

Account of the Mountain of Potosí and its Discovery (1572)

By parish priest Rodrigo de la Fuente Santangel

Relación del Cerro de Potosí y su Descubrimiento, 1572, Rodrigo de la Fuente Santangel, clérigo presbítero. Published in Biblioteca de Autores Españoles 185 (Madrid: Atlas, 1965), pp.357-61. The original ms. is in Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, ms. vol. J.58., 6ff.

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It is notorious how men who in a Christian way want to understand the works of nature must be guided by its Creator, who from them produces incomprehensible ends for the benefit and utility of the human species, because, seeing them, to praise the name of God and be to his honor and glory; to whom I beg to give me light in understanding so that I may manifest with truth that which I here want to declare to the peoples that today wish to know it and to remain in memory for the coming centuries how and when and in which time and for whom Our Lord was pleased to make known the riches in silver, so immeasurable, that were there and lay hidden in the mountain that the natives of this land of the province of the Caracaras Indians called and today generally throughout the whole world is called the mountain of Potosí, on account of the considerable news of it there is for its great wealth. And coming to recount how what I write came about, it was:

On the 31st day of the month of December in the year of our reckoning of 1572, being present the most excellent lord don Francisco de Toledo, viceroy of these kingdoms of Peru and Tierra Firme, in the imperial villa of Potosí, and on this day being present myself, Rodrigo de la Fuente, cleric and preacher, in presence of his excellency, there arrived an Indian with a petition saying he was the son of the first Indian to have discovered and given news to the Christians that there was silver in the mountain of Potosí; and that his excellency should give him a reward according to such a great service, and, well, it was obvious to the old residents present in that town that what he was saying was true.

His excellency was most happy to hear this petition, being as he is such a friend of doing good to the natives of this land, and he ordered me to take testimony to see if what this Indian was saying was true, as in the imperial villa of Potosí, where we were, there were people who could truly say whether or not what this Indian said was thus.

This day I went to the house of the father of the Indian who presented the petition to his excellency, where he lived with his children and wife in the *ranchería* [Indian township], and I took with me Jerónimo Hernández, fluent in the general language of the Incas and also in Aymara, so that through him I could better understand, and I found in the said house an Indian of good disposition and aspect and of superior reason and understanding, because despite the many questions I asked him, although he was in bed sick for days, and of this same sickness he died after fifteen days, he always gave me a great outcome in everything. He could have been, according to his appearance, 70 years old; he certainly seemed to show them, being surrounded by nine children, five of them women, all of a mature age and with children.

This Indian was called in his language Gualpa, and after being baptized and married he was called (p.357) don Diego Gualpa. He was a native of Chunbivilca, of the town they called Llanqui, of the *repartimiento* of Licenciado [Benito Xuárez de] Carvajal, on the outskirts of Cusco. He told me that in his land he was the son of a headman [*principal*] whom they called Alcaxuca, of the ayllu of Hanansaya, which among the Indians of this land they consider of high birth [*calidad*].

I seeing this Indian fatigued with his long illness that he had suffered for some days already, I consoled him spiritually and he received the consolation in a most Christian way, saying that he knew well that he had a soul and body, and that he was a creature of God, and that he hoped for the salvation of his soul, having been baptized and having lived in marriage with his wife for a long time, and that God loved his creatures very much, especially those who recognized him and believed him to be God and Lord, and that all this he had known since the time when the Christians arrived in [the land], as he had always treated with them and conversed with them, and had served them and heard the preaching of the padres; and that he had been confessed, and had made a will and entrusted his soul to Jesus Christ, as something done of his own accord.

I asking this Indian what age he was when the Christians entered in this land, he said he was already a fully grown man, and he pointed to a son of his who by appearance was above 25 years old; and [he said] that in that time he served Huascar Inca, son of Huayna Capac, lord of this land, as keeper of his feathers, a highly esteemed thing among the Indians, being as they were fond of adorning the head with plumes of various colors; and when the Christians gave battle at Cajamarca he was in his own land, and when the Christians climbed up to Cusco he went there with other Indians to see what people these were.

