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THE CREDIBILITY OF THE FRAY MARCOS ACCOUNT

By CARL O. SAUER

THE MYTHS of history, gaining authority by repetition, are stubborn things to slay. In 1932 I published in "The Road to Cibola" a version of discoveries in the Southwest, by which I gave Cabeza de Vaca and his party priority of entry into New Mexico and Arizona, and denied the claims of Fray Marcos beyond a slight penetration into Arizona. Further evidence was presented in my article in the NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW in 1937, "The Discovery of New Mexico Reconsidered." On Cabeza de Vaca I find myself in substantial agreement with Cleve Hallenbeck's monograph, published during the present year (1940). Against Fray Marcos I am allied with Henry R. Wagner, who has written in part in this same journal. We three, who are not professors of history, remain voices in the wilderness. The fourth centennial of its true discoverers went unnoticed in the Southwest; Arizona commemorated in 1939 the bare-foot friar from Nice. The recent article by Mr. Bloom in this journal, supporting Fray Marcos and rejecting my analysis, demands an answer, if only so that the record be cleared.

The contribution of Mr. Bloom is in the discovery of certain errors in the published version of Fray Marcos' relation. I have since examined a photographic copy of the originals and compared them with the printed Pacheco and Cárdenas version. The latter is remarkably exact except for the three mistakes noted by Bloom. Only one of these has any importance as affecting the itinerary, the error by which four *jornadas* became four *leguas*. However, this error in no wise "invalidates the Sauer analysis," as Bloom makes claim. By use of the printed document I placed the Friar at the northern end of the Opata settlements on May 5, where he rested three days, and whence he entered the *despoblado* on May 9. By the correct original, the first date

must be changed to May 1, followed by a rest of three days, and then by a march of four days to reach the *despoblado* on May 9, the date given by Fray Marcos. These four *jornadas* must then be interpreted as having been made beyond the limits of the Opata settlements, from the headwaters of the Sonora drainage through the *rancherías* of the Sobaipori Pima on the upper San Pedro of southern Arizona. The correction makes the record legible a bit farther. The country north of the Opata valleys, the high Cananea plateau, was unsettled, or very sparsely occupied, about to the International Border. Beyond, in the San Pedro Valley of Arizona, lay the Pima *rancherías*, and though these were smaller, fewer, and more primitive than the Opata villages, they should have been, and apparently were taken into account as being south of the great *despoblado*. The Friar thus reckoned the beginning of the great *despoblado* by his departure from the Pima villages, not from the upper end of the Opata land.

But that is all that this correction implies. It does not change the calendar of Fray Marcos, for, if he got to the end of the Opata country four days sooner than I had thought, instead of a schedule of fifteen *jornadas* between Opatería and Cibola, there now must be added for the return, to the fifteen *jornadas* back across the *despoblado*, four more to get to the northernmost Opata valley. This means simply that the four days, or *jornadas*, are shifted, not saved. Nor is the case against Fray Marcos so slight that he could be rehabilitated by gaining for him a small matter of four days. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bloom lost a precious week for his client by showing that the *Relación* was attested, signed, and sealed in Mexico City by August 26, whereas I have used the terminal date of September 2 of its formal presentation before the Viceroy.

There are two general questions still before us in the case of Fray Marcos: 1. Does his account in general show evidence of good faith? 2. Is its calendar reasonable or possible? I shall consider first, the second of these.

Bloom has the Friar at Cíbola on May 25, estimating the date from Fray Marcos' own account. The Indians had told him that from the beginning of the *despoblado* to Cíbola were fifteen long days of travel (*largos quince días de camino*), Bloom omitting the "*largos*" in his rendering. This was a fair statement of the distance from the San Pedro to Zuñi for a few tough Indians, traveling light. The Friar applied this yardstick to his own reputed march to Zuñi. But there is significant difference in the manner of travel of such Indians and that of the Friar. Previously, he had sustained no long marches, having taken two months to cover about three-fifths of the distance from Culiacán to Cíbola. Now he is supposed to have covered the remainder in half a month, including first an arid and then a mountain terrain. Moreover, the Friar here for the first time acquired an impressive safari, according to his story, of thirty principal men from among the Indians, dressed in gala attire, accompanied by "the people necessary to bring them and me food." Always they were very well supplied with a variety of game. Some of the Indians served as porters of chests of clothes and other things for barter. Such a train could not move rapidly, nor is there any note of hurry in the Friar's account. After the first day, there is indeed no mention of what was passed or seen, no mention of the "spiny country" that vexed Coronado's men, nor of the great ascent of the rim of the Colorado Plateau, of its wide pine forests, or of the high, grassy plains beyond. Nothing—only "I marched twelve days," though Marcos was charged especially by the Viceroy to observe "the quality and fertility and climate of the land, its trees and plants and tame and wild animals,—whether the land is rugged or smooth" and so on, to all of which Fray Marcos answered only, "I marched twelve days." And this was the one part of his supposed journey where no white man had preceded him. Not only would such a train have slowed down travel, but the time was adverse, being at the end of the dry season, when short cuts were out of the question because of failure of springs, and game also was hardest

