

A SUPPOSED FRANCISCAN EXPLORATION OF ARIZONA IN 1538: THE ORIGINS OF A MYTH

MICHEL NALLINO

16, rue Louis Garneray
06300 Nice, France

WILLIAM K. HARTMANN

Planetary Science Institute
620 North Sixth Avenue
Tucson, Arizona 85705

ABSTRACT

Historians have puzzled over early reports of a 1538 reconnaissance of the Sonora-Arizona region prior to the 1539 exploration of Sonora and Cibola by Fray Marcos de Niza's expedition. We show that the 1538 expedition is mythical and based on misunderstandings of the travels of Marcos, Governor Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, and associates, who departed Mexico City for the northern frontier in 1538. Contrary to several earlier historians, we conclude that Marcos sent messages back as he traveled north. These messages about prosperous northern lands arrived in Mexico City weeks before Marcos himself, triggering a later myth that Marcos had only confirmed results of a prior expedition. We also shed light on the possible messengers.

RESUMEN

Historiadores han sido intrigados por los reportes de un reconocimiento, en 1538, de las regiones de la Sonora y del Arizona antes de la exploración en 1539 del Arizona y de Cibola por Fray Marcos de Niza. Demostramos que esa expedición en 1538 es un mito, basado sobre interpretaciones falsas de los viajes de Fray Marcos, del Gobernador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, y de sus compañeros, quienes han salido de la ciudad de México para la frontera del Norte en 1538. En contra de varios historiadores anteriores, concluimos que Fray Marcos mandado atrás unos mensajes, como caminaba al Norte. Estos mensajes a propósito de tierras ricas al Norte llegaron a la ciudad de México semanas antes de Marcos sí mismo, induciendo más tarde un mito que Fray Marcos había solo confirmado los resultados de una expedición anterior. Hemos también relumbrado los mensajeros posibles.

At the end of the eighteenth century, in the prologue of his Franciscan chronicle of New Spain (Arricivita 1792), Fray Juan Domingo de Arricivita wrote:

In the year 1538, in the month of January, the Fathers Fray Juan de la Asunción and Fray Pedro Nadal left Mexico City, by order of the Lord Viceroy; after having walked for six hundreds leagues in a northwest direction, they reached a river with a very large flow that they could not cross; and Fray Pedro, who was very clever in mathematics, noted the altitude of the pole at thirty-five degrees.

In Fray Domingo's day such an expedition was regarded as fact. Since that time, many authors have discussed this supposed exploration (see, for example,

Bandelier 1886; Hartmann and Hartmann 1972; and Montané Martí 1995). Some support the existence of a 1538 expedition and propose that it was the first European entrance into Arizona. As yet, no definitive proof of such exploration has been found. Nonetheless, the sheer number of publications dealing with this subject has reinforced the belief that Fray Juan and Fray Pedro's trip was authentic.

Instead, this paper demonstrates that their expedition was a mythical event, the accounts of which originated and evolved as a sequence of authors misinterpreted their predecessors' writings. The key lies in Fray Marcos de Niza's journey to Cibola and the way it was perceived in Mexico City. Modern readers think of Fray Marcos' explorations as occurring in 1539 because Marcos' report (Niza 1999:83) opens with his departure from Culiacán in that year.

For residents of Mexico City, though, his trek had actually begun the previous fall, in September or October 1538, when he left Mexico City. On November 20, 1538 he had reached Tonalá, where he signed a receipt for his instructions from Viceroy Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza (Niza 1999:83). He was traveling with the newly appointed governor, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, and at least one other friar named Onorato, under secret orders to explore to the north. Many rumors were already circulating about that region (Hurtado de Mendoza 1864–1884), partly due to news brought in 1536 by shipwreck survivors Cabeza de Vaca (Cabeza de Vaca 1550), the Moor Estéban, and their companions, who had passed through the northern country.

It is important to note that Fray Marcos de Niza was approved and released for this journey by the provincial minister of his Franciscan order in Mexico City, Fray Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo. The provincial minister certified Fray Marcos' report when he returned from Cibola, stating, "I affirm that it is true that I sent Fray Marcos de Niza with another companion, a lay brother who was called Fray Honoratus, by the command of the lord Don Antonio de Mendoza, Viceroy of the said New Spain" (Niza 1999:83).

Also figuring importantly in the origin of the legend of a trip by two friars in 1538 (separate from and preceding that of Fray Marcos), are several explorations undertaken, independently or together, by Vázquez de Coronado and Marcos early in 1539, before Marcos finally departed for Cibola. All these events were reported only imperfectly and at a distance by later chroniclers in Mexico City. Therefore, to unravel the legend, it is crucial to delineate their chronology carefully.

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND OF MARCOS DE NIZA

Fray Marcos de Niza, OFM is an interesting figure in the history of both North and South America, and tantalizingly little is known about him. His birth was in or near Nice, France, about 1495. An orphan, his patronymic name is unknown. He took the habit of the Franciscans of Observance in Nice, and, as was the custom, was then called by his first name and by his place of birth.

In 1530 he went to Spain, crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and joined Francisco Pizarro, then conquering Peru. He very quickly became Pizarro's opponent and strongly denounced Spanish cruelties against native peoples. In 1534, he was also part of Pedro de Alvarado's attempt to conquer Ecuador. Fray Marcos followed Alvarado to Guatemala where in 1536 he testified about Alvarado in a trial instigated by Diego de Almagro.

He arrived in Mexico City in 1537 at the invitation of its archbishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga. Church documents of the time indicate that Marcos had a good reputation in ecclesiastic circles. In 1538, the viceroy, Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza, sent him to explore lands to the north of New Spain. Onorato, a lay friar, and Estéban, a Moorish servant, traveled with him. They reached Arizona and New Mexico and found Cibola, the Zuni pueblos where Estéban was killed. Marcos' positive account of the Cibola discovery was in part responsible for Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's June 1540 expedition of conquest. Marcos served as guide for the expedition. In 1540, he returned to Mexico City in disgrace, blamed for the lack of gold or treasure in Cibola.

Not much is known of his later career. During the 1542 "War of Miztón" or Indian revolt in northern New Spain, he was beside Mendoza as his counsel of conscience. He became Zumárraga's chaplain in Mexico City, but left in 1546 for a warmer climate and was residing in Jalapa in 1555 when he met Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta. He died on March 25, 1558 in Mexico City and was buried beside the "Twelve Firsts"—friars who had participated in the early conquests.