He chose to serve a soldier whom they called Cardoso, of the Portuguese nation, as he seemed to him by his appearance and bearing a lord, and he served him for a long time, in the course of which he climbed to the site of Porco, where there was news of an abundance of silver, as it was there that mines were worked for the lord of the land before the Christians entered it.

This Indian relating his history and narrating the events that befell him while serving his master, Cardoso, he said that he was given a letter for some soldiers who were in Chuquiabo, which today is the city of La Paz, and the soldiers seeing the letter became very angry about what it said, and to vent their anger on the messenger, a thing not done among proper and orderly people, they sent dogs after him to bite him and overtake him [literally 'dog' him], and his body was so damaged that he nearly died, and for this reason he did not return to where his master was for many days; and his master seeing the long absence of his beloved Gualpa, he asked about him among those who came from where he had been sent, if they had seen him. There was no lack of people to relate what had happened; he felt deeply the injury that had been done to him as well as the harm they had done to his servant; he came to Chuquiabo from Porco and found his *yanacona* injured with the dog bites; and telling him how he had suffered so for following an order, he [Cardoso] became greatly upset and went off in search of those who had done such a terrible thing, and he fought with them on an open field and killed one and injured another very badly, and he disarmed them, a thing that left Gualpa very much in his debt. He told me that his heart had not been wrong when he chose in his heart to serve this soldier Cardoso, it seeming to him that among all the many others that he saw, this one had the greatest personal valor.

This soldier Cardoso left the province of Charcas and the site of Porco to attend to business matters offered to him, and he went to the city of Los Reyes [Lima] and left this Indian Gualpa in the charge of another soldier friend of his, who was called Marín, with whom he lived for a time [engaged] in bartering and profit making, which was already customary in the site of Porco.

He said more, that one day there united four soldiers, called Marcos Xaramonte, Alvaro de Olmedo, Gaspar Montesinos, and Juan Camargo, to see a hill of *soroche* [silver-bearing lead sulfide, or galena] that was located next to the mountain of Potosí, which today we call the sites of Gonzalo Pizarro, in search of mines and *soroche*, and they told him, being on the said hill: ‘go look at that mountain and on the very top you will find much worked silver and gold offered to the *huaca* that is therein.’

This said Indian Gualpa climbed the mountain along with another Indian whom they ordered to go along with him, as the climb was substantial and rough (p.359), a distance of more than 2,000 paces. Going along on their errand with difficulty, both Indians arrived at the very summit of the mountain of Potosí, the same which has a mesa at its very top about a hundred feet across, more or less, and spreading out equally in all directions.

There they discovered that there was a shrine [pertaining to] the surrounding Indians and there were a few offered things of little importance to the *huaca* that was there, all which this said Indian don Diego Gualpa gathered up, and he loaded it onto [the back of] his companion and sent him to the four Spaniards who were down at the sites they named for Gonzalo Pizarro.

This Indian Gualpa stayed there alone on the mountain of Potosí after having sent his companion with the booty of the *huaca* that was on the highest point of the peak to the four Christians who had sent him. One can piously believe that it was the will of God our lord that that treasure, which for such a long time had been hidden underground, was revealed to mankind for his glory and honor by the hand of an Indian who had but poor knowledge of your divine majesty, so that he and the others of this land might understand, as today they go learning to understand, with the great concourse of good priests there has been, that there is our God and Creator of all things, and that they forget, as they are now forgetting, the belief in which for so many thousands of years they have been blind and deceived by the Devil, and that their idols and *huacas* had the power to give and take away man’s bodily health and also provide for his necessities, as for this they were invoked with offerings, presents, fasts, and sacrifices and spilling of human blood, as is entirely known among the priests who preach the evangelical law to them and among many other curious persons who with Christian breast [or heart] aid this necessity.