to find and in poorest condition. The march, moreover, was interrupted twice by news of the slaying of the Negro and his Indian companions. The first time, Marcos said that he re-animated the party to continue. The second bearers of bad tidings discouraged the company so greatly that only two of the chiefs and a few other Indians continued to the end. Yet all of this is supposed to have been done at an average rate of travel of about nine leagues a day, sustained for fifteen days.

Now as to the return journey. We can use estimates of distance only as rough approximations. Coronado's men counted the distance from Cíbola to Chichilticalli, roughly the crossing of the Gila, as eighty-five leagues. This was about halfway from the beginning of the Opata country, or about 170 leagues for the whole northern stretch. Fray Marcos reckoned 112 leagues to the place I have thought to identify as the crossing of the Mayo. About fifteen leagues should be added to get to Vacapa, whence Coronado estimated that it was sixty leagues to Culiacán. From Culiacán to Compostela lay a hundred leagues in the long reckoning of the time. All of which adds up to 450 or 460 of the leagues of the day, not the precise league of 2.6 miles of the land surveys, but on the whole long leagues. Anyone familiar with the itineraries of New Spain knows that the leagues of travel of the sixteenth century were consistently a good deal greater than those of the eighteenth century. Or, let us consider the matter in terms of miles. From Nogales on the Arizona border, the Southern Pacific runs 940 miles to Compostela by a very direct route. From the vicinity of Naco, where Fray Marcos should have crossed our border, the distance to Compostela at most would be reduced by less than a hundred miles from that by rail. From the border to Zuñi is somewhere around 400 miles. The total cannot be reckoned at much below 1300 miles; let us say we put it at 1250 miles.

Arrived at Cíbola, the Friar had just done 450 miles, perhaps better, in nineteen days if we may believe him.

Thereupon he is to turn about, without a rest, without a rest all the way back to Compostela, to accumulate a total of 1700 miles, perhaps more rather than less, in this sustained, stupendous march from upper Sonora to Cibola and back again to Compostela. Perhaps he could do the last hundred leagues on horseback. History is silent on that point, but we know that all the rest of it had to be done on foot. It is no wonder that Mr. Bloom needs all the days he can assemble in order to make feasible this terrific journey.

The case for the Friar is worse than has been stated thus far. It is not merely that it seems inevitable to limit his return journey to the month of June by the evidence introduced: 1) There are two geographic considerations stated in my previous studies, namely the fearful heat of that stretch of coast during that season and the complete cessation of land travel north of Compostela after June. No one could put on a maximum performance of marching at that season of the year when there is league on league of burning, shadeless *monte*. The Friar dared not risk getting caught this side of Compostela by the rains which turn the lowlands of Nayarit into a morass. 2) This non-pareil of long distance walkers has the face to say that on his way back he turned aside (in southern Sonora) to inspect the valley or opening (*abra*) where the mountains came to an end. He had noted this locality on his way up, but had left the inspection for the return. This really was a dreadful slip on the part of Marcos. He was concerned so little with the difficulties of time which he bequeathed to later students that he said nothing about the problem of time, but only that fear caused him to hesitate about the detour. I have written elsewhere of this land of civilized people and golden vessels which Coronado later found to be the first of the myths of Marcos. I have suggested that the slight element of truth may be supplied by the Chinipas Valley of western Chihuahua, which is more or less to the east of Vacapa. Fray Marcos declared that he got to the mouth of the gap in the mountains and saw beyond seven fair settlements, that he erected two crosses,

and took possession of the land. Had the Friar turned aside for a view of Chinipas, he must have used up at least a week of hard going, as I know, having been there and remembering well the weariness of that mountain trail. Marcos indeed said that the *abra* lay four or five jornadas off his road. Of course, there is no such gap, no plains beyond, no such a civilized people. The Friar never saw this fictitious land, but the point is that he added to the impossibility of his journey by claiming that he did take this side trip and thereby admitting a loss of eight to ten days from the already inadequate time of his return.