Fray Marcos was part of a group of millennialist and utopian Franciscans who attempted to build ideal Indian societies in America. Friend of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Marcos provided the bulk of the information that Las Casas used in his work on Peru.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN AND AROUND CULIACÁN

After Marcos and Vázquez de Coronado left Mexico City in the fall of 1538, they headed west and north to the frontier (Fig. 1); Marcos received Viceroy Mendoza's instructions in Tonalá on November 20, and signed for them. On December 15, 1538, the new governor and, presumably, Fray Marcos were in Compostela, the seat of the government of New Galicia, and Vázquez de Coronado wrote a letter to the king. The governor explained various administrative problems in Compostela and spoke of visiting the mines. He also sketched plans for improving the situation at the northernmost frontier outpost of Culiacán:

In the city of Guadalajara... I investigated some matters that were of importance As I was about to leave for this city of Compostela, the solicitor of the town of San Miguel in the province of Culiacán came to tell me that the residents of that town were about to abandon it... He begged me, in the name of Your Majesty, to proceed there at once in order to remedy the situation. He affirmed that if I failed to go within forty days, the residents would leave... As soon as I return from Culiacán, which will be as soon as I put things in order there, I shall try to pacify the Indians of this province (Vázquez de Coronado 1538).

As is clear from this letter and Marcos' instructions, there was considerable incentive to move promptly to Culiacán. Hallenbeck estimated the number of trail miles from Compostela to Culiacán as 305 to 310 (Hallenbeck 1949:46), from which we infer that the travel time would have been 16 to 20 days. If Vázquez de Coronado wrote his December 15 letter just before leaving (which seems likely), then he and Fray Marcos may have been in Culiacán as early as the first week of January 1539. Once there, in order to pacify the country, the governor had to campaign against the powerful *cacique* (chief) Ayapín, who threatened San Miguel's inhabitants (Herrera y Tordesillos 1944).

Letters from Vázquez de Coronado and secondhand reports from Viceroy Mendoza make it clear that he and Marcos undertook a number of activities to learn what was happening on the troubled frontier. In October 1539, Mendoza recounted sending Vázquez de Coronado, the black servant Estéban, and "a few Indians of that region whom I had gathered" to the north:

I sent them with Fray Marcos de Niza and one of his companions, a friar of the order of St. Francis to the town of San Miguel de Culiacán. Once the governor arrived, he sent the friars with some Indians of those I had given to their lands. They taught them to tell their people that Your Majesty had ordered that no more slaves be taken... After twenty days, more than 400 came back with these Indians; having met the governor, they told him that they wanted to see and know the persons who had done them so much good... they had been wandering and hiding like proud savages for years, for fear of being made slaves.

The governor consoled them with some good speeches, gave them food, and kept them with him three or four days: during this time the friars taught them to make the sign of the cross. At the end of this time, the governor sent them back to their homes, telling them not to be afraid, but to stay quiet, giving them prayers.

Their entry thus prepared, Fray Marcos de Niza and his companion [Onorato] left Culiacán ten or twelve days later, with the Black [Estéban], some slaves and the Indians that I had given them. And, as I had known about a province called Topira, located beyond the mountains, I had commanded the governor to learn what it was, considering this as very important, and he had decided to go there himself to see it. He [Vázquez de Coronado] had given orders to the said friar that, from this place of the mountain [Topira], he [Marcos] took the direction of a city called Los Corazones, 120 leagues from Culiacán, to meet him (Hurtado de Mendoza 1978–1988).

From this letter, we conclude that if Vázquez de Coronado arrived in Culiacán in early to mid-January 1539, then the Indian emissaries who returned after 20 days would have arrived in Culiacán between the last days of January and mid-February 1539. If Marcos then spent 3 or 4 days with the Indians and waited another 10 or 12 days more before leaving, he could not have departed for Cíbola earlier than late February or early March. While he was under orders to seek Cíbola, he and the governor also wanted to reconnoiter the district of Topira, which is believed to be the region called Topía in modern Durango. Topira, in the mountains north-east of Culiacán, was said to be rich in metals, which rumors, though exaggerated, may have had some foundation since the area has a history of mining. The conclusion of Mendoza's letter suggests that Vázquez de Coronado planned to go to Topira and to rendezvous with Fray Marcos at the town of Corazones, (near modern Urés, Sonora) which had been reported by Cabeza de Vaca, Estéban, and their companions in 1536. This meeting never occurred.

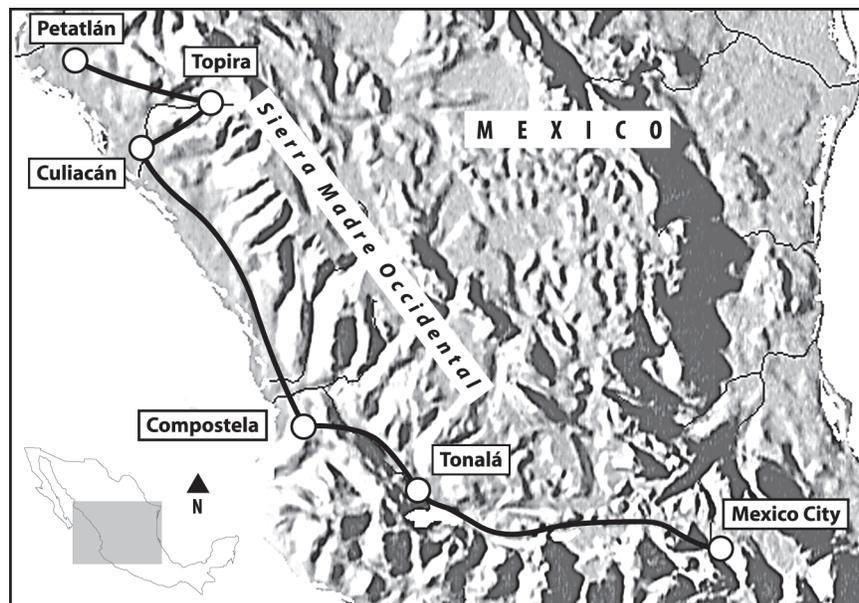


Figure 1. Caption goes here.

Vázquez de Coronado himself recounted some of these same events in a letter he wrote to the emperor on July 15, 1539:

Upon my arrival [in Culiacán], the settlers became calm again. In addition, I distributed [some encomiendas among them]. After doing this, I set out through the province in order to bring an end to the bloodshed. Little by little I succeeded in pacifying the natives. I explained that they are your vassals [and] promised them in your name to pardon them.

