
Esteban the African “Estebanico”

(c. 1500–1539),

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.73900>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

also known as “Esteban Dorantes,” was the first African-born person known by name to set foot in territories that became part of the United States. Born in Morocco, Estebanico was enslaved in his youth and eventually sold to a Spanish soldier and lesser noble named Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, though the precise time of the sale is unknown. In 1527 Estebanico accompanied Dorantes on an ill-fated expedition to explore and settle Florida led by the Spanish conquistador (conqueror) Pánfilo de Narváez. Of a landing party of three hundred, Estebanico and Dorantes were two of only four men to survive the expedition, along with Alonso del Castillo Maldonado and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, whose *Relación* (travel narrative) is the main source documenting Estebanico’s life. The four traveled overland for eight years throughout much of the American southwest and northern Mexico before reuniting with a group of Spanish slavers in the Mexican province of Nueva Galicia in 1536. After arriving in Mexico City, the three freemen returned to Spain while Estebanico was sold to the viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza. Given his knowledge of indigenous languages and customs, the viceroy sent Estebanico back to the northern frontier to act as a guide and interpreter on Spanish reconnaissance missions. Though accounts of his death differ, it was in this capacity that he is believed to have been killed by hostile Native Americans in northern Sonora in April 1539.

There are no contemporary sources documenting Estebanico’s early life or how he came to be enslaved and sold into the service of Andrés Dorantes. Later descriptions claim he was born at the start of the sixteenth century in the city of Azemmour, on the Atlantic coast of the kingdom of Morocco in the province of Doukkala. He may have been Islamic by birth, converting to Roman Catholicism in his youth. His birth name is thus uncertain, as the Christian name “Estebanico” for Saint Stephen may have been adopted after conversion.

Since antiquity, Azemmour had been known in the Mediterranean as a center of wheat production, the scarcity of which was a main factor driving early stages of European overseas expansion. The city became a tributary to the Portuguese king João II (John II of Portugal) by treaty in 1486. When local rulers in Azemmour threatened to end the city’s tributary status in 1508 and 1513, the Portuguese responded with raids and occupation. Though the search for grain to feed densely populated regions of southern Europe was ostensibly the objective of these early conquests, the soldiers leading the expeditions often turned to slaving as a means of personal enrichment. It is likely that Estebanico was initially enslaved during one of these uprisings.

The years between his enslavement and his enlistment in the Narváez expedition in 1527 are almost completely unaccounted for. Some scholars have suggested that he may have been brought to Spain after 1518 by the Flemish merchant Laurent de Gouvenot. It was in that year that the Spanish king

Carlos I (Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor) granted Gouvenot an exclusive license (*asiento*) to import African slaves to Europe and the Americas. Gouvenot subsequently sold some of his licenses to a group of Genoese merchants operating in Seville—one of the largest European markets for African slaves and the city in which the Narváez expedition was gathered. Meanwhile, a royal decree in 1526 reinforced a long-standing mandate that only Christianized, Spanish-speaking *ladino* (acculturated) slaves could be transported to the Americas, but added a stipulation that prohibited slaves who had been living in Spain for more than a year from making the transatlantic journey. Although it is possible that Dorantes purchased a specific license to secure Estebanico's crossing, some scholars suggest that the 1526 law indicates Estebanico may have arrived in Spain less than a year before the expedition began.

While no sources attest to the whereabouts of Estebanico on the eve of the Narváez expedition, testimony shows that Dorantes traveled from his home in Béjar, Spain, to Seville in early 1527, being notified of the expedition upon his arrival. As a member of the lower nobility, Dorantes enlisted in the hope of improving his family's position, receiving the promise of lands and titles in any territory that he helped bring under Spanish control. It was not uncommon for men of his status to bring slaves or personal servants on such journeys, and it is likely that Estebanico was one of several slaves with the Narváez expedition. It is also possible that the Narváez fleet included some free African or Afro-descended sailors among its five ships and six hundred men when it departed from the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda on 17 June 1527.

Arriving at Santo Domingo in August 1527, the fleet spent the winter tacking along the southern coast of Cuba before setting out for Florida the following spring. On 15 April 1528 they landed on the north harbor of Tampa Bay at present-day St. Petersburg. Narváez decided to split his land and sea forces, leaving three hundred footmen to trek overland with the intention of reuniting with the ships farther up the coast. The two contingents never did reunite, however, and after a spending the summer traversing rugged terrain and fighting sporadic battles with Tocobaga, Timucua, and Apalachee Indians, their number had fallen to 242. In desperation, the officers elected to build rafts and attempt to return to Cuba, setting sail on 22 September 1528.

