PART I: CONQUEST

Having few prospects in Nicaragua, we came to this district, where there's more gold and silver than iron in Biscay, and more sheep than in Soria, and great supplies of all kinds of provisions, and fine clothing and the best people that have been seen in the whole Indies.

Gaspar de Marquina, Cajamarca, Peru, 1533

Since conquest and settlement were one single ongoing process in Spanish America, we are a little reluctant to emphasize the distinction between them by devoting a separate section to conquest alone. Yet only in this way can we illustrate to what an extent the conquerors were acting like immigrants, businessmen and settlers. Then too, the creation of Spanish cities, governmental jurisdictions and encomiendas took place at the time of the conquests, as a direct reflection and integral part of them. Spaniards tended to take their new cities - the framework of their world - for granted, but the encomiendas and governorships, being the great rewards of the enterprise, engendered strife and comment; whole genres of conquest correspondence grew up to brag, complain or petition about these matters.

We also wish to give some notion of the often down-to-earth first reports on new areas, whether private (Letters 1, 6), official (Letter 2), or mercantile (Letters 4, 5). It is enlightening to compare these with texts written some years after the occupation, such as Letter 3, or the last pages of Letter 36, both good examples of incipient legend formation. Finally, in the accounts of the conquest one gets an impression of the vast geographical spread of the movement, the differences between regions, and the varying success of the conquerors, who achieved quick victory and large rewards in the most densely settled areas of the Andes and Mexico, but experienced long struggles and relative poverty elsewhere.
1. Conquest in the personal view

Gaspar de Marquina, in Cajamarca, Peru, to his father Martín de Gárate in Mendaro, Biscay, 1533

...When he arrived where we were, the Governor rushed out with all his men and we attacked them and seized the lord and killed many of his people...

To match the hundreds of extant reports to the crown that governors and captains wrote about their conquests, there remain very few of the many letters the conquerors sent from the scene to family and friends. Most of these — and it is a characteristic worth noting — stick close to personal matters (the writer's fortunes, his prospects of coming home, his plans for relatives and for himself), hardly mentioning the progress of the conquest or the nature of the country. So the present letter is doubly rare, since the impressionable young man who wrote it did devote some space to the land of the Inca empire and the climactic event of the capture of its emperor, Atahuallpa, in which he took part. What he says is as fresh and direct as conversation, and with the complete honesty of a person who has no need to extol or excuse. Most accounts of the episode at Cajamarca give prominence to the dramatic parley in which a Dominican friar told Atahuallpa of Christianity and the Spanish king, with the fighting beginning only when the emperor broke off the talk. Gaspar skips over this as though it had never happened — not that it did not, but in his eyes it was an unimportant detail. What really happened was a great display of Indian wealth and numbers, followed by a sudden, total reversal when the Spaniards attacked. Gaspar bears the Indians no ill will and appreciates their accomplishments, indeed more than many other Spaniards of his time, but no need to justify the conquest ever occurs to him, nor is he concerned about the Indians' conversion (though he takes permanent Spanish government for granted).

An aspect that Gaspar lays bare more fully than do many reports by leaders, who enlarge on their own bravery and skill, or keep silent, is the overwhelming Spanish military superiority. When fighting nomads, the Spaniards faced military near-equals. Even in the more settled areas, confined situations could cause them difficulty (like Mexico City, with its island situation, its maze of canals and stone buildings); but on flat land and against sedentary peoples, European steel and horses regularly produced results like those seen here. "We killed 8,000 men in about two hours and a half," Gaspar tends to attribute it to a miracle, while we may prefer the advantages of Eurasian weaponry and animals as an explanation. In any case it is a fact of capital importance, allowing the Spaniards to forget about the Indians much of the time and devote themselves to their own internal affairs and rivalries to a degree that never ceases to surprise.

Even in this letter, after all, the Indians and the fighting are mentioned almost in passing. They are relevant because they were instrumental in Gaspar's attaining wealth. That is what the letter is about: how Gaspar has gained wealth and success and can start doing something for his family, both past and future generations.

Note that Gaspar does not use the word 'soldier' for himself and his fellows; nor does it appear in our Letter 2, an official conquest report, nor in any of the other contemporary letters in this section. Only in the posterior, already myth-creating account of a lady in Paraguay (Letter 3) is the word to be found. The conquerors were free agents, emigrants, settlers, unsalaried and ununiformed earners of encomiendas and shares of treasure, and a great many other things that do not fit well with today's concept 'soldier.'

