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## JUAN DE LA ASUNCIÓN, 1538: FIRST SPANISH EXPLORER OF ARIZONA?

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### ABSTRACT

Cryptic discussions in early manuscripts refer to exploration several hundred leagues north of the Spanish frontier in 1538, a year before the famous journey of Fray Marcos de Niza, commonly described as the first northward exploration into Arizona. Discussed by Bandelier in 1890, these references have been given little attention by modern historians, although it has been said they imply the discovery of the Gila or Colorado River. Comparison of the old sources with more recently available information strongly indicates that the evidence is more consistent than has been asserted in the past, and that a friar named Juan de la Asunción, with several companions, traveled along the San Pedro or Santa Cruz River in 1538, discovered the Gila River, collected information about the Pueblos of the Rio Grande, possibly discovered the Casa Grande or related ruins, and became the first Spanish explorer of south-central Arizona.

### INTRODUCTION: THE SITUATION IN 1538

Following the conquest of Tenochtitlan by Cortez in 1521 "it was, of course, natural that the Spanish explorers, . . . should have rationalized their cupidity with a reasoned expectation of still other pots of gold at the end of some rainbow beyond the unknown," (Smith 1970). Sociological pressures, such as legend, the struggle for political power, and religious ethnocentricity, caused an especially strong impetus to northern expansion. By 1521 the name "California" had already come into usage as the result of a novel published in Toledo, describing an island inhabited by wealthy Amazons. In 1529 Nuño de Guzmán set out with a small army to find the island; failing this, in 1531 he founded Culiacán in an effort to carve out his own empire. He was soon engaged in forays beyond the frontier to capture Indians for the slave trade. As discussed by Bolton (1946:6) the stage had been set not only by the hard facts of Aztec gold, but also by European mythology which held that seven bishops in the middle ages escaped from invading Mohammedans by sailing into the Atlantic and founding the fabled Seven Cities of Antilia. Indian reports about a number of "wealthy" cities to the north excited speculation.

In 1536 Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions stumbled into the hands of one of Guzmán's slave-raiding parties roughly 80 miles north of

Culiacán [the route is traced critically by Hallenbeck (1940)]. They had just completed an eight year odyssey walking from the Texas coast where their ship had been wrecked, through New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, and down into Mexico. In the Arizona-New Mexico border region, de Vaca reported being told by the Indians of people who had cotton blankets better than those in New Spain, who dressed well, wore shoes, and had permanent houses and good farms. In southeastern Arizona and northern Sonora — an area still quite unknown to the Spaniards in Mexico — the travellers reported having been on a trade route and seeing turquoise, jewelry, and other items in transit to Mexico from the northern towns. Local Indians said these items had come from mountains to the north, where the people lived in “villages with many people and very big houses” (Hallenbeck:1940). According to the chronicle of Mota-Padilla (1742:111), de Vaca had reported a region called “Tzibola”, with “seven walled cities, and tall houses of six or seven stories.” Such reports further enhanced the rumors about the “Seven Cities of Cibola” and lured the Spanish northward.

At this time, Cortez was advancing his own claim to political power in New Spain by sending seaborne expeditions into the southern part of the Gulf of California, as pointed out by Bandelier (1890). To the dismay of Cortez, the king in 1537 appointed Antonio de Mendoza as the first viceroy, or governor, of Mexico. The new viceroy now had to demonstrate his own interest in exploration. As Bandelier (1890:70) comments, the post “exposed the incumbent to such perils that he was not to be envied for securing it.” To counter Cortez’s seaborne program, Mendoza judiciously planned land expeditions toward the north.

#### MARCOS DE NIZA: 1539

The most famous outcome of this situation was the journey of the Franciscan friar, Marcos, of Nice. The journey is documented, not only in Marcos’ own report, but in a letter from Viceroy Mendoza to the king, which has been taken by historians as a prime source for reconstruction of activities in this period. This letter probably written between November 20, 1538 and September 2, 1539 (Bandelier 1890:84) describes Marcos as “beginning to penetrate into the interior of the (unexplored northern) country.”

