

# CHASING THE DREAM

## THE ROLE OF MYTH IN SPANISH EXPLORATION OF THE AMERICAN WEST

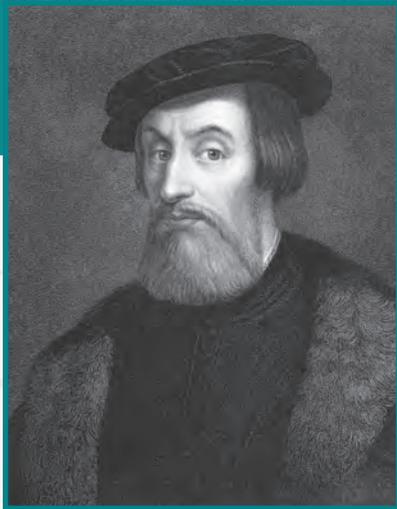
BY DAVID P. BAILEY

---

Spanish colonial historians often emphasize the importance of Spanish exploration in opening the American West and Southwest to trade and eventual settlement. What is often overlooked, however, is an explanation of the motivation for these explorers to travel into the unknown and dangerous region north of the conquered Aztec Empire.

The *Distant Treasures in the Mist* exhibition at the Museum of Western Colorado's Museum of the West tells the story of what motivated these explorations and presents the information they obtained on their journeys to the northern frontier.

### IN SEARCH OF THE SEVEN CITIES OF GOLD



The New World's first conqueror was Hernan Cortés.

In a long letter written by Cortés to the Emperor Charles V of Spain, he tells of his first conversation with the Aztec ruler Montecuhzoma, on Nov. 8, 1519, on the eve of the destruction of the Aztec Empire.

Montecuhzoma confided, "We have known for a long time, from the chronicles of our forefathers, that neither I, nor those who inhabit this country, are descendants from the aborigines of it, but from strangers who came to it from very distant parts; and we also hold, that our race was brought to this parts by a lord, whose vassals they all were, and who returned to his native country."

Cortés wondered if it were possible to locate the original Aztec kingdom known as Aztlán. He assumed it would be just as wealthy as the newly discovered Aztec kingdom.

The Spanish conquistadors had a legend from their own country, the story of the magnificent Seven Cities of Gold. In 711 A.D, the Moorish army invaded Spain and Portugal, but according to the legend, seven bishops and their followers sailed west to avoid the invaders. The bishops then founded the Seven Cities of Gold on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. By 1508, maps began to appear in Europe that relocated the Seven Cities of Gold to North America.

The Spanish conquistadors were told by Aztec priests, as part of their creation story, of their emergence from seven caves. It was not long before the Spanish put the seven cities and seven caves stories together and believed the Aztecs were originally from the Seven Cities of Gold. Hernan Cortés was determined to be the first to

---

find the rich Aztec homeland. He dispatched his lieutenants to search for any possible rich mining regions or a water passage to the South Sea (Pacific Ocean) in an unexplored area west of Tenochtitlán, present day Mexico City.

### THE STRAIT OF ANIÁN SAID TO BISECT NORTH AMERICA

The Spaniards founded a port at Zacatula (Bahía Petacalco), on the west coast of Mexico. Cortés built four small ships to explore the coastline of the South Sea.



He also believed strongly in another myth, the Strait of Anián, a large waterway that supposedly bisected North America from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. On the banks of that waterway would be rich kingdoms and possibly the Seven Cities of Gold.

On May 15, 1535, Cortés wrote a letter shortly after his discovery of Santa Cruz, known today as La Paz, Mexico, about his treasure expeditions. However, the section of his letter explaining his discoveries and secrets was mysteriously removed after it was received. Spanish colonial treasure hunters were extremely secretive about the information they gathered from explorations and it is not surprising that section is missing. The surviving section of the letter does mention pearls and one can sense his anxiousness to find other riches.

When Cortés got back to Mexico, he claimed to have discussed his findings with Friar Marcos de Niza. In 1538, the Viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, had sent Niza on an overland mission to explore the country east of the Sea of Cortés (Gulf of California). Niza came back with news of the existence of the Seven Cities of Cibola. The news would later send explorer Francisco Vásquez de Coronado on a disastrous quest to find the mysterious cities in 1540.