Should he have found horse transport from Culiacán to Compostela, little reduction in time would result. Almost the whole of this part of the journey was through a country then stripped of its natives and provisions, as we know from Coronado's expedition the following year and from other accounts of the time. Indians from the hills to the east raided the camino and made it necessary to travel with heavy guard. Provisions had to be carried for most of the road. Such escort and pack train travel again was not favorable to rapid transport.

The remaining crucial question is the time at which Fray Marcos got back to Compostela. Let us begin the reckoning at the City of Mexico where the finished *Relación* was attested, signed, and sealed August 26, as Mr. Bloom has stated. This is a longish document and a formal one. We may be sure that nothing went into it without careful discussion, and that it was well edited before it was given to the scribe and attested as a permanent record. A week allowed for the official casting of the report, which seems conservative, would bring us back to August 19. Before this time three trips between Compostela and Mexico must be provided. We know from the *Relación* that Marcos wrote from Compostela to the Viceroy and the Franciscan Provincial of his arrival, with request for instructions as to what he should do next. This involved one round trip for a messenger. Thereupon, Marcos went to Mexico, to present his

report. It was a good five hundred miles from Compostela to Mexico, with two or three formidable mountain stretches of road. There should be added, therefore, at least a month and a half for the three trips, and a few days for consideration of the communications. I do not see, therefore, how Fray Marcos can have arrived at Compostela after the first of July.

We are back, therefore, to the necessity of making the incredible journey from Zuñi to Compostela in the month of June. Worse still, the side trip to the *abra* must be accommodated. The whole business is clearly impossible. It has been shown that there was not the time for the journey that Mr. Bloom has postulated. He uses the date of entry into the northern despoblado as May 9, the arrival at Cibola on May 25, and the return to Compostela, possibly by July 10. This would require covering 1700 miles on the main trail in two months. However, by the Friar's own statement a minimum of eight days must be subtracted for the side trip to the *abra*. Thus, even Mr. Bloom's reckoning is up against the necessity of maintaining an average pace of thirty-three miles a day without let-up.

Mr. Bloom makes a last attempt to gain time for the Friar by turning to Coronado's letter of July 15, 1539, which Wagner and I first used. I am completely at a loss to understand the interpretation he has read into this letter. What Coronado says is simple. Writing to the King he says that since his Majesty will have news of the newly-found land, he is writing no more at that time, because the King will learn about it from "the Relación of Fray Marcos and from that which the Viceroy is writing to Your Majesty." I see no basis for an interpretation that Coronado had only advance reports brought back by Indians, which seems sheer supposition on Bloom's part. Coronado speaks of the Relación of Fray Marcos and of a letter about the trip from Viceroy to King in the present tense. The least one can infer is that these were then in process of preparation.

There may now be a final word as to the general veracity of the Friar's account:

(1.) Beyond Petatlan (later the villa of Sinaloa) he speaks of the scarcity of food, in part, because he had been told that it had not rained for three years. This is an obvious impossibility for that region, and I doubt that he was told any such thing.

(2.) He asserts having seen the island in which Cortez had been, saying that it was half a league from the mainland. This may be an attack on Cortez' claim to California. This putative position of Cortez' island would place it within the territory of the Spaniards of Culiacán, who antedated the expedition of Cortez. In the immediately preceding sentence of his *Relación*, the Friar had called attention to slave raids along this coast by Spaniards of Culiacán. If Marcos knew anything about Cortez' expedition to California, he cannot have believed that some sandbar or island in northern Sinaloa was the land to which Cortez sailed. The possibility that one of Cortez' supply ships may have passed by this locality does not make the Friar's statement correct or innocent.

(3.) Attention must be called again to the mendacity of the assertion that, having passed the first despoblado south of the Fuerte River, "I found other Indians who were astonished to see me because they have no knowledge of Christians, because they do not traffic with those on the other side of the despoblado." This is a compound falsehood. In the first place, there was no real despoblado, but rather a stretch of small and sparsely strewn rancherías between the rich and well-peopled valleys of the Petatlan and the Fuerte. Secondly, there was no barrier to the communication between these valleys. The Indians on both sides were of the same stock, language, and culture, and communicated freely at all times. In the third place, all this area had been entered repeatedly by Spaniards. Diego de Guzmán's party had penetrated across it to the northern end of the Yaqui country. Cabeza de Vaca's party had come through this area

and, moreover, had found this region desolated far and wide because of Spanish slave raids.

