



## Lesson 4: How California Got Its Name

**Objective:** Students will describe how Muslims influenced the name of California.

**Vocabulary:**

**Baja Coast:** A peninsula of the west coast of America that dips down into Mexico.

**Queen Calafia:** A legendary character known to the Spanish during the 1500's as an Amazonian Queen.

**Esplandian:** A legendary Spanish Muslim hero known to the Spanish during the 1500's made famous in romance novels by Garcia Rodriguez de Montevalo.

**Griffins:** Legendary animals that can fly like an eagle, but have a head like a lion.

**Caliph:** A title of ruler of a Muslim land.

### **The Origin of the Name of the State of California**

The state of California recognizes Queen Calafia as their namesake. Queen Calafia is a legendary character known to the people who discovered California. The legend is so widely accepted as the namesake of California, that Disneyland produced a live play a multimedia performance about it. In the play, Whoopie Goldberg plays Queen Calafia and narrates the history of California. The play is called *Golden Dreams*.

### **Who Discovered California?**

The first documented nonnative people to discover California were the Spanish. The oldest historical documents that refer to the western coast of North America by the name, "California," come from the records of voyages of two Spanish explorers, Hernan Cortez and Fortun Ximenez, who sailed up

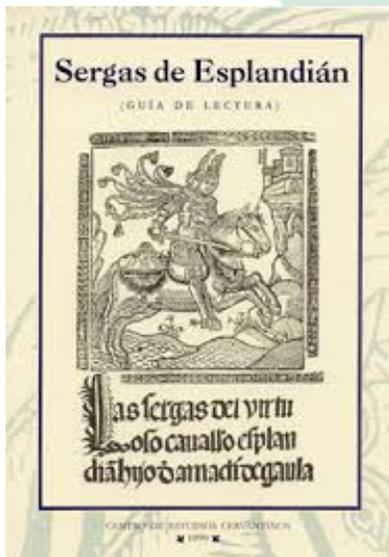
the **Baja coast** from Mexico on orders from the Governor of Mexico some time between 1550 and 1556 AD (Butterfield, 2012). The explorers referred to the area as an island, and in fact, California appears in later maps as an island.



If you've ever been to California, you may realize why it was thought to be an island. While its coastal shores are tropical and green, there are dry mountains and deserts as you travel inland, and many explorers likely did not make it past the mountains and deserts to find the eastern end of the supposed island. In their journals of their travels, Cortez and Ximenez referred to the area as, "California," as if the name was commonly used to refer to the area by Spaniards of the time.

### Where did the Legend of Queen Califia Come From?

At the time the Spanish were very well aware of a legendary character named **Queen Califia**. This character was popularized in Spain through



novels written by a Castilian author named Garci Rodreguez de Montalvo. His book, *Las Sergas de Esplandian (The Adventures of Esplandian)* referred to Queen Califia as a pagan female leader of an all female Amazonian tribe that lived on the island. The use of the title "Califia" comes from the Muslim Spaniards who called their leaders, "Caliphs." Queen Califia was described as an Amazonian dark skinned woman. She had command of several griffins. **Griffins** are flying animals that are half eagle and half lion. In the story, a Muslim warrior comes to her and

convinces her to help him join in a battle to prevent the Christians from taking Constantinople. She agrees, but when she gets to Europe, she is



frustrated that her griffins attack all men, whether they are Christian or Muslim, but will not attack women of either religion (Putnam, 1917).

### **Could Queen Califia, have really lived in California?**

There is no way to know if the character of Queen Califia was based on an actual person or not. However, we do know that there is proof that Mansa Abu Bakr II had already come to America, and that if such a character lived in California, she would have likely have been a descendant of the settlers he brought to America. She was reported to have been dark skinned, and Spaniards recognized dark skinned people as being Muslims because the majority of Africans they came into contact with were Muslims. This would explain why the Spaniards referred to her as a “Califia,” even though they portrayed her as a pagan. Columbus also reported to have seen black natives called Arawaks in the Bahamas. The Spaniards spoke of black natives in California and called them, “Khalafians.” Today, these people are called Olmecs. Spaniards were instructed to enslave these natives, and “Christianize” them. This would explain why there is little know about the black natives of California. Today efforts to prove the existence of Queen Califia come in the form of anthropological studies. Cave art of Khalafian Natives indicate a strong African influence, and characters in the cave art appear to have African features. Skulls and inscriptions of natives have also been traced to African cultures (Barton, 2001). Dr. Berry Fell has published his findings of Kufic script in areas of Nevada and California, indicating that Arabs arrived in the Americas long before Columbus. Kufic script is a form of Arabic script used in Africa (Fell, 1976).

#### **Study Questions:**

1. When was the earliest historical document to use the word California to refer to the current day area written?
2. Why did the Spanish Explorers refer to California as such? Where did they likely get the idea to name it California?
3. Who was Queen Calafia? Write a basic story of the life of Queen Calafia.
4. Why do you think people used to think that California was an island?
5. How are people attempting today to prove that Queen Califia was a real person?

### Activities:

1. Create a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast Queen Califia to a legendary character of your choice.
2. Research the difference between a sultan and a caliph.
3. Look at a topical graph of California. Explain why the Spanish Explorers may have thought this land was an island.
4. Research Queen Califia's Magical Circle sculpture garden in Escondido, California. Describe the artwork, and tell what you think the artist is hoping to achieve in the creation of the artwork.

