

# **Cabeza de Vaca's Observations of Native American Lifeways: Correspondences in the Archaeological Record of the Texas Coast**

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The narrative of Cabeza de Vaca has long been regarded as an invaluable source of information on the land and peoples of Texas and northern Mexico during the early sixteenth century, prior to the environmental, cultural and demographic effects of later, systematic European colonization. Cabeza de Vaca's observations on the various native groups of the Texas coast and interior southern Texas have provided scholars with much useful information on aboriginal lifeways, and thus have been regarded as the earliest ethnohistorical documentation for the region (e.g., Campbell and Campbell 1981; Newcomb 1961, 1983; Salinas 1990).

At the level of very basic and general cultural patterns, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative has traditionally been correlated with the archaeological record, insofar as he described mobile, non-agricultural groups both along the coast and in the adjacent interior of southern Texas, in keeping with the abundant archaeological evidence for coastal hunter-gatherer-fishing lifeways on the coast and mobile hunting and gathering adaptations on the adjacent inland prairies. However, due to limitations inherent in most material culture remains, it is generally difficult, at best, to test observations concerning the less tangible aspects of hunter-gatherer through archaeological investigations. In this sense, while the record left by Cabeza de Vaca fills a significant gap in knowledge of indigenous culture during the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric periods, there is often no way of independently evaluating the objectivity of his statements as reliable ethnohistorical information.

This paper briefly summarizes recent archaeological findings along the Texas coast which, in fact, mesh remarkably well with Cabeza de Vaca's observations of key aspects of native lifeways (while avoiding the complex and thorny issue of ethnic group identities). Most of the new information comes from the Mitchell Ridge Site on Galveston Island, with additional relevant insights provided by data from sites on the central Texas coastal prairie north of Corpus Christi.

## **The Mitchell Ridge Site, Galveston Island**

Recent excavations at the Mitchell Ridge Site (4 IGV66) have provided a wealth of archaeological information on the Late Prehistoric, Protohistoric and Early Historic native occupation of Galveston Island (Ricklis 1994). Since it is generally agreed that Cabeza de Vaca and his compatriots landed on Galveston Island, or perhaps some other nearby barrier island (e.g., Newcomb 1961, 1983; Covey 1963; Chipman 1991) the extensive findings at Mitchell Ridge can be assumed to pertain to the same basic native cultural expression observed by Cabeza de Vaca for the island folk among whom he lived during the first year of his famous sojourn. Even if his landing site were not actually Galveston Island, it can be assumed that he was exposed to the same cultural patterns evidenced

archaeologically at Mitchell Ridge, since the upper Texas coastal zone, from the Brazos River northward past Galveston Bay, has been defined as essentially a single archaeological culture area (Aten 1979, 1983; Story 1990).

Located about midway on the island's long axis, the site contained an extensive area of occupation and several aboriginal cemeteries. Excavations during the 1970s and in 1992, the latter sponsored by The Woodlands Corporation, yielded an unusually large sample of domestic debris, including over 25,000 fragments of native ceramics, flaked chert arrowpoints and other tools, bone and shell tools and ornaments, and a large and informative sample of faunal bone. Fortuitously, four small cemeteries, containing the remains of at least 51 individuals, produced a remarkable body of information on the indigenous mortuary tradition, providing significant insights into native social patterns which, on the whole, correspond well with pertinent observations left by Cabeza de Vaca.

A total of 31 radiocarbon dates, from both domestic activity features and burials, place the main occupation at Mitchell Ridge in the Late Prehistoric (ca. A.D. 800-1500), Protohistoric Period (ca. A.D. 1500- 1700) and Early Historic (18th century) periods. Thus, the occupation of the site and the use of the cemeteries clearly encompass the years (1528- 1533) of Cabeza de Vaca's stay on the upper Texas Coast. It should be noted, however, that no definitive evidence of his presence, or of other Spaniards of the early sixteenth century, was recovered. Glass trade beads were found in a number of the later burials at the site, but these were of types attributable either to a later Protohistoric Spanish presence, after ca. 1570 (perhaps obtained by down-the-line trade from Spanish settlements in Florida), and to the period of the Early Historic French fur trade in the region, ca. 1720-1754 (Ricklis 1994:452-461). Nonetheless, it is clear that the site was occupied during the general period of Cabeza de Vaca's presence, and the findings are doubtless relevant for understanding the regional native cultural patterns which he described.

