

from *La Relación*

Report by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

NOTABLE QUOTE

“Better than to exaggerate, I have lessened in all things.”

FYI

Did you know that Cabeza de Vaca . . .

- recorded the only accounts of some now-extinct Native American groups?
- was the first European to cross North and South America?
- was accompanied by an enslaved African named Esteban?

AuthorOnline

For more on Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, visit the **Literature Center** at ClassZone.com.



Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

c. 1490–1557

In 1536, Spanish slave hunters raiding in northern Mexico were startled by a strange sight: a Spaniard “strangely dressed and in company with Indians.” Long given up for dead, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca had survived one of the most disastrous expeditions in the history of the Spanish conquest to become the first European to cross North America.

Conquering Hero Cabeza de Vaca came from a family of Spanish *conquistadors*, or conquerors. He had been a soldier for nearly 20 years when, in 1527, he joined an expedition to Spanish North America. Appointed by the king of Spain, he became treasurer and second in command, assigned the task of colonizing the territory north and east of the Gulf of Mexico.

Disaster Strikes Led by Pánfilo de Narváez, the expedition sailed with five ships and 600 men. Two ships were lost

in a hurricane; 200 men drowned or deserted. After landing in Tampa Bay, Narváez sent his ships north and ordered 300 men to march to New Spain (present-day Mexico), which he guessed to be a few weeks away. Months later, the ships were gone and the desperate landing party was eating its horses to survive. Using horsehide and nails made from melted armor, they built five barges and sailed along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas, hoping to reach Spanish settlements in northern Mexico. Two barges and 80 men washed up on or near Galveston Island. Ultimately, only Cabeza de Vaca and three other men survived.

Cabeza de Vaca survived by adapting to his new surroundings. For six years, he lived with dozens of Native American groups in various roles—as a captive, a trader, and a well-known healer. In 1534, the four survivors escaped, setting out across the desert in search of New Spain. In 1536, they finally reached their goal. A year later, Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain, where he wrote his account of the expedition, *La Relación* (The Account), as a report to the king.

Conqueror No More The king rewarded Cabeza de Vaca by appointing him governor of a South American colony, where his humane treatment of Native Americans may have cost him his job. By 1545, he had been ousted from his position and convicted on a corruption charge in Spain. Exiled to Africa, Cabeza de Vaca was eventually pardoned. In 1552, he returned to Spain to end his days as a judge.

LITERARY ANALYSIS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When you read historical works, you may notice statements that seem strange or even offensive. These remarks might be a reflection of the work's **historical context**—the ideas and details from the author's time that influence the written work.

It was amazing to see these wild, untaught savages howling like brutes in compassion for us.

The author's statement reflects views about Indians that most people of his time shared. To familiarize yourself with the historical context of *La Relación*, read the author biography on page 68 and the background information on page 70. Then, as you read the work, note details that reflect this context.

READING STRATEGY: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE

Unlike a history book, *La Relación* is an eyewitness report of events. Such **primary sources** give us special insight into historical events. When using these sources, consider

- the intended audience
- the author's role in events
- where and when the document was written

As you read, complete a chart like the one shown. Consult the author biography and background information as needed.

Questions	Answers
What do I know about the author and his times?	
What details tell me about life in 16th-century North America?	
What is the relationship between the author and his audience?	
What is the author's role in the events he describes?	

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The following words help bring this explorer's account to life. Choose a synonym for each word from the numbered terms.

