

California Explorers Series

# Sebastian Cermeno



By Jody Payne & LeAnn Leyden

## Sebastian Cermeno (1560-1602)

Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno was a Portuguese adventurer who explored the coast of California for Spain. He was a skilled navigator and had lots of experience sailing across the Pacific. The Viceroy of New Spain who was the representative of King Phillip II needed someone to lead an expedition along the coast of California. Pirates, storms, and low supplies made finding safe ports for Spanish galleons a priority. Cermeno was the perfect choice.



In March 1594 Sebastian left Acapulco with several ships, first sailing to Manila in the Philippines to pick up luxury goods from Asia. In Manila, he switched to only one ship, a new eighty foot 200 ton galleon called the San Agustin. He carried two things on that ship that would determine the fate of the expedition. One would contribute to the deaths of twelve crewmen, while the other would save the lives of seventy others. Can you guess what he carried? Keep reading to find out.



The San Agustin had a rough crossing across the Pacific. The crew must have been relieved when they spotted land near the border of what is now California and Oregon. Their relief was short-lived. A big storm rose up fast. The crew wanted to outrun the storm by heading out to sea and back to Acapulco. Cermeno refused. He was not going to give up on the expedition. The ship turned towards land and found shelter in a small harbor that is now called Drake's Bay, about twenty-five miles north of present day San Francisco.



For two weeks, most of the crew camped on the beach while Cermeno explored the area. He met with friendly Indians who lived nearby and exchanged gifts. Unlike their meetings with Sir Francis Drake sixteen years earlier, the local tribes did not seem afraid or shy with the explorer. A small unassembled boat was unloaded from the ship and put together by the crew. It was Sebastian's plan to navigate and chart nearby rivers and bays. That little boat would soon prove to be very, very valuable.

Another storm hit, even harder than the last, while the San Agustin was anchored in the bay. Strong winds blew the ship right into the rocks and broke it into pieces. Cermeno had been carrying thousands of extra pounds of cargo that he was planning to sell for personal profit. All that additional weight made the galleon too heavy and vulnerable in the storm. The ship was destroyed, all the cargo was lost, and twelve men drowned.



It was a terrible blow for Cermeno and the remaining crew. They were stranded in an unknown land with no food, tools, or ship to get home. But there was bit of very good luck. Because they had removed the small boat form the ship before the storm, all seventy surviving men could squeeze onboard and sail to Acapulco.



Cermeno and his crew had a way to get home but only if they didn't starve to death first. They would have never made it back to Acapulco alive if it were not for the kindness and generosity of Indian tribes along the entire coast. Acorns, fruit and dried meat kept the men alive as they traveled south.



The San Agustin had sunk with all its treasure, twelve of the crew were dead, and they were sailing the open ocean on an overcrowded river boat. Still Cermeno was determined to explore every possible harbor, searching for the perfect place where Spanish ships could dock safely. Unfortunately, they passed right by the best natural harbor on the North American west coast, San Francisco Bay. It was very difficult to spot even under the best circumstances. Maybe that day was foggy, or the men were exhausted, or possibly they simply didn't see the narrow opening that looked like a solid wall of hills. For whatever reason, the bay would not be discovered by Europeans for more than another century.

It took until January 1596 to get back to Acapulco. No one wanted to give Cermeno a hero's welcome. Just the opposite. He was in big trouble with the government for losing his ship and 130 tons of cargo. It might have helped if he had found the ideal harbor, but he did not.

