



PROJECT MUSE®

*Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life, and
the Expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez* (review)

Ralph Bauer

Early American Literature, Volume 35, Number 3, 2000, pp. 337-341 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2000.0003>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/9678>

REVIEWS

*Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life,
and the Expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez.*

By ROLENA ADORNO AND PATRICK PAUTZ.

Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
3 vols.

Virtually from the sixteenth century to the very present, countless re-inventions have mystified the historical facts surrounding Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* (Account) about the demise of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition off the coast of Florida in 1527 and the legendary eight-year overland odyssey of the four survivors back to Mexico-Tenochtitlan. By going back to the original documents, Rolena Adorno and Patrick Pautz, in their lavishly illustrated, three-volume *Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, cut through the mist of myth and legend that has enveloped this early American classic and expose and correct the many misconceptions that have been perpetuated for centuries. Volume 1 includes a new edition and translation of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* as well as a new biography of the author; volume 2 provides an historical background of the Narváez expedition and commentaries on the extant historical documents; and volume 3 includes discussions of the textual history of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*, its creation and reception, as well as of the historical context of its early modern publications. Unable to do complete justice to the truly encyclopedic scope and range of these three volumes of impeccable philological scholarship, this review will have to be confined to highlighting those aspects that would seem of primary interest to literary historians of the early Americas.

The first distinction of Adorno and Pautz's three volumes is that they include the first Spanish re-edition of the first edition of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* since its first publication in Zamora in 1542. Because of the extreme rarity of this first edition—only two known copies survive today (one in the New York Public Library and the other in the John Carter Brown Library)—it has hitherto virtually been inaccessible to most readers. All previous Spanish re-editions of Cabeza de Vaca's account from the eighteenth century to the present—more than forty altogether—were based on the second edition, published in Valladolid in 1555. The history of previous editors' entrenched preference for the Valladolid over the Zamora edition can be traced back to the sixteenth century and is based, as Adorno and Pautz show, on the long-standing but mistaken assumption that the later edition was merely a corrected version of the earlier one. Moreover, although Adorno and Pautz do not seem aware of it (2: 46), their new edition has provided an equally valuable service to the English reader by providing also the first reliable English translation of the 1542 edition. While the standard English editions most commonly available today (Pupo-Walker, Favata & Fernández, *Account*) are all based on the 1555 edition, only Fanny Bandelier's *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca* (1905) claimed to have been “exclusively” based on the 1542 edition (Bandelier xiv). As a

comparison with Adorno and Pautz's transcription of the 1542 original will make readily evident to the reader, however, Bandelier's translation frequently followed in fact the Valladolid rather than the Zamora edition,¹ so that Adorno & Pautz can be said to provide not only the first modern Spanish edition but also the first reliable English translation of the 1542 edition of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*. Thus, Volume 1 juxtaposes the transcription of the Spanish text on the odd-numbered pages and a corresponding English translation on the even-numbered pages, providing in marginal annotations the deviations of the later Valladolid edition of 1555 and explanatory footnotes in English. While their comparison of the 1542 and the 1555 texts adds no new discoveries to those already listed by Fevata & Fernández in their in the appendix to their (Spanish) edition of the 1555 version (*La Relación* 149–61), the advantage of Adorno and Pautz's edition for the English reader is that these changes are also translated and that, in volume 3, they provide a detailed discussion of these differences. Aside from the edition, volume 1 also contains a new biography of Cabeza de Vaca, which, though by and large substantiating the record provided by previous biographers such as Morris Bishop and Enrique de Gandia, brings into consideration a number of new documents that suggest that Cabeza de Vaca may not have died destitute nor have been the "tragic, romantic figure" that twentieth-century historians have made him out to be (1: 412).

Volume 2 provides a four-hundred-page reconstruction of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition and its historical context from the Cabeza de Vaca's own account and other extant documents. Chapter One covers Narváez' release from prison in Mexico after his confrontation with Cortés, his return to Spain and lobbying at court at a time when the conquistadors' dealings in the Americas were increasingly attracting the watchful eye of imperial officials. Chapters 2 and 3 document the Atlantic crossing of the expedition and its stay-over in the Caribbean, as well as the landing in the Tampa Bay area. Chapters 4 through 6 chronicle the splitting-up of the expedition, the raft voyage to Galveston Bay, and the six-and-a-half-year stay with various Native groups along the Texas coast. Finally, chapters 8 through 11 take the reader from the inland journey, which brought the four survivors to the Pacific coast, to their arrival at Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and the sole return to Spain of Cabeza de Vaca (who was not, as previously thought, accompanied by Andrés Dorantes when petitioning to the emperor).

