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Coronado-era Place-names, I. Marcos de Niza in Sonora, and the Occurrence of Yaqui Names in his *Relación*

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Two words used by Marcos de Niza in the first European report on travel north through Sonora (1539) “*Sayota*” and “*Vacapa*” appear to be traceable to the Hiaki (Yaqui) language. Also, the Coronado expedition’s assignment (1540) of the name “Yaquimi” to what is now called the *Río Yaqui*, in its middle stretch near Onavas, indicates the presence of Hiaki/Yaqui-speakers in that region. These results are used to constrain the likely region of Hiaki/Yaqui-speaking peoples in 1539–42 and also the poorly known movements of Marcos de Niza and the Coronado expedition in Sonora at that time.

Dos palabras usadas por Marcos de Niza en el primer informe Europeo sobre los viajes hacia el norte a través de Sonora (1539)—“*Sayota*” y “*Vacapa*”—parece ser atribuibles al idioma Hiaki (Yaqui). Además, la asignación de la expedición de Coronado (1540) del nombre “Yaquimi,” a lo que ahora se llama el Río Yaqui, en su tramo medio cerca de Onavas, indica la presencia de Hiaki/Yaqui parlantes en esa región. Estos resultados se emplean para restringir la probable zona de pueblos de habla Hiaki/Yaqui en 1539–42 y también contribuyen a limitar los movimientos poco conocidos de Marcos de Niza y la expedición de Coronado en Sonora en ese tiempo.

KEYWORDS Coronado expedition route, Marcos de Niza: use of Yaqui words, Marcos de Niza route, Sonora: place-names in 1539, Vacapa location

Most modern analyses of the Coronado expedition route have been based on translation and analysis of 16th century documents (e.g., [Bandelier 1890](#); [Flint and Flint 2005](#); [Winship 1896](#)), together with analysis of the geography of possible routes (e.g. [Hallenbeck 1949](#); [Sauer, 1932](#)), recent archaeological evidence ([Brasher 2007, 2009, 2011](#); [Damp et al. 2005](#); [Duffen and Hartmann 1997](#); [Hartmann and Lee 2003](#); [Vierra 1992](#)), and various syntheses ([Hallenbeck 1949](#); [Hartmann 1997, 2005](#); [Hartmann and Flint 2003](#); [Hartmann and Hartmann 2011](#); [Sauer 1937, 1941](#); [Wagner 1934](#)). Data have converged on routing in southeast Arizona ([Brasher 2011](#)), but the routing and named locations in Sonora remain poorly constrained. Here we discuss the possibility that certain place-names used in the Coronado-era records may shed light on the route and on specific Sonoran locales.

Background and Assessment of Marcos de Niza's *Relación*

In 1538, a priest, Marcos de Niza, was assigned to explore northward on foot with a small number of companions in order to investigate whether a rumored major trade center might exist, and whether it might resemble the golden empires of Aztec Mexico or Inca Peru. In 1539 Marcos came back with the first European report of a prosperous, populous settlement, "Cíbola" (now known to be Zuni, New Mexico). He was soon written off as a liar and fraud. Several charges were made at several different times: (a) Coronado and his troops claimed in 1542 that Marcos misled them about the quality of the route and the nature of Cíbola; (b) popular early 20th century books commonly indicated that Marcos had reported gold in Cíbola, thus motivating the Coronado expedition under false pretenses; and (c) several well-known 20th century scholars concluded that Marcos did not have time to complete the journey he reported, and thus lied about coming within sight of Cíbola. Colorful epithets abounded, [Sauer \(1932:30\)](#) called Marcos an "amazing dunderhead"; [Wagner \(1934\)](#) said he was a victim of his own "imagination or hallucinations"; [Hallenbeck \(1949:113\)](#) spoke of him as "The Lying Monk."

Recent reappraisals of Marcos ([Hartmann 1997](#); [Hartmann and Flint 2003](#)) suggest that the earlier assessments are flawed. (a) Coronado, weeks after entering Cíbola and realizing it was an adobe pueblo with no gold, complained that Marcos had "not spoken the truth in anything," but we have to recognize that, at that point, Coronado was trying to paint Marcos as the scapegoat. Interestingly, no known source during the Coronado expedition directly charges Marcos with talking about gold in Cíbola, but merely with painting too optimistic a picture. Soldiers complained that Marcos while had described good trails on the trade routes from Sonora to Cíbola, that the roads turned out to be more difficult than Marcos said. The soldiers, however, were trying to lead horses and livestock across trails that Marcos and the indigenes traveled on foot. (b) Later writers claimed that Marcos had proclaimed gold in Cíbola in 1539 when he returned to Mexico, but we have two copies of Marcos's *Relación*, signed and notarized on 2 September, 1539, some days after his return, and they say nothing about gold in Cíbola. (The definitive translation of the *Relación* is by [Flint and Flint 2005:59–88](#)).

