

Cabeza de Vaca's Literary Importance

Historians and anthropologists have often pointed to the importance of Cabeza de Vaca's work, but usually for different reasons. More recently, Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* has received increasing analysis as a work of literature. Pilkington notes that "Cabeza de Vaca's more lasting significance has been literary and cultural, not historical." Pilkington continues: "Cabeza de Vaca was not only a physical trailblazer; he was also a literary pioneer, and he deserves the distinction of being called the Southwest's finest writer." Although some literary scholars would dispute this assertion, Pilkington bases his conclusion on his belief that Cabeza de Vaca's book serves as the prototype for much American literature that followed: "One of its underlying themes, for example, is the physical emotional struggle for an accommodation between races--a conflict that has never been very far removed from the American consciousness and one that has always been a factor in the works of our best and most vital writers. . . ." (145-46).

And Frederick Turner in *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit against the Wilderness* suggests that Cabeza de Vaca's story serves as the first captivity narrative, which became the most significant early American narrative and the basis for the Western from Cooper to Eastwood: Among the thousands of artifacts left to us, the inheritors of the centuries and acts of exploration--stone markers buried deep in jungles, rusted bits of armor accidentally exhumed, moldering slave castles, sailing orders, and cairns in wooded swamps--perhaps none is so absorbing as our legends of whites captured by natives. And none might have as much to tell us of the spiritual stakes involved in exploration. (231) Pulitzer Prize winning historian William Goetzmann finds a profound spiritual transformation in Cabeza de Vaca's change from conquistador to healer that resulted during his captivity. Goetzmann writes:

Although his account remains humble throughout, Cabeza de Vaca's experiences begin to resemble those of Christ himself as he toured the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Hailed as godlike persons and saviors, he and the other Spaniards went from tribe to tribe and band to band among the Coahuiltecas and far across Northern Mexico to Sinaloa, where at last they found their own kind--Christian Spanish soldiers who "wished to make slaves of the Indians we brought." As the Indians were being harassed by the slave hunters, the Indians contrasted them to the four healers, creating what amounted to an Indian set of beatitudes.

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