In his letter Mendoza describes the events leading to the Marcos journey. First, the viceroy had tried in 1537 to organize a northward expedition along de Vaca’s trail with two of the survivors of the de Vaca party, but this failed causing Mendoza some embarrassment with the crown. Determined to succeed the next time, he organized in 1538 another expedition around the one remaining volunteer from the de Vaca party, a group of northern Indians to be trained as translators, and Fray Marcos, who had arrived in Mexico City during that summer (Bolton:1949). Mendoza’s letter skips directly from the aborted 1537 attempt to the Marcos de Niza expedition, which left Culiacán on March 7, 1539.

So one might think judging from the official correspondence that has come down to us, that the only Spaniards who had been as far north as the Arizona border country prior to 1539 were de Vaca and his companions.

#### EVIDENCE FOR EXPEDITIONS IN 1538

In certain other documents besides the Mendoza letter there are cryptic references to extended northern journeys by friars in 1538, the year *before* Fray Marcos reached the pueblo country. Modern historians appear uncertain how to deal with these references. Bolton (1949), one of the most authoritative chroniclers of the era, ignores them and appears to trust only the Mendoza letter. Perrigo (1960) opts for the most persistent of the stories and states that two friars, Asunción and Nadal, probably reached and discovered the Colorado River. Winship (1896), who published a translation of a very early manuscript on Coronado’s expedition, comments that Asunción seems to have visited the northern Indians, but that “details of his journey are hopelessly confused.” Winship references Bandelier’s work of 1890, which contains careful analysis of the material. A re-analysis of this and more recent material unavailable to Bandelier suggests a solution to the problem.

Certain characteristics of the accounts discussed by Bandelier are listed in Table I. Briefly, the accounts seem to be second-hand stories about one or more friars who ventured north in 1538, reached a northern river populated by moderately prosperous Indians, heard tales of another more major river beyond with still more prosperous Indians, and upon their return passed this information on to Fray Marcos’ party. Some of the accounts appear to be based either on personal contact with a friar who made the journey, or on documents resulting directly from the journey. Latitude measures at the river are reported variously as 34°, 34½°, and 35°. Bandelier (1890) states that such measures by early Spanish explorers were systematically too high, typically by 1½°. Hammond and Rey (1940) note that this error was due to errors in the tables of declination of the sun then in use. Bandelier, therefore, modified the latitude measures to read 32½°, 33°, and 33½°.

The Gila River in the area in question lies at about 33° latitude, substantiating the report and suggesting that the story of the 1538 expedition deserves to be checked more closely.

It has already been pointed out there was a great deal of interest in northern exploration. Both the church and the state were encouraged to organize expeditions. Mange, in his account of 1720, specifically describes the situation in 1538 (Bandelier, 1890:93):

As in those times . . . all was holy ardor and fervor to attract heathens to the knowledge of God and of his faith, the spirit was not content with working within the boundaries of what had been discovered, but, overstepping

the limits of what was deemed possible, they braved the obstacles which Northern America offered. He who was most ardent in this field was Fray Marcos de Niza . . . who begged of his Provincial, Fray Antonio Ciudad de Rodrigo permission (to explore) . . . and as he did not obtain it for himself, secured license for another to go in his place — another friar — while he would remain to administer the missions of New Galicia . . . He dispatched, in 1538, Fray Juan de la Asunción [sic] and lay brother together with some Indians . . .

Mange not only states the wide desire among friars to explore the northern frontier, but also indicates that Marcos was only “the most ardent” of several who tried. Mange even names the leader of the 1538 expedition.

In regard to this name, Bandelier raises a misleading complication. He states, “The version of Mota-Padilla (Table 1) differs again from all the others in that it gives the name of the priest as Fray Juan de Olmeda.” Bandelier cites only part of Mota-Padilla’s text, but a complete reading shows that the name Olmeda refers to only one of several friars who were sent north. Mota-Padilla (1742:111) says, speaking of the lands described by de Vaca:

... Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo had sent ecclesiastics from Jalisco to discover those lands, and they had returned, giving an account of them . . . This information was given by one of the ecclesiastics, named Juan de Olmeda, to Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, who sent it with Olmeda to Fray Marcos de Niza . . .

