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Acarete du Biscay's account of travels to Peru and Argentina (1658)

In the age of mercantilism, world powers jealously guarded access to the sources of their wealth. Chinese silk and porcelain producers were forbidden from sharing their knowledge, Indian cotton manufacturers kept their trade secrets to themselves, and it was literally illegal for any outsiders to even step foot within Spanish domains in the Americas, let alone witness where and how the Spaniards were getting all their silver.

This doesn't mean that people often slipped through, however. In 1658, a Frenchman named Acarete du Biscay managed to travel through South America by disguising himself as the nephew of a Spanish merchant. His account of the great Bolivian silver city of Potosi is one of the best records we have of that remarkable and brutal place at the height of its productivity. Du Biscay's interest was clearly commercial; he may have intended to sell his knowledge as a kind of commercial espionage.

to the bundle, and then he repassed and swam my horses and mules over to me. . . .

Córdova is a town situate in a pleasant and fruitful plain upon the side of a river, bigger and broader than that I have just spoken of. 'Tis composed of about 400 houses, built like those of Buenos Aires. It has neither ditches, nor walls, nor fort for its defense. He that commands it is governor of all the provinces of Tucumán and, tho' it be the place of his ordinary residence, yet he is wont now and then, as he sees occasion, to go and pass some time at St. Jago [Santiago] de l'Estero, at St. Miguel de Tucumán, (which is the Capital City of the Province) at Salta and at Xuxui [Jujuy]. In each of these villages there is a lieutenant, who has under him an alcalde and some officers for the administration of justice. The Bishop of Tucumán likewise usually resides at Córdova, where the cathedral is the only parish church of the whole town. But there are divers convents of monks, namely of Dominicans, Recollects, and those of the Order de la Mercy, and one of nuns. The Jesuits have a college there, and their chapel is the finest and richest of all.

The inhabitants are rich in gold and silver, which they get by the trade they have for mules, with which they furnish Peru and other parts, which is so considerable, that they sell about 28,000 or 30,000 of them every year, which they breed up in their farms. They usually keep them till they are about two years old, then expose them to sale, and get about six patagons a piece for them. The merchants that come to buy them carry them to St. Jago [Santiago], to Salta, and Jujuy where they leave them for three years, till they are well grown and become strong, and afterwards bring them to Peru, where they presently have sale for them, because there, as well as in the rest of the western part of America, the greatest part of their carriage is upon mules. The people of Córdova also drive a trade in cows, which they have from the country of Buenos Aires, and carry to Peru, where, without this way of subsistence, 'tis certain they would have much ado to

live. This kind of traffic makes this town the most considerable in the Province of Tucumán, as well for its riches and commodities, as for the number of its inhabitants, which are counted to be at least 500 or 600 families, besides slaves, who are three times the number. But the generality of them of all degrees have no other arms but a sword and poignard, and are very indifferent soldiers, the air of the country, and the plenty they enjoy, rendering them lazy and cowardly.

From Córdova I took the way of St. Jago [Santiago] de l'Estero, which is 90 leagues distant from it. In my journey I, from time to time, that is, 7 or 8 leagues, met with single houses of Spaniards and Portuguese, who live very solitarily. They are all situate upon small rivulets, some of them at the corners of forests which are frequently to be met with in that country, and are almost all of algarobewood, the fruit of which serves to make a drink that is sweet and sharpish, and heady as wine; others of them in open fields, which are not so well stocked with cattle, as those of Buenos Aires. But, however, there are enough of them, and indeed more than needs for the subsistence of the inhabitants, who also make a trade of mules, and cotton, and cochineal for dying, which the country produces. . . .

A Description of the City of Potosí and the Mines There

I was no sooner alighted from my horse at a merchant's house to whom I had been recommended, but I was conducted by him to the President of the Provinces of Las Charcas, to whom the order I carried from the King of Spain was directed, as the Principal Director of his Catholic Majesty's affairs in this province, in which Potosí is situate, which is the place of his ordinary residence, altho' the city de la Plata is the capital. After I had delivered the order to him, I was brought to the *corregidor* [chief magis-

trate] to deliver that which belonged to him, and afterward to those other officers for whom I brought orders. They all received me very well, particularly the President, who presented me with a chain of gold for the good news I had brought him.