I took with me to this province of Culiacán a friar of the order of St. Francis, named Fray Marcos de Niza. The viceroy of New Spain had recommended that I send him inland, to explore, by land, the coast of this New Spain and to gain knowledge of the lands and peoples that are now unknown. In order that he might travel with greater safety, I sent some Indians of those who had been slaves to the towns of Petatlán and Cuchillo, nearly sixty leagues beyond Culiacán. I asked them to enlist some native Indians and to tell them not to be afraid. In view of this and the fact that the messengers who came to appeal to them were free, which astounded them not a little, over eighty men came to me.

After having taken particular pains to make clear to them your royal will I charged them to take Fray Marcos and Estéban, a Black, to the interior of the land (Vázquez de Coronado 1538).

Petatlán was a native settlement north of Culiacán that had been raided for slaves by the Spaniards before Coronado restored calm. It was one of Marcos' first stops. Onorato fell ill there and abandoned the journey, which was completed by Fray Marcos alone. As far as was known in Mexico City from the first reports, however, two friars had left for the north.

In the just cited letter, Vázquez de Coronado omitted any reference to an attempt to reach Topira, probably because it was not successful. In another letter closer to the time of the Topira trip, the governor revealed that his attempt to reach Topira

had not occurred until after Marcos' departure for the north. In fact, it had been delayed until April, probably because of the pacification activities described in the letter above. The March 8 letter stated, "With the help of God our Lord, I will leave this land of San Miguel de Culiacán for Topira on April 10" (Vázquez de Coronado 1978–1988a).

In summary, in spite of all the uncertainties, it is important to note the broad picture: Vázquez de Coronado, Marcos de Niza, and at least one other friar left Mexico City in 1538 and arrived in Culiacán. After emissaries were sent and received from nearby regions, Marcos departed to the northwest toward his ultimate goal, where he subsequently reported the prosperous villages of northern Sonora and the multistory pueblos of Cibola, while the governor probed northeast into the mountains for Topira, finding nothing of interest. As we will show, these facts are identical with the earliest versions of the supposed 1538 exploration by two friars other than Marcos and Onorato.

THE PROBLEM OF MARCOS' DEPARTURE DATE AND THE EXPLORATION OF TOPIRA

The above events conform to the later legend of a probe northward in 1538 by two friars, supposedly Juan de la Asunción and Pedro Nadal. Somewhat subordinate to this issue, but still relevant, are a host of problems about Fray Marcos' movements while at Culiacán and his actual departure date on his northward exploration.

One interpretation (more traditional and favored by William Hartmann) is that Marcos spent time in Culiacán befriending the Indians who had come from Petatlán and then left with them for the north on March 7, 1539. This fits the more "relaxed schedule" mentioned above: Vázquez de Coronado and Marcos arrived in Culiacán in mid-January, assessed the situation for a week or so, sent emissaries to Petatlán (who arrived 20 days later around mid-February), spent 3 or 4 days with the Indians, sent them back to their villages, and finally Marcos departed 10 or 12 days later with some of them for the great unknown on March 7. This departure date from Culiacán is stated explicitly by Marcos himself in the opening lines of his *Relation*:

I departed from the villa of San Miguel in the province of Culiacán, Friday, the seventh day of March, year of 1539, taking with me Father Friar Honoratus, Estéban de Dorantes, a black, certain Indians of those which the said Lord Viceroy liberated and with many other Indians from Petatlán and from the town that is called Cuchillo... And with the company that I have said, I took my way toward the town of Petatlán, receiving on the way many hospitalities and presents of food, roses and other things of this sort, and huts they built for me (Niza 1999:83–84).

This seemingly straightforward interpretation, however, is thrown into doubt by several documents. The first is Vázquez de Coronado's letter dated in Culiacán March 8, 1539, one day after Marcos supposedly left from there for the north. The letter not only gives no indication of Marcos' recent departure, but states, instead, that he had left a month before on February 7 and that the governor already had received a letter from him, indicating he must have been on the trail for more than a day:

With the help of God our Lord, I will leave this land of San Miguel de Culiacán for Topira on April 10; I will not be able to do it earlier, because at this time only the powder and fuse that Your Lordship has sent will have arrived; I think that they should already be in Compostela. Another reason is that I have to travel so many leagues among mountains that are so high they reach the sky, and there is nowhere to cross a [certain] river that is now so big and swollen. But I think that this will be possible in April. I had been told that from here to Topira is no more than fifty leagues, but now I know that it is more than eighty.

I do not remember if I wrote to Your Lordship about the report that I received concerning Topira, and even if I did it, it seems to me that I have to write those lines to Your Lordship, because I have been informed of more things.

I have been told that Topira is a very populated country between two rivers and that there are more than fifty inhabited locations. Further, there is another great country (and the Indians could not tell me its name) where there are large quantities of food, corn, beans, sweet red peppers, melons and marrows, and a lot of native chickens. The inhabitants wear gold, emeralds, and other gems, and they customarily use gold and silver, with which they cover their houses. And their chiefs wear large, well-made, gold chains around their necks and are dressed in painted clothing.

I have been told to not go there because I have few men in this country, and the Indians are numerous and courageous. What I tell you I heard from reports of two other Indians, neighbors of those [of Topira].

So, I will leave on the date that I told you, taking with me 150 horsemen and twelve more horses, 200 footmen, crossbowmen, and arquebusiers. I will take pigs, sheep, and all that I could find to buy.

Your Lordship may be sure that I will not come back to Mexico [City] without being able to say what I have seen with the greatest certainty. If I find profitable things, I will say nothing until I inform Your Lordship and you command what to do.

And if, by misfortune, there is nothing, I will attempt to go one hundred leagues farther, where I hope there will be something Your Lordship will be able to use for all those horsemen, and the ones that will follow. I think that there is nothing more to add. The water, the climate, and the aspect of the country will dictate what to do.

Fray Marcos went farther into this land on the seventh of the past month of February, and with him [is] Estéban. When I left them they were in the company of more than one hundred Indians of Petatlán. The chief with whom they had come held the friar by hand in the best possible way. We could not ask to portray his departure better than I did in the reports I wrote from Compostela and San Miguel. I wrote them as best I could, and though they reflect only the tenth part, they are a great thing.