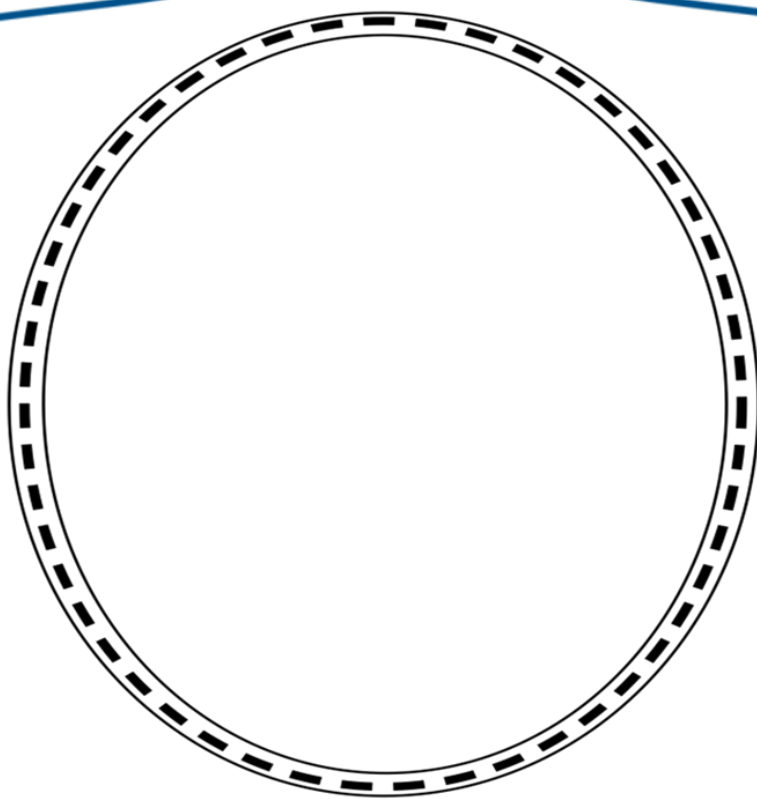


Even though Cermeno was an excellent navigator and map-maker, no one had confidence any longer in the charts he created. In fact, other captains refused to use them despite the fact that they were the most accurate maps of their time. Cermeno faded from history and died only a few years later.

So what happened to all that treasure at the bottom of the sea off the coast of Point Reyes? Sometimes iron nails and pieces of Chinese porcelain wash ashore on nearby beaches. Maybe the riches are still there for modern day explorers to discover.



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**Explorer**

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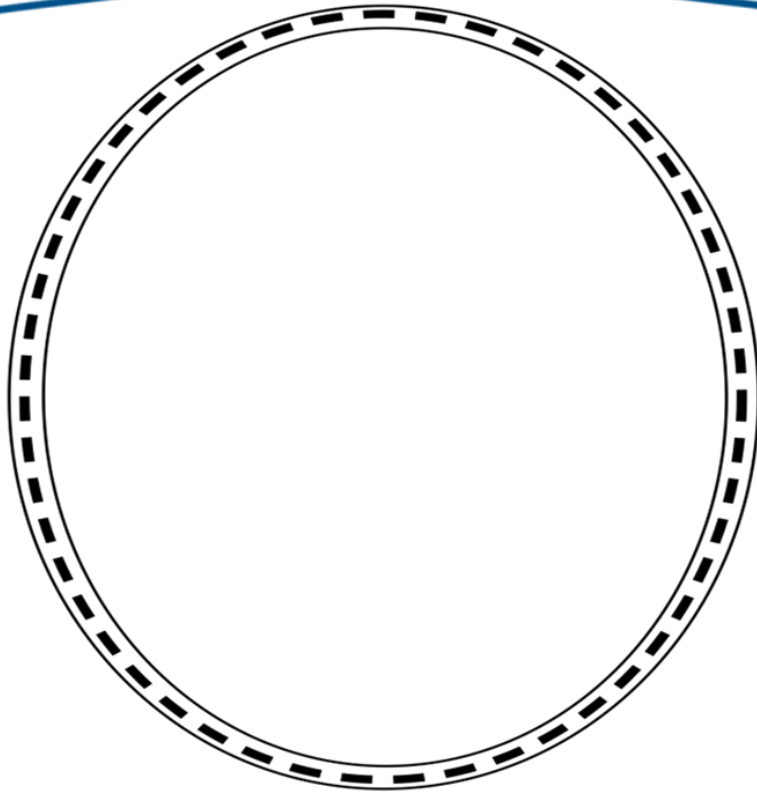
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**Explorer**

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Interesting Facts:

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One word that describes this explorer:

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