But before we go any farther 'tis convenient I should give some description of the city of Potosí, as I have done of others. The Spaniards call it the Imperial City, but nobody could ever tell me for what reason. 'Tis situate at the foot of a mountain called Araçassou [Aranzazú], and divided in the midst by a river, which comes from a lake inclosed with walls, which lies about a quarter of a league above the city, and is a kind of reserver [reservoir] to hold the water that is necessary for the work-houses of that part of the city, which is on this side of the river over against the mountain, [and] is raised upon a little hill, and is the largest and most inhabited part. As for that part of the city which is on the side of the mountain, there's scarce anything but engines and the houses of those that work in them. The city has neither walls, ditches, nor forts for its defense. There are reckoned to be 4,000 houses well built of good stone, with several floors, after the manner of the buildings in Spain. The churches are well made, and all richly adorned with plate, tapestry, and other ornaments, and above all those of the monks and Nuns, of whom there are several convents of different orders, which are very well furnished. This is not the least populous city of Peru, with Spaniards, mestizos, strangers, and natives (which last the Spaniards call *Indios*), with mulattoes and Negroes. They count there are between 3,000 and 4,000 natural Spaniards bearing arms, who have the reputation of being very stout men and good soldiers. The number of the mestizos is not much less, nor are they less expert at a weapon, but the greatest part of them are idle, apt to quarrel and treacherous. Therefore they commonly wear three or four buff-waistcoats one upon another, which are proof against the point of a sword, to secure themselves from private stabs.

The strangers there are but few; there are some Dutch, Irish, and Genoese, and some French, most of whom are of St. Malo, Provence, or Bayonne, and pass for people of Navarre and Biscaye. As for the Indians, they are reckoned to amount to near 10,000 besides the mulattoes and the blacks; but they are not permitted to wear either swords or firearms, nor [are] their *curacas* and *caciques*, tho' they may all aspire to any degree of knighthood, and to benefices, to which they are often raised for their laudable actions and good services. They are also forbidden to wear the Spanish habit, but are obliged to clothe themselves in a different manner, in a close-coat without sleeves, which they wear next their shirts, to which their band and laced cuffs are fastened. Their breeches are wide at bottom after the French fashion, their legs and feet naked. The blacks and mulattoes, being in the service of the Spaniards, are habited after the Spanish mode and may bear arms, and all the Indian slaves after ten years service are set at liberty, and have the same privileges with the others.

The government of this city is very exact, by the care which is taken by twenty-four magistrates, who are constantly observing that good order be kept in it, besides the *corregidor* and President of Las Charcas, who directs officers after the manner of Spain. It is to be observed that, excepting these two principal officers, as well as Potosí as everywhere else in the Indies, all the people, whether knights, gentlemen, officers or others, are concerned in commerce, of which some of them make so great an advantage that in the city of Potosí there are some reckoned to be worth two, some three, and some four millions of crowns; and a great many worth two, three, or four hundred thousand crowns. The common people, too, live much at their ease, but are all proud and haughty, and always go very fine, either in cloth of gold and silver, or in scarlet, or silk trimmed with a great deal of gold and silver-lace.

The furniture of their houses is very rich, for they are generally served in plate. The wives, both of gentlemen

and citizens, are kept very close to a degree beyond what they are in Spain; they never go abroad, unless it be to go to mass, or to make some visit, or to some public feast, and that but rarely. The women here are generally addicted to excess in taking coca. This is a plant that comes from the side of Cuzco, which, when it is made up in rowls [rolls] and dried, they chew as some do tobacco. They are so heated, and sometimes absolutely fuddled by it, that they have no command of themselves at all. 'Tis likewise often used by the men, and has the same effects upon them. They are otherwise very temperate in eating and drinking, tho' they have before dwelt in places well stored with all sort of provisions, as beef, mutton, fowls, venison, raw and preserved fruits, corn and wine, which are brought hither from other parts, and some from a great distance, which makes these commodities dear, so that the meaner sort of people, especially those that have very little beforehand, would find it hard enough to live there, if money were not very plenty, and easy to be got by them that are willing to work.

The best and finest silver in all the Indies is that of the mines of Potosí, the principal of which are found in the mountain of Aranzazu, where, besides the prodigious quantities of silver that have been taken out of veins, in which the metal evidently appeared and which are now exhausted, there is almost as great quantities of it found in places where they had not digged before. Nay, from some of the earth which they threw aside formerly when they opened the mines and made pits and cross-ways in the mountains, they have taken silver and have found by this that the silver has been formed since that time, which shows how proper the quality of this ground is for the production of that metal. But indeed this earth does not yield so much as the mines that are found by veins among the rocks. . . .

The King of Spain does not cause any of these mines to be wrought on his account, but leaves them to those persons that make the discovery of them, who remain masters

of them after the *corregidor* has visited them and declared them proprietors, on the accustomed conditions and privileges. The same *corregidor* describes and marks out the superfices of the ground, in which they are allowed to open the mine on the outside; which does not, for all that, limit or restrain their work underground, every man having liberty to follow the vein he has found, the extent and depth of it reaching never so far, tho' it should cross that which another has digged near it. All that the King reserves for himself, besides the duties we shall hereafter speak of, is to give a general direction by his officers for all the work of the mines, and to order the number of savages to be employed in them, to prevent the disorders that would arise if every proprietor of the mines should have liberty to set as many of them to work as he pleased; which would frequently give occasion to those that are most powerful and rich to engross and have so great a number of 'em [savages], that few or none would remain for others to employ to keep their work going forward.

