

# Marcos de Niza, Friar Biography

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# Biography

Friar Marcos de Niza (ca. 1500-1558), Franciscan missionary in Spanish America, set the route to the fabled "Seven Cities of Cibola" for the expedition of Coronado.

The birthplace of Marcos de Niza is unknown, but he was either French or Italian, probably the former. In his youth he lived at Nice in the duchy of Savoy. He became a Franciscan and went to Santo Domingo as a missionary in 1531, later going to Guatemala, Peru, and Mexico City.

The reports of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and three companions, who walked from the Texas coast to Culiacán in 1536, raised hopes in Mexico of fabulous riches to the north. Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza prepared the expedition of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado to investigate. However, in 1539 he dispatched Marcos de Niza with Estabanico (who had been with Cabeza de Vaca) to explore in advance. The friar sent his companion ahead. Estabanico reached the Zuni pueblo of Hawikuh in western New Mexico and was killed by Indians. Marcos learned of his companion's death but pressed on, escorted by friendly Mexican Indians, until he saw Hawikuh from a neighboring hillside. He gained an "incredibly distorted impression of Hawikuh," and it has been suggested that the sun shining on the dwellings made them look like gold and silver.

Marcos believed he had seen one of the "Seven Cities," originally located by legend on an Atlantic island but now thought to be westward. Returning to Mexico, he described the place as larger than Mexico City, with houses 10 stories high whose doors and fronts were made of turquoise.

Mendoza needed no more convincing. The Coronado expedition, with the friar as guide, departed early in 1540. They reached Hawikuh on July 7 and captured it. But the soldiers were enraged on finding nothing but a poor Indian village. They cursed the friar so vehemently that Coronado, not wishing to have the blood of a churchman on his hands, sent him back to Mexico City. The accompanying message stated, "Friar Marcos has not told the truth in a single thing that he said."

The rest of the friar's career proved uneventful. He apparently became stricken with paralysis and lived first at Jalapa and then in a monastery at Xochimilco. Bishop Juan de Zumárraga gave him aid until his own death in 1548. Nothing more is known other than that the friar died on March 25, 1558.