

The Name California

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THE ORIGIN OF the names of most of the states of our Union have been sufficiently explained. In many cases we have irrefutable direct evidence, in many others the circumstantial evidence is so strong that it has been accepted even by meticulous searchers in the field of American geographical nomenclature. However, there is a small group of state names which have so far defied all attempts of explanation: California is one of them. We are not sure of its etymology, origin, and meaning, we do not know who bestowed the name, nor can we tell the exact date that the name came into existence. Such a statement will be disappointing to those who believe that the author of *California Place Names* should be able to say the final word about the great name "California." The readers of *Names* should find comfort in the contemplation that such name puzzles are the most interesting for an onomatologist. Our science, at least as far as its philological phase is concerned, would become aimless if we did not have thousands of names in all fields which are still subject to research. Furthermore, there is no reason for us to despair of ever finding the source of the name and the circumstances of the naming. Only a few years ago, George R. Stewart showed quite convincingly that the name Wisconsin has its origin in the French spelling of the Indian name for the fabled "river of the west," and with a fair degree of certainty, that the name Oregon stems from the same source.¹ Why should it not be possible that a lucky searcher might find the solution of the name California in some dusty manuscript in a Spanish archive? The next international congress of onomastic sciences will be held in Salamanca in Spain. It would be a happy moment if a scholar could stand up and reveal the final story of the name California. If this should happen, I hope the scholar in question will be a member of the American Name Society. All that can be done at

present is to give a survey of the research done so far on the name California, including my own modest contributions, and develop on this basis my ideas concerning the name. They might be all right or they may be mostly wrong; yet my thesis will have to stand until it is challenged with more convincing and more substantial evidence.

Curiosity about the name California and its meaning has been expressed almost as long as the name exists; attempts of explanation date back into the seventeenth century. This interest increased after California ceased to be a vague geographical conception and the name was applied not only to the peninsula but to the region north of it, *Nueva* or *Alta California* which finally became a part of the United States. As early as 1844, one historian, Robert Greenhow,³ remarks pessimistically: “. . . the name California, respecting the origin and meaning of which, many speculations, none of them satisfactory, or even ingenious have been offered.” Investigation in the name received new impetus in 1849, when, right in the midst of the gold rush, George Ticknor found the name California as a geographical term in the Spanish romance *Las Sergas de Esplandian* by Garcí Ordoñez de Montalvo. In 1862 Edward Everett Hale boldly stated that this is the source of the name of the state and that California is thus nothing but a transfer name, taken from fiction like many other geographical names. Investigators now had something concrete to go by and the increased interest in American geographical nomenclature during the last century produced a great number of articles and monographs on the subject. The questions of the origin and etymology of Montalvo’s name, the date of the transfer to the new world, the reason for it, and who did it, again and again stimulated historians, philologists, geographers to delve into the problem in order to find satisfactory answers.



The first to take up the subject in its complexity was Professor Jules Marcou in the *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers, U. S. A.*, 1878.⁸ Marcou, to be sure, disregarded Ticknor’s discovery and Hale’s theory and maintained that Cortéz had derived the name from *calida fornax*, allegedly meaning ‘hot furnace’—an etymology which had been rejected more than a century before. The important—though not faultless—part of Marcou’s essay is the cartographical history of the name.

A more satisfactory account is given by Thomas E. Slevin in a paper read before the Geographical Conference of the California Midwinter International Exposition in 1894. He was one of those amateur historians who are often—not always—as thorough as professional historians, and sometimes clearer in their presentation. Slevin's may be considered the first attempt to summarize all previous theories and to throw light upon the subject from all angles. His paper was apparently never printed, certainly not in permanent form. But most of the material collected by him was used by George Davidson in his monograph, "The Origin and Meaning of the Name California," 1910.⁴ However, the conclusions as to the etymology which Davidson drew are untenable and of interest only because of the distinguished person of the author, the dean of astronomy, geodesy and geography on the Pacific Coast. It was Davidson's last literary contribution; old age and near blindness explain why we miss in the monograph the former vigorous style and logical determination.

