

How the mines of Potosí were discovered (1553)

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Chapter CVIII: Of the wealth there was in Porco, and how on the outskirts of this town there are great veins of silver.

It seems, according to what the Indians say today, that in the time when the Inca kings ruled this great kingdom of Peru they extracted in some parts of this province of Charcas a great quantity of silver ore, and for that purpose Indians were put in place, the same which gave the silver ore they extracted to their overseers and [royal] delegates. And on this hill of Porco, which is near the town of La Plata, there were mines from which they took out silver for their lords. And they affirm that much of the silver that was in the temple of the sun of Curicancha [in Cusco] had been taken from this hill; and Spaniards have taken much from it as well. Right now in this year [1552 or 1553] they are opening a mine belonging to Captain Hernando Pizarro, and they affirm that it will yield each year por ansedradas? which from it they will extract [silver worth] more than 200,000 gold pesos. Antonio Alvarez, a householder of this town, showed a little ore in Lima taken from a mine he has here on the hill of Porco and it seemed to be almost entirely silver. And thus it was that Porco was formerly a most rich thing, and it still is now; and it is believed that it always will be. And in many of the mountain ranges surrounding this town of La Plata and within its boundaries and jurisdiction they have found rich mines of silver. And it is taken for certain, from what one can see, that there is so much of this ore that if there were people enough to search it out and extract it, they would take out only a bit less than they get in iron from the province of Biscay. But without Indians to extract it, and the land being too cold for blacks and quite costly, this seems the reason why this great treasure is lost. I also say that in some parts of the district of this town there are rivers that carry gold, and very fine. But since the silver mines are richer they make little effort to recover it. In Los Chichas there are scattered villages that are held in encomienda by Hernando Pizarro, and which are subject to this town; they say that in some parts there are silver mines; and in the jungles of Los Andes great rivers originate, and if they wanted to search for gold mines I am certain they would find them.

Chapter CIX: How they discovered the mines of Potosí, from which they have extracted riches in silver never seen or heard of in other times, and how because this ore does not run [i.e., smelt with a bellows] the Indians refine it using the invention of the *guayras*.

The mines of Porco, and others that have been seen in these kingdoms - many of them from the time of the Incas - have open and obvious veins from which they take ore. But those that were discovered on this mountain of Potosí (about which I now wish to write) not only did they not recognize how rich it was, nor did they extract the ore until the year 1547, when a Spaniard called Villaroel walked by with certain Indians while searching out ore to extract, falling upon this great wonder that is a high hill of the shape here drawn: the most lovely and well situated of

any found in all that district. And because the Indians call the hills and high things 'Potosí,' it remained with the name Potosí, as they call it. And although in this time Gonzalo Pizarro went about making war on the viceroy, and the kingdom was full of disturbances caused by this rebellion, the flank of this mountain was nevertheless settled. And they built large houses, and many of them. And the Spaniards established their core settlement in this place, moving the seat of justice there, so much so that the villa [of La Plata] was nearly abandoned and depopulated. And thus afterwards they claimed mines, and on the heights of the mountain they discovered five extremely rich veins, which are called: Rich Vein [Veta Rica], Tin Vein, and another Centeno, and the fourth Mendieta, and the fifth Oñate. And this wealth was so renowned that Indians came from all the surrounding districts to this hill to extract silver, the site of which is cold, because next to it there is no [original Indian] settlement. And the Spaniards having taken possession, they began to extract silver in this fashion: he who had a mine gave to the Indians who entered there a mark [of silver per week as wages]. And if it was rich, [he gave them] two [marks] each week. And if one did not have a mine, he gave the lord-encomenderos of Indians half a mark per week. So many people came to extract silver that the site appeared to be a great city. And by necessity so much wealth will have to go on growing or start to diminish. I say, so that one may know the greatness of these mines, that according to what I saw in the year of our lord 1549 in this site, the corregidor of this town and of that of La Plata on His Majesty's behalf being Licenciado Polo, that each Saturday in his own house, where the smelting was done and the three-key treasure chests were kept, and in [royal] fifths there came to His Majesty 30,000 pesos, or 25,000, and sometimes a little less, and others more than 40,000. And in extracting so much wealth that the fifth of silver pertaining to His Majesty amounted to more than 120,000 castellanos [worth of silver] each month they said that only a little silver was coming out, and that the mines were not doing well. And this that came to the smeltery was only the ore of the Christians, and not all that they had, because much was taken out in flat ingots [tejuelos], to take wherever one wished. And it is truly believed that the Indians have taken great treasures to their lands.

And from this one may take as a great truth that in no other part of the world has there been discovered a hill so rich, nor is there a single prince of a single town - as is this famous village of La Plata - who ever had nor now has such rents and gains [provechos]. Just from the year 1548 to that of 1551 the royal fifths have been worth more than three million ducats, which is more than what the Spaniards found with Atahualpa, or what they found in Cusco when they discovered it.