With this letter, I add one that I received from the aforesaid friar. All the Indians say that they love him. I believe that, in this way, he could walk two thousands leagues! He says that, if he finds a good land, he will write to me. In that case, I will let Your Lordship know about it. I hope in God that, one way or another, we will find something good (Vázquez de Coronado 1978–1988a).

A common interpretation is that the dates in this letter (February 7 and March 8) are simply wrong, since they disagree with Fray Marcos' own certified account; or that copying errors were made by the time it was published in Italian translation by Giovam Battista Ramusio (1556). Ramusio's book is known to contain other errors in translation, as comparison with Spanish originals reveals.

Historian Lansing Bloom, however, suggested an alternative interpretation. He argued for accepting the February 7 departure date and concluded that Marcos thus had an extra month to complete his journey to Cíbola, which would render fatuous assertions by other historians that the friar had insufficient time to travel as far as he said he did (Bloom 1940, 1941).

Yet a third interpretation (favored by Michel Nallino) is that Marcos actually did depart from Culiacán on February 7, not on his northward trip, but rather on a foray toward Topira. In support of a possible trip by Marcos to Topira is the Italian summary of a lost letter from Vázquez de Coronado to a secretary of the viceroy, dated March 8, 1539:

[This letter] says how Fray Marcos de Niza went to the province of Topira, where he found that all the Indians had run away into the mountains out of fear of the Christians. And how, because of his love, they all decided to go down and meet him with great happiness and safety. The men are of a sound constitution and whiter than the others, and the women are more beautiful. There is no large city; however the houses are very good and built of stones. In their houses they have much gold, which is as lost since they do not use it in any way.

The inhabitants wear emeralds and other valuable jewels. They are courageous and have weapons made with a very good silver, worked as figures of various animals. They love the things that they have in their houses as if they were gods, for example herbs and birds. And they sing them prayers in their language, which is not much different from the one at Culiacán.

They said to the friar that they wanted to be Christians and vassals of the Emperor, because they had no government. This on the condition that no one hurt them. They also said they would exchange their gold for things that they lacked and were not able to produce themselves. It was ordered that they be received without any harm being done to them (Vázquez de Coronado 1978–1988b).

In this view, the “tighter time schedule” is favored, with Fray Marcos arriving in Culiacán in early January, receiving emissaries by later January, spending 10 to 12 days with them, and then leaving to probe toward Topira on February 7. It is possible he was not with Vázquez de Coronado in Compostela on December 15, 1538; his presence there at that time is only inferred, not proven. Marcos and the governor had different goals and activities. Vázquez de Coronado commenced his duties as governor in Compostela and later had to pacify the region of San Miguel de Culiacán. Fray Marcos, on the other hand, had to instruct the Indians and to prepare his northward journey. Thus, he had little apparent reason to spend time in Compostela and might have preceded the governor to Culiacán, rather than waiting for him.

Proceeding directly from Tonalá (November 20, 1538) to Culiacán, without stopping in Compostela for more than a short rest, he would have been able to arrive in Culiacán as early as mid-December, and so have time to send Indians north, wait 20 days for their return, spend 3 or 4 more days teaching them, send them back to their homes, and wait 10 or 12 more days before finally departing himself on February 7.

We cannot be confident about the reports of gold and jewels in Topira since Ramusio or his editors Marica and Milanesi are known to have added similar passages while “translating” other Spanish documents, in order to make them more attractive to European readers. There is, however, no clear reason why Ramusio would have fabricated the reference to a Topira trip.

The results of both Marcos’ and Vázquez de Coronado’s expeditions to Topira are known from a 1539 letter from Mendoza. His use of pronouns in that letter, instead of names, unfortunately inhibits our comprehension:

He [Vázquez de Coronado] went through this province [Topira], and found it, as I told in my other letters, in a state of great starvation. And the mountains were so rough that he could not find any way to go further, and was obliged to go back to San Miguel. In selecting [Fray Marcos] to go, as well as in preventing [Vázquez de Coronado] from finding a way, God our Lord showed the door to a poor shoeless friar and hid it to all the other people who, by the use of their human strength, wanted to try this undertaking.

In that way, he [Marcos] began to enter the land farther on. His entry having been prepared so well, he was very well received (Hurtado de Mendoza 1978–1988).

Fortunately, the account by Castañeda who was part of the subsequent full-fledged expedition in 1540, clarified the meaning of Mendoza's letter. The chronicler confirmed that Vázquez de Coronado explored Topira after Marcos left for Cíbola:

After Francisco Vázquez de Coronado had sent Friar Marcos de Niza and his party on the search already related, he was engaged in Culiacán about some business that related to his government, when he heard an account of a province called Topira, which was to the north of the country of Culiacán. He started to explore this region with several of the conquerors and some friendly Indians, but he did not get very far, because the mountain chains, which they had to cross, were very difficult. He returned without finding the least signs of a good country, and when he got back, he found the friars [Castañeda thought that there were two Franciscans with Marcos in his journey] who had just arrived [from the discovery of Cíbola], and who told such great things about what the Negro Stephen had discovered and what they had heard from the Indians, and other things they had heard about the South Sea and islands and other riches, that, without stopping for anything, the governor set off at once for the City of Mexico, taking Friar Marcos with him, to tell the Viceroy about it (Castañeda de Najera 1992:67–68).

Because the governor's March 8 letter implies that Fray Marcos had been on the road for some time and had sent messages back, and because Mendoza's 1539 letter suggests an intended route from Topira to Corazones, we infer that Marcos went toward Topira, sent back a report, and headed directly on toward the northwestern country. In this interpretation, all the dates in the Coronado March 8 letter are correct, while the date of March 7 in Marcos' *Relación* is wrong. This interpretation also requires that Marcos reached Petatlán directly from Topira, meaning his *Relación* is incorrect in stating that he went directly from Culiacán to Petatlán (with no mention of Topira). This inference would explain why the friar did not provide many details about the road between Culiacán and Petatlán, for which he has been reproached by some historians; the usual explanation, however, is that he reported nothing because this route was already well known to the Spaniards from the days of Nuño Beltrán de Guzman's slave raiding.