WORD LIST	cauterize	ingratiate	locomotion
	embody	inundate	tarry

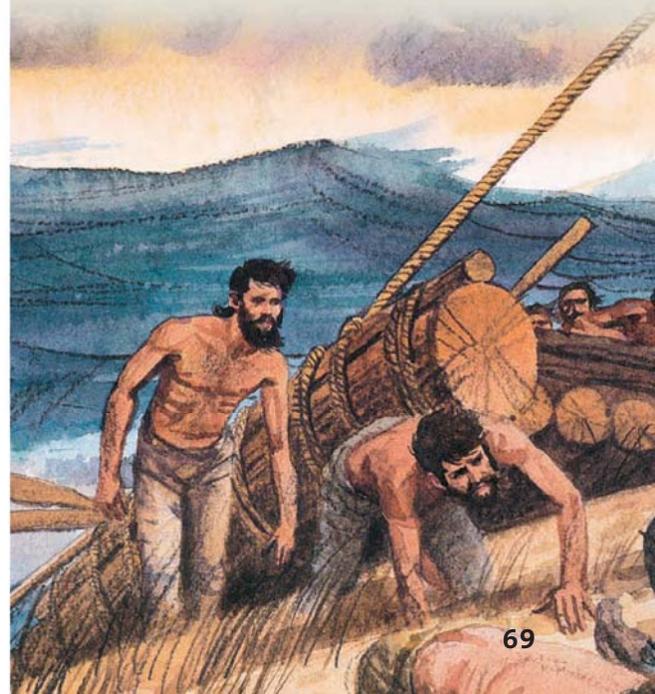
1. movement
2. personify
3. burn
4. seek favor
5. flood
6. delay

Explore the Key Idea

What's the **STORY** behind the **GLORY**?

KEY IDEA Dreams of wealth, glory, and conquest lured adventurers to the Americas, but few were prepared for the harsh reality that awaited them. For every hero who claimed a fortune, there were hundreds of others who died trying. Often, the greatest prize of all was living to tell the tale. What enabled some to **survive** while others failed?

DISCUSS In a small group, share stories you've read or heard that describe a person's struggle to survive in desperate circumstances, such as a shipwreck, war, or a natural disaster. Then make a list of traits that those people or characters exhibit. Decide what qualities seem essential in a survivor.



La Relación

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

BACKGROUND In the 1500s, Spanish conquistadors took to the seas to claim new land for Spain. Seeking gold and silver, they explored unfamiliar territory and encountered Native American cultures they did not understand. By the time Cabeza de Vaca sailed, Spaniards had conquered the Aztecs of Mexico and the Inca of Peru, two of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas. Millions of Native Americans would die in this often brutal cultural encounter. In *La Relación*, Cabeza de Vaca finds himself unexpectedly at the mercy of the people he came to conquer.

At this point in the account, Narváez's barge has abandoned the rest, and Cabeza de Vaca's barge has joined one commanded by two other officers. The next three chapters describe the shipwreck of Cabeza de Vaca's barge on Galveston Island and the crew's encounter with the Karankawa Indians who lived there.

A Sinking and a Landing

Our two barges continued in company for four days, each man eating a ration of half a handful of raw corn a day. Then the other barge was lost in a storm. Nothing but God's great mercy kept us from going down, too.

It was winter and bitterly cold, and we had suffered hunger and the heavy beating of the waves for many days. Next day, the men began to collapse. By sunset, all in my barge had fallen over on one another, close to death. Few were any longer conscious. Not five could stand. When night fell, only the navigator and I remained able to tend the barge. Two hours after dark he told me I must take over; he believed he was going to die that night. **A**

10 So I took the tiller. After midnight I moved over to see if he were dead. He said no, in fact was better, and would steer till daylight. In that hour I would have welcomed death rather than see so many around me in such a condition. When I had returned the helm to the navigator, I lay down to rest—but without much rest, for nothing was farther from my mind than sleep.