He said that upon descending from the highest part of the mountain, there came a wind so great that it knocked him to the ground, a common occurrence on this mountain of Potosí as it has great gusts, being scoured on all sides and as nature has created it in the shape of a point of a diamond, where he lost his senses and remained for a space of time after coming to, without being able to get up. He looked all around to see if his companion he had sent to the four Christians had returned, who said he was [also] called Gualpa, *yanacona* of the said Marcos de Xaramonte.

Upon rolling over to lift himself up, he put his hands on the ground, and they made a mark in it as if one were passing his hands over well smoothed clay, and it marked his hands; and as the hour had arrived in which God Our Lord took as right for his service that such an immeasurable treasure should be made known to humanity, he opened the eyes of understanding of this Indian and he recognized that it was silver ore upon which he had placed his hands, as he had seen in the camp of Porco another ore like this, and he took of it a quantity of eight or ten marks [about four or five pounds] and he descended the mountain in search of the four Christians who had been sent, the same which did not wait for him but had returned to Porco.

This Indian Gualpa went to Porco and showed Alvaro de Olmedo the ore he had brought, and told him what had happened to him, but he made light of what the Indian told him, saying it was impossible that from the mountain of Potosí he had brought something so rich. He responded that it was certain that he had told him the truth, and that if he wanted to see for himself, they would go to take a look together. And by his persuasion they left Porco and came to the mountain of Potosí, which was about five leagues' distance, and with difficulty they went climbing the mountain, and arriving near where this Indian had extracted the ore he showed to the said Alvaro de Olmedo, there came a wind so great that it smashed into the said Alvaro de Olmedo, tearing off his cape and hat and knocking him to the ground, and this made him very upset, which, on top of the fatigue he felt from the trail, caused him to become quite disgusted, and he was angry for having come, as he was afraid to be in that place not frequented by Spaniards, and out of this fury he struck the Indian (whom he hoped would make him rich) with blows and he tossed him by the hair, and with this anger and sudden assault he did not want to go where the said Indian Gualpa had found the ore that he had shown him, because God did not raise this man so that he would be the first to enjoy these riches, but rather another that came later. And thus they descended without locating that which had been revealed, and they arrived at what is today called Guaina Potosí, and the Spaniard Olmedo said to him: 'in this place there are silver mines, but not where you took me, where there are nothing but *supays* or demons,' which is to say the same thing.

When this Indian saw that the Spaniard Olmedo did not want to reach the place where he had taken the ore that he had shown, he told him in Porco: 'take half of this ore and smelt it,' and the Indian was left with the other part; and smelting this, the said Alvaro de Olmedo, as a thing God had not nurtured him to do, everything went up in the smoke, and the Indian Gualpa smelted his part, and adding to it a bit of *soroche* [galena], he took out almost as much silver as he had put in as ore, from which, he said, he took great satisfaction.

Twenty days later, this Indian Gualpa returned to the mountain of Potosí, to the spot from where he had brought the ore he smelted in Porco, and there it was on top of the ground like tallow, a gift of the sun [*a manera de sebo regalado del sol*]; he said that with a stave he gathered it together and put a quantity of it in a gunny sack or *guayaca*, as they call it, and he descended to Porco and smelted it together with the ore from there [i.e., Porco] and from it he took out very fine silver.

For the most part, the good things that befall men, if not communicated to one's friends, do not make the spirit as content as when one shares them, and to enjoy this privilege and contentment, this Indian don Diego Gualpa had as a friend a *yanacona* whom they called Chalco, native of the

village of Accha, next to Cusco, Inca by nation, to whom he said he had discovered on the mountain of Potosí much wealth in silver, and he showed him what he had left of that which he had taken from the said mountain and related to him what had happened to him in the course of discovering it. As for the most part nature allotted among the Indians of these parts greater inclination to the Inca Indians than to the rest of the nations herein, this *yanacona* Chalco was anxious to see and know where his friend Gualpa had taken out this richness in silver, and he pleaded with him to take him to see where it was that he had spoken of and shown.