Rather than conflicting with the other information, as indicated by Bandelier, Mota-Padilla’s account is quite consistent with the others in stating that several friars travelled north. Olmeda may have made at least part of the journey, and he was apparently the one who relayed the information.

Having concluded that a 1538 expedition is not historically improbable, we should next consider the accounts themselves.

Translations of the various accounts are too long to be included here, and most are quoted by Bandelier (1890). Since the accounts are all quite similar we take the liberty of combining them into one paraphrased version. Lest it be thought that the different accounts are so similar as to be mere copies of one another, Bandelier points out numerous specific differences that suggest more than one original source; probably four independent sources are involved in accounts 1/2, 3, 4, and 5/6. The numbers in brackets refer to material specifically drawn from the accounts as numbered in Table 1.

In January [6] 1538, two friars named Juan de la Asunción [5,6] and Pedro Nadal [6], started from Mexico City for the north and northwest. They travelled through Jalisco [1,2,3] and Culiacán [3,4] and were joined by eight [2] Spaniards who were searching for mines [1,2,3]. In the province of Sinaloa [3], just beyond the previously known regions [1,2] the trail to the north forked into two main branches. At the miners’ urging, they selected the eastern fork, but after a few [1,2] (two) [3] days’ journey the party encountered rough mountains and had to turn back [1,2,3]. The other road they found to be passable, but one friar [1,2] (lay brother) [3] fell sick and with the Spanish miners turned back (after three days travel on the western road) [3]. The other friar continued northwest [3,4] with two [1,2] Indian interpreters [1,2,3]. After a few days’ march [1,2] they came to a region inhabited by poor people who came out to greet the friar, called him a messenger from heaven [1,2], and brought crosses in their hands [3]. They

TABLE 1. Summary of Bandelier’s References on Pre-Marcos Journey

Author	Year	Probable Sources	Year Given	Distance Travelled	Latitude (Given)	Latitude (Bandelier)	Friars Mentioned
1. Motolinia	1540	Contemporary	1538	300 L. from New Galicia			2 friars
2. Mendieta	~1596	Knew Marcos. Saw Asunción’s report?	1538	>200 L. from New Galicia			A friar
3. Mange	1720	Sonoran sources?	1538	600 L. NW from Mexico City	34°	32½°	Juan de la Asunción & lay brother. Juan de Olmeda
4. Mota-Padilla	1742	Tovar papers (1542)	implies 1538	Far enough to hear about Cibola.			
5. Garces	~1776	Library at Queretaro	1538	600 L. NW of Mexico City			Juan de la Asunción
6. Amicivita	1792	Library at Queretaro	1538	600 L. NW	35°	33½°	Juan de la Asunción & Pedro Nadal

hunted rabbits and deer, which they shared with the travellers [1,2,3]. From day to day the travellers were now accompanied by 100-200 [3] (200-300 [2], 300-400 [1]) Indians.

In this manner the friar traveled over 200 leagues [2,4] (300 leagues [1]) further or about 500 leagues [3,5,6] northwest [3,5] of Mexico City. Along nearly this whole [1,2] stretch he observed people who were clothed and had houses of sod [1,2,3]. The houses were many stories high [1,2], (low, with many families living in each one owing to great width [3]). The people living here were kind, well built, and decorated with iridescent shells and strings of red beads resembling coral [3]. They had only a little maize, some white [3].

The friar was stopped by a large and unfathomable river, too deep to cross [3,5]. Here the Indians told him that ten days journey beyond [3,5], to the north [3], was another [5] still greater [6] river [4]. One Indian had been there as a captive [3]. The friar was told that the banks of the more distant river were settled by many people [3,4,5], whose numbers were indicated by handfuls of sand [3,5]. These distant people lived in enclosed villages [1,2,3], with houses of three stories [3], were dressed and shod [5] in buckskin and cotton mantles [3,5] and were at war with their neighbors [3]. The (other) [2] people had not only cotton, but wool clothing of good quality [1], sheep of some kind [1], "cows" [1,2,4] larger [2] (smaller [1]) than those of Spain, other unusual animals [1,2], shoes that cover the foot - a thing so far known no where else [1], and many turquoises. The poorer Indians, which the friar was visiting, had examples of some of these things which they obtained in the distant larger villages where they sometimes went to work as laborers [1,2].