We also have statements or letters from a number of eyewitnesses who were present in Mexico City ca. September 1539, and the great majority speak only of Marcos talking about good country with prosperous towns that he had found in the north, which was true (Hartmann 2002:419–439). The claim of treasure in Cibola, attributed to Marcos, stems at least partly from European publishers in the 1500s and 1600s, who often inserted bogus embellishments, calculated to sell more books. For example, Hakluyt's (1600) English translation claimed that when Marcos was within the sight of Cibola, he recorded that the Cibolans "use vessels of gold and silver, for they have no other metal, whereof there is greater use and more abundance than in Peru . . ." That sentence no doubt contributed to the view, common in English-speaking countries by the late 1800s, that Marcos trumpeted gold in the streets. (c) The charge that Marcos lacked time during his 1539 trip to reach Cibola, and lied about it, was based primarily on a false assumption by Sauer (1932:28; 1937), Wagner (1934:213–215), Hallenbeck (1949) and others. They all assumed that when news of Marco's "good country" in the north surfaced in the Mexico City area, in July of 1539, it meant that Marcos himself had returned by that time, and they gave good arguments that this did not give him time to get to Cibola and back. New Mexico historian Bloom (1940, 1941) was first to refute this, by pointing out that Viceroy Mendoza had ordered Marcos to send back messages about his discoveries along the way. Indeed, the wording of the July 1539 documents suggests they were based on messages sent back during Marcos's trip north, before he reached Cibola (Hartmann 2002). Hence, Marcos had until late August to reach Mexico City, when a sudden flurry of news about Marcos culminated in the 2 September ceremony where copies of Marcos's *Relación* were signed by Marcos himself and notarized. Oddly enough, Sauer (1941) immediately attacked Bloom's idea as "sheer supposition" with "no basis." Hallenbeck (1949) admitted that Marcos had been ordered to send back messages, but claimed that Marcos "totally ignored" the instruction. Bloom's idea was thus strangely ignored until the 1990s (Hartmann 1997, 2002).

Contrary to the accounts mentioned above, what Marcos *did* report was mostly correct. He stated that the coast turned west around latitude 35 degrees. This is about 3.5 degrees higher than the westward turn at the head of the Gulf of California, but as Wagner (1934) noted, Spanish latitude measurements in this region averaged around 2 degrees too high, for unknown reasons. Marcos reported numerous other facts correctly, citing his interviews with native informants. For example, Marcos recorded that Cibola had multi-story structures built of stone; that Cibolans used ladders to reach upper floors of their buildings; that they had buffalo-derived products; and that they had much turquoise, including turquoises mounted in doorways. Marcos, in central Sonora 'and also the naval captain Alarcón, who navigated up the Colorado River to the Yuma area in 1540' described individuals who had traveled 400–500 miles to Cibola over native trails from both regions.

Marcos recorded that he traveled to Cibola with a party of southern Arizona village leaders, but that a few days from his goal, he learned that his emissary, Esteban the Moor, who had arrived in Cibola before him, had been killed in an altercation, and that the Cibolans were up in arms. Hence, Marcos said he sneaked

within sight of one of the towns of Cíbola, but did not attempt contact with the now-hostile Zunis. After some moments viewing the town and erecting a cairn and cross, he turned back in order to assure that he could deliver his news to Viceroy Mendoza.

A mystery might seem to exist about why Marcos's *Relación* did not discuss in more detail his routing details or the possibility of gold in Cíbola. It now seems likely that Marcos and the viceroy conspired to keep these details out of Marcos's publically notarized report to prevent unauthorized expeditions. Indeed, in Mexico City on 24 August, 1539, probably a day or so after Marcos's return, the viceroy issued a ban on any such unauthorized "wildcat" exploration to the north. Marcos's formal *Relación* was notarized publically on 2 September, and seems designed to give the viceroy claims on the northern lands, in the face of competition from ships sent out by Hernán Cortés (for a more detailed analysis, see [Hartmann \(2014\)](#)). Marcos turned around and helped to lead the Coronado expedition all the way to Cíbola in early 1540. This would have been an unlikely move if Marcos knew that many witnesses in southern Arizona villages could have told any of Coronado's troops that Marcos had turned back before reaching Cíbola.

Controversies remain about Marcos's route (not to mention his veracity), and pinning down the route is important, because Marcos recorded the first purposeful European anthropological observations from southern Sonora to northwestern New Mexico, and these observations would be much more valuable if we could pin down their locations (Cabeza de Vaca's party of four shipwreck survivors passed southward through the region in 1536; their routing and observations, too, would be clarified if we could clarify the positions of related locations recorded by Marcos.).

As a result of the above considerations, we suggest that it is worthwhile to study specific terms and place-names that Marcos mentioned, in a search for clues about the people and places he visited. Before proceeding, we should clarify a few points concerning the linguistic and orthographic discussion. Linguists use a universal alphabet to transcribe spoken language, called the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This alphabet has fixed sound-symbol correspondences, and transcriptions in IPA are phonetically unambiguous. To separate IPA transcriptions from ordinary writing in the relevant language-specific orthography, they are typically enclosed in square brackets. We follow this convention in discussing sound/spelling correspondences below, and where sequences of letters are enclosed in square brackets, the letters have the phonetic values associated with them in the IPA. The accurate pronunciation of the name of the people and language commonly called 'Yaqui' in English and Spanish is [hiæki], with an initial voiceless glottal fricative [h]. The spelling 'Yaqui' was established by Spanish-speaking explorers, missionaries and administrators, based on a term they heard. Note that Spanish itself lacks phonemic glottal fricatives, so its omission from the spelling (and pronunciation) of these Spanish speakers is hardly surprising.