MARCOS' JOURNEY FROM MEXICO CITY TO PETATLÁN

There is little question of copying error in Fray Marcos' *Relación*. Three copies of the manuscript are available in Sevilla and in Vienna. (The two Sevilla copies were both prepared by the same scribe and were signed by Marcos himself. The Vienna copy is in a different hand). One of us (Nallino) suggests that Fray Marcos' report might represent a censored or altered version, the censoring being done in part to avoid reference to the failure at Topira and to make the route north sound shorter and more appealing than in fact it was. This may have been part of an effort

to promote the Coronado expedition, which was organized in the weeks after Marcos' report was filed and certified, and to encourage more conquistadors to invest their lives and savings in the effort. This also accords with suggestions that other parts of the report were "softened" for the same reason. Examples of such "softening" may include Marcos' vague wording of his visit to the coast, his confirmation that the coastline turns west near latitude 35°, and his lack of any discussion of metal in Cíbola.

The inconsistencies regarding Marcos' departure date allow various interpretations. Regardless of these problems, though, the important point for our purposes is that none of the early reports gives the slightest hint of a northern exploration by friars preceding Marcos and Onorato. Later stories of such an undertaking were based solely on the fact that Fray Marcos and Vázquez de Coronado departed in fall 1538 from Mexico City for Culiacán, from where Marcos subsequently embarked for Cíbola. Before making his final departure for Cíbola, Marcos may have made an expedition into the mountains toward Topira that was later repeated by the governor. Now we look at how those expeditions have led writers to build and develop the myth of a trip made by earlier friars.

ORIGINS OF THE OLMEDO-ASUNCIÓN STORY

That Marcos' dramatic *Relación* precipitated an enormous expedition led by Vázquez de Coronado in 1540 is well known. Marcos participated in the expedition as guide, and he returned to Mexico City after the Battle of Hawikuh between the expeditionary force and Zuni warriors.

After his return from Cíbola at the end of 1540, Marcos de Niza's reputation collapsed because there had been no city of gold; he almost disappeared from public life. The Catholic Church and Franciscans themselves wrote little about Marcos for many years. It was not until 1620 that a biographer, Diego de Córdova de Salinas, published a complete work on Fray Marcos, particularly on his life in Peru (Córdova de Salinas 1957:57–68, 139–143). Meanwhile, in 1540, Fray Toribio de Benavente, also called Motolinía, published a garbled account of Marcos' journey in his *History of the Indians of New Spain*. Motolinía's text is no more than a summary of the Marcos *Relación*, though it never identifies the friar by name and does not mention Estéban or the full details from the *Relación*:

In the year of 1538, this same provincial [minister] Fray Ciudad-Rodrigo, sent two friars in the direction of the South Sea, going north to Jalisco and to New Galicia. A captain went with them to make discoveries. Once they had crossed the land already discovered, known, and conquered, they took two completely open paths. The captain chose to go to the right in the direction of the interior of the land. After a few days he arrived among mountains so rough that he could not pass farther and was obliged to return by the same route he had taken on the outbound journey.

Of the two friars, one fell ill and the other, with interpreters, took the path to the left, going toward the coast, and followed it. After a few days he arrived in a land inhabited by poor people, who met him and called him messenger of Heaven, and all touched him and kissed his habit (Benavente 1945, 3:48–50).

This is clearly an abbreviated account of the Vázquez de Coronado/Marcos/Onorato experiences, without names. We can identify the “messenger of Heaven” as Fray Marcos, who mentions a very similar passage in his own *Relación*:

These Indians gave me many receptions and much food, and they tried to touch my robe, calling me Sayota, which would want to say, in their language, man from the Heaven. (Niza 1999:84)

The “friar who fell ill” is Fray Onorato, whom Marcos reported “was seized with illness” in Petatlán (Niza 1999:84). Francisco Vázquez de Coronado is the unlucky captain who, at Topira, took the path toward the right, eastward, into the rugged Sierra Madre that he could not cross. Motolinía dated the beginning of the trip as 1538 because that was actually the year the trio left Mexico City for Culiacán. The Motolinía document seems to be merely an early account of the first part of Fray Marcos and Vázquez de Coronado’s journey from Mexico City to the north.

In 1596 another Franciscan, Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, also wrote about the first exploration of the north. Mendieta, a spiritual heir of Motolinía, wrote an account that is nearly identical to Motolinía’s:

In the same year of 38, he [Fray Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo] sent two other friars by land, following the same coast of the South Sea towards the north, to Jalisco and the New Galicia. Accompanying the two friars, was a captain who went to discover new lands, but with different destinations. Once they had crossed the land that was already discovered, known, and conquered, they found two fully open paths. The captain chose the one on his right hand, which seemed to go in the interior of the land, and arrived after a few days in such hard and painful mountains that he could not go further and was obliged to return. One of the friars fell ill (Mendieta 1870, Book 4, Chapter 8).

This account of the Topira episode was the same summary of Marcos’ account as that in Motolinía’s. At the end of the summary, however, Mendieta added this surprising conclusion:

At that time the provincial [minister] of this province of the Holy Gospel was Fray Marcos de Niza, born in the same city of Nice, in the Duchy of Savoy, a man of great knowledge and religion. In order to certify what the other friar [who had come back from travel to the north] had published, he wanted to do the work again and took over, before the others could decide, and left with the best courage he could. Having verified the report and indications that the friar had given about the regions where he traveled, he [Marcos] came back to Mexico City and confirmed what the other one had seen (Mendieta 1870, Book 4, Chapter 8).

As we have emphasized, there is not the slightest indication in the “eyewitness testimonies” of Vázquez de Coronado and Marcos de Niza that any such foray toward Cíbola had been undertaken prior to their arrival in Culiacán. Moreover, neither Marcos nor the chroniclers of the 1540 expedition, who talked to natives in the area of northern Sonora, southeast Arizona, and Zuni, ever reported any tales of such 1538 explorers who had gathered data from the people who knew about Cíbola; instead, all such accounts indicated that Fray Marcos had been the first discoverer of places along the road to Cíbola.

Apparently Mendieta, or others of his generation, misinterpreted Motolinía and whatever other sources of information they had, giving rise to the idea that the captain and two friars reported by Motolinía represented a separate expedition

before Marcos de Niza's. This is the genesis of the myth that Marcos de Niza had received his initial information from an earlier Franciscan journey to the north. A succession of authors has repeated and amplified this myth.

The first to repeat the story was Fray Juan de Torquemada, who in 1615 wrote in his *Monarquía Indiana*:

[Fray Marcos de Niza] then came to New Spain, to this province of the Holy Gospel, where by his letters, religion, and good uses, he was received with much pleasure. In a few years he was elected the third provincial minister, after the holy and brave Fray Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo had finished his term. With the office of provincial [minister], he left in quest of the new land of Cibola, of which he had heard in the report of another friar, as we tell in another part of this work (Torquemada 1969:499–500).