The Indians visited by the friar lived along a river at  $34^{\circ}$  ( $32\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ ) latitude [3]. Fray Pedro Nadal, who accompanied Asunción and was versed in mathematics, here observed the altitude of the pole to be  $35^{\circ}$  ( $33\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ ) [6].

The friar returned by the same road, arriving in Compostela nine months later, and thence returning to Mexico (City) [3]. His information was reported to the Provincial, Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, who had sent him on the journey [1,2,3,4]. This information was conveyed to Fray Rodrigo by Fray Juan de Olmeda, who then was sent by Fray Rodrigo to report the information to Fray Marcos de Niza [4]. Fray Marcos, in order to satisfy himself of the truth of what the friar had published, determined to travel there and see for himself before any others should conclude to do it [2]. He went as quickly as possible [2], during the following year [6]. Finding that the report of the friar was true, he returned to Mexico and confirmed what the other had said [2].

The river which Asunción reached was doubtless the Colorado of the West [5]. The river reached by Asunción was reached in 1539 by Fray Marcos and was called the River of the Rafts, also known as the Colorado [6].

As can be seen, these accounts are on the whole remarkably coherent but are in a few cases self-contradictory. Bandelier refers to evidence that the "River of the Rafts" was not the Colorado but the Gila, thus disposing of the last paragraph. Minor inconsistencies, such as differences in "mileage", the uncertainty in size of the "cows" (no doubt buffalo), and the confusion over house size along the visited river versus house size along the distant river testify that the different versions were at least partly independent, not mere copies of each other, and hence they actually strengthen the story. Less a skeptic wonder how a priest could be stopped by a "Gila River" that now appears as a narrow ditch lined with mud, we point out that the modern Gila is dammed. Mange, in 1694, described the Gila as carrying "so much water that a ship could be navigated".

The remarkable consistency of the stories allows us to pursue two lines of historical sleuthing: reconstruction of the journey from Mexico and determination of the final destination in Arizona from clues given by both Indians and Spaniards (Figure 1).

The large-scale map in Figure 1 (left side) shows points mentioned in the manuscripts. The expedition passed through Culiacán (A), and then reached the fork in the trail (B), where some members turned back. Poor Indians with crossed were met next (C), indicating that Asunción was either on the path of de Vaca, or in a region previously visited by priests exploring the northern frontier, whose existence is suggested in the accounts. The region of Corazones, or Hearts (named after deer hearts presented to de Vaca here) (Hallenbeck 1940:92) near the present town of Ures (D) was already known to Viceroy Mendoza in 1539 and was traversed by Fray Marcos and Coronado. Hence, it is most probable that this was the main Indian trail and that Asunción travelled along it. The accounts stress that Asunción travelled north and west. The Sierra Madre prevented a strong eastern turn, while the Gran Desierto, the Pinacate lavas, and what was to become the infamous Camino del Diablo prevented a sharp western swing directly toward the Colorado. This geography, in addition to the description given in the accounts, makes it very unlikely that Asunción reached the Colorado or followed the route shown by Perrigo (1960). For these reasons, in addition to Bandelier's identification of the "River of the Rafts" as the Gila, we rule out a discovery of the Colorado in 1538. The accounts state that Asunción travelled more than 200 leagues from the frontier, a limit shown by E. He must therefore have crossed the modern border in the vicinity of the headwaters of the San Pedro or Santa Cruz Rivers. It is known that major Indian trading routes to Cibola criss-crossed this region, and that one of these trails, from the Pueblo country, followed the course of the Gila (Hallenbeck 1940:225). Doubtless the local Indians guided the party northward along such trails. For example, Coronado apparently followed the San Pedro trail to Cibola (Bolton 1949).