Two orthographies are in use by the people themselves, one based on Spanish spelling conventions, in which the letter 'j' is used for the glottal fricative sound, and one based on English-spelling conventions, in which the letter 'h' is used for that sound. Thus, in Mexico, the spelling of the name of the people and language in their own orthography is 'Jiaki'; in the community in the United States, the correct spelling in

the people's own orthography is 'Hiaki'. Our consultants use the American orthography, so we spell the name of the language and people 'Hiaki' throughout the document below. For established place-names such as the Río Yaqui, and in quotations from other sources, however, we stay with the original Spanish 'Yaqui' spelling.

The Problem of "Sayota"

After leaving Culiacán on a date Marcos recorded as 7 March (Friday), and then losing 2–3 days of "down time" due to an aide's illness, Marcos crossed beyond the known Spanish frontier some days later. Here he referred to a 4-day *despoblado* (unpopulated zone), which may have corresponded to Friday (14 March), Saturday, Sunday and Monday (17 March), according to a reconstruction by one of us (W.K.H.). This was possibly a 120–136-mile stretch between the lower Río Fuerte and the lower Río Yaqui. The lower Río Mayo would have been in the middle of this stretch, but may have been temporarily depopulated because of earlier Spanish slave-raids recorded in that area (Bolton 1949:6). The viceroy had ordered Marcos to gain information about the coastal configuration; Marcos followed this instruction, apparently stayed close to the coast and recorded names of islands. In this dry, near-coastal plain, roads are fairly straight and level, and the implied travel rate of about 30–34 miles per day is quite feasible, given that an enthused Marcos was accompanied by a crowd of recently liberated locals, who carried his packs, prepared camps, and so on (Note that the initial travel rates are constrained in part by later parts of the *Relación*, and must be close to these numbers in order to make the rest of the journey work out.).

Marcos next describes arriving at an unnamed location where he met "other Indians who marveled at seeing me, because they had no knowledge of Christians, since they have no dealings with those below the *despoblado*." In other words, he was now beyond the Spanish slaving zone. He says these people

tried to touch me on my clothes and called me 'Sayota,' by which they mean in their language 'man from the sky.' . . . Thus I traveled for three days [among] those same people (translation from Flint and Flint, 2005:68).

An interesting linguistic clue may point to his location around this time, consistent with a position on the Río Yaqui. Dictionaries of the Hiaki language, such as Molina and Shaul (1993) and Fernández et al. (2004) list a verb, *so'ita* or *soita*, as referring to vertical movement, including one specific meaning, to "move from above to below." The word appears not to have a Piman language cognate [Note that here we use 'Pima' for the Tepiman-language speaking people which the historical documents refer to as the 'Pima'. The documents do not distinguish between different Tepiman-language speaking groups in the areas under discussion, which include speakers of O'ob Nook (also known as Pima Bajo), Tohono O'odham (formerly known as Papago) and Akimel O'odham (formerly known as Pima), as well as some now-extinct Tepiman languages previously spoken in northern Sonora, more similar to the O'odham languages than to O'ob Nook.].

In a 2012 meeting between two of us (H.H., W.K.H.) and two elder Hiaki speakers, Maria Florez Leyva and Santos Leyva, the latter couple agreed that the word “*so’ita*” related to vertical movement, such as a tradition of raising a new baby to present him/her to the heavens, during the baptism ceremony. They related it also to the action of throwing grain upward and letting it fall, to separate the chaff. Marcos’s transcription, *sayota*, being similar in sound and connotation to the Hiaki word, thus suggests that Marcos was in a Hiaki-speaking area.

Regarding people in this same area, the Cabeza de Vaca party remarked that “anything they don’t have, or don’t know the origin of, they say came from the sky,” and that this was a common belief among “natives of the Río Sonora area.” It was also observed among other peoples from the Caribbean to Mexico (Adorno and Pautz 1999:351–352). The whole concept is similar to our own idiom that anything unexpected comes “out of the blue.”

An additional possible phonetic connection exists. A modern village on the mid Río Yaqui is now named Soyopa (Figure 1), and we investigated whether this name could be an echo of the “man-out-of-the-blue” term that Marcos spelled ‘*Sayota*’. One of us (C.M.F.) has noted that Soyopa has in the past been spelled Sayopa, even closer to Marcos’s term, and that some verbs connoting that something is falling from the sky, as in “to hail,” have a –pa ending. Our Hiaki-speaking consultant, Santos Leyva, regarded “Soyopa” as a Spanish town name, but with the same meaning as the Hiaki term, *so’ita*. In the context of discussing the modern town name, he mentioned again the connotation of throwing grain up in the air and letting it fall. The implication in his mind seemed to be that the modern Mexican town name is a corruption of the original Hiaki word, referring perhaps to a place where grain was processed.

