The First Exploration of the California Coast

Four-hundred and seventy-eight years ago, in November of 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, captained a small fleet of ships that was the first European expedition to explore the coast of California. He had been commissioned by Antonio de Mendoza, the Viceroy of New Spain (Mexico today), to search for trade opportunities and perhaps to find a way to China as there was little knowledge at the time of the North Pacific.

Cabrillo departed from Natividad, Mexico with three ships in June and soon they were in uncharted waters where no Spanish ships had gone before. On September 28 they entered what is now San Diego Bay, and a week or so later reached Santa Catalina Island, which he named San Salvador after his own flagship. They subsequently visited and named San Clemente Island, and then arrived at San Pedro Bay on October 8, which they named Baya de los Fumos, or Smoke Bay due to the smoke from the fires of the native inhabitants.

They explored the other Channel Islands and described a number of native villages on the islands and along the mainland coast as well. On November 13 they sighted and named Cabo de Piños, although it is unclear whether this was Point Piños on the Monterey Peninsula or Point Reyes, which is about 110 miles further north. Cabrillo missed San Francisco, as did other explorers over the next two centuries, likely due to the fog that often hangs around the Golden Gate.

The ships may have reached as far north as the Russian River or possibly even the Columbia River, which was 600 miles to the north. Storms eventually forced them to turn back and sailing back down the coast, they entered Monterey Bay and named it Bahia de los Piños. On November 23, 1542, Cabrillo’s fleet arrived back at Santa Catalina Island to make repairs and spend the winter. Around Christmas Eve, Cabrillo splintered his shin on jagged rocks while stepping out of a small boat. The injury got infected and developed gangrene, leading to his death on January 3, 1543.

Cabrillo was an interesting character, and because he was the first European to explore the coast of present-day California, there is no small number of landmarks, streets, schools and a myriad of other features named after him. As we have looked more carefully at Cabrillo and many other early leaders, however, much has emerged that has begun to change our view of these historic individuals and the naming honor we have bestowed upon them.

Historians still argue about whether Cabrillo was Spanish or Portuguese, which today may matter little. But as a young man he shipped to Havana and joined forces with
Hernan Cortés in New Spain. His later success in gold mining in Guatemala made him one of the richest of the conquistadores in Mexico.

His biographer has written that Cabrillo took an indigenous woman as a common-law wife and had several children, including at least three daughters. During a hiatus in Spain he married Beatriz Sanchez de Ortega in Seville, who returned to Guatemala with him and bore him two sons.

Cabrillo benefited greatly from the encomienda system, which was a Spanish labor system that rewarded conquerors with the labor of particular groups of conquered Native people in the Americas. The laborers, in theory, were provided with benefits by the conquerors for whom they labored, the Catholic religion being a principal, but highly questionable benefit. In Honduras, Cabrillo broke up families, sending the men to the mines for gold and to the forests to harvest trees for shipbuilding. The woman and girls he gave over to soldiers and sailors, presumably for slaves. These are likely some of the reasons why there is some controversy today about having so many places named after him.

Sixty more years were to pass before the Spanish returned to the California coast when Sebastián Vizcaíno was appointed general-in-charge of an expedition by the Spanish viceroy in Mexico City, Gaspar de Zúñiga, the 5th Count of Monterrey. Vizcaíno was a Spanish soldier, entrepreneur, explorer and diplomat whose varied roles took him to Mexico, the Philippines, the Baja California peninsula and the California coast.

Vizcaíno’s charge was to locate safe harbors in what was then known as Alta California, which Spanish galleons could use for resupplying on their return voyage from the Philippines to Acapulco. He was also given the authority to map in detail the California coastline that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo had first explored 60 years earlier.

As Sebastian Vizcaíno sailed up the coast in 1602, he named and also renamed many of the prominent features, San Diego, Santa Catalina Island, Santa Barbara, Point Conception, Carmel Valley and Monterey Bay, that had been named by Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542. He prepared quite an accurate map of Monterey Bay and described it as a safe harbor “sheltered from all winds,” and “the best port that could be desired.” This didn’t turn out to be quite true, but this was over 400 years ago and perhaps they had a calm day. More to tell about this story.
Map of Monterey Bay prepared by Sebastian Vizcaino, 1602