

The mines of Potosí: the miserable condition of the Indian miners (1 July 1550)

Fray Domingo de Santo Tomás

Fr. Domingo de Santo Tomás to the Council of the Indies. Published in José María Vargas, Fr. *Domingo de Santo Tomás, defensor y apostol de los indios del Perú: Su vida y sus escritos* (Quito: Editorial Santo Domingo, 1937), pp.15-21. Orig. ms. in AGI Lima 113.

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It must have been about four years during which this land was about to be lost that there was discovered a mouth of hell, into which have entered, as I say within that time, a great quantity of people, which by the greed of the Spaniards they sacrifice to their god, and these are some silver mines that they call Potosi. And so that your highness may understand that it truly is a mouth of hell that, in order to swallow up souls God permitted to be discovered in this land, I will here paint something of it. It is a hill in an extremely cold wasteland, around which for six leagues in all directions not a single plant grows that can sustain beasts, nor is there firewood to cook food. Indians bring these things on their backs or on llamas, those who have them, and the same is true for all that is necessary for the sustenance of the Spaniards and Indians who reside and remain there. The closest source for these things is 12, 15, or 30 leagues away, and the farthest is Collao, a hundred leagues away. A bushel of wheat commonly costs 30 *castellanos* [gold pesos] in that place, and most often more; the bushel of maize, which is the food of the Indians, from 15 to 20 *castellanos*; the bushel of other foods of theirs called chuño and potatoes, which are roots of plants, at 12 or 15 *castellanos*. They take the ore from that mountain I mentioned with all the labor one could imagine could be taken out of them, both because it is a great task to remove the ore from so deep among so many rocks and with such danger of frequent mine collapses, as well as what happens to them from the cold and distemper [*destemple*] of the land. The charcoal to smelt it [the ore] they bring from six leagues away and more. The firewood with which to warm themselves and to cook their food from the same distance to the fame of this hill and its richness from 200 leagues and more, from here 250, from there 230. From 180 leagues away they send the poor Indians by the force of each allotment [*repartimiento*] according to its rules. From one allotment fifty, from another sixty, from another 100, from another 200, and so on in greater numbers. However contrary to reason and the laws of free persons this may be, anyone who knows what freedom is ignores it, because sending off souls by force is either the condition of slaves or of condemned men to such a great penalty for grave crimes, and not the law of the free which your highness in his provisions and ordinances claims these poor folk to be. [goes on to emphasize hardships of travel to mines vs. mine work, challenges those who say Indians do well in mines. True only of some yanaconas, according to Santo Tomás.]