We will present a few details about Gaspar beyond those he gives in the letter. The use of a different surname in the Indies — in this case Marquina rather than Gaspar's father's name, Gárate — was a quite common phenomenon, particularly with the Basques, who were happy enough to let themselves be called anything the other Spaniards could pronounce. Gaspar was born out of wedlock, but recognized by his father and brought up
carefully, so that he had strong family roots, as indeed the letter itself shows. In his early twenties at the time of the letter, apparently acting as Governor Pizarro’s page, he was still one of the expedition’s least influential members. After this, he soon bought a horse and began to acquire some business connections, but later in 1533 the Spanish vanguard imprudently went single file up a long steep slope not far from Cuzco, losing more men than in all the fighting up to that time, and Gaspar de Marquina among them.

Dear Sir:

It must be about three years ago that I got a letter from you, in which you asked me to send some money. God knows how sorry I was not to have anything to send then, because if I had anything then there wouldn’t have been any need for you to write; I’ve always tried to do the right thing, but there wasn’t any possibility till now. You also told me to remember my homeland; God knows if I remember my homeland or not, but as I said, till now there hasn’t been time to think of it. I give you my word that I never had a penny the whole time since I came to these parts until six months ago, when God was pleased to give me more than I deserved, and now I have over 3,000 ducats; please God that it will be for his holy service.

Sir, I’m sending you 213 pesos of good gold in a bar with an honorable man from San Sebastián; in Seville he’ll have it turned into coin and then bring it to you. I’d send you more except he’s taking money for other people too and couldn’t take more. His name is Pedro de Anadel, I know him, and he’s the kind of person who will get the money to you, so that’s why I asked him to do me a favor and take you the money.

Sir, I would like to be the messenger myself, but it couldn’t be, because we’re in new country and haven’t been here long, and they aren’t giving license to leave except to married men who have been in these parts for a long time. I expect to be there with you in two years with the aid of our Lord; I swear to God that I have a greater desire to be there than you have to see me, so that I can give you a good old age.

Sir, I’ll tell you something of my life since I came to these parts; you must know how I went to Nicaragua with Governor Pedrarias as his page, and I was with him till God was pleased to take him from this world. He died very poor and so all of his servants were left poor too, as the carrier of this letter can very well tell you when he sees you. Then a few days after he died we got news of how Governor Francisco Pizarro was coming to be governor of this kingdom of New Castile and so, hearing this news and having few prospects in Nicaragua, we came to this district, where there’s more gold and silver than iron in Biscay, and more sheep than in Soria, and great supplies of all kinds of provisions, and fine clothing and the best people that have been seen in the whole Indies, and many great lords among them; one of them rules over 500 leagues. We have him prisoner in our power, and with him prisoner, a man can go by himself 500 leagues without getting killed, instead they give you whatever you need and carry you on their shoulders in a litter.

We took this lord by a miracle of God, because our forces wouldn’t be enough to take him nor to do what we did, but God gave us the victory miraculously over him and his forces. You must know that we came here with Governor Francisco Pizarro to the land of this lord where he had 60,000 warriors, and there were 160 Spaniards with the governor, and we thought our lives were finished because there was such a horde of them, and even the women were making fun of us and saying they were sorry for us because we were going to get killed; but afterwards their bad thoughts turned out the opposite. The lord came with all his armed men within two shots of a crossbow from where we were camped and pitched his camp there, and then from there he came to see the governor and what kind of people we were, with about 5,000 men all dressed in his livery, and him in a litter covered with gold, with a hundred nobles carrying him and sweeping the ground in front of his litter, and all of them singing in unison, and when he arrived where we were, the governor rushed out with all his men and we attacked them and seized the lord and killed many of his people, most of the ones that came with him, and then we went out where all
the rest of the warriors were, all armed with lances 15 feet long, and we routed them all. In the rout we killed 8,000 men in about two hours and a half, and we took much gold and clothing and many people. It would be too long to tell if it all were told; the bearer of the present letter can inform you, and I won't say more because as I say, it would be too long to tell. 

Give my greetings to Catalina and my brothers and sisters and my uncle Martín de Altamira and his daughters, especially the older one, because I am much in her debt, and also to my cousins Martín de Altamira and Marina de Gárate and my uncle San Juan de Gárate and my uncle Pedro Sánchez de Arizmendi and all the rest of my relatives, because I've already forgotten many of their names. I really want you to greet them all from me and tell them that I greatly desire to see them, and pleasing God I'll be there soon. Sir, the only thing I want to ask you is to do good for the souls of my mother and all my relatives, and if God lets me get there, I'll do it very thoroughly myself. There is nothing more to write at present except that I'm praying to our Lord Jesus Christ to let me see you before I die. From Cajamarca, in the kingdom of New Castile, 20th of July, 1533.

Your son who would rather see than write you,
Gaspar de Gárate

[On the outside is a memorandum to Anadel, bearer of the letter:]

Sir, I implore you to write me with the first people who come, and if by chance God our Lord has been pleased to take my father from this world, give the 213 pesos to my uncle Martín de Altamira and to San Juan de Gárate, jointly to both, and if one of them is dead, to either of them, so that with 100 pesos they can do good for the souls of my parents Martín de Gárate and María Ramírez de Altamira, and divide the other 113 pesos among my brother and sisters, and in case both my uncles are dead, to my brother Jorge de Gárate with a guardian, who as I say should do good for my parents with the hundred and divide all the rest between himself and his and my brothers and sisters, all equally.