Here we pause to remember that native words written by Marcos de Niza (originally a French speaker writing in Spanish), and by other Coronado-era chroniclers, are merely syllable-by-syllable attempts at phonetic transcriptions (using Spanish orthographic conventions), of what they thought they heard. Thus, spellings often differ from one Spanish recorder to another. Therefore, a wide net is cast regarding possible associations between the terms recorded by the Europeans and the sound of the original native words. Given that Marcos’s term *Sayota*, or the town name *Soyopa/Sayopa*, may relate to the Hiaki term now spelled *so’ita*, one of us (C.M.F.), noted a similar transition. Buelna (1890:205) listed a “Yaqui” verb “to eat” as *buaiē*, equivalent to *bwayē*. The “i” and “y” are both often used to transcribe the same palatal glide sound, also evident in the spelling alternatives “Yaqui/Hiaki/Jiaki,” discussed above, and in modern Hiaki, that word is spelled *bwa’e*. This example of connections between “i,” “y,” and the modern symbol “’”, thus fits our proposal that Marcos’s “*Sayota*” and the town name “*Sayopa*” are similarly related to the modern Hiaki verb “*so’ita*.”

Similarities of spellings have, of course, led scholars notoriously astray because linguistic coincidences are frequent. Nonetheless the phonetic and semantic similarities here are striking, and summarized as follows:

Sa yo ta (Marcos writing the name by which natives called him a “man from the sky”), probably in the region of the Río Yaqui

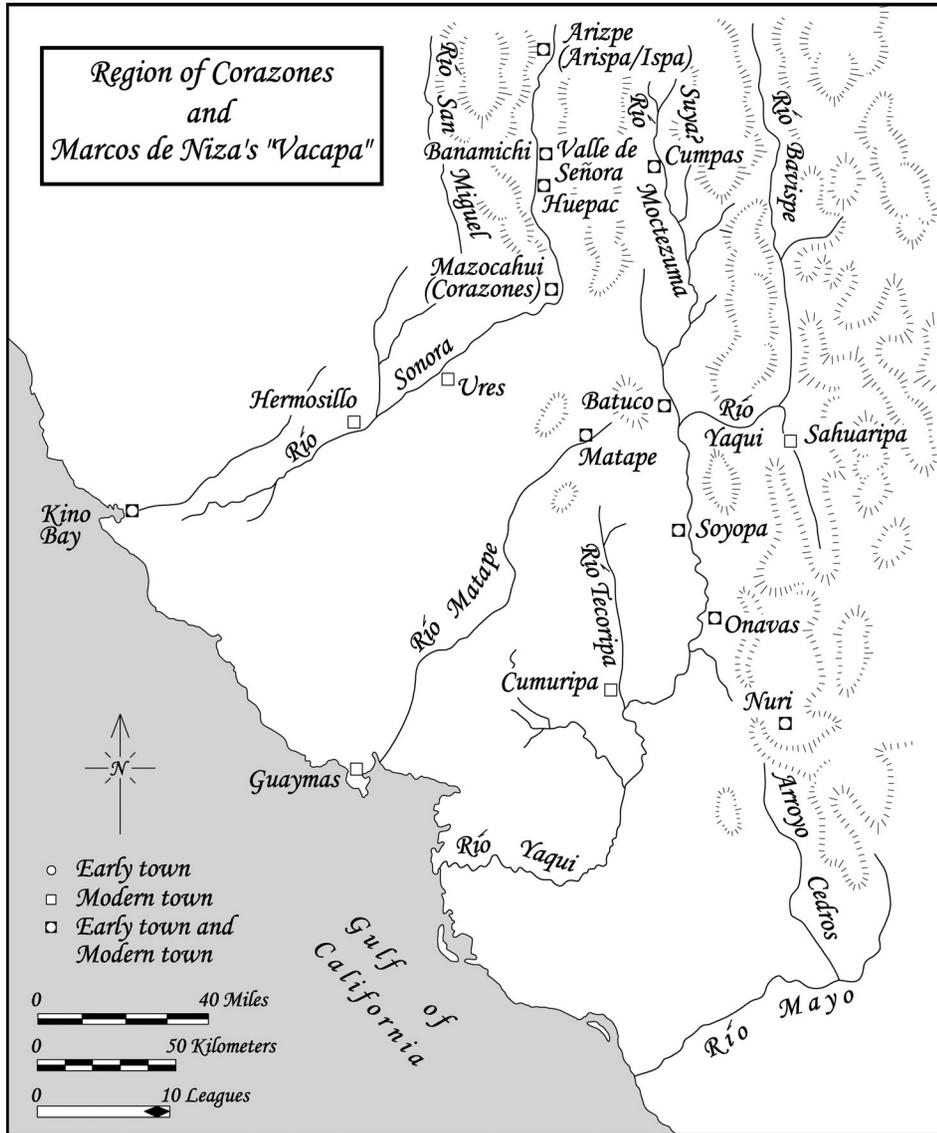


FIGURE 1. Map of Central Sonora showing the likely regions of Marcos de Niza's "Vacapa" and the town of Corazones mentioned by Cabeza de Vaca and Coronado chroniclers. Vacapa is likely to be in the general region bounded by the towns of Soyopa, Matapé, and Batuco. See text for further discussion of these and other locations on the map (Cartography by Ron Beckwith.).

