



Anthropomorphic description of the Americas Descripción del antropomórfica del continente americano

Text Information

Author | Miguel Cabello Valboa

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Transcription, translation and introduction by Leonardo Velloso-Lyons.

Introduction to the Text

This odd description of South America as a giant appears in the equally unusual work titled *Miscelánea Antártica* ("Antarctic Miscellany", c. 1586), a history dedicated to two main subjects: the origins of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the history and culture of the Inca empire.

The author of this history, Miguel Cabello Valboa, was a soldier-turned-priest from Archidona, a small town roughly thirty miles north of Málaga, Spain. Most of Cabello Valboa's life before he arrived in the Americas in 1566 remains known to scholars only through what he presents in the *Miscelánea*. Cabello left Spain at the age of thirty after having fought for the Spanish king in the Netherlands, and he spent the rest of his life between Peru and modern-day Ecuador, where he became a lay priest, working to convert indigenous and afro-descendant peoples in the northern part of South America to Catholicism. It was during his stays in Quito and Lima that he allegedly wrote the *Miscelánea*.

The full title of Cabello's work is *Antarctic Miscellany, in which both the origin of our Western Indigenous peoples, as deduced since Adam, and the founding and beginning of the Inca Kings of Peru are described; their lives and wars; and other notable deeds undertaken between the years of their births and deaths, as well as what was happening in other parts of the world during such times* (*Miscelánea Antártica, donde se describe el origen de nuestros Indios Occidentales, deducido desde Adán, y la erección y principio de los Reyes Incas del Piru; Vidas y guerras que tuvieron; cosas notables que hicieron computados los años de sus nascimientos y muertos y a el o que por el universo yva subcediendo durante sus edades y tiempos*). For Cabello, his book is a "miscellany" because its contents are *miscellaneous*: a wide variety of stories and episodes connected more-or-less closely with the work's two main subjects: the origin of the Western Indies' indigenous peoples and the history of the Incas of Peru.

The excerpt which is presented here—the poetic rendering of the continent as a giant—showcases several important themes that appear regularly in Spanish and Portuguese writing from this period, especially in works on Spain's and Portugal's colonial interests in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. This short introduction will touch on just three of them.

The first theme is the portrayal of the colonies as wild and uncivilized. While Cabello's description praises South America for its natural and cultural riches, it also implies that the continent—with everyone and everything in it—is somewhat monstrous. The way he uses adjectives—such as *corpulento* ("pudgy"), *robusto* ("robust"), *grande* ("great"), *osudo* ("bony"), *gruesas* ("thick"), *desmesurada* ("disproportionate")—is particularly striking: he matches the continent's physical geography with the giant's body parts, inviting his reader to share his vision of South America as an impressive but nonetheless grotesque body.

The second theme is the use of cartographic language—the vocabulary associated with maps and geographic charts. For instance, Cabello notes how each body part is positioned as if he and his reader were looking at a map, and he locates some body parts with geographic coordinates (longitude or latitude). Readers of early modern literature about the Americas will not be surprised to see Cabello combining his own imagination with cartographic knowledge that he had. Writings about colonial spaces during this period regularly mixed admiration, curiosity, fear, and estrangement.



The third noteworthy theme of Cabello's description is its global gaze: it is not exclusively focused on South America. When describing Brazil's Cape of St. Augustine, South America's easternmost part, Cabello points out its relative proximity to Africa. He also compares the South American mountain ranges and rivers to what he identifies as their African counterparts. These comparisons between South America and Africa epitomize a sixteenth-century tendency to think of the non-European parts of the world as intrinsically connected and similar in important ways.

What lies behind this seemingly incidental connection is the real connection created between Africa and the Americas in the form of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial projects. Not only were the Spanish and the Portuguese colonizing territories on both sides of the Atlantic, but they were forcing many non-European communities (both Africans and indigenous Americans) into indented servitude and causing massive migrations by forcing individuals (mostly Africans) into slavery. The afro-descendent individuals whom Cabello tried to convert to Catholicism were the children and grandchildren of escaped slaves. This is a very good text to use as an example of the European colonial imagination, and its ties to the real oppression of peoples around the globe who lived under European colonial rule.

About this Edition

The text was transcribed from the most recent edition of the *Miscelánea Antártica*, by Isaías Lerner (Fundación José Manuel Lara, 2011). There are only two surviving manuscripts of this source, one held by the university library at University of Texas, Austin, and another one held by the New York Public Library. Lerner's edition takes both manuscripts into account, and has modern Spanish spelling for comprehension.