Gaspar de Marquina

1 Published in Spanish and English in Appendix 1 of Lockhart, The Men of Cajamarca, which also includes further biographical material on Gaspar.

2. A standard conqueror's report

Pedrarias de Avila, governor of Tierra Firme, in Panamá, to the emperor, 1525

We hear news of great wealth.

It is a shame, in a way, that the best-known early official reports from the Indies are Columbus' hand-waving Italianate pictures of an island paradise, and Cortés' university prose, elegantly magnifying himself and his conquest. As fine and informative as these writings are, they are not representative of the scores of reports that Spanish leaders sent the crown every year from new areas rich and poor, important and unimportant. There, sobriety and woodiness ruled. Yes, there were bows to the king, and some talk of spreading Christianity, far more than in private letters, and even some mention of marvels of nature and divine intervention, but all in few words, one item after the next, in matter-of-fact, unexcited language corresponding well to the conquerors' generally Spartan temperament. The message usually went to the basics of whether or not the climate was tolerable for Europeans; whether the Indians were settled and agricultural, capable of sustaining encomiendas and Spanish cities; and whether there was gold, silver or some other product that could subsidize imports from Europe and pay the crown the revenues it desired.

We have chosen the present letter because it has a little of everything; it illustrates the points above, and more. In the second and third decades of the sixteenth century, Tierra Firme and its capital Panamá were the clearing house for exploration and conquest in both directions along the South Sea (the Pacific, with the North Sea in this context being the Caribbean). Thus two major conquests appear underway in this letter, that
of Nicaragua led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba and others, and that of the 'east' or Peru led by Pizarro and Almagro. The relay system of conquest, with each new area conquered by people and resources from the immediately preceding one, is seen very clearly here, as well as the tensions that grew out of it. The governor would aid some important citizens in outfitting expeditions which he sent out in his name to add new territories to his own jurisdiction. But the subordinates, who usually took much of the initiative and bore most of the expense, invariably sought independence, and often attained it. In this letter Gil González de Avila, a former quasi-subordinate of Pedrarias, is causing trouble in Nicaragua, but that was only the beginning, for Pedrarias would later have to come there in person to quell a rebellion; before many years both Nicaragua and Peru would be independent of Tierra Firme. Thus it is by no means atypical that this report speaks more of conflicts among Spaniards than of fighting with Indians, or that notaries should be spilling ink, taking and authenticating evidence against fellow Spaniards, at the ends of the earth.

Famous names abound in the letter. Two, Benalcázar and Soto, evoke careers which illustrate the continuity of personnel and the repeating cycle of tension in the Spanish conquests. Both men came to prominence under Pedrarias in Tierra Firme, then moved to Nicaragua, as the most important new area then being opened up. From Nicaragua they later went as quite major leaders to the far wealthier Peru, where their very influence made them unacceptable to the Pizarros, so with riches gained in Peru they undertook further conquests, Benalcázar in Quito and New Granada, Soto in North America. The person referred to as 'an Oviedo' is Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the voluble and sharp-tongued chronicler. Fray Francisco de Bobadilla, who is here being gently nominated for bishop (conquerors would try to have the most prominent of their ecclesiastical companions named bishop of their area), did not attain that dignity, but did later appear in Peru. He figures again in Letter 25.

We have left geographical names as they are in the original text and will not attempt to identify them further, since the important thing here is the generic aspect, the sheer variety of strange new names written down with as little explanation as if they were Seville and Toledo.

Sacred Catholic Caesarean Majesty:

On the tenth of this month of April of '25 there arrived here in this city of Panamá a messenger from the west, named Sebastián de Benalcázar, who has taken part in everything that has been done there, and was sent by my lieutenant Francisco Hernández with a letter in which he reports the following things:

At the Doubtful Strait a town called Bruselas was founded, at the site of Urutina, which has plains on one hand, and the sea on the other, and good fisheries. The land is fertile, with good orchards, and the Indians are peaceful. The town is in the midst of all the people of those provinces. It is a very good region with good waters and air and hunting and fishing in quantity and rich land with good orchards, well suited for the native grain, which it bears in abundance.

From this settlement to the province of Nequecheri is thirty-five leagues. The land up to there is very populated and abundant. In this province there is a populated area of more than three leagues, and in the middle of it they founded and settled the new city of Granada. In the surrounding region are up to 8,000 native households; it has good rivers, gardens, fishing and hunting. The city is on the banks of the fresh-water sea. In this city they made a very sumptuous church, which is well served and adorned. No town was founded in the province of Nicaragua because though it is very large in itself, it is only the beginning of the land, and there was no necessity to settle there.

