

# California: Land of Mythology





In 1510, the Spanish writer Garci Ordenez de Montalvo wrote *Las sergas de Esplandian* (*The Exploits of Esplandian*) in which he described an island of riches ruled by an Amazon Queen.

"Know that to the right hand of the Indies was an island called California, very near to the region of the Terrestrial Paradise, which was populated by black women, without there being any men among them, that almost like the Amazons was their style of living. These were of vigorous bodies and The Warrior Queen Calafia strong and ardent hearts and of great strength ..."





**“They dwelt in caves very well hewn; they had many ships in which they went out to other parts to make their forays, and the men they seized they took with them, giving them their deaths ... And some times when they had peace with their adversaries, they intermixed ... and there were carnal unions from which many of them came out pregnant, and if they gave birth to a female they kept her, and if they gave birth to a male, then he was killed...”**



**“There ruled on that island of California, a queen great of body, very beautiful for her race ... desirous in her thoughts of achieving great things, valiant in strength, cunning in her brave heart, more than any other who had ruled that kingdom before her...Queen Calafia.”**



The novel was highly influential in motivating Hernan Cortez and other explorers in the discovery of the "island", which they believed lay along the west coast of North America.



# The Chronology of the Island Myth

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- 1620 – Spanish Friar Antonio de la Ascension, who accompanied Sebastian Vizcaino on his West Coast expedition of 1602-03, drew the first map depicting California as an island. It was never published.
- 1625 – An English Cartographer, Henry Briggs published the first map that included California as an island.
- 1656 – French Cartographer, Nicolas Sanson, published the first map emphasizing California as an island.
- 1679 – Sanson's second map was the first to show the English, French, and Spanish claims over what is now the United States.
- 1705 – Italian priest, Eusebio Kino drew the first map that destroyed the California as an island myth.





**First printed map to show California as an island – 1625 – Henry Briggs**





**Earliest map to focus on California as an island – Nicolas Sanson, 1656**





**First map to show claims of powerful European nations on what became the U.S., including the Spanish claim over “Californie Isle” – Sanson, 1679**



# Map ending the California as an island myth - Father Eusebio Kino, 1705



- At the time Kino came to Sonora, he believed California was an island. But in 1699, while at the Gila River, the natives gave him blue abalone shells that could have come only from the Pacific. This suggested to him that California was not an island.
- In 1701, at the confluence of the Gila and Colorado Rivers, he viewed the continuous mountains to the west and he became convinced that California was attached to the mainland.



## **So, before it was ever a place, California was a mythological figment of an author's imagination**

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- Throughout this semester, we will grapple with the question of what are the myths versus the realities of California's history.
- For now, let's begin with both the California as an island myth, and the reality that for most of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when California's history was being written for the first time, its origin and growth was told as a romantic, anecdotal story featuring heroic events and larger than life heroes.

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- ◉ *Who are some of these heroes?*
  - ◉ *What are some of these historic events?*
  - ◉ *What is the message these heroes and historic events give us about California?*
  - ◉ *Who are the people excluded from this traditional narrative of California history?*