Both went agreeably to the mountain of Potosí and he [Gualpa] showed the place from which he had taken the silver he had, where they found it in the same state and way already recounted, at which both friends rejoiced, and as a thing so close at hand, and extracted with so little work, both loaded up with that ore and returned to Porco, made their assay, and from what they had recovered, which was a lot, and good, they parted in a brotherly way without weighing it, because they had taken almost as much silver as cargo as they had ore brought down from the mountain.

This *yanacona* Chalco, Inca by nation, served Lorenzo Estupiñán, householder at one time in this land, and with other *yanaconas* that he had in his service in the camp of Porco, he left them to Diego de Villaroel, who was his majordomo, so that they would be occupied in whatever he ordered, this during the time that he [Estupiñán] went off to the city of Los Reyes [Lima], where in those days there resided the highest ranking people of this realm; the same said *yanacona* Chalco gave notice of what he had seen on this mountain of Potosí and he displayed the silver he had taken out in company with the *yanacona* Gualpa, and he swore what he said was true to Diego de Villaroel, majordomo of his master, Lorenzo de Estupiñán, and he urged him that there was much more than he had said; and with this display of silver and the Indian's guarantee, Diego de Villaroel, who was at the time in Porco, was disposed to come with other companions to see that which had been so clearly affirmed to be thus by the said *yanacona* Indian Chalco.

The *yanacona* don Diego Gualpa said that being one day in Porco, he saw coming along the road Diego de Villaroel, Gonzalo Bernal, and Juan de Portillo, Spaniards, with the *yanacona* Chalco and some other Indians with ore from the mountain of Potosí, and that Diego de Villaroel registered before a magistrate, first among the rest of his companions, the mine that today is in the vein of Diego Centeno, as it is known today; and this was the first one discovered and registered on the mountain of Potosí according to the will of God.

And this *yanacona* Gualpa carrying on with his confession of what occurred and what he had seen in that time on the mountain of Potosí, he said that next to the crown of the mountain there were at that time some ten or twelve large *quinua* trees, among which were beds of the lions of this land, and on no other part of the mountain was there the least bit of forest until you came down to what is today the township of the Indians and the Spanish village, that in these places there was ample woodland of the type called *quinua*, of the same which this Indian Gualpa showed me, a thick stave in his house, which was one from that time. I have wanted to mention this particularity, because today one does not find in all the (p.361) circumference of the mountain, nor in all the populated part of Potosí, one tree, nor even any other thing that looks like one, as it is now quite denuded [lit. 'threshed,' *trillado*] as much by Indians as by Spaniards.

This *yanacona* don Diego Gualpa said something more, that a great piece of this rich ore from the mountain of Potosí he gave to Antonio Quijada, a soldier from that time, and he still lives in this province, so that he would send it to the Hatun Apo of Castile, which in that time was the most ingenious Caesar Charles, fifth of this name and first [as] king of Spain, the same which was sent to President Gasca, and Licenciado Polo saw it sent, according to what the same Antonio Quijada told me this day above mentioned, that that was true, as he was then present in the imperial villa of Potosí.

I asking this Indian don Diego Gualpa how much time had passed since the discovery of the mountain of Potosí and its riches, he said that it had been 28 years and 9 months, a few days more or less, from the day he gave me this account; the same which he gave under oath that I administered and I required that he tell the truth based on the oath he had taken before this confession was made, and for the time when I was there, as he was at the end of his life and very ill. The same which passed before the witnesses written in, who were don Diego Conde Gualpa Inga, native of Urcos, next to Cusco, and don Pedro Gualpa, native of Cusco, and Francisco Hacha Angara, who were found present this day, and other old Indians who were in the house of this don Diego Gualpa, whom he had known for some time, since before this said mountain of Potosí was discovered, the same which said that it was called this, this same mountain, before its wealth was discovered and extracted, as it still is.

The same witnesses said it was true that which the said don Diego Gualpa had said, and they affirmed under oath that for this purpose I took from them, being present and interpreter the abovementioned Gerónimo Hernández, and we signed it in our names on this same day, month, and year abovementioned.

[signed] Rodrigo de la Fuente Sanct Angel.
Gerónimo Hernández