In 1917, Miss Ruth Putnam published her monograph, "California, The Name," in collaboration with Herbert I. Priestley.⁵ The various etymologies she gives only in an appendix; she was concerned chiefly with the application of the name and comes to the impossible conclusion, indicated already by the historian H. H. Bancroft, that the name was applied in derision. Assuming that it was Cortéz' idea that the wonderful utopia of California could be found along the Pacific Coast of North America, Alarcón or one of his followers, trying to belittle Cortéz, sneeringly called the stone and sand desert of the peninsula "California."

In his standard history of the Spanish period of California, first published in 1921, Charles E. Chapman considers the name of such importance that he devotes his entire chapter VI to it. This has remained the best scholarly condensed account intended for the general reader. Questionable is Chapman's attempt to connect the term "Califerne" which occurs in the *Chanson de Roland*, directly with Montalvo's "California."

Henry R. Wagner, the cartographical historian of the Pacific Coast next took up the problem in an article in the *California Historical Society Quarterly* of July 1922. He is extremely critical with regard to the time of application and admits to the possibility that not a navigator but a cartographer placed the name on the

map on his own authority. In view of his scepticism it is somewhat surprising that Wagner regards Davidson's etymology (from Greek κάλλος 'beauty' and ὄρνις 'bird') as possible.

In his *Names on the Land*, first published in 1945, George R. Stewart naturally devotes several pages to this most interesting name in the United States. In a fascinating though extremely subjective account he tries to show why Cortéz discovered and named California but why he does not say so in his report to the king.

The last summary of the various onomatological, geographical and historical aspects of the name was given in my *California Place Names* (1949), a brief and very condensed account, as it is proper for an entry in a dictionary.

Since I do not intend to list all the plausible, possible and impossible suggestions for the origin of the name California, I may mention here those which came to my attention after the publication of my geographical dictionary, mainly as reactions to my explanation. These suggestions form a typical cross section of etymological endeavor and show at the same time that interest in the name stands unflagging.

A friend from Virginia informed me that the Spaniards called the state *Caliente Hornilla*, 'hot stewhole,' referring to its intense heat. "Early Americans in your state quickly contracted it into its present name,"—a new angle to an old story.⁸

A letter written in Spanish informed me that the *conquistadores* found here a mighty empire ruled by a queen, and from the name of that queen the region derived its name. That is an example of hitching the horses behind the wagon.

A patriotic Englishman in San Francisco wrote solemnly that California was doubtless named by English settlers after California in Devonshire, England. Upon inquiry, Mr. Arthur Sparkes, headmaster of the South Brent School, Devon, was kind enough to find out for me that the English California was first mentioned in 1887 as "land and tenement," and in 1888 as "California Inn." It consists of one house and a blacksmith's shop.

A scholarly treatise by A. E. Sokol, "California: A Possible Derivation of the Name," was published in the March, 1949 issue of the *California Historical Society Quarterly*. That a member of the Calpurnia family was one of Caesar's wives and that in the middle ages "Calefurnia" (variously spelled) had somewhat the

meaning of our modern "Jane Doe" was known, of course. The name was introduced into western Europe when Roman law became general. Professor Sokol gives an unusually interesting account of the name in legal and literary language, especially in Germany. While the spelling of the name resembles our name California perhaps more than any other name prior to the publication of the *Sergas*, there is not the slightest evidence or possibility of logical deduction to connect the two names.



To serve as a background for a discussion of the name I shall consider the geographical phase, namely, the time of its application, the change of its position, the extension of the territory designated as "California."

The name California appears for the first time on the Mexican map by Castillo, made (probably) in 1541. For several reasons scholars consider the name on this map as a later interpolation. Considerable research would be necessary to affirm or disprove this statement. The time element, Henry Wagner's chief argument, does not necessarily prove an interpolation of a later date. Even if we discount the often repeated statement that Cortéz himself left the name California on the peninsula in 1535, there is little doubt that in 1542 navigators were using California as if it were an established name. Indeed, it will be shown that the name might have been applied as early as 1533 by the man who first set foot on the peninsula. In the seventeenth century, during the palmy days of imaginary geographical nomenclature, names came into existence which had originally existed only in the phantasy of a cartographer. But in these early days of exploration it was more likely that a name had become current before it was placed on a chart.