- So'i ta Modern spelling of Hiaki verb for vertical movement associated with the sky
- Sa yo pa Early spelling for modern village on the Río Yaqui
- So yo pa Modern village name on the Río Yaqui, associated by Hiaki consultant with throwing grain up and letting it fall.

Marcos's comment about traveling three days in this area, through country inhabited by "Indians who had no knowledge of Christians," may thus have involved travel upstream along the Río Yaqui to the region of the village Soyopa/Sayopa. Marcos says that people along the way welcomed his party with cheerful receptions and gifts of food, and he learned he was finally moving inland, which fits the way the Río Yaqui angles away from the northwest-trending coast. The three days mentioned could have been most of Tuesday AM (18 March) to Thursday PM (20 March), during which he moved perhaps 78–93 trail miles upstream at 26–31 miles/day. The first 40 miles would be due north (mostly covered now by a large modern reservoir) to a point where the river forks, near the modern town of Cumuripa.

Because of the fork, Marcos had two choices. The first would be to follow the modern Río Yaqui upstream, jogging inland, then north. On this route, a journey of another 40 miles (plus the initial 40 miles, for a total of 80 miles at 27 miles/day) could bring him upriver by Thursday evening (20 March) to the modern town of Soyopa, mentioned above. If one assumes this choice, it is tempting to speculate that a Yaqui-occupied village where the "man from the sky," Sayota/so'ita, paused in his journey for two weeks, came to be known through Spanish adaptations as the town of Sayopa/Soyopa.

The second choice, a more direct route north, would continue about 37 miles upstream on the western fork, now known as the Río Tecoripa or Río Suaqui (even modern Mexican road maps vary in their names for some rivers, due to local traditions and the old European habit of naming segments of single rivers according to local towns and landmarks.) The western fork might have been favored by Marcos, as he was under the viceroy's instructions to gain information about the coast. In this case, by Thursday night (20 March) he could have arrived in the headwaters of that drainage. By Friday, he could have crossed over from the Río Tecoripa/Suaqui to the next drainage to the north, the Río Matapé, where a town known as Matapé became important in colonial times, a century later.

The Issue of "Vacapa"

Marcos's next sentences provide one of his rare dates and village names. On the Friday before "Passion Sunday," (Friday, 21 March), probably about 132 days of travel since departing Culiacán, Marcos arrived at "a fairly large settlement they called Vacapa, where they gave me a grand welcome and . . . much food." (Here we adopt a consensus among historians that Passion Sunday, as used by Marcos, was two weeks before Easter). Marcos described Vacapa as "all irrigated" with abundant food, and 40 leagues inland—about 100–124 trail miles. After his exhausting, relatively high-speed hiking, and knowing he was moving away from the coast, Marcos decided to pause in Vacapa until Easter, 6 April—a two-week stop to assess his location, by sending scouts in different directions, and to decide where to go next. Carl Sauer (1932:18) wrote that Soyopa was "the only good ford on the river" across the Río Yaqui in the Spanish colonial period of the

1600s–1700s. When Sauer visited the area, around 1930, he reported it was still the “only ford on the river for vehicles.”

Such a good ford would have offered a motivation for Marcos to pause there. He and his party could easily cross to either bank, and his scouts could fan out in all directions, yet be able to cross upon their return. First, he sent scouts by three routes to the sea, following Mendoza’s instruction to get more reports about the coast. Second, he sent his charismatic ambassador, Esteban the Moor, northward to look for news about “the great things we were seeking.”

Vacapa thus becomes an important lynchpin in reconstructing Marcos’s journey, because of the known date and some notable news that he received there (see below). If Vacapa is placed too far north, Marcos wouldn’t have time to reach it by 21 March, but if too far south, he wouldn’t have enough remaining time to reach Cíbola. A specific clue exists: Vacapa needs to be about 32 or 33 days’ travel south of Cíbola, because when Esteban (and later Marcos himself) reached an unnamed village two to three days north of Vacapa, they learned that he was 30 days’ travel from Cíbola at native travel rates ‘in other words Cíbola was 32–33 days from Vacapa’. These facts constrain Vacapa to be in a central Sonoran region encompassing Matapé, Soyopa, Batuco (also known as “Batuc”), and nearby towns (see Figure 1).

In spite of these constraints, earlier investigators have placed Vacapa all over Sonora. One group of theories places Vacapa too far south to fit what Marcos said. Carl Sauer (1937:279–280) claimed it is “apparent at once that Vacapa can hardly lie much north of the present Sinaloa-Sonora boundary”; he placed it “between the Fuerte and Mayo Rivers,” in southern Sonora. Cleve Hallenbeck (1949) placed Vacapa even farther south, on the Río Fuerte. These theories made it easy for Marcos to reach Vacapa, but put it too far south to make the rest of the trip possible. Sauer, Wagner and Hallenbeck used this scenario to argue that Marcos was a liar who never reached Cíbola.