(4.) In the Fuerte valley Fray Marcos found an abundance of food. Remembering, perhaps, that he had just spoken of a land where it did not rain for three years, he added that this country had much food because it was all irrigated. If there had been such a great drought, irrigation would have been much reduced and crops also. Moreover, the inhabitants of the Fuerte valley did not practice irrigation.

(5.) Why should the Negro, as he scouted ahead of Fray Marcos, have sent the repeated and excited accounts of the great news that he was discovering? The Negro well knew and so did Fray Marcos that this was only the back trail, down which the Negro had lately come with Cabeza de Vaca. The Negro had, in fact, been bought by the Viceroy to serve the Friar as guide. Yet the Friar's account has not one word of Cabeza de Vaca's prior expedition and expressly claims that the Indians north of the Petatlan area knew nothing of white men.

(6.) In the build-up of the story of the riches of Cibola, Fray Marcos underscores the increasing abundance northward of turquoise, and cow (buffalo) hides among the natives of Sonora. By the time he got to upper Sonora, the people were laden with turquoise ornaments, and buffalo hides were seen by the thousands. We are quite well informed about the condition of the Indians of Sonora at the time of the Spanish occupation, and know somewhat their archaeology. The road of Fray Marcos was one of the routes by which turquoise was traded from the Southwest into Central Mexico. There is no evidence that it was accumulated in any conspicuous amount by the people of Sonora. Buffalo hides were also traded into Sonora, but in limited numbers. Its people did not dress in heavy buffalo skins, as he said, but used light and pliable buckskin.

(7.) The version of the fame of the Pueblo people among the Opata is most improbable. According to the

Friar, the Sonora Indians regarded the people of Zuñi with awed admiration. As a matter of fact, the Opatas were at as high a cultural level as the Pueblo people, and their standard of living was markedly better. The Opatas were much more numerous than the people of Zuñi, probably as numerous as all the Pueblo folk together. They had larger towns than those of Cibola; they had much more and better farming lands, and a far larger agricultural production. The Friar insists that these prosperous and well-fed Indians migrated annually as day laborers to Zuñi to gain their livelihood. This is entirely out of character for what we know, both of the Opatas and the Zuñi.

(8.) Similarly, the fear of the Zuñi by the Opatas is out of character. The Zuñi were few and peaceable. The Opatas were numerous and some of the hardiest fighters of New Spain. They gave the Spaniards a rather bad time of it for a while, and they fought the Apaches successfully for generations. No one who knows the Opatas will incline to accept the Friar's account of the timorous folk sitting by the wayside, terror-stricken.

(9.) Having come to the hill whence he claimed the view of Cibola, the Friar made the flat assertion: "The population is greater than that of the City of Mexico." Can the veracity or good faith of the author of such a statement be upheld?

(10.) Then and there, he continues, he erected, with the aid of his Indians, a great heap of stones with a cross upon it. The final remnant of the party had crept up for a view of the promised land. Then they exposed themselves by the erection of this monument. Let us consider the improbability of the situation. The Negro and the horde of Sonora Indians had gone, it is claimed, to Zuñi as an advance party. These had been killed, except for the few who escaped to bear the tidings of disaster back to Sonora. If this happened, a great war party of Opatas must have been expected at Zuñi to be on the way to seek vengeance. Under such circumstances, the approach of the Friar's party would have been

noticed by Zuñi scouts days before he got to Zuñi, and the Friar and his Indians would have been cut off en route. Even had the Zuñi been without any apprehension, the Friar's approach would surely have been reported by people who were out hunting and collecting long before he got to the settlement. Indians don't spent their time sitting in their villages unaware of what goes on within sight of their habitations.

The scrutiny of the account could be continued, but these items, together with the calendar of the itinerary itself, suffice to show that the *Relación* is malodorous throughout. Not only is a move against Cortez involved in the account, but it is significant that none of the survivors of Narváez' party was chosen for the trip except the Negro slave who had been bought by Mendoza. The omission of all reference to their priority indicates a deliberate suppression. The reason I do not know, unless this might have clouded the title which Mendoza was anxious to secure to the northern country. The men of Narváez were from the islands and of a different jurisdiction. The purpose of Narváez' expedition was another attempt to establish a separate government to the north of New Spain. Mendoza was anxious to extend title northward and block off both Cortez and claims originating from the islands. The document of Fray Marcos is to be regarded as a political instrument. In order to attain these ends, it became a tissue of fraud, perhaps without equal in the history of New World explorations.

Berkeley, California

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