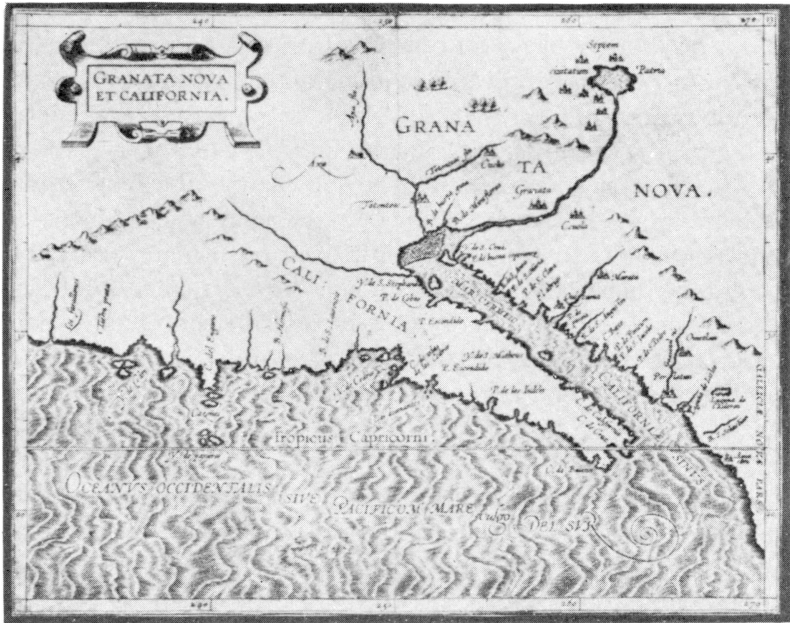
The first appearance of the name of which we can be certain is on Diego Gutierrez' map of 1562.⁷ The southernmost tip of the peninsula is designated as *C[abo] California*. The maps of the following decades show this name in more or less the same position. It is impossible to say which cartographer transferred the name to the territory, i.e. the present peninsula, *Baja California*. In Mercator's great atlas of 1595 a map is reproduced which bears the date 1569. It is a map of the North Polar regions and to the name Cali-



C[abo] California
Ortelius 1564



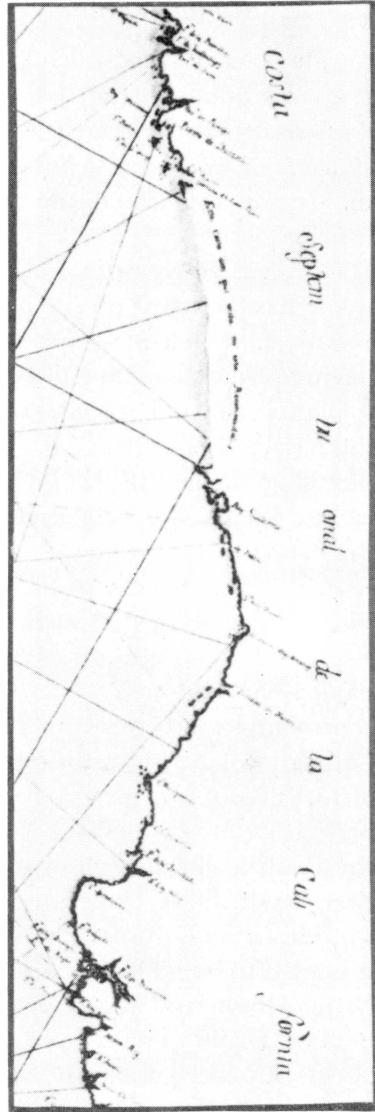
California regio
Mercator 1569?, 1595



California, C[abo] de California, Californiæ Sinvs
Wytfliet 1597



California an Island
Blauw 1648



From Cape San Lucas to Alaska
López de Harro 1788



From Cape San Lucas to
Cape Mendocino
Deslisle 1700

formia (!) is attached the highly significant legend: *regio sola fama Hispanis nota*—'region known to the Spanish by hearsay only.'⁸ This shows clearly that in western Europe the existence of a land called California was firmly established, and at the same time, that the region for which the name stands had remained a vague conception.