Further Reading

Bradbury, Jonathan David. "The 'Miscelánea' Of The Spanish Golden Age: An Unstable Label." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 105, no. 4, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010, pp. 1053–71.

- Article on the literary genre "miscellany" and its importance for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish literary culture.

Bradbury, Jonathan David. *The Miscellany of the Spanish Golden Age: A Literature of Fragments*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

- Monograph on the "miscellany" genre. The book features a whole chapter on the *Miscelánea Antártica*.

Echevarría, Roberto González. "Review of *Miscelánea Antártica*." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1296–97. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669428>.

- For readers who do not read Spanish, this is a good review of Lerner's edition and Cabello Valboa's work in general.

Ostenfeld-Suske, Kira von. "A New History for a 'New World': The First One Hundred Years of Hispanic New World Historical Writing." *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 3: 1400-1800*, edited by José Rabasa et al., Oxford Univ. Press, 2012, pp. 557–74.

- General introduction to the writing of histories in Hispanic America.



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Resta ahora que con la más claridad y brevedad que nos fuere posible, en tanto que la parte de el mundo que dijimos se acaba de henchir de gentes y darnos materia que tratar, digamos de la forma y postura en que el soberano criador la formó, a lo menos en la que nuestra nación la halló cuando pasó a ella. Y no halló artificio para expresar esto mejor que imaginarla un corpulento y robusto gigante acostado en el mundo sobre sus pechos, cuya disforme y mal peinada cabeza está en cincuenta y cinco grados de altura al Polo Antártico. Y de esta cabeza, degollado el cuello por los cincuenta y dos y medio que es lo que llamamos estrecho de Magallanes, cuya longitud corre leste oeste.

De este cerebro, destroncado de su lugar, nace el grande y osudo espinazo, que con mal parejos ñudos va haciendo y formando la gran cordillera que el sagrado texto, según Montano, llama Sephar, y los nuestros los Andes. El brazo izquierdo de este monstruo, que le cae a la parte de el levante, lo tiene estendido, y en sus músculos y coyunturas escondidas infinitas naciones bárbaras. Y son sus venas grandes y espaciosos ríos que desaguan en el gran mar Occéano. Todas las ijadas de este inmenso cuerpo que caen al lado izquierdo, está humidísimas y montosas, lavadas en el agua de el mar y río de la Plata, Paraguay y otros no menores lagos y desaguaderos que por aquella banda se hacen. Sus gruesas costillas son las cordilleras que de el ñudoso espinazo de su cordillera nacen, entre las cuales se hacen hondos y húmedos valles, que con canales profundas llevan innumerable suma de agua a el Mar de el Norte. Deja tender su pierna izquierda hacia el septentrión, y de su rodilla hace el cabo de Sant Agustín, que de aquesta tierra es la parte más cercana a la de Áphrica. Recoge su espinilla y de su corva le sale el caudaloso río Marañón, no sin causa llamado Mar Dulce. Viene finalmente a rematar su pie en las asperezas de Caracas y sus vecinas sierras, quedándole en aquel vacío de la dobladura de su desmesurada pierna aquellos llanos de la Venezuela por donde se camina con el mismo tiento y gobierno que por la mar, a causa de su mucha grandeza.

Given that the part of the world already mentioned¹ is now full of people and provides us with our subject², it is now time to describe as clearly and briefly as possible the shape and form that God Almighty chose to give this continent—at least, the shape that our nation³ encountered when we first came here. And He found no better artifice with which to express this continent than imagining it as a pudgy and robust giant, lying on his front upon the world, his disformed head with its poorly combed hair beginning at around fifty-five degrees latitude from the Antarctic Pole. And his head is severed from the neck at around fifty-two-and-a-half degrees latitude, where the Strait of Magellan runs longitudinally from East to West.