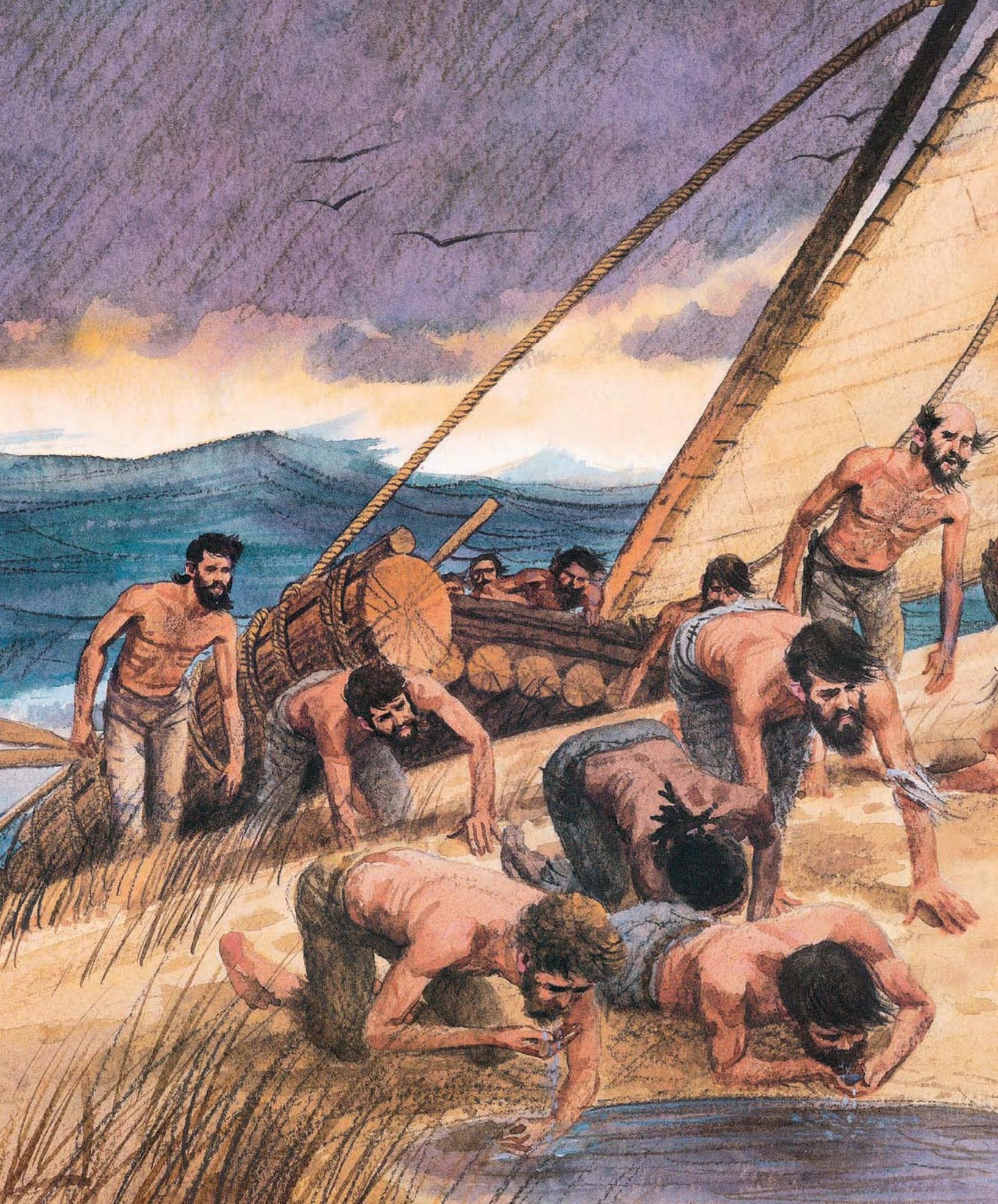
Near dawn I seemed to hear breakers resounding; the coast lying low, they roared louder. Surprised at this, I called to the navigator, who said he thought we

ANALYZE VISUALS

What **details** in the image convey the desperate situation of the shipwrecked men?

A PRIMARY SOURCE

Describe the **tone** of lines 4–9. In what ways might the author's choice of tone be influenced by his intended **audience**?



were coming close to land. We sounded and found ourselves in seven fathoms.¹ The navigator felt we should stay clear of the shore till daylight; so I took an oar and pulled it on the shore side, wheeling the stern to seaward about a league² out.

20 As we drifted into shore, a wave caught us and heaved the barge a horseshoe-throw [about 42 feet] out of the water. The jolt when it hit brought the dead-looking men to. Seeing land at hand, they crawled through the surf to some rocks. Here we made a fire and parched some of our corn. We also found rain water. The men began to regain their senses, their **locomotion**, and their hope.

This day of our landing was November 6.

What Befell Oviedo with the Indians

After we ate, I ordered Lope de Oviedo, our strongest man, to climb one of the trees not far off and ascertain the lay of the land. He complied and found out from the treetop that we were on an island. [This was Galveston Island.] He also said that the ground looked as if cattle had trampled it and therefore that this

30 must be a country of Christians. **B**

I sent him back for a closer look, to see if he could find any worn trails, but warned him not to risk going too far. He went and came upon a path which he followed for half a league to some empty huts. The Indians were gone to shoal-flats³ [to dig roots]. He took an earthen pot, a little dog, and a few mullets⁴ and started back.