However, in view of the fact that until 1589 no other map known to me has the name on the peninsula, it may have been the almost equally famous cartographer Ortelius who deserves the credit of having placed the name California on the territory and thus made it permanent. On the *Maris Pacifici* in his famous atlas of 1589 the name, also spelled Califormia, but without the Latin note, is placed on the peninsula and appears also for the cape. On Plancius' map of 1592 the original spelling of California is restored and from then on we may consider the name as established for the peninsula.⁹

In the meantime a strong rival for the name had appeared. In the summer of 1579 Francis Drake had landed north of San Francisco, had taken possession of the country for his Queen, and had named the region *Nova Albion*. On English and also on many continental maps the approximate region of the modern state of California is henceforth designated as *Nova Albion*. There is one historical and one geographical reason that Drake's name did not become definitely established. Except for a few later weak attempts, the English did not follow up their claim to the coast, and in the twenties of the seventeenth century some cosmographer conceived the idea that California was an island (as it had been originally supposed to be). There was no longer room on the maps to inscribe *Nova Albion* and the region north of the latitude of San Diego became a void. Toward the end of the century the mistaken idea of the insular character of California was gradually abandoned. It was the great Jesuit Eusebius Kino who proved that the region was a part of the continent, but it appears that cartographers showed California again as a peninsula even before this. At any rate, both types of maps of the great French geographer Guillaume Delisle have the name extending from Cape Mendocino into the peninsula. *Nouv. Albion* is shown only as a tiny section of the enormous territory. In other words, the maps of the early eighteenth century are responsible for the fact that the southwesternmost state of the Union bears today the name California.

When the Spanish resumed their explorations along the coast the name was carried north with them. On the Lopez de Haro *Carta Reducida* of 1788 the legend "Costa Septemtrional de la California" stretches as far north as Alaska. British map-makers, to be sure, tried to restrict the name California to the peninsula and called the region of the present state again "New Albion" to demonstrate the British claim to this part of the world. When the Spaniards in 1769 began to settle *Alta California*, as it was now called to distinguish from the peninsula, *Baja California*, the name became firmly established.



The next question is: which navigator placed the name on the tip of the peninsula, thus starting it on its phenomenal career?

Up to the very present many writers believe that it was Cortéz himself who is responsible for the name on the map. The only evidence for this is a statement by the historian Antonio de Herrera that it was Cortéz *que le puso este nombre*, namely California. However, a critical scholar who knows how little credence can be given even to contemporary statements of that period will not be able to accept this statement as evidence. It is true that Cortéz landed on the peninsula in 1535 but he called the place Santa Cruz and we know of nothing, except Herrera's statement, that could connect Cortéz' name with the name of California. Making use of poetic license George R. Stewart tells in his book that Cortéz did not dare to report to the king of Spain that he had discovered California and therefore he changed the name to Santa Cruz. That is very interesting and ingenious but can hardly be accepted as a valid theory.

Unfortunately we are likewise unable to connect any other navigator with the name and the naming. It is most tempting to think of the probable discoverer of the peninsula as the man who named the new land. The expedition under Diego Becerra which Cortéz had sent out in 1533 came to grief because of a mutiny led by the pilot Fortun Jimenez. The latter took command of the ship and to all appearances discovered a new land, although he could never report personally because he and most of his followers were killed by the natives. It is of great significance that the few survivors reported the finding of pearls in the new land—pearls, as we shall see, are closely associated with the name California and their discovery might be considered a circumstantial though somewhat slight evi-

dence that Jimenez left the name California on the discovered land.