According to what has been seen, the silver ore cannot be refined with bellows, nor can the residue from its fire be converted into silver. In Porco and in other parts of this kingdom where they extract ore they make great plates [planchas] of silver, and the ore they purify and separate from the dross that forms from the earth with the fire, having for that their great bellows. Whereas here in Potosí, although they have tried very hard to do it, they have never been able to do it with that [i.e., smelt the ore with a bellows]. The hardness [rezura] of the ore appears to cause it, that or some other mystery. Because great masters have as I said attempted to extract it with bellows, and their diligence has yielded nothing. And in the end, since men may discover a remedy for all things in this life, they did not fail to extract this silver by using an invention, the strangest in the world, which is this: In earlier times, the Incas being so ingenious, when they discovered silver ores in some parts that could not be refined with bellows, like those here in Potosí, in order to profit from the ore they made certain clay vessels [formas], of the size and type of an albahaquero in Spain, having all over it certain slits or ventilation holes. In these

things they placed charcoal, and the ore on top, and placed upon the mountains or upon their sides where the wind was strongest, they extracted silver, the same which they purified and refined later with their little bellows or pipes through which they blow. In this way they extracted all this great quantity of silver that has come out of this mountain. And the Indians went off with the ore to the heights all around it to extract silver. They call these vessels Guayras. And at night there are so many of them among all the fields [campos] and hills that they seem like luminaries. And in times when there is a stiff wind they extract silver in quantity; when the wind fails, by no means can they extract the least amount. In the same way that the wind is needed to navigate by sea, such is it here in this place for the extraction of silver. And as the Indians have not had overseers, nor can one take them by the hand as they extract the silver, as they take [the ore] (as already said) to refine in the hills, it is believed that many have become rich, and carried off to their lands a great quantity of this silver. And it was for this reason that Indians from many parts of this kingdom have come to this site of Potosí, to take advantage. And well, there was for that such a great preparation [aparejo, app. referring to the guayra].

Chapter CX: How next to this mountain of Potosí there arose the richest market in the world in the time when these mines were in their prosperity.

In all this kingdom of Peru it is known by those of us who have traversed it that there are great *tiangués*, which are markets, where the natives exchange their things, among which in former times the greatest and richest was that of the city of Cusco, because even in the time of the Spaniards its wealth was known for the great quantity of gold that was bought and sold in it, and for other things that were brought, all that could be had or imagined. But it did not equal this market or *tiangués*, nor did any other in the kingdom, [such is] the greatness [soberbio] of Potosí. Because so great was the trade that among Indians alone, not counting Christians, they exchanged in times when the mines prospered 25,000 and 30,000 gold pesos [worth of goods] each day, and some days more than 40,000, an amazing thing. And I believe that no fair in the world would equal the trade of this market. I made a note of it several times, and once I saw stretched out along a plain towards the main square of this town site a long string of baskets of coca, so much that it was the greatest wealth of these parts; and on another side heaps of blankets and richly decorated shirts both thin and wide; in another part were great piles of maize and dried potatoes and other foods of theirs; not even mentioning that there were a great number of quarters of beef of the best sort available in the kingdom. And as they extracted silver every day, and these Indians are great eaters and drinkers, especially those who trade with the Spaniards, everything brought for sale was consumed. And thus they arrive from all parts with supplies and all things needed for its provisioning. And it is such that many Spaniards enriched themselves in this site of Potosí having nothing more than two or three Indian women working by contract for them in this marketplace. And [they come] from many places: there came great squads of yanaconas, which are understood to be free Indians, those who may serve whomever they wish; and the most beautiful Indian women of Cusco and of all the kingdom are to be found in this place. One thing I saw in the time I was there was that they committed many frauds, and some were given to trade with deceit [check trans]. And as for the cost of things, there were was so much merchandise that they sold Rouen woolens, broadcloth, and Dutch linens almost as cheaply as in Spain. And at auction I saw some things sold at such low prices that they would be taken for cheap in Seville. And many men who had enjoyed great wealth, not having satisfied their insatiable greed, were ruined in trying to move merchandise and sell. Some of them ran off

to Chile, Tucumán, and other parts for fear of their debts. And thus all that went on were lawsuits and disputes that these had with each other. The site of this Potosí is healthy, especially for Indians, as few or none get sick in it. The silver is taken along the royal road to Cusco, or along the one to the city of Arequipa, near which is the port of Quilca. And the greatest part of it is carried by llamas and alpacas, such that lacking these only with great difficulty could one get around or engage in trade in this kingdom, due to the great distances between one city and another, and for the lack of beasts of burden.