Ibid.*, 26.

. William Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscapes of the Americas in 1492," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (September 1992): 369-85;

also, Martyn Bowden, "The Invention of American Tradition," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (January 1992): 3-26.

- . "Relation," 27.
- . *Ibid.*, 29.
- . *Ibid.*, 30.
- . *Ibid.*, 34.
- . Bruce Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact," *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1195-1215.
- . See Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* (New York: Viking, 1980).
- . "Relation," 56-8.
- . *Ibid.*, 65.
- . Figueroa's account in the "Relation," 66-69.
- . See Jeffrey Huebner, "Late Prehistoric Bison Populations in Central and Southern Texas," *Plains Anthropologist* 36 (1991):343-58.
- . See Erhard Rostlund, "The Geographical Range of the Historic Bison in the Southeast," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50 (December 1970): 395-407.
- . *Ibid.*, 73-78.
- . *Ibid.*, 79-89.
- . *Ibid.*, 89.
- . See Dan Flores, ed., *Journal of an Indian Trader: Anthony Glass & the Texas Trading Frontier, 1790-1810* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985): Epilogue.
- . *Ibid.*, 92-5.
- . *Ibid.*, 100-104. I refer to Texas Tech University anthropologist Nancy Hickerson's speculations about the origins of the Kiowas.
- . *Ibid.*, 105-6.
- . *Ibid.*, 112.

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