We had begun to worry what might have happened to him, so I detailed another two men to check. They met him shortly and saw three Indians with bows and arrows following him. The Indians were calling to him and he was gesturing them to keep coming. When he reached us, the Indians held back
40 and sat down on the shore.

Half an hour later a hundred bowmen reinforced the first three individuals. Whatever their stature, they looked like giants to us in our fright. We could not hope to defend ourselves; not half a dozen of us could even stand up.

The Inspector [Solís] and I walked out and greeted them. They advanced, and we did our best to placate and **ingratiate**. We gave them beads and bells, and each one of them gave us an arrow in pledge of friendship. They told us by signs that they would return at sunrise and bring food, having none then.

The Indians' Hospitality Before and After a New Calamity

As the sun rose next morning, the Indians appeared as they promised, bringing an abundance of fish and of certain roots which taste like nuts, some bigger than
50 walnuts, some smaller, mostly grubbed from the water with great labor.

That evening they came again with more fish and roots and brought their women and children to look at us. They thought themselves rich with the little bells and beads we gave them, and they repeated their visits on other days.

locomotion

(lō'kə-mō'shən) *n.* the power to move from place to place

B HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1500s, "Christians" was used as a synonym for Europeans. What does this suggest about how the Spaniards saw the world?

ingratiate (ĭn-grā'shē-āt')

v. to gain another's favor by deliberate effort

1. **We sounded . . . fathoms:** We measured the depth of the water and found it to be about 42 feet. (A fathom is equal to 6 feet, or 1.83 meters.)

2. **league:** a unit of distance; Cabeza de Vaca probably used the Spanish league, equal to 3.1 miles (5 kilometers).

3. **shoal-flats:** stretches of level ground under shallow water.

4. **mullets:** certain edible fish.

Being provided with what we needed, we thought to embark again. It was a struggle to dig our barge out of the sand it had sunk in, and another struggle to launch her. For the work in the water while launching, we stripped and stowed our clothes in the craft.

Quickly clambering in and grabbing our oars, we had rowed two crossbow shots from shore when a wave **inundated** us. Being naked and the cold intense, we let our oars go. The next big wave capsized the barge. The Inspector and two others held fast, but that only carried them more certainly underneath, where they drowned.

A single roll of the sea tossed the rest of the men into the rushing surf and back onto shore half-drowned.

We lost only those the barge took down; but the survivors escaped as naked as they were born, with the loss of everything we had. That was not much, but valuable to us in that bitter November cold, our bodies so emaciated we could easily count every bone and looked the very picture of death. I can say for myself that from the month of May I had eaten nothing but corn, and that sometimes raw. I never could bring myself to eat any of the horse-meat at the time our beasts were slaughtered; and fish I did not taste ten times. On top of everything else, a cruel north wind commenced to complete our killing. **C**

The Lord willed that we should find embers while searching the remnants of our former fire. We found more wood and soon had big fires raging. Before them, with flowing tears, we prayed for mercy and pardon, each filled with pity not only for himself but for all his wretched fellows.

At sunset the Indians, not knowing we had gone, came again with food. When they saw us looking so strangely different, they turned back in alarm. I went after them calling, and they returned, though frightened. I explained to them by signs that our barge had sunk and three of our number drowned. They could see at their feet two of the dead men who had washed ashore. They could also see that the rest of us were not far from joining these two.

The Indians, understanding our full plight, sat down and lamented for half an hour so loudly they could have been heard a long way off. It was amazing to see these wild, untaught savages howling like brutes in compassion for us. It intensified my own grief at our calamity and had the same effect on the other victims.

When the cries died down, I conferred with the Christians about asking the Indians to take us to their homes. Some of our number who had been to New Spain warned that the Indians would sacrifice us to their idols.⁵ But death being surer and nearer if we stayed where we were, I went ahead and beseeched the Indians. They were delighted. They told us to **tarry** a little while, then they would do as we wished.