From his brain, severed from its rightful place, springs his great and bony spine with its uneven nodules making and shaping the great chain of mountains which the Sacred Text (according to Montano) calls Sephar⁴, and which our people call the Andes. The monster's left arm is extended: it rests pointing towards the East, and within his muscles and crevasses infinite barbarous nations hide. And his veins are enormous and broad rivers that run into the great sea ocean⁵. The entire flanks on the left side of this immense body are mountainous and extremely humid, washed by the ocean's water and by the River Plate, the Paraguay River, and other equally large lakes and river mouths that run through that region. His thick ribs are the mountain range that spring from his spine, full of mountainous nodes between which valleys, deep and humid, emerge, bringing an infinite amount of water through their deep canals to the Northern Sea. His left leg hangs, pointing north, and his knee forms the Cape of St. Augustine, which is the part of these lands which is closest to Africa. His lifted shin forms a curve from which springs the abundant Marañón River, which is rightly called "Freshwater Sea". His foot rests in the harsh lands of Caracas and its neighboring mountains. In that empty region where his oversized leg bends is where Venezuela's prairies are located; there, walking proceeds at the same speed and accuracy as sailing the sea because the distances are so immense.



Volviendo a tomar el hombro derecho deste corpulento gigante que le cae a la parte de el poniente, lo hallamos nevado y húmedo, interrumpido de muchas ensenadas y bahías que el mar hace en él; mas en comenzando a estender su brazo, el cual tiene menos apartado de sí que el izquierdo, se van mejorando sus cielos y suelos y abarca con sus molledos muchas naciones bárbaras y belicosas. Comienzan luego sus estendidas ijadas, con una sequedad tan intensa que pocas y raras veces le alcanza un rocío y menuda stilcidia de el cielo, y lávalas el Mar de el sur. Estiéndese con tan fogosa sequedad la distancia que dejamos señalada en el capítulo 15 de esta Segunda Parte, y la infinita multitud de gente que en esta parte habita pereciera de hambre, si el soberano proveedor no ordenara que de entre las costillas de el lado derecho de este monstruo, que son cordilleras desmembradas de el lomo, no desaguaran, haciendo grandes y fértiles valles, muy caudalosos ríos, que a sus tiempos conocidos traen y acarrear a estas tierras llanas y fogosas el agua que llueve en lo alto de la sierra.

Y aquestos riegos hacen tan fértiles y abundantes estas tierras que no tienen ni le queda a lo demás de el mundo de que le pueden tener imbidia. La pierna de esta monstruosa figura no va tan apartada como la oriental que antes dijimos, sino, corriendo de norte a sur, sigue el rumbo con que el brazo se comenzó a apartar de el hombro y se va estendiendo hasta tener por su espinilla las grandes cordilleras de Caramanta y Encerma, de donde torciendo, por no quebrarse en ninguno de los dos mares, se mete por entre ambos, tomando el nombre de Capira, en la tierra firme de Castilla de el Oro, dejando sus muslos, corvas y pantorrillas y más partes de su pierna, pobladas de grandísima suma de naciones diferentes en lenguas, trajes y adoraciones, aunque muy ricas de oro. Lo alto de sus lomos se ciñen no con cualquiera cinta, sino con la tórrida, por donde siempre el sol camina. Su osudo espinazo de la nuca, desencasado por aquel estrecho, va corriendo de el Polo Antártico hacia el Ártico, haciendo grandes y encumbradas sierras de nieve y volcanes de fuego dando, con todo eso, lugar a que infinitas naciones vivan sana y opulentamente entre aquellas asperezas.

Now, returning to this pudgy giant's right shoulder, which falls onto the western side of his body, we find it covered in snow and water and interrupted by many inlets and bays created by the ocean. But as he begins to extend his arm, which he keeps closer to his body than the left one, the skies and earth start to look better, and he embraces many barbarous and bellicose nations with his biceps. This is where his extensive flanks begin, where the land is so dry that few and rare are the times when we see a morning dew and the sky is frequently barren⁶; the South Sea washes these flanks. This burning and barren area extends over a great distance, as mentioned in Chapter 15 of this second part⁷, and the infinite multitudes of peoples living in these parts would perish from hunger if the Almighty Provider⁸ had not commanded that, between the ribs on this monster's right side (which are the mountain ranges that originate in his loins), water should be brought by powerful rivers, generating great and fertile valleys; these rivers have been bringing and carrying the water that rains at the top of the mountains to these barren and burning lands since the beginning of time.