All we can say with a degree of certainty is that some navigator must have bestowed the name sometime between 1533 and 1542, when it appears for the first time in the report of the Cabrillo-Ferrer expedition.¹⁰



Many etymologies have been suggested for the name California under the assumption that it is not a transfer name but originated locally by description, incident, corruption, misunderstanding or coining. Miss Putnam in her monograph has given a list of such folk-etymological attempts. Although this list could be considerably enlarged it is not my purpose to discuss, much less to refute these various, mostly fantastic and far-fetched explanations of the origin of the name. Until evidence to the contrary is produced we are justified in assuming that the name was lifted out of Montalvo's romance. Proceeding from this assumption the question arises: why was this particular name transferred to the newly discovered world?

No matter how religious the people of the Middle Ages were, how firmly they believed in a blessed world after their departure from the miseries of this earth—we find in all literatures a strong undercurrent of the hope or belief of an earthly paradise, the prototype of which is naturally the Garden of Eden. The German *Schlaraffenland* and the French *Cocagne* offer the best examples of such wishful thinking on the part of the mass of the people living in poverty. With the discovery of a new world the idea of an existence of an earthly paradise gained new momentum. It is one of the most interesting historical facts that with the exception of the barren plains of the north and the jungles of South America the new world was explored within an incredibly short time, and that the reason for this astonishing feat was the irresistible desire to conquer those realms of unbelievable riches, which were nothing but figments of the imagination of romancers and would-be *conquistadores*. The conquest and plundering of the Aztec and the Inca kingdoms seemed to lend substance to these wild tales and whetted the appetite of the explorers all the more.

One of these fabulous countries was called "California." At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Spanish writer Montalvo published the story of *Las Sergas de Esplandian* as an addition to

the well-known romance *Amadis de Gaula*. There is no point in telling again this fantastic and for us quite indigestible story: it has been told and analyzed again and again, most satisfactorily perhaps in Miss Putnam's repeatedly quoted monograph. Suffice it to say that California, in the imagination of Montalvo or some other popular writer before him, was a mighty island kingdom, full of gold and pearls and inhabited by black women ruled over by the queen Calafia. Highly significant is the location of the utopia: at the right hand of the Indies, very close to the terrestrial paradise.

It has not yet been proved—and here we have a weak link in our argument—that the name California and the Amazon kingdom for which it stands were familiar to navigators and land explorers as, for instance, the fabulous El Dorado. Yet, the circumstances speak so much in favor of it that we can safely assume it without fear of contradiction. Since, as has been mentioned already, pearls actually were discovered on the coast of the peninsula, it required only a bit more of wishful thinking that the gold and the women could be found a little farther inland. That the navigator who bestowed the name cautiously did not name the land but only the cape would indicate that Calafia's kingdom had not been occupied but at least it had been found. The question of who was this navigator who gave to the new world one of the most beautiful names will, alas, probably remain unanswered.



The last part of the discussion, is, naturally, the etymology and origin of the name *California* found in Montalvo's novel. Did Montalvo find the name somewhere and simply used it because of its sound or because it fitted in his story? Until it can be shown that the name as used by Montalvo existed before, the answer must be negative. The second question is: did Montalvo take an existing name and change it, deliberately or carelessly, to the present spelling? In answer to this three possibilities must be mentioned. One of them can hardly be seriously considered, the female personal name *Calefurnia* taken from medieval legal language. The names of two archeological sites in Sicily, *Calaforno* and *Calaforninu*, on the other hand, offer at least a possibility.²¹ Sicily was at that time under Spanish rule and the names might have been known to Montalvo. Also deserving of discussion is the name in the