From this New Granada they went down to the province of Ymabite, in the midst of the great and very populated province of Masaya; and in the province of Endeví and Managua next to this province of Masaya there is a great fiery crater that never ceases to burn; at night the great fire seems to touch the skies and lights up everything as clear as daytime for fifteen leagues around. In this province of Ymabite, in the middle of it, the
new city of León was founded; in the surroundings are 15,000 native families. They built the best church there that has been erected in these parts. Near this city of León is another high mountain, with fire coming out above its peak from five mouths, clearly visible day and night; around the mountain there is a great quantity of sulfur. All this land is very level, and there are very large rivers in it, though in some parts there is a lack of water. Some of the rivers are very hot, so that they can hardly be crossed for the heat of the water; there is a fountain so constantly boiling that if they put in a fowl or something else raw it is immediately cooked, and if they want to roast something it can be roasted quickly by the heat of the water. This city is also not far from the fresh-water sea, and has many large orchards and groves.

The fresh-water sea has two arms, one of them thirty leagues wide; going from one to the other is a strait through which the water flows, and between the two arms is a small lake in which there are many populated islands. On this sea they launched for my lieutenant a brigantine that can be carried in pieces, and using it they explored and circumnavigated the entire sea. They found an outlet or river through which it is drained, but the brigantine was not able to navigate it because it is very rocky and has a strong current besides two very large rapids, so they explored it in a canoe, but could not find its mouth. It is thought to flow into the North Sea.

In the interior of this land another captain went with some men eighty leagues farther and found the country very populated, with large groves of sandalwood, citrine, cedar and pine, oaks of different kinds, and cork trees in great quantities; they have been making a great deal of pitch from the pines.

From this city of León they went ahead discovering and pacifying as far as the great city of Nequepio, which they said was the same as Melaca where Alvarado had arrived with Cortés' men; they saw where he had had his camp, and they saw some of the things he left there, especially a cannon and some footwear. From there the men turned back, and while they were quartered in a city called Toreva, Gil González arrived with some horsemen, musketeers and crossbowmen in the middle of the night, shouting 'St Gil, death, death to traitors,' and at the noise the captain ran out with the men he had and fought without knowing against whom, and some cavaliers and horses were killed, and then Gil González, after the men and horses were dead, called out loudly saying 'Peace, sir Captain, peace in the name of the king,' and Captain Soto answered 'peace, in the name of the emperor.' Believing the peace was real and not feigned, Captain Soto withdrew his men; although his companions told him that Gil González was acting deceitfully in the expectation of more men, he still turned aside with his men. Then when Gil González was stronger, more of his men having arrived, and the other side trusting in peace, seeing his advantage he started the fighting again and took from them 130,000 pesos of local low-carat gold and some other spoils, as though they were his enemies. When Gil González saw the error he had made, and that he could not maintain his position, he abandoned his men, leaving behind the banner and some halberds and a folding chair and some other stores, and went away with ten horsemen and twenty foot. My lieutenant sent me sealed and authenticated evidence of all this; I am sending your majesty a signed copy and keeping the original, thinking that because of the bad ink with which it is written, after such a long journey it might be illegible when it arrives there.

He also says that more than 400,000 souls have been converted to our holy Catholic faith of their own free will, and more continually come to request baptism, because the Indians in one town where a wooden cross had been set up tried to burn it and never succeeded, and then all the people of the town died of pestilence without an Indian remaining, and seeing this miracle and other miracles that have occurred, the Indians of the region around came to be baptized and request crosses, which are given to them with the greatest ceremony possible. Also certain mosques that had not yet received images of Our Lady were struck by lightning and burned, and seeing this the people of those towns come to request images and crosses and baptism, and as there are few priests, the Indians themselves, seeing the
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acts the priests perform, cross themselves and sprinkle water on each other.

He also says that he has sent people in the direction of the North Sea to look for gold mines, feeling sure they exist; and they have written asking for permission to melt down and distribute the gold they have taken and what they should take or get from the mines in the future; I will write granting it as soon as possible.

Royal treasurer Alonso de la Puente will leave, with the aid of God, at the end of May, or by the end of June at latest, with all the gold he has and whatever more should come or could be obtained; he is not going now because this ship goes unescorted. When he goes he will take everything that should be here, as well as a full accounting of the royal treasury which has been and is under his care.

This then is what has been done toward the west along the South Sea by the expedition that went under my lieutenant Francisco Hernández. It was done without touching your majesty's royal treasury; some individuals in this your majesty's kingdom gave me their aid, because my own estate is not sufficient for the great expenses that present themselves every day.

