

Spain authorizes Coronado's conquest in the Southwest, 1540

Introduction

This letter, written on behalf of King Charles V by Francisco Garcia de Loaysa, the president of the Council of the Indies, acknowledges Francisco Coronado's report of the famous Niza expedition of the previous year and authorizes Coronado to explore the northern lands, in the search for wealth and resources, and in the hope that "through your excellent efforts you will bring the natives of that province under our sway and dominion and will bring them into the knowledge of the holy catholic faith." This letter is possibly the earliest surviving official authorization by any European regent to explore the lands that became the United States.

The Niza expedition, named after its leader, the Franciscan friar Marcos de Niza, recorded the enduring myth of Cibola—a city or series of cities in the American Southwest rich with gold. The Niza expedition is also significant in that Niza's Moorish manservant, Estevan Dorantes, also called Estevan the Black, was the first African documented in the New World. His presence predated English and Spanish African slaves by decades, and his ability to communicate with Native tribes proved to be vital to Niza's expedition.

Coronado, spurred by dreams of wealth, was shortly authorized to mount an impressive campaign to seek out Cibola. Setting out from Compostela (in present-day Sonora, Mexico), he reached the Zuni country in New Mexico that most scholars suspect to be the location to which "Cibola" referred. Coronado's quest for wealth carried him farther into America, later in search of another mythically rich land called Quivira. The area referred to as Quivira proved to be the lands occupied by the Wichitas in present-day Kansas. Some anthropological research supports the claim that Coronado traveled as far as Kansas, but scholars are divided. Nevertheless, this authorization spurred one of the most famous explorations of the New World.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the translation in order to answer the following questions:

1. List and explain at least three reasons given to Coronado in this document to undertake continued exploration of the American Southwest.
2. In what way would the traditions of any American Indians Coronado encountered be threatened? Explain your answer.
3. How can we explain the rumors of the existence of the cities of Cibola and Quivira?

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Transcript

Francisco García de Loaysa to to Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, June 21, 1540 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04883)

[*English translation*]

Letter from P.M. to Francisco Vázquez de Coronado:

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, new Governor and Captain General of the Province of Galicia¹ of New Spain, we saw your letter of July 15th of the year prior to 1540, in which we became aware of the state of things of that province and the things that you have worked on to bring peace to the natives of the land who remained in revolt² for which I thank you and have in service the notice that you had and have of the pacification³ and population of the land⁴ and of the good treatment of the natives⁵ that reside in the land and if you continue to be in charge of them, that you continue according to the letters of Don Antonio de Mendoza, my viceroy of New Spain, through whom I have made known by my name that I send you through as the Captain General of this population of the conquest and land that was discovered by Fray Marcos de Niza, that we have given to you because we hope, that through the giving of this title, with your life, my lord, you will be of service and the crown be royally presented; and that with your good management⁶ you place the land under my rule and bring its natives to the knowledge of my Holy Catholic faith and we do order you to, with all prudence and good order, work on making sure that the orders and provisions that have been ordered by us and the order that has been given by my son, the viceroy, by which we inform you that my son, the viceroy, has been sent in your absence so he may be able to watch your governance and provide what is beneficial to the service of my God.

Sent on June 21, 1540

According to his name

Joan de Gaman?

¹ The official name of the province at that time was *Nueva Galicia*

² Literally “up-risen”

³ Or “appeasement”

⁴ In the Spanish its literally “that reside in her” with “her” meaning The Land, i.e. The Province of Galicia, I have chosen to use “The Land” wherever “*ella*, i.e. her” appears.

⁵ Literally “naturals”, in Spanish they use *naturales*

⁶ Literally “industry” the inference here is management

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[*docket*]

Letter of utmost importance

Francisco Vasquez

Notes: Translated by Joshua Perea (Guesnerth Josué Perea), staff member of the N-YHS education department, on May 2011. All footnotes were created by Joshua Perea.