Presently thirty of them gathered loads of wood and disappeared to their huts, which were a long walk away; while we waited with the remainder until near nightfall. Then, supporting us under our arms, they hurried us from one

inundate (ɪn'ʊn-dāt') v.
to cover with water; to
overwhelm

C PRIMARY SOURCE

Reread lines 68–71. What does the author's reponse to his current situation tell you about his usual diet?

tarry (tār'ē) v. to delay

5. **New Spain . . . their idols:** New Spain included what is now the southwest United States, Mexico, Central America north of Panama, and some West Indian islands. In Mexico, conquistadors had encountered Aztecs who practiced human sacrifice.

to another of the four big fires they had built along the path. At each fire, when we regained a little warmth and strength, they took us on so swiftly our feet hardly touched ground. **D**

Thus we made their village, where we saw they had erected a hut for us with
100 many fires inside. An hour later they began a dance celebration that lasted all night. For us there was no joy, feasting, or sleep, as we waited the hour they should make us victims.

In the morning, when they brought us fish and roots and acted in every way hospitably, we felt reassured and somewhat lost our anxiety of the sacrificial knife.

Cabeza de Vaca learned that men from one of the other barges had also landed on the island, bringing the number of Europeans there to about 90. In a matter of weeks, all but 16 of them died of disease, which spread to the Karankawas and killed half of them as well. Some of the Karankawas wanted to put the remaining Europeans to death but were dissuaded by Cabeza de Vaca's host. Cabeza de Vaca and his men were later forced to act as healers.

How We Became Medicine-Men

The islanders wanted to make physicians of us without examination or a review of diplomas. Their method of cure is to blow on the sick, the breath and the laying-on of hands supposedly casting out the infirmity. They insisted we should do this too and be of some use to them. We scoffed at their cures and at the idea we knew
110 how to heal. But they withheld food from us until we complied. An Indian told me I knew not whereof I spoke in saying their methods had no effect. Stones and other things growing about in the fields, he said, had a virtue whereby passing a pebble along the stomach could take away pain and heal; surely extraordinary men like us **embodied** such powers over nature. Hunger forced us to obey, but disclaiming any responsibility for our failure or success.

An Indian, falling sick, would send for a medicine-man, who would apply his cure. The patient would then give the medicine-man all he had and seek more from his relatives to give. The medicine-man makes incisions over the point of the pain, sucks the wound, and **cauterizes** it. This remedy enjoys high repute among the Indians. I have, as a matter of fact, tried it on myself with good results. The
120 medicine-men blow on the spot they have treated, as a finishing touch, and the patient regards himself relieved.

Our method, however, was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria*,⁶ and pray earnestly to God our Lord for their recovery. When we concluded with the sign of the cross, He willed that our patients should directly spread the news that they had been restored to health. **E**

In consequence, the Indians treated us kindly. They deprived themselves of food to give to us, and presented us skins and other tokens of gratitude. 

Translated by Cyclone Covey

D GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 93–98. Note how the author uses **prepositional phrases**, such as “until near nightfall” and “along the path,” to add important details about where and when events are happening.

embody (ěm-bŏd'ē) v. to represent in human form

cauterize (kŏ'tē-rīz') v. to burn or sear to destroy diseased tissue

E HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Cabeza de Vaca's time, no one had good knowledge of what caused disease. Reread lines 105–125. In what ways did the Spanish and the Karankawas have similar ideas about healing?

6. *Pater noster* (pā'tēr nŏs'tēr) and *Ave Maria* (ă'vā mē-rē'ə): the Lord's Prayer (“Our Father”) and the Hail Mary, named for the prayers' opening words in Latin.

Comprehension

1. **Summarize** What was life like for the Spaniards on the barges?
2. **Recall** What happened to Cabeza de Vaca’s men when they tried to leave Galveston Island?
3. **Clarify** Why did the Karankawas enlist the Spaniards as healers?

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** Based on the events and reactions Cabeza de Vaca describes, what appears to be the Karankawas’ view of the Spaniards? Cite details to support your answer.
5. **Examine Character Traits** What qualities of a **survivor** does Cabeza de Vaca demonstrate in each situation?
 - approaching Galveston Island (lines 10–17)
 - meeting the Karankawas (lines 41–46)
 - asking the Karankawas for help (lines 89–91)
 - adopting a new healing practice (lines 118–119)
6. **Evaluate a Primary Source** Review the information you collected about *La Relación* as you read. In what ways would you consider this account a valuable and reliable source of information? What are its shortcomings? Explain your conclusions.
7. **Make Generalizations About Historical Context** To understand the historical context of a work, you need to consult sources outside of the work for information. Identify three passages from *La Relación* that reflect ideas, values, or events from the author’s time. Then, using the footnotes to the text and the background information on page 70 as sources, explain the historical context of each example. Based on your results, what generalizations can you make about 16th-century Spanish perspectives? Create a chart to organize your notes.