### **Points of Agreement Between Cabeza de Vaca's Narrative and the Mitchell Ridge Data**

Several important aspects of the archaeological findings at Mitchell Ridge are in basic agreement with Cabeza de Vaca's narrative concerning life on "Isla Malhado". These can be concisely summarized as follows:

1. Cabeza de Vaca noted that his island Indians subsisted largely on fish and aquatic roots. While remains of plant foods were not preserved at Mitchell Ridge, abundant fish bones were found in occupation debris deposits, indicating that fishing was an important part of the subsistence economy at the site.
2. According to Cabeza de Vaca, the Indians spent the fall and winter on the island (October through February), and "then went to other parts to seek sustenance" (Bandelier 1905:65; Covey 1983:61). Archaeological seasonality indicators at Mitchell Ridge are not abundant, but the limited data tend to agree with this observation: Analyses of seasonal growth patterns on oyster

shells and marine fish otoliths from debris deposits suggest an emphasis on fall-winter occupation of the site (Ricklis 1994:107-108, 494).

3. Three post mold patterns, exposed during the 1992 excavations at Mitchell Ridge, are interpreted to represent probable aboriginal structures. These were small round-to-oval in floor plan and 3-5 meters in diameter. In all three cases, the post mold patterns were semicircular, suggesting that one side may have been left open, perhaps only covered with mats or hides. Such simple, minimal structures would seem to be in keeping with Cabeza de Vaca's description of native domiciles, which were quickly constructed and "very open", thus providing to the shipwrecked Spaniards only minimal protection from the elements (Covey 1983:60).
4. Cabeza de Vaca made a number of statements concerning native social organization which appear to agree with findings in the Mitchell Ridge cemeteries. He noted that particularly high regard was accorded to children and adult males. Concerning children, he stated that "These people love their offspring more than any in the world and treat them very mildly" (Covey 1983:61). He also mentioned that when "...a child of one of them happens to die, parents and relatives bewail it and [so does] the whole settlement, the lament lasting a full year, day after day." These attitudes may be reflected by the differential distribution of burial goods at Mitchell Ridge, following the generally accepted archaeological principle that the amount of material wealth in graves is a basic reflection of social status of individuals during life (e.g., Binford 1964, 1972; Peebles and Kus 1977; Chapman and Randsborg 1981; Brown 1981; O'Shea 1984). In terms of the number of classes of grave goods interred with individuals (a variety of bone and stone tools, shell ornaments, whooping crane bone whistles), the average number with subadults was 3.3, nearly as high as for adult males, whereas the average for adult females was only 1.0. A relatively high regard for children appears to be indicated.
5. A relatively high status for males is suggested by Cabeza de Vaca's statement that "...when a son or a brother may die, no one [in that family] goes out for food for three months, the neighbors and other relatives providing what is eaten" (Covey 1983:62), as well as by an apparently general pattern of patrilineal descent (discussed briefly below). High male status is suggested by the Mitchell Ridge burial data. The majority (61.5%) of adult males were interred with material items, as compared with 43% for adult females. The average number of offering classes, which in general reflects the amount of material wealth disposal (as opposed to mere presence or absence), is perhaps most telling in terms of relative social status: Adult male graves with goods had, on the average, 4.38 classes of goods; as noted above, subadults were a close second with an average of 3.3 classes of goods, whereas adult females averaged 1.0.
6. A patrilineal descent pattern is suggested by the following passage from Cabeza de Vaca:

When [a man] takes a woman for his wife, from the day he marries her, whatever he may hunt or fish, she has to fetch it to the home of her father, without daring to touch or eat of it, and from the home of the father-in-law they bring the food to the husband. All the while neither the wife's father nor her mother enter his abode, nor is he allowed to go to theirs or the homes of his brothers-in-law, and should they happen to meet they go out of each other's way a crossbow's shot or so, with bowed heads and eyes cast to the ground, holding it to be an evil thing to look at each other or speak. The women are free to communicate with their parents-in-law or relatives and speak to them (Bandelier 1905:66). It is apparent that, after paying a required bride price to the wife's father, the husband had no direct social interaction with his wife's family. The wife, on the other hand, was free to interact with her husband's family, suggesting that upon marriage her social identity became linked to his relatives, as would be expected in the context of a patrilineal descent system.