The endpoint of the journey can be located from internal clues in the story: these clues define a bounded region which is heavily outlined in the detailed map in Figure 1. The reported latitudes of  $32\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  and  $33\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ , according to Bandelier's corrected measures, bound the region on the north and south. The region is at least 200 leagues from Culiacán. If we can now determine the identity and location of the Indians said to be living along a larger river ten days' journey to the north, we can further delimit the site. Bandelier, while expressing dismay at the confusion of the story, is inclined to suggest that the second river was the Colorado:

... the present condition of the case leads me to believe, that the journey was really made, that Fray Juan de la Asunción was the man who performed it, and that he reached as far north as the Lower Gila, and perhaps the lower course of the Colorado ...

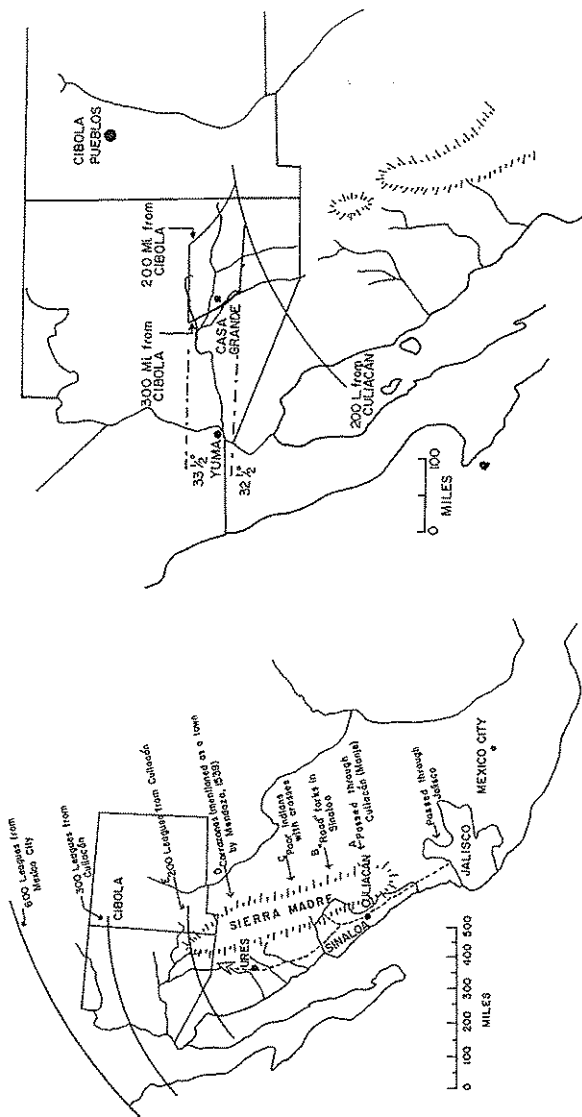


Figure 1. Reconstruction of Journey from Mexico, and the Final Destination in Arizona.

Bandelier proposes that a similarity exists between descriptions of Asunción's distant Indians and the Yuma Indians near the Colorado's mouth. Most other authors, probably influenced by the early Spanish accounts' suggestions that the Colorado was involved, have followed suit. On the contrary, there are numerous indications that the Colorado River was *not* the river alluded to by Asunción. To the north, in the direction Asunción indicated, the Colorado is difficult to reach because of mountains and the Mogollon Rim, and the river was not heavily populated. Asunción makes no reference to the Grand Canyon. The populated region of the Colorado that Bandelier refers to lies ten days' journey (about 200 miles) to the west, not the north, in the region of the Gila-Colorado confluence. Contrary to the descriptions of the distant Indians of Asunción, Kroeber (1925:795) states that the lower Colorado Indians lacked "architecture in stone . . . the loom . . . and body dress on a notable scale." For these reasons, the Colorado may be excluded from consideration as the distant river.

On the other hand, the Rio Grande and its pueblos meet all the requirements, historical, geographical, and ethnological. Historically, we know that this is the direction in which Fray Marcos went in 1539 when he followed most of Asunción's route, and we know that Coronado in 1540 again followed this route. Presumably this came about because the later travelers were exposed to the same information that Asunción received.

