

"A miracle in Potosí" (c.1603)

By Alonso Ramos Gavilán

Alonso Ramos Gavilán, *Historia del Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Copacabana*. Ed. Ignacio Prado Pastor. Lima: P.L. Villanueva, 1988, 373-74. Originally published in Lima by Jerónimo Contreras in 1621. The woodcut is in the original p.334.

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Ramos Gavilán mentions the Imperial Villa many times in his account of the Virgin of Copacabana, often in relation to the Potosí-born sculptor Francisco Tito Yupanqui, who carved the image, now housed in its shrine on the south shore of Lake Titicaca. Ramos Gavilán also mentions briefly cases of ill travelers and native mineworkers trapped in cave-ins. The incident of the mill-stamps translated below is simply the longest of the Potosí incidents mentioned and the most graphic. Ramos Gavilán stresses throughout his narrative the relationship between native devotion and the excessive obligations of the Potosí mita. The Virgin of Copacabana is first recognized in some inchoate way by local caciques and kurakas as an intercessor in the face of the viceroys' and mine owners' demands. It is in 1582 that Anansayas headman or gobernador don Alonso Viracocha Inga goes to Potosí to find the sculptor, described as 'a friend of his' ['un deudo suyo']. Francisco Tito Yupanqui then carves the image based on others he sees of the Virgin of Candlemas (Candelaria) and Viracocha Inga seeks permission from the bishop of Charcas to establish a confraternity. The basic story is that the bishop and everyone else choose to snub the native devotees and their image, saying it's badly made. It gets kicked and mistreated by ignorant and mean Spaniards but it is always restored despite punishing peregrinations to its original form. Ramos Gavilán even includes a letter or testimony allegedly written by Tito Yupanqui in a colloquial Spanish (234-38). The virgin, aided by her humble devotees, overcomes all doubt and survives many tribulations to triumph in Copacabana. The miracles begin.

A miracle in a mine (295-6):

In that same year [1590], being inside the Cerro de Potosi excavating a mine, the whole thing caved in, trapping inside a hundred Indians and a Spaniard; they were buried for eight days, calling out constantly to the Most Sacred Virgin of Copacabana, entrusting themselves most truly to her, and she hearing their pleas she pulled them out of those dark jails where death threatened them as if to spite her, and giving to them certain life, in the end not one of them was harmed, all coming out free and healthy, and all in unison proclaimed the miracles of that Lady.

In another case from 1590 a native mineworker from the town of Copacabana, Juan Cusinga, was healed by praying to the virgin while convalescing in Potosi after a mine collapse (299). In several other cases, priests and native workers on their way to Potosi were saved from apparently mortal illness. In one case from 1609, a llama is resurrected after a prayer (391). In 1610 a member of the Copacabana confraternity in Potosi was struck by lightning while seeking alms with the virgin's insignia, but although hit on the crown of his hat he survived unscathed after calling out to his patroness (404). And finally in 1617, an woman named dona Maria Magdalena

was saved after being thrown from a mule while on her way to Copacabana from Potosí (411). She wanted to give thanks for surviving the plague of diphtheria [*garrotillo*] that had hit the city.

Here is the miracle of the mill-stamps from late 1603:

In the Imperial Villa of Potosí (which is so well known among all the nations of the world for its admirable mountain, which has supplied the avarice of Spain with more than its own size in silver, having risen so precipitously) there occurred an admirable and portentous case [*caso*], which for never having occurred before or since left all the citizens and residents of that city doubly struck with wonder. The ore milling machines and inventions that have spurred on the industry of men in these kingdoms are not easy to describe, but the one that among all of them (for its artifice) aids most is called an engine [*ingenio*], and with good reason since with nothing but falling water its giant wheel is set in motion, and this perpetually governs certain stamps of the size of half beams, sheathed with steel, and with some rising and others falling it crushes within a large basin or mortar, without stopping for an instant, the hardest rocks and gravels that hide silver within their hardness. And since not everyone could imagine the construction of these mills, I wanted to reveal them in a woodcut, with the warning that sometimes the picture diminishes how the thing is in reality, from which comes the saying: the lion is not as brave as he appears painted. But here it is the contrary, since the mechanical power of those engines is greater than the picture suggests. In one of these engines there worked an Indian with less diligence than his overseer would have liked. I have never ceased to condemn throughout my life the cruelty with which they treat these miserable Indians, almost without thinking [*casi a una mano*], all the operators and overseers of these engines, and when my mind recalls the sufferings that the Egyptians inflicted on the sons of Israel, doubling their tasks without giving them more reward and wage than lashes and beatings, I believe with that tyranny they nearly match that which the Spanish have in their treatment of these poor Natives, making them work day and night, heaping upon them the hardest tasks, and since when greed faces off against the worker, there is no peon so hardy that he does not appear clumsy, nor any diligence that does not appear malingering. And so it came to pass that the majordomo was so enraged with the phlegmatic response of the Indian he kicked, with incredible choler he shoved him into the mortar, so that the mill stamps would come down upon him, crushing his bones as they mill the rocks. But as soon as he executed this cruel act he realized his crime and knelt quickly, invoking the favor of the Virgin of Copacabana. Oh admirable portent, oh most singular miracle, oh incomparable speed of that most Serene Queen, of that most powerful Empress, of that most pious Mother of the needy and afflicted! Having barely invoked the name of the Virgin, that repentant majordomo, there stopped, visibly detained in the air, all the mill stamps that were about to fall upon that miserable Indian, even as the others that would not have harmed him went on milling ore, moved by the force of the wheel. They got the Indian out of the ore crushing bin, and immediately the stamps that had been detained and suspended to that point went on with their job as before. In a short time news of the new miracle spread throughout the Villa, igniting in the breasts of all the faithful a new devotion to our Lady of Copacabana, in whose honor was ordered a solemn procession, and standing out among them was the Indian with a candle in his hands.