### RUMORS OF THE LOST SPANIARDS

Coronado traveled for two years looking for riches and was told of another great city, Quivera, which turned out to be just as unattainable. Coronado returned to Mexico bankrupt and disgraced. The attention Niza was getting for his “discoveries” greatly upset Hernan Cortés. From 1521 to 1539, Cortés financed numerous land and sea expeditions in search of rich cities and kingdoms, their locations based on legends and stories from native peoples. The expeditions found no great cities or treasure on the banks of the mythical Strait of Anián, only more stories of great riches from native groups they encountered. In 1541, Hernan Cortés left Mexico for Spain to settle legal issues with the King of Spain, and never returned.

Cortés eventually gave up his treasure quest and one of his veteran soldiers, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, carried on the search for the treasure cities on the Strait of Anián by sailing up the present day California coast in 1542. Cabrillo had fought the Aztecs with Cortés and had become a favorite of the Spanish government. The Viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, asked him to lead an expedition to the South Sea to look for the Strait of Anián. On June 27, 1542, Cabrillo set out with three ships and headed north toward the coastline of the South Sea, the California coast. The trip was uneventful until Aug. 25, when Cabrillo and his men encountered five natives who indicated through sign language they saw other men like them with beards, dogs, crossbows and swords.

The native men had decorated themselves with white paint that mimicked coats, trousers and ornamental sashes. They indicated the Spaniards were five days travel from them. On Oct. 8, 1542, an Indian elder told them again there were other Spaniards traveling on the mainland. Native villages all along the coast told the same tale of mysterious bearded men wearing similar Spanish style clothing.

This was the beginning of a new myth about lost Spaniards living inland that would last for centuries and take its place alongside the legends of the Seven Cities of Gold and the Strait of Anián. The Cabrillo expedition would return to Mexico after a nine-and-a-half month trip without their lead-

er, who died from a fall during the trip. Although the Cabrillo expedition found no riches, they did add valuable information on the geography and native groups of the California coast.

## EARLY MAPS SHOW GOLDEN CITIES IN PRESENT DAY COLORADO

The Spanish colonial government kept excellent records in the form of maps, diaries and ledgers to enlighten the King of Spain on his newly conquered lands. The full story of the Spanish pursuit of legends and myths began to unfold with the discovery of an early map of the Western Hemisphere.

One of the most interesting of the early mapmakers was Joan Martines. From 1550 to 1591 he produced over thirty charts and atlases.



Curiously, Martines's map and many other New World maps marked the area of present day west central Colorado at the

intersection of 39 degrees north latitude and the source of a large unknown river. This river, apparently the Colorado River of today, emptied into the Gulf of Mexico and was the site of the Seven Cities of Gold!

The geographical information of these early maps was based partially on the Spanish conquistadors' and European explorers' limited nautical and inland explorations. However, the early mapmakers based most of their information on legends, myths and cultural stories from the native peoples. The mapmakers went even one step further by placing the locations of these mythical cities on their maps.

## MYSTERIOUS SPANIARDS SAID TO BE SHIPWRECKED

Spanish adventurer Sebastián Vizcaíno sailed up the California coast in 1602 and encountered more strange tales of lost Spaniards. On Nov. 10, 1602, Father Ascensión, who accompanied Vizcaíno, related that after their arrival at San

Diego harbor they encountered native men carrying silver ore. The men indicated other bearded Spaniards wearing collars and breeches were living inland and had the same ore.

When the Vizcaíno expedition arrived at present day Santa Catalina Island, his diary entry, dated Nov. 30, 1602, states an elderly native woman brought two pieces of Chinese silk with figures on them to the attention of the crew. The woman explained that men dressed like them were shipwrecked on the coast long ago. Father Ascensión was so concerned with these native sightings of European-like strangers that he asked the King of Spain to send an expedition to locate them.

At that time the Spanish Empire was worried that other European nations were trying to encroach on their territory. Although the King never acted on the recommendations, the Cabrillo and Vizcaíno expeditions had engrained in the Spanish psyche the notion of lost Spaniards and mysterious cities in the wilds of North America.

## KINGDOM OF QUIVERA RICH IN PRECIOUS METALS

The numerous stories of mysterious Spaniards and settlements reported by the maritime explorers were strengthened by the reports of Spanish priests who interviewed native peoples during their travels in the present day Southwest of the United States. Of particular interest was Father Alonso de Benavides's Royal Report of 1630. He traveled to many areas in the Southwest and recorded the different lives and customs of tribal groups as well as the mineral resources and legendary places.