Of particular importance for literary critics is chapter 12 (volume 3), "Textual History of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*," for it fundamentally alters our understanding of the textual evolution of the two primary texts—the 1542 edition of Zamora and the re-edition of Valladolid in 1555, the latter of which included also the narrative of his South American venture in La Plata, written by his scribe Pero Hernández. Traditionally, scholars have worked under the assumption of a rather straight line of progressive textual evolution from an enigmatic manuscript found in the *Archivo General de Indias* in 1870 and attributed to Cabeza de Vaca, to the "Joint Report" that the three Castilian survivors filed with the authorities after their return to Mexico-Tenochtitlan and which, though lost today, is summarized in book 35 of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdes's *Historia general y natural de las indias*, to a petition written by Cabeza de Vaca and Andrés Dorantes and presented to the emperor by Cabeza de Vaca personally upon his return in 1537, and,

finally, the two published versions of 1542 and 1555. By bringing into consideration a number of documents not hitherto studied in connection with the textual history of *Relación*, such as the account of the Narváez expedition given in the *Crónica del emperador Carlos V* (1551) by the royal chronicler Alonso de Santa Cruz, Adorno & Pautz, by contrast, draw a number of new conclusions with regard to the “pre-history” of the 1542 edition as well as to the relationship between the two primary texts published under Cabeza de Vaca’s own name. First, they argue that the manuscript found in the *Archivo General* was not an earlier version of Cabeza de Vaca’s published accounts written by himself but rather an excerpt from the published version of 1542 (or a ms version close to it) made by Santa Cruz in preparation of his *Crónica*. The important implication of this is that the manuscript, hitherto considered to be central in our understanding of the textual history of *Relación*, will theretofore have to be relegated to its reception history. With regard to Oviedo’s text, by contrast, Adorno and Pautz substantiate the importance traditionally attributed to it in the textual history of *Relación*. By comparing Oviedo’s six-chapter summary of the “Joint Account” as well as a textual commentary amended in form of a seventh chapter in a later edition of *Historia* with Cabeza de Vaca’s 1542 publication, they reconstruct the lost “Joint Report,” which was the documentary basis for both Oviedo’s *Historia* as well as Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación* published in 1542. From this reconstruction, it becomes apparent that Cabeza de Vaca, when preparing the 1542 edition, drastically revised and expanded the “Joint Report” from which he worked, making evident the highly mediated nature of his published account. Second, with regard to the relationship between the two primary texts, the 1542 and the 1555 publication of *Relación*, Adorno and Pautz discredit the long-standing critical notion that the 1555 edition was a corrected, and thus more perfect, version of the 1542 edition. Rather, they argue, the particularities of each edition must be explained in light of the specific biographical and historical circumstances in which each was published and the respective rhetorical purposes each was therein intended to serve. Thus, while the 1542 edition was specifically geared toward supporting Cabeza de Vaca’s application for an imperial office, the 1555 edition was published in order to vindicate his reputation after he had been granted that office in the form of a provisional governorship of La Plata but had stood indicted for abuses of his power before the Council of the Indies. Thus, the conventional modern editorial practice to separate the account of the Florida expedition from the account of the La Plata mission in the 1555 publication, and to publish the former without the latter, Adorno and Pautz argue, is a historical decontextualization that has frequently resulted in misinterpretations of *Relación* itself.

Chapter 13 traces the reception history of Cabeza de Vaca’s account in oral transmission and textual traditions in Spain, Italy, and England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, while chapter 14 provides reviews of the Spanish language editions of *Relación* from 1730 to the present. While the authors here qualify the (perhaps exaggerated) notion that Cabeza de Vaca’s account was a direct cause for the launching of subsequent expeditions of discovery and conquest into New Spain’s northern frontier, they document the lasting importance of this text in subsequent discourses of religious edification, in particular on the issue of evangeliza-

tion. Substantiating previous reception studies by Jacque Lafaye, they find a general "trend from historicizing to mythologizing," which has particularly highlighted the miraculous nature of the healing cures performed by the four survivors through the eighteenth century, and a popularizing trend in juvenile editions, radio shows, film, music, comic art, and fiction in the twentieth century (3: 171, 175-199).

The last three chapters (15-17) provide historical discussions of the Spanish activities during the discovery and conquest in the Gulf of Mexico between 1508 to 1528, the development of the mythic image of the "South Sea" as a source of great wealth from Columbus to Cabeza de Vaca, and of the Nuño de Guzmán's endeavors to conquer Nueva Galicia, which forms the historical backdrop against which especially the latter parts of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* dealing with Indian slavery must be read. While the historical discussions provide an indispensable background for an understanding of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*, much of the material discussed leading up to the Narváez expedition, such as the competition between Cortés, Francisco de Garay, and Diego de Velásquez for control of the western Gulf of Mexico, has been familiar material and will therefore not be further discussed here.

A number of eminent scholars who have published on Cabeza de Vaca in recent years are bound to feel somewhat humbled, perhaps even embarrassed, by the devastating rigor and polemical severity in which Adorno and Pautz never cease to expose and punish the countless factual errors that have been uncritically repeated by generation after generation of readers. Some will want to disagree with a number of the interpretative claims they offer in volume 3, such as their tendency to discredit the hagiographic elements of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Adorno and Pautz have produced more than twelve hundred pages of humanist scholarship of the most meticulous sort that will stand as a Renaissance to all future investigations of Cabeza de Vaca's life, his account, and of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition to *La Florida* in 1527.

The University of Maryland

RALPH BAUER

NOTES

1. To cite only one obvious example, Bandelier's translation of on p. 81-82—"This Indian, his wife, their son and another Indian who was with them were all cross-eyed" (81-82)—cannot be based on the 1542 text because the sentence rendered here was added only in the 1555 edition (see Adorno & Pautz I: 129; also Favata & Fernandez, *Relación*, 153).

WORKS CITED

- Bandelier, Fanny, ed. *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*. New York: Allerton, 1905.
- Pupo-Walker, Enrique. ed. *Castaways*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993.
- Favata, Martin. A., and José B. Fernández. *The Account: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Relación*. Houston: Arte Público, 1993.

———. *La Relación o Naufragios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*. Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanista, 1986.