Toward the east along the South Sea, as I have written your majesty, I sent another expedition under Captain Pizarro, my lieutenant in the east, with very good people and good equipment. We daily expect good news from them which will please God and your majesty and ennoble these kingdoms, because we hear news of great wealth. May our Lord guide it all so that it can in some way serve your majesty. For this expedition to the east the reverend father Maestrescuela don Fernando de Luque and Captain Pizarro and Diego de Almagro have aided me with their own means, showing the good will that true vassals of your majesty should.

I am busying myself with building ships and doing what is necessary to bring back spices from the islands, as pilots assure me can be done. I implore your majesty, since expenses here are so great and for this enterprise of the spice islands your majesty's aid is necessary, that you order me given favor and aid for it, and also that you have friars and learned persons sent to instruct the Indians in the things of our holy Catholic faith, because they are much needed here. The reverend father fray Francisco de Bobadilla, provincial superior of the order of St Mary of Mercy in this kingdom, is going to inform your majesty of this matter, and I humbly beg you to give him audience, because he is a person whose example and teaching have borne much fruit in the conversion of the Indians, and he has given much consolation to the Christians with his preaching; he has founded some houses of his holy order here, and knows of matters here as an eyewitness. Order him to return forthwith, because his teaching is greatly needed by both Indians and Christians, and order him favored so that he can bring back friars with whom to augment the holy faith of Jesus Christ, since that is the principal thing your majesty has charged me with in your service.

I have been informed that Captain Gil González, forgetting the benefits he received from me in this kingdom and how much I, trying to serve your majesty, helped him with the expedition under his command, has departed from the truth and told falsehoods to your majesty and those of your very high council. And also they say that an Oviedo who was here filling certain offices for Secretary Lope Conchillos and fled secretly in fear of the punishment his crimes merited has presented certain charges against me, and since any guilt on my part should be punished more severely than in another, I humbly beg your sacred majesty, in remuneration for the services I have performed since my childhood and that I did for the blessed Catholic Monarchs of glorious memory, for your grandfather and your father and for your majesty, that you appoint a judge above suspicion to come and review my performance, because I feel sure that then your majesty will be informed of my services, and I will be freed from the iniquitous accusations the above two have made against me. Also I beg your majesty to give me license to come and kiss your royal hands and feet, because in respect to your majesty no one should dare tell you an untruth, and whoever does not do right by his own good
name will not do right in the service of God and your majesty.¹

¹Published in Spanish in Raúl Porras Barrenechea, ed., Las relaciones primitivas de la conquista del Perú, pp. 59–62.
²The concluding formulas and signature are missing.

3. The woman as conqueror

Doña Isabel de Guevara, in Asunción, Paraguay, to Princess doña Juana, regent in Spain, 1556¹

... The men became so weak that all the tasks fell on the poor women...

The heroic woman in the style of early North American history is not really a central figure of the Spanish conquests. Mainly Indian servant women accompanied the conquerors. Most expeditions set out with no Spanish women at all; at most one or two camp followers or mistresses of leaders, like the well-known Inés Suárez in Chile. But in the relay system of conquest, at the more established base from which the expedition left there would always be wives and female relatives of the conquerors, who would begin to appear in the new country almost before the fighting was over. And legends formed around them. In the rich central regions the first women became known as grain goddesses and bearers of European civilization, each reputed to have introduced wheat and other European foods and amenities. On the periphery, tales were told of the hardships and battle prowess of the once humble women who came with the conquerors, Inés Suárez again being a good example.

The present letter pertains more to the second phenomenon, though with some differences. The Plata region was indeed the periphery of the periphery, one of the most difficult and, in sixteenth-century terms, economically hopeless regions into which Spaniards ventured. However, this was not known in Spain when don Pedro de Mendoza, expecting another Peru, bypassed the step-by-step series of conquests and brought a great expedition directly from Seville, including no small number of women who were not camp followers; some were ladies with the title of doña and noble surnames like Guevara. As to the rest, doña Isabel tells it, not untruly, but in legendary and heightened form, twenty years after the fact and with the urgency of a disappointed claimant.

Very high and powerful lady:

Several women came to this province of the Río de la Plata along with its first governor don Pedro de Mendoza, and it was my fortune to be one of them. On reaching the port of Buenos Aires, our expedition contained 1,500 men, but food was scarce, and the hunger was such that within three months 1,000 of them died; it was such a famine that the one of Jerusalem cannot equal it, nor any other be compared to it. The men became so weak that all the tasks fell on the poor women, washing the clothes as well as nursing the men, preparing them the little food there was, keeping them clean, standing guard, patrolling the fires, loading the crossbows when the Indians sometimes to do battle, even firing the cannon, and arousing the soldiers who were capable of fighting, shouting the alarm through the camp, acting as sergeants and putting the soldiers in order, because at that time, as we women can make do with little nourishment, we had not fallen into such weakness as the men. Your highness will readily believe that our contributions were such that if it had not been for us, all would have perished; and were it not for the men's reputation, I could truthfully write you much more and give them as the witnesses. I believe others will write this story to your highness at greater length, so I will cease.