Benavides's report actually gave coordinates for finding the legendary kingdom of Quivera. Benavides indicated that the Quivera Indians adorned themselves with gold earrings and necklaces and that precious metal was commonplace in their kingdom. The report was presented by Father Benavides to the Spanish

royal court in hopes of receiving more priests and money to continue religious work in New Spain. Benavides's narrative of the Seven Cities of Cibola described that one of the seven cities, Sibola (Cibola), consisted of a thousand beautiful three to four story timber and stone houses.

Fifty-six years later a second geographical description of New Spain was published. Alonso de Posada's Royal Report of 1686 mentioned the important kingdom and provinces of Teguayo. Posada gave directions to this new kingdom. If travelers left Santa Fe, located at thirty-seven degrees north latitude, proceeded northwest and crossed a large river (Colorado River), they would enter the country of the Utes. Approximately seventy leagues (a Spanish league is equivalent to 2.6 miles) from this country he would cross into Teguayo, also called Copala, the ancient homeland of the Mexicans. The report stated that all people of Central and South America originally came from this region. Here again the legend of the Aztec homeland resurfaced and rekindled interest in finding the rich cities and treasure.

This report also reinforced the Spanish belief of unknown kingdoms not far from a great river and above thirty-seven degrees north latitude. The Royal reports of Benavides and Posada were largely based on information from many sources, including soldiers, traders and native peoples.

## **TWO EXPEDITIONS INTO UTE COUNTRY**

Nearly eighty years after the Benavides and Posada reports, another explorer, Juan Maria Antonio Rivera, would attempt to solve the mysteries of the northern frontier. By 1765 the Spanish government had become worried about the uneasy northern alliances with the Comanche and Ute Nations. New Mexican Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín sent an expedition to the unexplored northern frontier to investigate the situation.

Rivera was chosen to lead two expeditions to Ute country. He kept detailed diaries of each of his trips. In June of 1765, Rivera and a group of experienced trappers and traders left for "the northern mystery," a Spanish term for the uncharted area north of New Mexico, which includes present day Colorado and Utah.

Rivera was also told by the governor to investigate where a Ute warrior had found a piece of silver ore traded to a New Mexican blacksmith. They traveled uneventfully to Ute country, present day Colorado, and investigated possible locations of silver deposits with no success.

The Utes told Rivera that on the other side of the Río del Tizón (Colorado River) were bearded white men that dressed in armor and wore metal hats.



Rivera must have been intrigued by this revelation because many of the maps of his day located the southernmost metropolis of the

Seven Cities of Gold at thirty-nine degrees north latitude.

## **JUAN RIVERA VENTURED TO PRESENT DAY DELTA**

Many historians believe Rivera reached as far west as present day Delta, Colorado. This would put Rivera's expedition about fifteen Spanish leagues south of the first of the seven fabled cities that were listed on the Dieder Robert de Vougon dy map published in 1772.

The Utes convinced the Spanish it was too dangerous to travel any further north because of hostile tribes, and Rivera and his men returned to New Mexico. In October of 1765, Rivera was sent on a second mission by Governor Cachupín to find the Río del Tizón and look for bearded men living in towns or nations along its banks. The Utes were again hesitant to take Rivera to the river because of the danger. In his diary, Rivera said he finally was guided to the Río del Tizón, but at the wrong place. The Utes finally told Rivera the lost Spaniards they were looking for were killed in a battle. Rivera, disillusioned by his lack of success, returned to New Mexico.

## ESCALANTE SEEKS OVERLAND ROUTE

In 1775, Father Silvestre Vélez Escalante sent numerous letters and plans to the governor of New Mexico and the provincial minister of the Franciscans asking for permission to find an overland route from New Mexico to the Spanish mission in Monterey, California. By 1776, Escalante's



plan was approved and he traveled to Santa Fe to get supplies and find capable men to go on the expedition.

Father Escalante was born in Trenceño, Spain in 1750. At 17 he joined the Franciscan order and traveled to Mexico. Escalante was transferred to New Mexico to conduct missionary work and taught Christian doctrine at the Zuñi mission. Escalante traveled extensively across the northern frontier.

The Spanish frontier missions had large libraries, and he reviewed the limited history on northern exploration. In a letter dated April 30, 1776, he mentioned receiving valuable information while smoking cigars with a Havasupai man. The man used charcoal to draw a detailed map of the northern frontier on a saddle blanket.

During their conversation, the man explained the terrain and the different tribal groups in the area. Escalante had contemplated an overland expedition from New Mexico to the Spanish mission in Monterey, California. If a land route were established, it would increase their ability to communicate and coordinate mission work in the west. After his conversation with the Havasupai man he decided it would be safer to travel through Ute country and take the northern route to Monterey.