In “another part of this work,” we once again find the Topira episode, a summary of Marcos' *Relación*, and repetition of Mendieta's assertion that Marcos sought to verify another friar's discovery. Torquemada's wording is almost identical to Mendieta's.

Another twist to the story was added in 1653, when Fray Antonio Tello, following in the footsteps of Mendieta and Torquemada, wrote his *Crónica Miscelánea de la Sancta Provincia de Xalisco* and added a name to the apocryphal friar who preceded Marcos. His name, he said, was Juan de Olmedo. Fray Antonio's phrases echo the earlier literature, but tell a confused story:

Before this, according to a confused chronicle, large armies and fleets had been sent, by land and by sea, to discover the land, but God permitted only a Franciscan friar, ragged and mended, to find it first. Having suffered great troubles, hunger, and adversity on such a long road, he came back to Mexico City and reported to his prelate, who was the father Fray Marcos de Niza, who had been general commissary of Indies, an erudite and very religious man, who was at that time provincial [minister] of the province of the Holy Gospel. He also reported to Viceroy don Antonio de Mendoza.

Some authors do not agree on the names of those religious. Francisco López de Gómara, part I, folio 28 and following, says that one was Fray Juan de Olmedo, and that those two friars left with the authorization of their prelate Fray Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo for the province of Jalisco, for which they had long been destined. Once they had reached it, they stayed there some time because they were ill, and then went to Culiacán, where Fray Pablo remained a few days. Father Fray Juan de Olmedo went further, up to the provinces of Sinaloa, the province of Sonora, of the Imires and Yaquis, and all the places referred to above. From there he came back to give a report to his superiors. In his way he met his companions, who where already in Sinaloa looking for him.

In order to confirm what the other friar had reported, the blessed Father Fray Marcos de Niza, decided to go and see. He started his journey on foot, shoeless, being already of great age, with the enthusiasm of the saving souls. Though he was disturbed by other friars, he did not give up his journey, as reported by Herrera, Decade VI, book I, chapter I, page 201. He took with him the Father Fray Juan de Olmedo, who was from the Province of Xalisco, and though Torquemada says that he took him as guide, it was not the only reason. Instead, he did not want to offend the Holy Province of Xalisco, of which Father Fray Juan de Olmedo was a son. (Tello 1968–1985, 2:98–99)

Fray Antonio de Tello seems very precise in his quotations, and at first glance, he appears to give excellent sources for what he wrote. Unfortunately, Carmen Aguirre and Leandro Tormo checked different prints of Gómara and found that Gómara does not mention the name of Fray Juan de Olmedo (Aguirre and Tormo

1986:729). He simply says: “Fray Marcos de Niza and other friars entered the land of Culiacán in 1538” (López de Gómara 1965, 1:360).

Moreover, the chapter of Herrera’s work that Tello quotes concerns not New Spain or New Galicia but Venezuela! Herrera does write about Marcos de Niza and Vázquez de Coronado, in Decade 7, Book 1, Chapters 7 and 8, but he does not mention any expedition to Cíbola that preceded Marcos’ trip, and he does not give the name of Juan de Olmedo. Furthermore, Torquemada does not say that Marcos took another friar as guide. These difficulties reduce the credibility of the Tello account.

One of Tello’s comments is of special interest to us here, the phrase about “God allowing a single ragged friar to make the discovery instead of a large army”; that is a nearly precise quote of a statement made about Marcos de Niza by Hernán Cortés in a letter to the viceroy, written on August 6, 1539, upon receipt of the first news about the good lands to the north. Wagner’s translation is: “And so God wished to reveal this, not as the result of expenditures for huge fleets by sea and large armies by land, but through a single discalced friar” (Wagner 1934:217). Viceroy Hurtado de Mendoza used very similar phrases in his October 1539 letter cited earlier.

In the Cortés and Hurtado de Mendoza cases, this remark concerned Cíbola being found by humble Marcos instead of Governor Vázquez de Coronado, who had accompanied the friar in 1538. Cortés’ clever remark may have been widely paraphrased. Fray Antonio Tello’s use of the phrase strongly suggests that his sources were referring to Marcos and not some other friar.

Nearly a century after Fray Antonio wrote, Matías Mota Padilla completed a similar history in 1742. He used the *Crónica Miscelánea* as source. He also claimed to have examined documents of Pedro de Tovar, one of the captains on the Coronado expedition. These latter documents, which Mota Padilla said were located in Culiacán, are considered lost today. Mota Padilla’s account contains the following:

Ciudad-Rodrigo had sent out priests from Jalisco to discover these lands, and they returned giving a report of them. These priests went by way of the coast of the South Sea, and around toward the north, and when they had swerved to the left more than 200 leagues, many Indians came out to receive them, from whom they heard that further on, the land was inhabited with people who wore clothes and who had houses of many stories, and that there were other tribes on the banks of a copious river, and that there were cows and other animals. This report was given by one of the priests called Fray Juan de Olmeda to Fray Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo, who by the same person forwarded the report to Fray Marcos de Niza, the commissary-general, who was of such a turn of mind that he set out, on foot and shoeless, taking with him the said Father Olmeda.

Having reconnoitered the provinces of Marata, Acux, and Tonteaca, and getting news of the province of Tzibola, he found it convenient to return to Mexico, and gave a detailed report to the Viceroy (Mota Padilla 1940).

Once again, the report of a trip ascribed to Juan de Olmeda is really a synopsis of the early information obtained by Marcos de Niza as he followed the coast northward and received descriptions of the multistory pueblos of Cíbola. And the narration of the second trip, attributed to Fray Marcos and Fray Juan together, is an

abbreviated version of what Fray Marcos learned about Cíbola and the nearby areas of Marata, Acus, and Totontec as he moved inland. As pointed out earlier, on this trip Marcos had Fray Onorato as a companion, not Juan de Olmeda.

In 1729, Captain Mateo Mange repeated the erroneous story once again, but introduced the name of Fray Juan de la Asunción instead of Juan de Olmedo; he added more confusion, replacing the captain who accompanied the friars with eight miners and stating that Marcos de Niza's first journey to Cíbola was in 1544, fully two years after the end of the full-fledged expedition led by Vázquez de Coronado (Mange 1926:88–89)!