For this would be contrary to the King's interest, which is to make provision that there be a sufficient number of slaves for all the mines that are opened. For this end he obliges all the *curacas*, or chiefs of the savages, to furnish every one a certain number, which they must always keep complete, or else are forced to give twice as much money as would have been paid in wages to those that are wanting, [lacking] if they had been present.

Those that are destined for the mines of Potosí don't amount to above two thousand and two or three hundred. These are brought and put into a great enclosure which is at the foot of the mountain, where the *corregidor* makes a distribution of them to the conductors of the mines, according to the number they want. And, after six days constant work, the conductor brings them back the Saturday following to the same place, where the *corregidor* causes a review to be made of them, to make the owners of the mines give them the wages that are appointed them, and to see how many of them are dead, that the

curacas may be obliged to supply the number that is wanting—for there's no week passes but some of them die, either by divers accidents that occur, as the tumbling down of great quantities of earth and falling of stones, or by sickness and other casualties.

They are sometimes very much incommoded by winds that are shut up in the mines; the coldness of which, joined to that of some parts of the earth, chills them so excessively that, unless they chewed coca, which heats and fuddles them, it would be intolerable to them. Another great hardship which they suffer is that in other places the sulphurous and mineral vapors are so great that it strangely dries them up, so that it hinders them from free respiration. For this they have no other remedy than the drink which is made with the herb of Paraguay, of which they prepare a great quantity to refresh and moisten them when they come out of the mines at the times appointed for eating or sleeping. This drink serves them also for physic to make them vomit and cast up whatever incommodes their stomachs.

Among these savages they ordinarily choose the best workmen to break up the ore between the rocks. This they do with iron bars [crowsbars], which the Spaniards call *palancas*, and other instruments of iron; others serve to carry what they dig in little baskets to the entrance of the mine; others to put it in sacks and load it upon a sort of great sheep [llamas], which they call *cameros de la tierra*. They are taller than asses and commonly carry two hundred pound weight; these serve to carry it to the work-houses, which are in the town along the river, which comes from the lake I have spoken of before. In these work-houses, which are a hundred and twenty in number, the ore is refined, of which take the following account:

They first beat it well upon anvils with certain great hammers, which a mill continually keeps at work. When it is pretty well reduced to powder, they pass it thro' a fine sieve and spread it upon the ground about half a foot thick in a square place that is very smooth, prepared for

the purpose. Then they cast a great deal of water upon it, after which they, with a sieve, spread upon it a certain quantity of quick-silver, which is proportioned by the officers of the mint, and also a liquid substance of iron, which is prepared by two millstones, one of which is fixed, and the other is continually turning. Between these they put an old anvil, or some other massy piece of iron, which is worn away and consumed with water by the turning millstone, so that 'tis reduced to a certain liquid matter. The ore, being thus prepared, they stir it about and mix it, as men do when they make mortar, for a fortnight together, every day tempering it with water. After this, they several times put it into a tub, wherein there is a little mill which, by its motion, separates from it all the earth with the water, and casts them off together, so that nothing but the metallic matter remains at the bottom, which is afterward put into the fire in crucibles to separate the quick-silver from it, which is done by evaporation. As for the iron substance, that does not evaporate, but remains mixed with the silver, which is the reason that there is always in eight ounces (for example's sake) three-quarters of an ounce or thereabouts of false alloy.

The silver, when thus refined, is carried to the mint, where they make an essay [assay] of it whether it be of the right alloy, after which it is melted into bars or ingots, which are weighed, and the fifth part of them deducted, which belongs to the King, and are stamped with his mark. The rest appertain to the merchant who, in like manner, applies his mark to them and takes them away from thence when he pleases in bars, or else converts them into reals and other money. This fifth part is the only profit the King has from the mines, which yet are esteemed to amount to several millions. But besides this, he draws considerable sums by the ordinary impositions upon goods, without reckoning what he raises upon quick-silver, both that which is taken out of the mines of Huancavelica, which are situated between Lima and Cuzco, and that which is brought from Spain, with which two vessels are loaded

every year, because that which is taken out of these mines is not sufficient for all the Indies.