## LOST SPANISH COLONY RUMOR IS PERSISTENT

Escalante also was interested in solving the mystery of a colony of lost Spaniards living on the northern frontier. Both the Spaniards living in California and the Ute Indians told stories of this lost Spanish colony. In a letter dated Oct. 28, 1775, to

Governor Don Pedro Fermín de Mendinua, Escalante wrote:

“It must be forty years since reports of the said Spaniards were first had. It was printed in the diary of the journey of the year of [17]51 which Father Fernando Consag made through California. Because the settlement of Monterey is much more modern, it is inferred evidently that the Spaniards who have been seen on the other side of the great river of Tison [present day Colorado River] cannot be from there. In circumstances wherein two nations so different as are the Californians and the Utes find themselves in accord, I myself, not having received further reports for so long a time, suppose that some shipwreck or other contingency threw upon the coasts of Monterey some European people and that they, having penetrated inland, established themselves on the banks of the said river and that finally their descendants are those whom the Utes and the rest, perhaps because of the color and dress, call Spaniards. Their discovery would be very useful to religions and the crown both to prevent any attack upon this kingdom, if they are foreigners, and to incorporate them with ourselves if they are, as they say, Spaniards.”

## BEARDED NATIVES MAY BE “SPANIARDS”

In 1775 Escalante was joined on his journey by Father Francisco Atanasio Domínguez. Don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, a well-known surveyor and mapmaker, and seven experienced traders and townsmen also joined the group. After several delays the men left Santa Fe on July 29, 1776. Their journey took them through the present day areas of northern New Mexico, western Colorado, Utah and back down through Arizona.

The early winter weather stopped them from reaching Monterey. Escalante kept a detailed diary of their trip and reported on flora, fauna, native groups and terrain. On Sept. 30, 1776, his diary entry describes twenty bearded native men resembling Spaniards came into their camp south of present day Utah Lake, Utah.

Escalante speculated since they crossed Tizón earlier on their trip, perhaps these were the “lost Spaniards” on the other side of the river the Utes

had talked about. The expedition arrived back in Santa Fe on Jan. 2, 1777, having failed in their mission, but having gained valuable new knowledge of the northern frontier. On April 2, 1778, Escalante wrote Father Juan Agustín Morfi a letter that reiterated his theory that the “Spaniards” living across the Río del Tizón were the bearded natives he met on his expedition in 1776. Father Velez Escalante’s new theory did not stop the centuries old search for the lost Spaniards and their colony.

### LAST EXPEDITION BLOCKED BY RIVER

There would be one last Spanish expedition to find their “lost” countrymen, by Don José Rafael Sarraceno, a prominent citizen of Santa Fe. In 1811, while serving as the Postmaster of New Mexico, he decided to make a trip to the northern frontier.

Sarraceno wanted to find the Spanish settlement the Utes said was beyond their border. He traveled for three months searching for the settlement and stopped at a large river, which may have been the Colorado, where natives told him they traded for items with people who lived on the other side of the river. Sarraceno failed to find a river crossing to the north and west and returned home to Santa Fe.

### FAILED TREASURE SEEKERS OPENED LANDS FOR SETTLERS

Why did the Spanish spend centuries searching for the Seven Cities of Gold, lost treasures and mysterious Spanish colonies based on stories and myth without more concrete evidence?

The story of the Seven Cities of Gold had traveled with the conquistadors from Spain. The Strait of Anián was an old nautical tale from Spanish and English mariners. Perhaps the lost Spanish Colony myth was based on native encounters with Spanish Colonial Army deserters or actual sailors from the many Spanish ships that sank off the California coast.

The Seven Cities of Gold, Strait of Anián and lost Spanish Colony myths brought frustration and fail-

ure to the early Spanish explorers. However, their new knowledge of geography and native cultures would open up these lands to those who followed for trade and settlement.

David Bailey has been the Director of the Western Investigations Team since its inception in 2005 and has served as Curator of History at the Museum of Western Colorado since 1992. Bailey has been a historical consultant for *National Geographic*, the History Channel, the BBC and Travel Channel’s *Mysteries at the Museum*. Bailey has spent seven years researching and producing the Distant Treasures in the Mist Project, which includes his first book, a film and an exhibition about the Western Investigations Team’s fascinating discoveries at Kannah Creek.