The final step in rounding out the myth came in 1792 when Juan de Arricivita reformulated Mange's and Torquemada's material and gave the name of the companion of Juan de la Asunción as Fray Pedro Nadal (Arricivita 1792).

HOW DID THE MYTH ARISE?

Our summary of the sequence of accounts suggests the origin of the idea of an expedition by friars in advance of Fray Marcos. The descriptions that make up the supposed Olmedo/Asunción report match Marcos' *Relación* of the early and middle stages of his trip, when he was welcomed by villagers in Sonora and collected detailed accounts of the lifestyles in Cíbola. None of the later accounts of the fanciful Olmedo/Asunción trip provide information from farther north. There is no sense of a culmination of their supposed trip by arrival at Cíbola, nor is there any detail about Seven Cities. Based on these facts, we suggest that the myth arose through misunderstanding the role of messages sent back by Marcos while he was on his way north – messages that arrived in Mexico City in a “first wave” of news about good lands in the north, many weeks before Marcos himself returned with additional news. Records or memories of this “first wave” of reports were later mistaken for evidence of an expedition prior to that of Marcos de Niza.

On his way north, Fray Marcos almost certainly sent messengers back to New Spain, as he was instructed to do by Viceroy Hurtado de Mendoza. Bloom suggested this sixty years ago and pointed out that it solves many problems about rumors of Marcos' discoveries that began to circulate in the summer of 1539 (Bloom 1940, 1941). However, Bloom's suggestion was during a debate about Marcos' veracity, and was countered by Sauer (1932, 1937, 1940) and Hallenbeck (1949), who emphatically denied that Marcos sent messengers back. This denial is strange; Hallenbeck and Sauer gave no grounds for it. Their views blocked acceptance of Bloom's remarks and hindered all later understanding of the case.

Not only was Fray Marcos instructed by the viceroy to send such messages, but a letter by Vázquez de Coronado actually referred to an early message received from Fray Marcos (Vázquez de Coronado 1978–1988a). If messages were received in Culiacán or Compostela by the governor in late May or June, describing Marcos' welcome by the villagers and his first news of a great northern city with multistory

buildings, Vázquez de Coronado would likely have forwarded them promptly to Mexico City. Indeed, on July 15 the governor wrote about Marcos' reports of "the grandeur of the land" (Vázquez de Coronado 1539), and as early as July 26, Cortés, near Mexico City, wrote of rumors of Fray Marcos "having found a good country" (Cortés 1539a). Thus, in July 1539, a "first wave" of information clearly came back about Marcos' news of good lands in the north and Vázquez de Coronado's failure to find much in Topira, and these reports began to circulate in court circles or even in the street. Then, in late August 1539, a "second wave" arrived with Fray Marcos himself, including news of his view of Cíbola.

This sequence is all but confirmed by Mendieta's garbled phrase that Marcos "came back to Mexico City and confirmed what the other one had seen" (Mendieta 1870, Book 4, Chapter 8). As perceived by chroniclers in Mexico City, first one friar appeared with news of discoveries (Marcos' messages), and later Marcos de Niza appeared and "confirmed" what the first one had reported!

Who brought these messages back from Marcos to the provincial father Ciudad-Rodrigo and the viceroy? A possible answer is that the messengers were priests or lay brothers. López de Gómara wrote, "Fray Marcos de Niza and other friars entered the land of Culiacán in 1538." Castañeda maintained that two friars, Fray Daniel and Fray Antonio de Santa Maria, accompanied Marcos, presumably referring to his departure from Mexico City. These friars and/or lay brothers might have remained in Culiacán or Compostela and would have been able to carry messages back to Mexico.

If such men returned to Mexico with Marcos' news, their names (rather than Marcos') might have mistakenly been associated with the discoveries. Antonio Tello, who in 1653 reportedly had access to documents contemporary with the 1538–39 trip, explicitly confirmed that the early records were "confused" and that different names were given for the friars who made the trip. This is just what we would expect if Tello or others had come upon records saying that otherwise obscure people (such as Juan de Olmedo?) had reported the grandeur of populous lands in the north before Marcos reported them. In this way, the messengers may have later gotten credit for the message. In the centuries that followed, authors tried to identify those mysterious travelers and proposed names from the large number of Franciscan friars recorded in New Spain in the sixteenth century. Among the names proposed were Juan de Olmedo, Fray Pablo, Juan de la Asunción, and Pedro Nadal.

Another clue about the role of Marcos' associates comes from Tello in 1653 and Mota Padilla in 1742, supporting our hypothesis that the messenger who brought the first wave of reports was one of those who left Mexico in 1538 with Fray Marcos and Governor Vázquez de Coronado. Tello wrote that Juan de Olmedo had traveled to Sinoloa and Sonora, and then returned to Mexico City, adding that Marcos took Juan de Olmedo with him. Mota Padilla wrote that it was Juan de Olmeda who brought the first report from the north to the provincial minister, Antonio de Ciudad-Rodrigo, and agreed that the same Juan de Olmeda accompanied

Marcos de Niza to Cíbola (supposedly after Marcos received the first report and decided to go see for himself on a second expedition). Mota Padilla might be accused of simply repeating Tello's account, but he claimed to have used documents by Pedro Tovar, a Fray Marcos contemporary and resident of Culiacán, as the basis for his history (Mota Padilla 1940).

WHO WERE THE FRIARS AND MESSENGERS?

According to Antonio Tello, the mysterious Juan de Olmedo was a native or "son" of Jalisco. Because he was said to have accompanied Fray Marcos in 1538, he was probably born no later than about 1520, suggesting he was an Indian, the Spaniards not yet having conquered Jalisco. His ecclesiastical name, following usual Franciscan practice, indicates that he was from a town named Olmedo such as the one in the south of Valladolid in Spain. This does not prove Olmedo (if he existed) was from Spain, as similar place names exist in Jalisco (see below).

Several friars with Olmedo or a similar place name as the final element of their names are known to have been in New Spain prior to 1540. The first was Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo, a Mercedarian and chaplain to Cortés during the conquest of Mexico, as early as 1518. In 1519, a Fray Juan de Olmedo was among fourteen Franciscans who arrived in Hispaniola to convert the natives there (Aguirre and Tormo 1986:726). Mendieta reported the existence of the Franciscan Fray Juan de Alameda who arrived in New Spain in 1528 with the future bishop Fray Juan de Zumárraga. He was sent as missionary to Huexotzingo, Tula, and Guacachula (Mendieta 1870, Book 5, Part 1, Chapter 36). None of these three friars was a "son" of the Province of Jalisco, or even connected with Jalisco.