Another group of theories place Vacapa too far north. The historian, Father Oblasser Bonaventure, writing in 1939, placed it in the northwest corner of Sonora, because the famed Jesuit explorer, Father Eusebio Kino, during his travels in 1698–1701, recorded a village there by the name “Bacapa,” centered around springs in extreme northwest Sonora. Michel Nallino (2012), Marcos’s biographer from the friar’s home town of Nice, France, similarly places Vacapa near Nogales, on the present Arizona/Sonora border. These locations do not seem credible, however. Three arguments are that (1) Kino’s tiny village of 80 “poor and naked” souls clustered around desert springs does not fit Marcos’s description of an “all-irrigated” town with abundant food; (2) these locations are too close to Cíbola (Zuni, N.M) to fit Marcos’s statement that Vacapa was 32–33 days south of Cíbola; and (3) northern towns “with many people and very large houses” were known in the town that Cabeza de Vaca referred to as Corazones (e.g. Pupo-Walker 1993:104). Corazones was on the Río Sonora according to the Coronado chroniclers (see Figure 1), so it seems that Vacapa (where Cíbola was not known), could not have been north of the Río Sonora.)

Marcos’s *Relación* survives as a trustworthy document only if Vacapa is midway between these extremes, in the general region of Matapé and Soyopa. We now

summarize the clues that narrow down the location of Vacapa, and then take up an interesting linguistic connection.

1. Vacapa must be no more than about 13.5–15 days north of Culiacán (13.5 days of fast march plus 1.5 days of rest in Petatlán).
2. Since Cíbola was unknown in Vacapa, the unnamed village two or three days farther north, where Esteban learned about Cíbola, was probably on a different drainage than Vacapa.
3. Vacapa needs to be about 32 or 33 days south of Cíbola along the native trade route.
4. Vacapa needs to be no more than 2–3 days south of some part of the Río Sonora. The logic here is the town Cabeza de Vaca's party named "Corazones" was in the Río Sonora valley (as confirmed by Coronado chroniclers; see Figure 1), and the inhabitants of that town knew of the northern trade center with big buildings—presumably Cíbola (See also [Hartmann and Hartmann, 2011](#)).
5. Additional evidence supports the idea Vacapa was only a few days from Corazones, the town mentioned in item 4. Coronado chronicler Pedro de Castañeda described the Coronado army moving north from Corazones, and in the next sentence, he mentions passing through a "province called Vacapan." This suggests Corazones lay close to Vacapan (Taken literally it seems to put Vacapa north of Corazones if Vacapa = Vacapan. This does not make sense, because of the previous two clues. Castañeda was writing 20 years after the fact, however, so that his Vacapa/Vacapan might have been out of correct sequence, due to a lapse of memory; or Vacapan may have referred to a broad province.)
6. Vacapa needs to be 40 leagues (100–124 trail miles) from the sea. Marcos reported this distance explicitly. Coronado described Cabeza de Vaca's town of Corazones as being five hard days travel from the coast. Marcos indicated that 8–10 leagues was a long day for him, which would also give 40–50 leagues inland). These data are consistent with both Vacapa and Corazones being roughly within a day or so of the same distance from the coast.

All these clues fit a Vacapa location on the upper Río Matapé near Matapé village, or on the Río Yaqui, in the Soyopa-Batuco region, and a few days south of the Río Sonora. This Matapé-Yaqui area fits another criterion. From a tabulation of road mileage from the old site of Culiacán to this area on Mexican road maps, one of us [W.K.H.] estimates approximately 370–380 road miles to a Vacapa location either on the Río Yaqui north of Soyopa, or near Matapé. This in turn yields a very plausible 27–28 miles/day average for Marcos's probable 13.5 day of actual trail time during his initial, enthusiastic march to Vacapa.

Linguistic connections create additional evidence. "Vacapa" is a recognizable Yaqui/Hiaki word, referring to the so-called Mexican palo verde tree (*Parkinsonia aculeata*), which is listed in the Molina and Shaul dictionary of Hiaki as vaka'apo, and in other Hiaki dictionaries as vaka'apoa or baka'apoa. Note that the "a'a" represents a glottal stop separating the two instances of the low vowel [a], but Marcos might well have heard or rendered this simply as an [a] vowel. In modern-

day Hiaki, we note, the glottal stop is often omitted or reduced in everyday speech. Pima-speaking Indians, north of the lower Río Yaqui, used a different word for the Mexican palo verde tree: “oobjam” or “ooba’igam.” In summary, Vacapa was located in an area occupied in 1539 by Hiaki, not Pima, speakers.

We note also that the use of tree names as place-names in Hiaki is common even today. For example, in the early 1900s, two Hiaki-occupied areas in Tucson were called Bwe’u Hu’upapo and Ili Hu’upapo, meaning ‘(At) Big Mesquite’ and ‘(At) Little Mesquite’, respectively; the use of Vaka’apo, i.e., ‘Mexican palo verde’, as a place-name would thus be very consistent with Hiaki naming practices. “Vacapan” mentioned by Castañeda (north of Corazones?) might thus have been a name applied to a broader province where the Mexican palo verde was a common tree.