When this so perilous turbulence was over, the few who were still alive decided to ascend the river, weak as they were and with winter coming on, in two brigantines, and the weary women nursed them and looked after them and cooked their meals, carrying firewood on their backs from off the ship, and encouraging them with many words not to let themselves die, that soon they would reach a fertile land, and carrying them on our shoulders to the brigantines with as much tenderness as if they were our own sons. And when we came upon a kind of Indians called Timbues who are great fishermen, again we served
28th of September 1526.

Your very faithful servant,

Martin

And gentlemen, don’t forget to send that money of mine to milady wife because, as you know, she has need of it. And I ask you as a favor always to take charge of supplying my household, since I am so far away and there is no one else who could do it for her.

Published in Spanish, with comment, in Otte, ‘Mercaderes vascos en Tierra Firme a la raiz del descubrimiento del Perú,’ Mercurio Peruano, nos. 443-4 (1964), 81-9.

5. The merchant and the conquest of Mexico

Hernando de Castro, in Santiago, Cuba, to his senior partner Alonso de Nebreda in Seville, 1520

... This Cortés is in that city, some sixty or seventy leagues from the sea...

Until all are at peace, it is clearly no time to do business...

Having been introduced to some aspects of mercantile organization and correspondence in Letter 4, the reader will perhaps be prepared for this letter, written earlier but longer and more complex. Here, in addition to the characteristics seen before, we glimpse the operation of a large-scale commercial network with branches and representatives in several places at once. In the letter, names fly by bewilderingly. Without trying to be exhaustive, let us detail some of the most important figures. All were from Burgos, Old Castile, the town whose merchants, in the period before the discovery of America, long shared dominance of Spanish international trade with the Genoese.

(1) Alonso de Nebreda, recipient of the present letter, based in Seville, the head of interests trading towards both Flanders and the Caribbean.

(2) Juan de Ríos, Nebreda’s brother-in-law as well as longstanding factor and partner, based in Santo Domingo.

(3) Hernando de Castro, writer of the present letter, from a prominent Burgos family, important investor along with Nebreda and Ríos in a new venture to sell goods in Cuba and ‘Yucatán’; yet acting as factor and junior partner, based in Santiago, Cuba.

(4) The Herrera brothers: (a) Francisco, referred to here sometimes as ‘Herrera’ and ‘young Francisco,’ Castro’s chief aide, who despite intentions to leave eventually succeeded Castro as the company’s factor in Santiago. (b) Juan, working for Juan de Ríos, the Santo Domingo representative; in Ríos’ name, he took merchandise to Mexico, selling it to:

(5) Pedro de Maluenda, Hernando de Castro’s cousin, not part of the Nebreda-Castro enterprise at the moment, but in Mexico as a representative of Cuban governor Diego Velázquez.

(6) Fernando de Santa Cruz, nephew of Castro, killed in a shipwreck on his way to Mexico, taking merchandise for his father.

(7) Juan Fernández, in Seville, who was Castro’s cousin, as well as his associate in selling black slaves.

All of these people maintained close personal and commercial connections, investing in joint enterprises or more individual ones, working for each other or for themselves as it best suited them at the moment, but still somehow within the framework of the larger group. Nebreda, Castro and Ríos also invested in a ship (in Cuba at the time of the letter), saving freight costs but earning themselves much worry and trouble, as the reader will see.

Perhaps two more names will bear a little explanation. ‘Villalón’ is a reference to the Fair of Villalón; Nebreda and Castro had bought a large part of the goods for the new venture on credit, and the debts fell due at the time of the fair. ‘Baltasarrejo’ is the Spanish-speaking black slave Castro so praises and considers indispensable; nevertheless, he ran away shortly after the letter was written.
what is in the book. I do not yet know who the passengers will be, so you will have to find out there who they were to order to take your part. I think the ship will carry some from here to la Yaguana, and also from la Yaguana to Seville. Don't let them take more from us, it was enough with the thousand damages they have done; I am missing 13½ arrobas of olive oil, worth 13½ pesos, and 7 arrobas of vinegar. The master owes 3,635 maravedis, from which you should deduct, sir, 1,560 for the candles he bought for the ship.

Herrera here is also writing you about the ship of Hernando Gallego, and I refer you to what he is writing. May God give it a good voyage, amen. This is being sealed on the 15th of September.

At your service.

Hernando de Castro

The ship has been kept here more than twenty days because Diego Velázquez, who has been in Trinidad for ten months, has left to come here and wants to use it to send messages to Castile. And for the same reason they will not let Ambrosio go, because such is the custom in this land. They say that gold will be melted down by Christmas, and at the same time the Indians will be distributed and when that is done, Diego Velázquez will go to his Yucatán. If all this occurs, I think I will have a reasonable sale of the merchandise. May God grant it as I desire, amen. So far I thank God for having given us peace. The news could not be worse from Yucatán, with this discord; while here we have peace, but not a penny. May God aid us, amen.

