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## Was Fray Marcos a Liar?

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## EDITORIAL SECTION

*Was Fray Marcos a Liar?*—Last year in a paper on “Who Discovered New Mexico?” I gave some space to the question whether Fray Marcos de Niza reached the land of the Pueblo people as represented in his *Relación*. As I then stated,<sup>1</sup> I was making no attempt to give a complete survey of the long-standing controversy; I did, however, call attention to three errors of more or less importance in our reading hitherto of that *Relación*, and also to a significant oversight in Dr. Sauer’s reading of the letter from Coronado to Charles V, dated at Compostela on July 15, 1539. According to Zuñi tradition, the black rascal Estevanico had long before that date been kicked to Kingdom Come, but Coronado’s letter shows that *when he wrote it*, he did not yet know the negro was dead, and an unavoidable deduction is that Fray Marcos had not yet returned to Compostela,—although this seems not yet to be accepted by Dr. Sauer in his paper elsewhere in this issue.<sup>2</sup>

Lest it be thought that “all the packing is out of this case,” we now call attention to a point which has been disregarded in another of Coronado’s letters, that written to the viceroy from Culiacán on March 8, 1539, in which Coronado states that Fray Marcos “proceeded farther inland on the seventh of last February.”<sup>3</sup> The editors of the text cited state in a note that this should read “March 7” (the date given by Fray Marcos himself in his *Relación*); and they conclude, in a final note, that Coronado’s letter as we now have it is wrongly dated.

1. N. M. HIST. REV., XV, 130-1.

2. The basis for our statement is a little clause of four words. In his letter, Coronado stated that Fray Marcos had been accompanied by the negro “que se dice Estévan” (who is called Estévan).

Another unavoidable deduction from this Coronado letter (as I pointed out a year ago) is that the friar’s *relación* mentioned by Coronado could not be the *relación* which we now have.

3. Hammond and Rey (eds.), *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, 42-45, translated from the Italian text of Ramusio.

Of course if we change the date in the text (February 7 to March 7), we must also change the date of the letter; for it would be absurd for Coronado, writing on March 8, to say that Fray Marcos had "proceeded farther inland on the seventh of last March"! For the same reason, we cannot infer that the letter was written on March 18 or any other day in that month.

But if both dates are moved forward a month, what is the result? Then, *writing on April 8*, Coronado would be saying in his opening sentence, "God willing, on April 10 I shall leave this land of San Miguel de Culiacán for Topira," and (he continued) it could not be done sooner for he was awaiting the arrival of powder and fuse being sent by the viceroy which "must have reached Compostela by now"—April 8 and a hundred leagues from Culiacán! If we are precluded from this change in date also, then obviously the date of the letter as we have it cannot be wrong.<sup>4</sup>

If the dates of this Coronado letter cannot be changed, then Fray Marcos did start out from Culiacán on February 7 instead of March 7. If it is surprising that he should have made a mistake of a month as to this date, we might remember that he wrote the *Relación* which we have in August, more than six months later, after an arduous journey of many dangers and trials. Also the earlier date fits in with other known facts: Coronado delivered the viceroy's instructions to Fray Marcos at Tonalá on Nov. 20, 1538,<sup>5</sup> and then escorted him via Compostela north to Culiacán; and there on March 8 (according to this letter) he wrote to the viceroy that Fray Marcos had gone on inland a month before.<sup>6</sup>

If we accept as correct the dates given by Coronado in this letter, then we shall hesitate to accept the identification of the place "Vacapa" advanced by Dr. Sauer.<sup>7</sup> With a time period in this part of the journey of a good six weeks instead

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

5. *Op. cit.* "Acceptance by Fray Marcos," p. 61.

6. A month's delay in Coronado getting off for Topira may have been a factor in the failure of his rendezvous with Fray Marcos at Corazones, 120 leagues from Culiacán. *Op. cit.*, "Mendoza to the King," p. 53.

7. *N. M. Hist. Rev.*, XII, 279-282.

of two, it may be well to reconsider the identification of "Vacapa" by Adolph Bandelier as the modern Matape.<sup>8</sup>

The present writer is not acquainted with that country, but Bandelier was a pioneer field investigator in the history and archaeology of our Southwest, including the Sonora country, and the reasons which he presents for locating "Vacapa" much farther north than does Dr. Sauer find added weight in this Coronado letter. In fact, the two Coronado letters seem definitely to relieve the difficulty as to the time factor at both the beginning and the end of Fray Marcos' journey.

Regarding other difficulties stressed by Dr. Sauer, it is of course absurd to think of Fray Marcos pushing along during midday summer heat; travel during early and late hours and night travel by moonlight were doubtless practiced then as now; also while the rainy season would make travel difficult it would not make it impossible. Nor can I conceive of Fray Marcos staying at Compostela while an advance messenger went on to Mexico City and returned before Fray Marcos started for that city. It is more reasonable to think that Fray Marcos proceeded at a more leisurely rate and was well along that last stretch when any reply reached him.

Was Fray Marcos a liar? All in all, we must admit at least that "reasonable doubt exists" and it is a good old principle that a man is innocent until he is proven guilty.

L. B. B.

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8. This is found in his paper first published in *The Magazine of Western History* (1886), and reprinted in the *N. M. HIST. REV.*, IV, 28-44, where see especially pp. 32-33.