They use divers ways of carriage to transport all the silver that is annually made about Potosí for Spain. First they load it upon mules that carry it to Arica, which is a port on the South-Sea [Pacific], from whence they transport it in small vessels to the fort of Lima, or Los Reyes, which is a fort upon the same sea, two leagues from Lima. Here they embark it with all that comes from other parts of Peru in two great gallions that belong to his Catholic Majesty, each of which carry 1,000 tons and are armed each with fifty or sixty pieces of canon. These are commonly accompanied with a great many small merchant ships as richly loaded, which have no guns but a few *petareros** to give salutes and take their course toward Panama, taking care always to send a little pinnace 8 or 10 leagues before to make discoveries. They might make this way in a fortnight's time, having always the help of the south-wind, which reigns alone in this sea. Yet they never make it less than a month's voyage, because by this delay the commander of the gallions makes a great advantage in furnishing those with cards that have a mind to play on ship-board during the voyage, which amounts to a very considerable sum, both because the tribute he receives is ten patagons for every pack of cards, and because there is a prodigious quantity of them consumed, they being continually at play, and there being scarce anybody aboard but is concerned for very considerable sums. . . .

Fiesta at Potosí

Three weeks after my arrival at Potosí, there were great rejoicings made for the birth of the Prince of Spain, which lasted for a fortnight together, during which time all

* A *petarero* is a small explosive device which shoots or fires small charges—I. A. L.

work ceased throughout the city, in the mines, and in the adjacent places. And all the people great and small, whether Spaniards, foreigners, Indians, or blacks, minded nothing else but to do something extraordinary for the solemnizing of this festival. It began with a cavalcade made by the *corregidor*, the twenty-four magistrates of the city, the other officers, the principal of the nobility and gentry, and the most eminent merchants of the city, all richly clothed; all the rest of the people, and particularly the ladies, being at the windows and casting down abundance

of perfumed waters, and great quantities of dry sweet-meats. The following days they had several plays, some of which they call *Juegos de Toros*, other *Juegos de Cannas*, [Cañas] several sorts of masquerades, comedies, balls, with vocal and instrumental music, and other divers amusements, which were carried on one day by the gentlemen, another day by the citizens; one while by the goldsmiths, another while by the miners; some by the people of divers nations, others by the Indians, and all with great magnificence and a prodigious expense.

The rejoicings of the Indians deserve a particular remark, for, besides that they were richly clothed, and after a different manner, and that comical enough, with their bows and arrows, they, in one night and morning, in the chief public place of the city, prepared a garden in the form of a labyrinth, the plots of which were adorned with fountains spouting out waters, furnished with all sorts of trees and flowers, full of birds, and all sorts of wild beasts, as lions, tigers and other kinds, in the midst of which they expressed their joy a thousand different ways, with extraordinary ceremonies.

The last day save one surpassed all the rest, and that was a race at the ring, which was performed at the charge of the city with very surprising machines. First there appeared a ship towed along by savages of the bulk and burden of a 100 tons, with her guns and equipage of men clothed in curious habit, her anchors, ropes, and sails swelling with the wind, which very luckily blew along the

street through which they drew her to the great public place, where, as soon as she arrived, she saluted the company by the discharge of all her canon. At the same time, a Spanish lord, representing an emperor of the East coming to congratulate the birth of the prince, came out of the vessel attended with six gentlemen and a very fine train of servants that led their horses, which they mounted, and so went to salute the President of Los Charcas. And, while they were making their compliment to him, their horses kneeled down and kept in that posture, having been taught this trick before. They afterward went to salute the *corregidor* and the judges of the field, from whom, when they had received permission to run at the ring against the defendants, they acquitted themselves with great gallantry, and received very fine prizes distributed by the hands of the ladies.

The race at the ring being finished, the ship and a great many other small barks that were brought thither advanced to attack a great castle wherein Cromwell the Protector, who was then in war with the King of Spain, was feigned to be shut up; and, after a pretty long combat of fireworks, the fire took hold of the ship, the small barks, and the castle and all was consumed together. After this a great many pieces of gold and silver were distributed and thrown among the people in the name of his Catholic Majesty. And there were some particular persons that had the prodigality to throw away two or three thousand crowns a man among the mob.

The day following, these rejoicings were concluded by a procession made from the great Church to that of the Recollects, in which the Holy Sacrament was carried, attended with all the clergy and laity. And, because the way from one of these churches to the other had been unpaved for the celebration of the other rejoicings, they repaved it for this procession with bars of silver, with which all the way was entirely covered. The altar where the Host was to be lodged in the Church of the Recol-

lects was so furnished with figures, vessels, and plates of gold and silver, adorned with pearls, diamonds, and other precious stones that scarce ever could anything be seen more rich, for the citizens brought thither all the rarest jewels they had. The extraordinary charge of this whole time of rejoicing, was reckoned to amount to above 500,000 crowns. . . .