Another possible candidate is a second Fray Juan also mentioned by Mendieta. This friar, a warehouse assistant (probably an Indian servant and "lay brother") was killed by Indians along with three other friars during an attack on the convent of Izatlán in Jalisco during the War of Miztón. This friar with Jalisco connections might have inspired Antonio Tello, who may even have gratuitously attributed to him an origin in Olmeda since there are locations in Jalisco with similar names such as Almeda or Alameda. As a son of Jalisco himself and since he was writing a story in which Jaliscan people—particularly Indians—played a positive role, Fray Antonio may have ascribed to "his" Juan de Olmeda the deeds that Mendieta and Torquemada had reported. If it seems harsh to suggest that Antonio Tello fabricated a Juan de Olmeda or Olmedo, we note only that a number of this friar/chronicler's other references are not reliable.

To be more optimistic, it is also possible that Juan de Olmeda was a real, if obscure, figure who actually carried the first message to Mexico City. Such a messenger could have been sent by Fray Marcos de Niza to Culiacán, or could have been someone who "stood by" in Culiacán or Compostela and was assigned to

take Marcos' news on to Mexico City. With his arrival in the viceregal capital, the good news "leaked" to the populace.

The historian Otto Maas proposed that the friar known as Fray Pablo in Tello's account was Fray Pablo de Acevedo, and that he was a companion of Juan de Olmedo. According to Maas, "The first Franciscan to have entered the province of New Mexico was Fray Juan de Olmedo, who, in the year 1538, in the company of Fray Pablo de Acevedo, left for Jalisco, and both went to Culiacán, where Fray Pablo de Acevedo remained for a few days" (Maas 1929:v). Mendieta (1870) reported on the life of a Fray Pablo de Acevedo. This Pablo de Acevedo was Portuguese, became a Franciscan in Hispaniola, went to Tlaxcala and then to New Biscay, and was killed by native people in Sinaloa. However, he can probably be discounted as Juan de Olmedo's companion because Mendieta mentions that Pablo de Acevedo had been one of his (Mendieta's) companions in the convent of Tlaxcala, and Mendieta did not arrive in New Spain before 1554 (Mendieta 1870, Book 5, Part 2, Chapter 8).

No data have been found concerning Juan de la Asunción and Pedro Nadal, the names given by Juan Mange in 1729 to the supposed 1538 explorers, except for the mention of the arrival of a Pedro Nadal in Venezuela in 1534 (Boyd-Bowman 1964–1968, Volume 2, Entry 6031).

Thus, with the exception of Fray Onorato, who was mentioned by Marcos himself, and who fell ill a few days north of Culiacán and gave up the journey, the various names of other supposed explorers are hard to trace or are even apocryphal, but we hypothesize that some of them are associated with the messengers sent back by Marcos from Culiacán or Compostela with the first wave of news about the good discoveries in the north.

Even Marcos de Niza's companion, Fray Onorato, is a mysterious figure. Very little is known about him apart from the fact that he accompanied Marcos as far as Petatlán during the 1539 expedition. Marcos did not report how or when Onorato returned to Mexico City. Hallenbeck simply writes, "He turns up later, well and hearty, in the history of New Spain" (Hallenbeck 1949:89). Richard and Shirley Flint, in a private communication (XXXX), pointed out to us during their investigations in the archives of Seville in 2002 that Onorato sailed to the New World in 1533 (Casa de Contratación 1533) and that he testified at the trial of Coronado in 1544, when he was said to be more than 40 years old (Flint and Flint 2002). The latter reference may be what Hallenbeck had in mind and would make Onorato perhaps 35 to 39 years of age during the Marcos expedition in 1539. We could find no further mention of Onorato.

The name Onorato may provide a clue about the man. "Onorato" is very seldom used in Spanish. It may come from two patron saints: San Honorato de Navarra, born in the Roman Hispania Tarraconensis, who was the second or the third bishop of Toulouse, France; or Saint Honorat, born about A.D. 350 near Toul in northeastern Roman Gaul, who founded a monastery on one of the islands of Lérins (today

known as Saint Honorat Island) in the Bay of Cannes. This latter Saint Honorat has been well known and popular in Provence since Raymond Féraud's 1300 publication that recounted his life in a long poem of Provençal verses.

Therefore, one possibility is that Fray Onorato was born in Navarra or the Toulouse region if he took his name in honor of San Honorato de Navarra. If, on the other hand, his patron was Saint Honorat, Fray Onorato may well have been born in Provence, more particularly on the French Riviera. Edouard Béri has even suggested that, like Marcos de Niza, he was born in Nice (Béri 1938:140).

CONCLUSION

The apocryphal 1538 journey to northern Sonora and southern Arizona, prior to that of Marcos de Niza, was attributed first to Juan de Olmedo and Pablo de Acevedo and later to Juan de la Asunción and Pedro Nadal. It began with an error by Gerónimo de Mendieta, who misunderstood Motolinía's cryptic description of the departure of Fray Marcos de Niza and Governor Francisco Vázquez de Coronado from Mexico City to the northern frontier in 1538. A long chain of subsequent fragmentary citations added credibility, transforming the myth into a seemingly plausible story.

The original report involved the travels of Vázquez de Coronado and Marcos to Topira and to Cíbola after they reached the frontier at Culiacán. These travels possibly included a trip toward Topira by Marcos and Onorato in February 1539, followed by Vázquez de Coronado's own trip to Topira in April 1539, and the journey north along the coast by Marcos and Onorato, followed by Marcos' journey to Cíbola in 1539.

A key to the whole affair is that as Marcos traveled north through Sonora, he sent back messages as ordered by the viceroy. Fray Onorato was forced to give up the trip at Petatlán and was thus available to relay to Mexico City (either in person or by other messengers) Marcos' first messages about prosperous northern lands. Thus, news of his good discoveries arrived in Mexico City before the man himself. To later historians, this gave the impression of discoveries from a 1538 expedition, followed by a Marcos' expedition.

There is no credible contemporary report of a 1538 land expedition by two Franciscans who preceded Fray Marcos de Niza or who delivered substantive information about the north in advance of Fray Marcos' reports. Neither Viceroy Hurtado de Mendoza's letters summarizing the attempts at northern exploration nor the chronicles of members of the Coronado expedition that was subsequently mounted mention such a precursor.



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