Indirectly, the Mitchell Ridge burial data can be inferred to reflect a change in female social relations upon attainment of maturity. The striking dearth of disposed material wealth placed in adult female graves contrasts with the relative abundance of grave goods with subadults, both male and female. This suggests a pattern in which female status changed significantly with the passage from childhood to maturity (i.e., at the age of marriage; this contrasts with the case of adult males, who apparently lost no status at the age of maturity, judging by the relative abundance of grave goods interred with men). Again assuming that mortuary wealth is a general reflection of the individual's status before death, it can be inferred that a shift in social identity-- one which involved a lowering of status-- occurred when a female reached marriageable age.

7. Cabeza de Vaca made certain observations on specific customs concerning mortuary rites which have probable archaeological correlates at Mitchell Ridge. He noted that it was customary to mourn deceased individuals for one year before performing final funeral rites (Bandelier 1905:66-67). While most of the burials at Mitchell Ridge were primary (in-flesh) interments, suggesting burial shortly after death, twelve (24%) of the interred individuals were represented by defleshed bone elements intentionally placed in grave pits, suggesting a significant lapse of time between death and final burial. In one grave, cut marks on the disarticulated bones of two different individuals indicate intentional defleshing (Powell 1994:324-326). These findings indicate that secondary burial, indicative of a delay in burial after death, was in fact a repeated, culturally sanctioned practice at Mitchell Ridge.

Cabeza de Vaca also stated that the practice of cremation was reserved for the remains of medicine men or shamans (Bandelier 1905 :66-67). It may thus be relevant that a minority (7, or 14%) of the individuals buried in the Mitchell Ridge cemeteries were cremated, since shamans can be expected to have comprised only a minority of the population. However, this suggestion should be qualified by two archaeological observations. First, one of the cremated individuals was a subadult, probably a child under age ten at the time of death. Practicing shamans can be expected to have been adults, though it is perhaps possible that a similar mode of burial could be conferred upon the offspring of a

shaman. Secondly, one old adult male was buried in the flesh, with what is confidently interpreted as a shaman's bloodletting device (a small comb-like implement containing a row of sharpened rat incisor teeth which matches well with an early historic description of such tools, left by Jean Baptiste Talon, a boy captured by Karankawa Indians in the late 1680s at La Salle's Fort Saint Louis near Matagorda Bay; cf. Ricklis 1994:261; Bell 1987:225). If it is assumed that adult males were generally buried with personally owned / used implements (which seems to have been the case, based on the presence of tool kits with other adult males at Mitchell Ridge), this non-cremated may have been a shaman. This would not, of course, obviate the possibility that the cremations represent shamans, but would suggest that the practice may not have been consistently applied, or perhaps was not reserved solely for such people, as indicated by Cabeza de Vaca.

Despite such ambiguities concerning modes of burial as indicators of the functional roles of individuals in native society, it is noteworthy that both secondary burial and cremation are indicated by Cabeza de Vaca for his island people and well represented archaeologically at Mitchell Ridge. In fact, prior to the Mitchell Ridge findings of 1992, these two modes of non-flesh burial were scarcely documented in the archaeological record for the upper Texas coast (see Aten 1976). While this may be an artifact of a limited archaeological data base, it could also reflect real differences between aboriginal burial practices among groups within the region.