And these flows make these lands so fertile and abundant that there is no other place in the rest of these world that these lands can envy. This monstrous figure's leg is also not as far from his body as the previously discussed eastern one; it runs from North to South, following the path where his shoulder ends and his arm begins, extending until it reaches his shin—the great mountain ranges of Caramanta and Encerma—and there it twists so that it will not break into either of the seas; squeezing between the two, it takes on the name "Capira" and turns into the solid ground of Castilla del Oro. His muscles, curves, and calves, and other parts of his leg, are populated with a very great number of nations—nations which differ in language, clothing, and forms of worship, although all are rich in gold. The highest part of his loins is girded, not with any regular belt, but with the torrid zone⁹ where the Sun always treads its path. His bony spine, severed from his head by the aforementioned strait, runs all the way from the Antarctic Pole to the Arctic, forming great, towering, snow-capped mountains and fiery volcanos, providing a rich and healthy life for the infinite nations that live in those harsh lands.



Córrele la una y otra costa, como dicho queda, siguiendo el mismo rumbo de sur a norte, y la costa meridional dista de su altura de la cordillera por las partes más lejanas casi quinientas leguas, y por la que menos, más de ciento, y la costa y ribera del mar por la banda de el occidente, por la parte que más lejana la tiene, serán sesenta leguas, y treinta por donde más se le acerca, donde se hacen aquellos llanos y secos arenales de que ya habemos tratado, semejantes a los de Libia, aunque no tan olvidados de el rocío de el cielo, puesto que jamás en ellos llueve, como queda dicho. Mas así como en el Egipto fertilizan las tierras la crecientes que por el Nilo bajan de la Ethiopia, en estos llanos arenales, así mismo, fertilizan las tierras de sus valles las crecientes de los ríos que bajan de los Andes o cordilleras serranas.

As already stated, both coasts run the same course from South to North, and the southern coast is five hundred leagues away from the tall mountain range that runs in parallel; whereas where they are closest, coast and mountain range are only one hundred leagues apart¹⁰. As for the sea shore on the western side, the part that is furthest away from the mountain range is sixty leagues, and thirty where they are the closest, where those plain and dry deserts, which we discussed, are formed, similar to those in Libya except not so forsaken by the sky's dew, although it never rains, as already stated. Just as in Egypt, where rivers which originate in Ethiopia flow into the Nile and fertilize the lands through which they run, so these deserts are also fertilized by the rivers that descend from the Andes or the other mountain ranges.

Critical Notes

- 1 Cabello Valboa uses this turn of phrase to refer to the Americas, as the *Miscelánea Antartica*'s previous chapters, and the one from which this translation comes, were dedicated to laying out his thesis about the origin of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, i.e. that they descend from peoples from Asia, who migrated to the Americas.
- 2 I.e. the subject of this work. The use of the first person possessive here simply refers to the Cabello's book, the *Miscelánea Antartica*, more precisely the work's main subject: the origin of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.
- 3 By "our nation," he probably means early modern Spain, which included the kingdoms of Castile, Leon, Aragon, Navarre, and Portugal (at the time that he finished writing the *MA*), among others.
- 4 Here, Cabello Valboa references one of Iberia's most prominent antiquarians and Bible scholars, Benito Arias Montano, one of the many scholars who attempted to find evidence that the Americas were known to Hebrews and Christians before the Spanish kingdoms discovered it in 1492.
- 5 "El mar Oceano," as early modern Spanish and Portuguese speakers would have called it, means the Atlantic Ocean.
- 6 I.e., it rarely rains in these regions.
- 7 The *MA* has a lot of instances of self-reference, something not uncommon for early modern books of this magnitude and size. Chapter 15 is dedicated to explaining how the indigenous peoples—from whom all indigenous peoples of the Americas descended—arrived in the Americas. In this same chapter, Cabello Valboa also introduces a few comments about Andean geography, and how it differed from that of his own time.
- 8 I.e. God. Cabello Valboa was a Catholic priest, which probably explains why he finds many words to describe the Christian God without directly naming.
- 9 I.e. the Equator. He means the region between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. Early moderns often referred to it as "the torrid zone."
- 10 For this and the following comment on distances, it is hard to make sense of Cabello Valboa's original language. There seems to be an opposition between two coasts, which would have the reader believe that he is writing about the western (Pacific) and the eastern (Atlantic) coasts of South America. However, as the whole passage concerns the Andes (the mountain range that he references), the "southern" coast could refer to the southern portion of the western (Pacific) coast—modern day Chile—and the "western" coast could refer to the northern portion of the western (Pacific) coast—modern day Peru and Ecuador. Modern editors of the work have tended to leave this confusing passage uncommented.