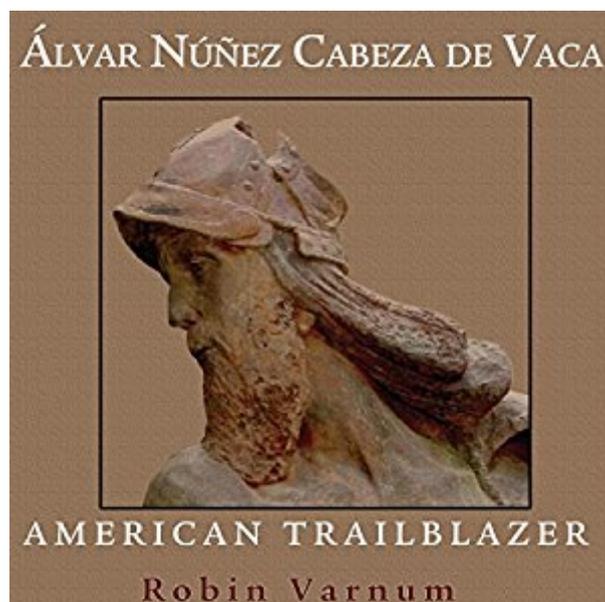


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Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca: American Trailblazer



Synopsis

In November 1528, almost a century before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the remnants of a Spanish expedition reached the Gulf Coast of Texas. By July 1536, eight years later, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca (c. 1490 - 1559) and three other survivors had walked 2,500 miles from Texas, across northern Mexico, to Sonora and ultimately to Mexico City. Cabeza de Vaca's account of this astonishing journey is now recognized as one of the great travel stories of all time and a touchstone of New World literature. But his career did not begin and end with his North American ordeal. Robin Varnum's biography, the first single-volume, cradle-to-grave account of the explorer's life in 80 years, tells the rest of the story. During Cabeza de Vaca's peregrinations through the American Southwest, he lived among and interacted with various Indian groups. When he and his non-Indian companions finally reconnected with Spaniards in northern Mexico, he was horrified to learn that his compatriots were enslaving Indians there. In Rio de La Plata he tried to keep his men from robbing the Indians, enslaving them, or exploiting them sexually - policies that caused grumbling among the troops. When Cabeza de Vaca's men mutinied, he was sent back to Spain in chains to stand trial before the Royal Council of the Indies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca holds a curious place in history. His story is in two parts that are related, but could each stand on its own as a complete narrative. The first part is his participation in the ill-fated Narvaez expedition to Florida of 1528. Just about every horrible thing that could happen

did happen, including battles with Indians, attacks by wild beasts, shipwrecks, and hurricanes that saw him wash up naked on Galveston Island off the coast of Texas in November of 1528. He and three companions were all that was left of the 600 men who started the expedition in Spain. They were enslaved by Indians for a couple of years before they escaped and tried to work their way down to the Spanish settlements in Mexico. They spent nine years in the wilderness before being accidentally discovered near the Gulf of Coronado by a Spanish slave-capturing expedition, who returned him to civilization. He was profoundly changed by the experience, especially with regard to his attitude toward the indigenous peoples of the Americas. After returning to Spain, he received a commission to govern an outpost in South America. He vowed to be different from the other conquistadors by treating the Indians with kindness, consideration, and respect. Those Spaniards who were already there resisted his new methods of government because they had grown comfortable exploiting and terrorizing the local Indians. A mutiny ensued and Cabeza was shipped back in chains to Spain, where he was tried on false charges and found guilty. It took him years to finally be vindicated. Cabeza de Vaca's story is an important one, especially today when there are voices in authority who preach that all white men are evil and their coming to the New World was the equivalent of one continent raping another.

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