### **Archaeological Correlates of Cabeza de Vaca's Assessment of Inter-Group Relations along the Central Coastal Prairies of Texas**

It is relevant to mention one other aspect of Cabeza de Vaca's observation of native lifeways which finds agreement in the archaeological record, namely the general kinds of relationships between coastal and inland groups farther down the coast toward the Corpus Christi area. As Campbell and Campbell (1981:13) have pointed out, Cabeza de Vaca stated that coastal Indians in this area (his "Camoles") had friendly relations with Indians of the immediately adjacent interior ("Anegados"), who freely visited the coast.

Information from a number of Late Prehistoric archaeological sites in San Patricio and Refugio Counties identifies the approximate boundary zone between coastal populations (represented archaeologically by the Rockport Phase, largely a correlate of Karankawan peoples), and inland peoples (represented by the Toyah Phase or Horizon; see Hester 1980; Black 1986). A marked shift in the kinds of ceramics at a point about 40 kilometers from the mainland shoreline marks the spatial boundaries of Late Prehistoric Rockport and Toyah material cultures, and ethnohistorical data from the Spanish Colonial period support the placement of the inland margins of Karankawan territory at this distance from the coast (Ricklis 1996:95-100).

The key point is that sites of the inland Toyah Horizon and the coastal Rockport Phase, both found along the boundary zone, show a pattern of seasonally

complementary boundary zone occupation, based on seasonality analyses of Rangia cuneata clamshells using the method developed by Lawrence Aten (1981). The Toyah sites show fall-winter seasonality, while the Rockport sites evidence a spring-summer seasonality, suggesting an ecological complementarity, as inland people filled the void created as coastal groups who followed a seasonal round indicated archaeologically, returned to favored shoreline fishing camps in the fall and winter (Ricklis 1996). Such a pattern of shared use of a boundary zone suggests a basically cooperative relationship between inland and coastal folk during the Late Prehistoric period. Cooperation is also suggested by data from the Mellon Site (41RF21) in Refugio County, a deer and bison hunting/processing camp with spatially discrete and possibly contemporaneous Rockport and Toyah components. The fact that the two components at this site, which is also situated in the boundary zone some 40 km from the coast, have similar radiocarbon ages, and adjoin at the center of the small site without significant overlap, suggests simultaneous use by both inland and coastal groups.

## Conclusions

The findings at Mitchell Ridge and on the prairies north of Corpus Christi offer significant correspondances to the observations of Cabeza de Vaca concerning the lifeways of native groups along and near the Texas coast. On the whole, the archaeological record suggests that Cabeza de Vaca was indeed a reliable observer of basic economic and technological practices (e.g., seasonality of island occupation, kinds of domiciles, subsistence patterns), as well as of less tangible sociocultural patterns.

Of course, many of Cabeza de Vaca's observations were of a general kind, and should not be assumed to be either complete or fully reflective of native cultural patterns. For example, it can be suspected that many of his observations of seasonal subsistence patterns glossed over considerable variability and/or heterogeneity in economic activities. Whereas he wrote that the Indians of Isla Malhado basically ate only fish and aquatic roots while staying on the island, there is ample evidence from Mitchell Ridge for hunting of deer and even, in a limited way, bison, as well as for a significant reliance on trapping of the hispid cotton rats which still abound on the undeveloped parts of the island today. Statements to the effect that during a given season a group lived only on berries, or nuts, or oysters, or prickly pears, should not necessarily be taken as a complete picture of subsistence activities. Too, his statement that the island Indians had "no ruler among them" (Bandelier 1905:71) does not necessarily mean that there was no appreciable sociopolitical development among the indigenous people; the findings at Mitchell Ridge in fact suggest at least incipient sociopolitical hierarchy, by virtue of spatial segregation of wealth disposal in cemeteries (see discussion in Ricklis 1994:477-481). Relatively subtle but quite real expressions of sociopolitical development may have been unrecognizable to a sixteenth century Spaniard, whose "cultural filter" should always be kept in mind when interpreting his observations.

Such qualifiers aside, however, it is apparent that the available archaeological data express an impressive concordance with cultural patterns as recorded in the Cabeza de Vaca narrative. Clearly, the observations recorded in his remarkable narrative should continue to be considered a highly important and essentially reliable source of early ethnohistoric information.

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