<i>Examples from Text</i>	<i>Information from Other Sources</i>
•	•
•	•
•	•
<i>Generalizations About Historical Context</i>	
•	
•	
•	

Literary Criticism

8. **Biographical Context** Later in life, Cabeza de Vaca spoke out against the enslavement of Native Americans. How might his experiences as a captive, trader, and healer among the Karankawas and other groups have influenced his position? Explain your answer, citing evidence from the text.

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word that is not related in meaning to the other words.

1. (a) transit, (b) locomotion, (c) movement, (d) connection
2. (a) inane, (b) incompetent, (c) ingratiate, (d) inept
3. (a) deluge, (b) inundate, (c) wind, (d) overwhelm
4. (a) cauterize, (b) sear, (c) singe, (d) weep
5. (a) obtain, (b) dawdle, (c) tarry, (d) linger
6. (a) embody, (b) personify, (c) actualize, (d) construct

WORD LIST

cauterize
embody
ingratiate
inundate
locomotion
tarry

VOCABULARY IN WRITING

How do you suppose Cabeza de Vaca's men looked to the Karankawas when they first met? Write a brief description of the crew from the Karankawas' point of view. Include two or more vocabulary words. You could start like this.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

The strangers on shore seemed to **embody** pure misery.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: ETYMOLOGIES

The **etymology** of a word, or its origin and history, can provide insight into the word's meaning. Information about a word's etymology will often appear near the beginning or end of a dictionary entry, as in the following example:

cau•ter•ize (kō'tə-rīz') *tr.v.* **-ized, -iz•ing, -iz•es** **1.** To burn or sear with a cautery. **2.** To deaden, as to feelings or moral scruples. [Middle English *cauterizen*, from Late Latin *cauterizāre*, to cauterize, brand, from Latin *cauterium*, cautery.]
—**cau•ter•i•za•tion** (-tər-ĭ-zā'shən) *n.*

PRACTICE Use a dictionary to answer these questions.

1. From what language did *oratorio* enter English?
2. From which Greek word is *cynosure* derived? What is the word's current meaning?
3. What is the origin of the word *malaprop*?
4. Through which languages can the history of *querulous* be traced?



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the **Vocabulary Center** at ClassZone.com.

Reading-Writing Connection

WRITING PROMPT

EXPLORER'S ACCOUNT Explorers often keep journals to record their experiences. These accounts—from the historical writings of Lewis and Clark to the reports of a modern astronaut—describe what the explorers see, when events on their journey occur, and how the writers are changed by their experiences.

Write a **two-to-four-paragraph journal entry** to describe an interesting moment in an exploration. Your journey can be real or fictional, physical or mental—a trip to a new town or a new galaxy, a trek across the desert or the race to a new invention. Be sure to share your reactions to it.

SELF-CHECK

A successful journal entry will ...

- be written in the first person, using the pronouns *I* and *me*
- clearly recount a specific event or moment in the writer's exploration
- vividly describe the surroundings, people, or events influencing the moment
- reveal the writer's reactions to the experience or event

GRAMMAR AND STYLE

ADD NECESSARY DETAILS Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 74.

Cabeza de Vaca uses numerous details throughout his account to help readers visualize his amazing journey. **Prepositional phrases** include details about what happens, as well as where, when, and how. Read this example from *La Relación*:

A single roll of the sea tossed the rest of the men into the rushing surf and back onto shore half-drowned. (lines 63–64)

PRACTICE Rewrite each sentence, adding prepositional phrases that modify the boldfaced words. Follow the directions in parentheses. An example has been done for you.

EXAMPLE

The barges, filled with half-starved men, **drifted** for days. (Tell where they drifted.)

The barges, filled with half-starved men, drifted on the stormy seas for days.

1. They told us they **would return** and bring us food. (Tell when they will return.)
2. We **traveled** through the woods to the **village**. (Add two phrases. Tell how long they traveled and where the village was located.)
3. We waited anxiously for **news**. (Tell what kind of news was expected.)



For prewriting, revision, and editing tools, visit the **Writing Center** at ClassZone.com.