1 Published in Spanish, with comment, in Otte, ‘Mercaderes burgaleses en los inicios del comercio con México,’ Historia Mexicana, XVIII (1968), 120–9.

6. The non-hero

Maestre Baltasar, on Gallo Island off Ecuador, to his brother in Panamá, 1527

...Two years is long enough to go about begging without servants...

Readers of Prescott or the Spanish chroniclers get no inkling of what expeditions of discovery and conquest in the Indies were like. Hardships, high mortality, and sometimes fierce fighting were indeed involved. But what the chroniclers took for granted, and Prescott did not know, was that the expeditions were joint economic ventures shot through with capitalism and commercialism. The leaders were the largest investors, in ships and supplies, to which they gave their men access—practically always for a price; but all the men invested something, if only their person and clothing, and the shares the conquerors won were adjusted more than anything else to the size of their investments. Owning a horse doubled one’s share. The ships may have left most of the import merchants behind, but commercialism and lively trading continued to be part of the picture. The wealthier expedition members took stocks to be sold to their fellows later, when supplies would be scarcer and higher priced. The expeditions contained blacksmiths, tailors, surgeons, notaries and others who charged for their services. And trading back and forth of horses, weapons, clothing and slaves went on constantly.

Another aspect not much spoken of, and which for lack of sources scholars still know too little about, is the large number of Indian and black helpers the Spaniards always took with them on expeditions, outnumbering themselves at least two to one. Their direct role in the fighting was not great, but they freed the conquerors by carrying the baggage, searching for provisions, bringing wood and water, and helping with other tasks; the women among them were also cooks, mistresses, companions. Blacks, as highly expensive slaves, were the minority. The bulk were Indians, who might either be informal permanent dependents, simply commandeered somewhere, or slaves like
the conqueror in jail

Hernando Pizarro, in the fortress of La Mota in Medina del Campo, Spain, to his majordomo the priest Diego Martin in Peru, 1545

...Being in prison like this is the cause of it all...

As we said in introducing the preceding letter, royal officialdom did not take too active a hand with the governors who emerged from the expeditions of conquest. Letting nature take its course, however, led not infrequently to the ruling conqueros murdering and committing outrages on upstart subordinates or other rivals who threatened their jurisdictions. For these political crimes many were jailed and variously sentenced or deprived. Sebastián de Benalcázar, for one example, died while appealing a death sentence for having executed a rival governor. While the early giants were thus at a disadvantage, their enemies would descend on them with claims and suits, and new powers would rise in the areas they ruled. The other side of the matter was the resilience of the apparently toppled great; even in jail they were powerful figures, and if not they, then generally their families long survived with wealth, influence and high title, though sometimes in Europe rather than in the Indies (as with both the Cortés and the Pizarro descendants).

We have just seen much of the background of the present situation in Letter 9. Hernando Pizarro, Francisco's haughty brother and right-hand man, led the forces that defeated Almagro, and it was Hernando who ordered Almagro's execution. Hernando then went off to Spain (sent by Francisco) to justify the action, with the result that he was kept in jail under various kinds of legal assault for over two decades. Here we see him after a reversal, but not humbled, still browbeating and mistrusting his employees, plotting to smuggle money from his large Peruvian estates into Spain, asking for documents which he hopes will throw the blame onto his now dead brother the Marqués. Worse was yet coming for Hernando; just at this time his younger brother Gonzalo was leading Peru's most serious revolt to ultimate defeat. Nevertheless, Hernando eventually got out of prison, kept his estates in Peru and Spain, consolidated the family titles and entails, and established a lasting prominent position for the family in its ancestral Trujillo, Extremadura.

Reverend Father:

In many letters I have written you the state of my affairs and urged you to provide for me. What I have to report to you now is that the sentence has been handed down, as far as it refers to Almagro's death, and a very severe one too, for the little guilt there is. They condemned me to perpetual exile, to serve in an African border area of his majesty's choice for all the days of my life and to be removed from this fortress, but that provisionally, until the other matters of which I am accused are decided, I am to remain a prisoner here under heavy guard. Since they have conducted themselves so harshly in this trial where there is no guilt, if in the other evidence they should find some, they would do us no honor, but I think that, with God's aid, they will find no guilt if there are not false witnesses.
Hasten greatly and send the proof, and send me the order that the Marqués, rest his soul, gave me in Ica, because the copy that Diego Velázquez brought failed to mention the day it was presented in council; have it sent as it should be, and let a lawyer see it, and let there be no neglect in the copying as there was with the other one. If you could get the original, it would mean my life. Also send me two orders that the Marqués gave me there in Ica: one to arrest Almagro, and the other to arrest his captains. Also send me an authorized copy of the division of the jurisdictions, and how Cuzco was included in that of the Marqués, and don’t neglect it, because much depends on it. If you delay from one day to the next, the damage here will be great. You didn’t even manage to send me a copy with Castillo, who departed from Lima there on the 24th of August of last year, 1544. Don’t let a boat leave there without sending a letter in it.