We can compare “Vacapa” with the Hiaki word for the Mexican palo verde, syllable-by-syllable, based on various sources for the latter. We have:

Va ca pa (Marcos de Niza, writing in his *Relación* in 1539; see [Flint and Flint \(2005\)](#))

va ka’a po (Molina and Shaul, Yaqui-English dictionary, 1993:130)

ba ka’a po a (Fernández et al., Yaqui-Spanish dictionary, 2004:59)

va ka’a po a ([Felger et al., 2001](#), discussion of *Parkinsonia aculeata*)

Note that Fernández *et al.* use Spanish orthographic conventions in writing Hiaki, in which the voiced bilabial fricative [β] is transcribed as ‘b’ rather than ‘v’, as in the English-based transcription of Molina and Shaul and that of Felger *et al.*; all these sources thus reflect the same phonetic sequence in Hiaki, modulo the final [a].

Mayo people (along the Río Mayo, just south of the Río Yaqui, use a slight variation for the Mexican palo verde, listed by Felger *et al.* as “bakaporo.” We regard the Río Mayo to be more than 32 days from Cibola, violating items 3 and 4 in the list above.

Charts of the distribution of the Mexican palo verde, [Turner et al. \(1995\)](#) show the main concentration at latitude about 27–31 and at elevations about 1000–2000m. There are possible concentrations east of Hermosillo in the general area of Matapé (The place-name “Matapé” is used in several place along the Río Matapé latitude 29 and elevation approximately 750–1000 m), and also along the north–south upper Yaqui/Bavispe drainages. Perhaps the whole area was known as the “Vacapan” region, the region of Mexican palo verdes, fitting our general reconstruction, in which Vacapa should lie a few days south of the Río Sonora.

Implications of the Usage of “Sayota” and “Vacapa” by Marcos de Niza

If we accept the hypothesis that the “Sayota episode” and the account of “Vacapa” involved Hiaki words in Hiaki-speaking territory, then a significant question arises about the location of the boundary between the Pima-speaking and Hiaki-speaking

groups in 1539. Modern linguistic maps (Spicer 1962) show Piman languages, not Hiaki, being currently spoken through areas we mentioned, extending well south of Matapé and Soyopa, with Hiaki spoken only in a narrow zone around the mouth of the Yaqui River (mutually intelligible with the language of the Mayo people, still farther south along the Río Mayo). This might seem to contradict our suggestion that the terms “Sayota” and “Vacapa” were heard by Marcos on the upper Río Matapé or along the Río Yaqui near or north of Soyopa.

Another linguistic clue, however, supports our argument. It comes from the Coronado expedition memoirs. In 1540, the expedition was guided north through this area (at least partly by Marcos) on its way to Cibola. Chroniclers recorded following a route north along the Arroyo Cedros, probably the inland route that Marcos said he followed on his return. Jaramillo, after mentioning the expedition’s arrival at the Arroyo de los Cedros, remarks that “From here we went to the river called Yaquimi.” Castañeda lists the word “Yaquimi” in a list of “rivers” encountered on the way before reaching the Río Sonora. Both sources are translated in a definitive edition by Flint and Flint (2005). The letter –m and sometimes the syllable –mi are plural markers, so the connotation of the name Río Yaquimi, as written by the Spaniards, may have been ‘river of Hiaki-speakers.’ Sauer (1932:map facing p. 58) notes that the historically recorded “camino real” route to the north indeed came out of the Arroyo Cedros drainage into a fertile part of the valley of the Río Yaqui near Onavas (see Figure 1), which is about 34 km south of Soyopa. We conclude that the Coronado-era descriptions of the “Arroyo de los Cedros” and the “Río Yaquimi” fit the modern Arroyo Cedros and Río Yaqui, and presumably do refer to those drainages.

One of us (W. K. H.), in two different informal conversations with Southwestern scholars, has encountered a view that “Yoeme,” rather than “Yaqui” or “Hiaki,” is the word applied by the Hiaki people to themselves, and thus that “Yaqui” is not a Yaqui-speakers’ term that the Coronado expeditionaries would have heard. Our consultants, however, disagree with the assertion that ‘Hiaki’ is not used by speakers of the language to describe themselves. ‘Hiaki’ (or in the conventional spelling, “Yaqui”) is the term used by the people to distinguish their language and culture from other groups; it has a long history of use by both the Hiaki themselves and others. Our consultants, and dictionary sources, confirm that ‘Yoeme’ also used, but it is a more general word. Its primary meaning is ‘man’, though it can also be used to mean ‘humans’ or ‘people’ (Linguist Terry Langendoen, personal communication, notes that this use of ‘Yoeme’ is similar to the English use of ‘Man’ as a generic term for humanity). Our consultants agree that ‘Yoeme’ or its plural ‘Yoemem’ might be used when referring to a particular group to which one belongs. For example, in talking about one’s family heritage, as in ‘Our people have lived here for many years.’ Hiaki/Yaqui/Jiaki, however, is a long-accepted name designating the group as a whole, however, and we believe it would have been in use in Sonora in the 16th century. Molina and Shaul (1993:154) list “Hiakim” as a term for “Yoeme country” ‘very close to the “Yaquimi” term that the Coronado chroniclers assigned to a certain portion of the Yaqui River valley’. They also list the modern Yaqui term for the Yaqui River as “Hiak Vatwe,” literally “Hiaki River.