Many men died from starvation and thirst before a hurricane decimated the makeshift fleet, killing Narváez himself and stranding eighty survivors on a barrier island near present-day Galveston, Texas. Although they were given food and shelter by the local Native Americans (probably Atakapan and Karankawa), by April 1529 the number of survivors had dwindled to fifteen. It was at this point that Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo Maldonado took it upon themselves to gather the remaining survivors and cross to the mainland, hoping to reunite with their countrymen in the port of Pánuco.

For reasons that are unclear, Cabeza de Vaca chose to remain on the island rather than accompany the others. Four years passed before he left the island in 1533, at which point he learned that all but three of his companions had died, while the others—Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico—were being held as slaves by Coahuiltec Indians, the Mariame and the Yguase. It was not long until Cabeza de Vaca was also taken captive.

Suffering constant mistreatment, the four survivors resolved to flee their captors and search for their countrymen in New Spain. Though their precise route remains a subject of speculation, it is believed that they wandered across much of Texas and the Mexican states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León over the next two years, possibly traveling as far west as the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona.

They paid their way by posing as faith healers, eventually earning the following of several hundred Native Americans. Estebanico distinguished himself during their journey as an able scout and interpreter, having become fluent in several Native American languages.

In July 1536 the survivors and their Native American entourage encountered a party of Spanish slave raiders north of the city of San Miguel de Culiacán. From there, they continued south to Mexico City, where Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza tried to convince the four to return north with the expedition of Fray Marcos de Niza. Failing to persuade the three Spaniards, Mendoza resolved to purchase Estebanico from Andrés Dorantes and to have him return to Culiacán, where the Niza expedition launched on 7 March 1539.

In recognition of his significant ability and experience, Fray Marcos sent Estebanico ahead of the rest of the expedition with his own coterie of several hundred Native American scouts and soldiers to reconnoiter. What happened next is uncertain. In April 1539 Fray Marcos reported that Estebanico had been killed along with three hundred of his Native American allies by Zuni Indians on the outskirts of the city of Cibola, though he did not witness Estebanico's death firsthand. Subsequent reports of the conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and the navigator Hernando de Alarcón contradict both each other and Fray Marcos's account. As a result, there is no definitive record of Estebanico's death, but it is generally accepted that he met a violent end sometime in the spring of 1539. It is unlikely that he was killed near Cibola, as Fray Marcos drastically exaggerated the extent of his expedition. Modern scholarship places the location of Estebanico's death in northern Sonora.

As one of the most visible early African explorers and settlers in the Americas, Estebanico has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest, much of it revolving around lingering questions on his identity and background. He was identified in Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* as a "negro alárabe, natural de Azamor" the precise translation and meaning of which have been the subject of controversy. In particular, the phrase "negro alárabe" has incited speculation about Estebanico's racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity. In that phrase, the word *negro* (black man) is modified by the adjective *alárabe*, which literally means "of Arabia" and has been variously translated as "Arabized," "Arabian," "Arabic," or "Arab." A common translation is "black Moor," connoting a person from Mauritania or Morocco. This interpretation has been rejected by many scholars, who argue that the contemporary writers who described Estebanico would have known very well the accurate geographic implication of "moro" (Moor), but chose "alárabe" to imply linguistic knowledge, as in "Arabic-speaking," rather than ethnic provenance. Meanwhile, others have imbued the term "alárabe" with religious meaning, citing the term as evidence that Estebanico may have been Islamic. Though it is perhaps likely that Estebanico was born a Muslim, by Spanish law he would not have been able to join the Narváez expedition had he not been first baptized and his companions certainly would have viewed him as Christian.

Apart from questions of identity, many basic biographical facts about Estebanico's life and death remain obscured by a lack of documentary evidence. He does not appear in contemporary records as an individual until he is mentioned along with the other Narváez survivors upon their arrival in Mexico City in 1536. Unlike the other survivors, Estebanico was not asked to give testimony about his experiences. A few passing references by witnesses in Mexico City simply mention the presence of a "black man named Esteban who traveled with them," while later reports, such as those surrounding his death, contradict each other directly. Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* is undoubtedly the single most detailed contemporary account of Estebanico's life. Though he appears in the narrative as early as the barrier island episode of 1529, the account itself was not written until Cabeza de Vaca's return to

Spain in 1537. After its publication in 1542, word of the Narváez expedition spread quickly, leading to a number of memorializations and retellings. These secondhand and often apocryphal accounts originate from roughly the same period as the actual tale, further complicating attempts to untangle fact from fiction.

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