Bustillo, I mean Pedro González Bustillo, wrote me that he was going to send a copy of the division of jurisdictions, but he didn’t send it. The moment they arrive there, all they do is look after their own profit, while I’m here in despair, ready to put a rope around my neck and hang myself, and dying of hunger. May God give the remedy. Diego Moreno told me that there was still gold in Cuzco, and those rogues in my house are holding it back to fill their hands with it as in the past. Since I had written that nothing was to be left there, there was no reason to keep it back. By your life, leave no wretches in the house; I have been told that a great deal of rascality is going on, and even though I should not write about it, don’t let anyone remain in the house who is best not there. Truly I am their enemy as much as if they had killed my father, and even more so of those who leave here fleeing and later turn everything to their own advantage. Castañeda wrote me from Valladolid that when he left, you had just come from Cuzco, you and the regent and Ampuero, that you had gone there on orders from the viceroy, and he wished that you had brought back the gold that was there, to send to me since you knew I was in need.

The silver that Juan de Zavala sent me from Nombre de Dios when you went through there was taken and impounded at the House of Trade, which has done me great harm, because the Council of the Indies has sentenced me to pay Hernán Sánchez de Badajoz 2,000 pesos, and I had to take the money on credit to pay him, with the silver having been seized. For the love of God I ask you to succor me; I need it more than you can imagine. And if I must stand for my servants stealing and spending everything while my life and honor suffer here, then it would be better for you to sell what is there and take care of me. Consider that I have placed my hopes in you and you must help me, for now I am in greater need than ever, and require my own resources and those of others; I want what I have now. You can send me whatever you should want to by way of merchant friends. Juan Sánchez de la Sáo is going to be stationed at Nombre de Dios, because Juan de Zavala is coming back; through one means or another, be sure that nothing stays behind there. Diego Velázquez is rather lukewarm about going back, I’m not sure he will return soon. I wish he would go, for your sake, but I am confident that you with your good industry will be sufficient to take care of everything.

I believe the originals of the orders I mentioned above are in the possession of Salas; don’t neglect to send them, and a certified copy of the division of jurisdictions. Also don’t neglect to furnish the evidence, since they will overlook nothing in our case, as I see. Again I implore you to send me my own wealth and that of others, because it is more needed than one can imagine. And realize that I am trusting in your good friendship and expecting you to perform better than those of the past, who have consumed everything and left me to suffer. Leave none of them in the house; they are my enemies and make war on me, since whoever sees me suffering and doesn’t help me from my own property is abundantly my enemy. And again, be sure that you send me what you can scratch together, confidentially, by way of merchants and by way of Juan Sánchez de la Sáo, and let it not be like the relief of Escalona, coming after the time of need.

Doctor Jara is suing me here for the property of his son. By
your life, make his estate give strict account of my property, and if it should result that I owe anything to him, I mean to his executors; then pay it, and if he owes me, collect it, and if there are no means, then send the order to pay to me, and later it will be in my hand to do with it as I wish. Keep a lawyer to look after the suits in Lima, where the viceroy and Audiencia are, and let nothing be lost for lack of legal advice.

I have had very good tools made to order for silver mines, and am sending to Lisbon for black mining technicians. I will send them all with Diego Velázquez, if he wants to go, or with someone else if he doesn’t. I will also send donkeys, both stallions and females. Be very diligent with the mines, and don’t wait till next year for anything that could be mined this year. Complain to the viceroy of all the damage Vaca de Castro has done to me and my nephews, and how he has used the avenues of justice to do injustice to me.

Be sure that you pay immediately whatever I owe there, that is, what I promised to pay Alonso de Toro and others, because I don’t want them coming here to ask it of me. When it is paid, write me; Toro’s brothers say that he gave me money for them that was not delivered. And a brother of Pedro de Soria is also complaining that his brother gave me money for him and I am keeping it from him. Before long they will make me a thief; patience doesn’t suffice for such roggeries. Being in prison like this is the cause of it all, and so again I tell you, pay off everything still unpaid that I obliged myself for when I left.

Palomino has arrived here, and I have been told that he brings money. Write if he is bringing me anything, and if they gave him anything there send me his statement of receipt so that we can ask for it. Whenever you send anything, take acknowledgments from those who bring it, so account can be taken of them. I urge you to do a thorough job on Armenta.

Send me the silver pieces and the gold alloy that I have asked for in some memoranda. May our Lord guard your reverend person as, sir, you desire. From La Mota in Medina del Campo, on the 8th day of March of the year of 1545.

At your orders, sir,
Hernando Pizarro