Geographically, the concentration of Pueblos along the northern Rio Grande, with a population of 60,000 (estimated by Dozier 1970:130), lay ten days' journey northeast of the region probably reached by Asunción. Asunción's location would thus be 200 to 300 miles from the pueblos (judging in part from the mileage clocked by Kino in his later journeys). In Figure 1, arcs centered on the Pueblo region have been drawn to indicate the east and west boundaries of the endpoint area.

Ethnologically, the Pueblos are the best candidate for the distant cities, as the Pueblo people grew cotton, made periodic trips to the plains to hunt buffalo, wore shoes and boots of buffalo hide and deer skin, kept turkeys for food and feathers (could feather down materials have mistakenly been reported as wool, which none of the Indians had?), embroidered cotton robes, and used turquoise jewelry (Dozier 1970). Furthermore, the description reported by Asunción sounds remarkably like that given by de Vaca, who noted cotton, shoes, and turquoise among Pueblo peoples in 1536.

These clues, as illustrated in Figure 1, strongly indicate that Asunción reached the Gila River near its junction with the San Pedro River. Asunción and his party must have travelled north along either the San Pedro or Santa Cruz Rivers.

#### POSSIBLE DISCOVERY OF CASA GRANDE RUIN

The reader will have noted some confusion in the old accounts about the life style of the Indians along the river that Asunción visited. While Mange

says these Indians lived in low sod houses, the earlier accounts say (Motolinia, 1541): "... along the whole route (he) had notice of a country inhabited by many people who were clothed, and who have houses constructed of sod and of many stories." Mendieta (ca. 1596) has almost exactly the same wording. This explicitly says Asunción noted multi-story buildings on the route he traversed, but does not as explicitly say that Indians lived in them.

Within our identified endpoint area (Figure 1) lies the Casa Grande ruin. Built in the fourteenth century (Van Valkenburgh, 1962), it would have been roughly 200 years old when Asunción passed nearby. The ruin must have been very impressive at that time. When Bernal saw it in 1697 it was about 350 years old, and Bernal stated (Van Valkenburgh, 1962:6): "... one sees the four stories with good rooms, apartments, and windows curiously plastered inside and out so that the walls are smooth and mortered (plastered?) with a reddish mud..." There were other one, two, and three-storied buildings surrounded by a walled enclosure at Casa Grande. Kino, when he first came upon Casa Grande in 1694 (the reputed discovery date) was told that "further to the east, north, and west there are seven or eight more of these large, old houses and the ruins of whole cities..." and Kino later verified this for himself (Van Valkenburgh, 1962:6). During Kino's 1697 visit, some of his companions crossed the Gila "with difficulty" and saw "a ruin, square and very large, with very high walls more than a yard in thickness." Yet, by the 1800's, many of the multi-story buildings in the Gila vicinity had collapsed and were reduced to mere rounded mounds of mud-like debris.

If Asunción reached the Gila-San Pedro junction, he was 45 miles east of the Casa Grande ruin; if he travelled along the Santa Cruz, he passed within ten miles of the ruin. Probably he was told of the 200-year-old buildings, which must have been even more spectacular than in Kino's time, and he may even have visited them or similar ruins.

This would explain the confusion between different chroniclers' accounts of the local Indian villages. We can speculate that, upon returning to Mexico, Asunción said that he had seen Indians who lived in low, sod houses, that he had seen walled, three- and four-story buildings nearby, and that he had been told of numerous prosperous walled villages of multi-story buildings ten days' journey to the north. Such a report, circulating in Mexico, could have led to the varied interpretations given by later chroniclers.

In conclusion, we concur with Bandelier that the 1538 journey by Fray Juan de la Asunción did occur, but in contrast to Bandelier and other historians we conclude that the evidence is quite consistent in indicating that Asunción discovered the Gila River, was the first Spanish explorer of south-central Arizona, probably blazed the first Spanish trail along the San Pedro (or Santa Cruz), returned information about the Pueblos on the Rio Grande, and may have discovered the Casa Grande or similar ruins.

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