We can surmise from the *Relación* of Marcos de Niza and other Spanish records of that era, that the most notable characteristic identifying “new” groups of people, as Coronado and other early Spanish explorers moved north across Mexico, was an encounter with a new language group, requiring new translators. Interestingly, [Molina \(1972\)](#), in his book on “Indigenous Names in Sonora and their Translation to Spanish,” lists “Yaqui” as “one who speaks in screams” (El que habla a gritos). We do not confirm that connotation, but note that words beginning with ‘hia-‘have meanings ranging from “soul” and “spirit” to “vocalizing, speaking emitting sound”. All such meanings suggest a practice of referring to people by their speech, rather than by their geographic location.

To summarize, we conclude that the Coronado-era Spaniards, as exemplified by Jaramillo, named “the river called Yaquimi” to mean literally “a valley where the people speak Hiaki,” rather than adopting the Hiaki geographic term for the river itself; later Mexicans adopted this name ‘Yaqui’ for the Hiaki speakers.

To summarize, combining all our evidence, we conclude that the mid-stretch of the Río Yaqui, around Soyopa and Onavas was an area associated with Yaqui-speaking people in 1539–40, and it makes sense that the term ‘Yaqui’ was the descriptor borrowed into Mexican terminology.

We mentioned above that Piman languages dominate the area in more recent centuries. This raises the question, when and why did Pima-speakers move into the area? Ethnographic records from the mid-1700s reveal the Yaqui River as an important linguistic boundary at that time. Two Jesuit priests, Juan [Nentvig \(1980\)](#), writing ca. 1763) and Ignaz [Pfefferkorn \(1989\)](#), writing ca. 1794–5), independently wrote commentaries about Sonora, based on their years of service there, 1750–1767 and 1756–67, respectively. They both reported that in the mid-1700s, Piman speech extended through “Sonora,” but they defined “Sonora” as extending south only to the Yaqui River. For example, [Nentvig \(1980:4\)](#) said “the correct boundary [of Sonora] on the south would be the right bank (northwest side) of the Yaqui River, except for the (upstream) portion, northeast” of the fork with the Río Tecoripa, where “Sonoran” missions extended to the southeast side of the Río Yaqui. As for the 1500s and 1600s, anthropologist Edward [Spicer \(1962, p. 87\)](#) offers supporting clarification based on additional historical records. He states that a Piman-speaking group, known as Ópatas,

seem to have been advancing slowly down the Yaqui River. . . . There is some indication that the Lower Pimas of the middle Yaqui River were, in turn, pushed against the Yaquis and that this stimulated. . . warfare [between the Pima-speakers and the Yaquis]. At the . . . beginning of the 1600s, there seems to have been regular and persistent fighting between the [Piman speakers] and the Yaquis. . . . [This] suggests that [the Yaquis] were already under some pressure and that this pressure must have come from their nearest northern neighbors B the Lower Pimas.

Spicer also notes that a group of Pima-speakers moved south with Cabeza de Vaca in 1536 and leapfrogged past the Yaqui area, settling on the Río Sinaloa (south of the Río Yaqui and Río Mayo), in a village called Bamoa. Hiaki speakers may have still

occupied the “Río Yaquimi” in 1539–40, but then been pushed out of the middle Río Yaqui drainage in the early-mid 1600s, when Spanish missionaries concentrated them in eight mission towns near the mouth of the Río Yaqui.

Based on the above, we suggest that the geographical zone dividing Pima and Yaqui language groups in 1539–40 lay north of the present boundary, being located between the Río Sonora on the north, and parts of the Río Yaqui on the south. The mid Yaqui River valley, in the region of Onavas, Soyopa and Batuco was thus, indeed, a “valley of Hiaki speakers.” Our linguistic clues (which, as far as we know, have not been suggested in the Coronado literature before) explain why a discontinuity in knowledge of Cíbola occurred around this latitude, as discovered in 1539 by Marcos de Niza. From the region of Batuco, Marcos and later the Coronado expedition in 1540, crossed over from the Río to the Río Sonora and encountered Pima-speakers. These Pima-speakers, from the Río Sonora to the north, traded with Cíbola in 1539; the Yaqui-speakers, from the Río Yaqui to the south did not. Boundaries in geographical knowledge thus coincided (reasonably enough) with cultural/linguistic boundaries.

Conclusions

We suggest that two native words recorded by Marcos de Niza, “*Sayota*” and “*Vacapa*” ‘along with the term “*Yaquimi*” in Coronado expedition documents—are recognizable terms from the Hiaki language’. This implies in turn that the locations where they were used were associated with Yaqui/Hiaki speakers in 1539. Other evidence from Coronado-era documents, including the Spaniards’ assignment of the name “*Río Yaquimi*,” implies that these terms were likely used on the Río Yaqui or Río Matapé, but not as far north as the Río Sonora. These conclusions support earlier suggestions that the Hiaki-speaking people were pushed south along the Río Yaqui between the mid-1500s and the 1600s or mid-1700s. In general, the linguistic associations tend to support that Marcos de Niza, at least in this part of his journey, reported reliable explicit and implicit information that can clarify our understanding of 16th century Mexico and the Coronado-era explorations.

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