Chanson de Roland, "Califerne." Charles the Great, in lamenting the death of his nephew, Roland, lists the peoples who might become dangerous to the Frankish kingdom; among them are the people of *Califerne*. There can be little doubt that the minstrel who composed the epic meant the Arabs, the people of the land of the caliph, i.e., the supreme ruler, a title borne for centuries by the successors of Mohammed. Indeed, since Roland fell in a fight against the Arabs in Spain and since the far-flung Mohammedan empire is otherwise not listed—the conclusion that *Califerne* means 'the lands of the Caliph' is almost inescapable. However, the *Chanson de Roland* was unknown at the time of Montalvo. The deeds of Roland, as well as those of the knights of King Arthur and of the Nibelungen, to be sure, were told in many popular versions. But it is hardly possible that a minor name like *Califerne* could have lived throughout the centuries in which the Roland legends were kept alive by word of mouth only. In fact, no such pattern was necessary: the titles *califa* and *califato* were as current in Spanish as in other European languages.

The late Professor Frank Otis Reed of Wisconsin went a step farther. Without denying that Montalvo might have thought of the root *caliph* when he coined the word, he maintains that the author did not need to have *anything* in mind when he created the name. "As to the formation of the fantastic names of the sixteenth century *libros de caballerias*," he states, "very little can be said which would have any scientific value. They are made up from every conceivable combination of associations . . . Occasionally some favorite prefix will start a whole list of formations; of this class, I quote a few taken from *Amadis*: Branm, a river of Great Britain; Brananda, a forest of Great Britain; Brandalia, a principality; Brandalisa, a lady; Brandisidel, a knight; Brandcibas, a knight; Brandonio, a man's name; Brandueta, a maid; Branfil, a knight."¹² Why should not the author of the *Sergas de Esplandian* have taken a fancy to the prefix *cal* and derived from it the names in his story: Calafia, California, Califin, Califera, Califerno? In the modern state of California we have a great number of place names coined from Cal-: Calistoga, Calada, Calneva, Calwa, Caldor, Calpack, Calor and others. To be sure, meaningless as these words are, the elements which were connected with the first three letters of the name of the state were not taken out of the thin air, as those of Montalvo

probably were. The name-givers thought of something definite when they coined these names; but that is because we live in an age in which logic and grammar and not imagination and inventiveness rule our thinking and our language.



This then brings us to the conclusion which will have to stand as final until other more convincing arguments or results of further research will make it necessary to revise it:

Hale's parallel between Montalvo's fictitious name and the American geographical name has never been discredited or seriously challenged.

Montalvo coined the names Calafia and California probably without even thinking of the Spanish words *califa* and *califato*.

The name California in the Spanish romance stood for one of the fabulous countries created by fertile imagination after the discovery of America.

A navigator somewhere between 1533 and 1542 landed on, or at least saw from board of ship, the land which is now Baja California, imagined that he had discovered the realm of Queen Calafia, and placed the name on the map.

NOTES

¹ *American Speech*, April, 1944.

² *The History of Oregon and California* . . . London, 1844.

³ Washington, 1878. Part of "Appendix N. N."

⁴ *Transactions and Proceedings of the Geographical Society of the Pacific*. Vol. VI, Pt. 1; ser. 2.

⁵ *University of California Publications in History*. Vol. IV, No. 4.

⁶ Cf. F. P. Farquhar, "A Footnote on the Name California," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, June, 1927. Farquhar found an item in *Notes and Queries*, 2nd series, Vol. III (London, 1857), where *califonia* is mentioned as a combustible substance and the medieval Latin *calidus furnus* is said to mean 'caldron.'

⁷ Reproduced by Putnam, *op. cit.*

⁸ Reproduced in A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Facsimile-Atlas to the Early History of Cartography*. Stockholm, 1889.

⁹ For reproductions or descriptions of these and other maps mentioned on the following pages see Henry R. Wagner, *The Cartography of the Northwest Coast of America to the Year 1800*. University of California Press, 1937.

¹⁰ Herbert E. Bolton, *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706*. New York, 1916.

¹¹ George R. Stewart called my attention to Biagio Pace, *Arte e Civiltà della Sicilia Antica* (Milano, 1935), where these names are listed.

¹² Putnam, *op. cit.*, 356 f.