
Document 1513

Balboa's discovery of the South Sea in 1513, as narrated by Peter Martyr

*Sources: Peter Martyr of Anghiera or Angleria¹ wrote, among other works, thousands of letters, some of which were published as **Opus epistolarum** (Alcalá, 1530). The rest of the story is taken from his *Decades of the New World*, whose title in Latin is **De orbe novo** (Alcalá, 1530). I have followed translations of this book, made in Spanish by Torres Asensio (Madrid, 1892), and made in French by Gaffarel (Paris, 1907).*

Letter to Luis de Hurtado, son of the Count of Tendilla, dated Valladolid, 23 July 1514

We have received news from the New World. Vasco Núñez [de] Balboa, carried out a coup with some people whose favors he had gained, defeating the royal officials and usurping for himself the command of the Spanish in the Darien. He overthrew Governor Nicuesa and jailed Judge Anciso who was supervisor of courts.

Balboa undertook and carried out such a great feat by which he not only obtained the pardon of His offended Majesty but he was decorated with honorific titles. Among the inhabitants of those lands it was well known that on the other side of the high mountains, there was another southern sea, richer in pearls and gold, but that in between there were kings, brave defenders of their rights, and that, therefore, one thousand armed men were needed to break the power of those kings. In order to open the pas-

¹ Ed. note: Pietro Martire d'Anghiera was an Italian who spent most of his life at the Spanish court. Born in about 1455, at Arona on the Lago Maggiore, his family lived in Milan. In 1477, he went to Rome and joined the retinue of Cardinal Sforza. He befriended the Spanish ambassador, Íñigo de Mendoza, and accompanied him to Spain in 1487. The Count of Tendilla presented him to the Court, then sitting at Zaragoza. As a soldier, he fought in the reconquest of Granada. He became a deacon, a priest, an archpriest, and finally the prior of an abbey in Granada, whose income was derived from Jamaica. He spent most of his life as teacher of the young nobles at the Spanish court. As of 5 March 1520, he was the official historian of His Majesty, with a salary of 80,000 maravedis a year. He died in October 1526.

sage through those lands with steel, Pedro Arias [Dávila], whom I have mentioned earlier, has been sent with such a body of warriors.

While the preparations were being made in Spain, soldiers being recruited and armed, ships being built, that Vasco Núñez Balboa took it upon himself to try his luck at such a great enterprise. He gathered 190 men from those in the Darien and hit the road on the 1st of September of last year 1513. The small kings having been pacified, in part by force of arms, in part with blandishments and gifts from here, he crossed the mountains and saluted the sea, thus removing from Pedro Arias and his companions such a task and the glory attached to such a big enterprise.

They have written marvellous things about it. When I have received authentic copies, I will let you know...

Valladolid, 23 July 1514.



Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who became governor of the Darien after a coup d'état, went on to become the first European to sight the South Sea or Pacific Ocean in 1513, thus gaining glory for Spain and earning a pardon from King Ferdinand. (From the frontispiece of Vol. 2 of "*Fuentes históricas sobre Colón y América*", by Pedro Martir Angleria, edited by Joaquín Torres Asensio, Madrid, 1892)

Extracts from the Third Decade of the New World

Peter Martyr of Milan, apostolic protonotary, King's counsel, to Leo X, Pontiff Sovereign, about the New World.

Chapter I

Most Holy Father,

I had closed the doors upon the New World, as it seemed to me that I had covered those regions enough, when I received new letters that forced me to reopen those doors and take up my pen anew.

Vasco Núñez, after he had chased away from the Darien Captain Nicuesa and Judge Enciso, arrogated to himself the command with the connivance of his allies; I have already narrated that part.¹ I have received letters from him², and also from many of his companions, written in a military style. They tell us that he has crossed the mountains that separate our ocean from another southern ocean previously unknown. Tiberius did not write with more pride than Vasco, when he reported what Capri said about Seianus. However, I have borrowed from his and the other letters only the events that are worth mentioning. Not only has Vasco succeeded in conquering the good graces of the Catholic King who was irritated against him, but he has gained additional favors. He has received from the King, and his companions as well, privileges and honors as a reward for such deeds.³ Let Your Holiness pay attention, with serene mind and happy heart, to the narrative of those events, inasmuch as this Spanish nation, with varied works and many death-defying feats, has pacified not just centurions or legions but numberless thousands of men who ought to bow before your sacred throne.

Vasco Núñez did not suffer idleness, because he was an impetuous spirit who could not stay still for long, or else for fear that another man would take away the honor of the enterprise. Many contend that he had been forewarned of the coming of Pedro Arias⁴. Maybe for both reasons, or maybe because he knew that he had irritated the King with his previous actions, he resolved to try, with a few others, a plan of conquest that he had heard the son of the [native] chief Comogro say would be impossible without at least one thousand men.

1 Ed. note: More details of the insurrection were given in his Second Decade.

2 Ed. note: Two of the letters from Balboa have been preserved. They were published by Navarrete, in his "Colección de los viages", vol. 3, pp. 358-375.

3 Ed. note: Gaffarel, who has written Balboa's history in French: "Nunez de Balboa", in which he has translated the two letters published by Navarrete, says that the favors made to Balboa by King Ferdinand included the rank of *adelantado* or lieutenant-governor of the provinces of Panama and Coiba. In addition, Governor Pedro Arias (who arrived at the Darien coast in June 1514) was to consult with him on all important matters.

4 Ed. note: Gaffarel says that he had indeed been warned by his friend, the alcalde Zamudio.

quantity, worth about 110 gold pesos, each valued at one *castellano* each, the reason being that the previous year he had been despoiled, as I have said before.¹

Vasco, in order not to be outdone, gave him strings of glass beads, suitable for necklaces and bracelets, mirrors, brass bells and other European-made trade goods. The natives value those things highly, because they value above all what is foreign to them. In addition, Vasco gave Poncha a few iron axes to cut trees with; there is no other thing that they estimate more, because they have no metals except gold, and it is so difficult for them, without iron tools, to cut any sort of wood to build their houses and dig out their canoes. Now they do all their carpentry work with sharp stones which they find in streams.

Having made an ally out of Poncha, and no longer fearing for his rearguard, Vasco led his men through the mountains.² Poncha had given him some guides and porters who marched in front and opened the way. They had indeed to go through wild country without any trails, populated with wild beasts, and to climb steep hills. The natives maintain only rare communications between themselves; being naked and using no money, they have few needs to trade. When they do trade, they exchange gold with their neighbors for ornaments and useful furniture. As trade is practically non-existent, there are no practical trails between them. However, their scouts know some hidden trails which they use to lay ambushes or rob at night, or else to massacre themselves and reduce the others to slavery. Thanks to the efforts of Poncha's men and of his own carpenters, Vasco crossed fearsome mountains, and passed many streams and wide rivers, by building bridges with either wooden beams or woven lianas. He managed to keep his troop healthy. So as not to become boring, I skip over the many details of their immense labors, but I do not think I should omit the narrative of what happened with the caciques they met along the way.

Before they reached the peak of the mountain range, the Spanish entered the province of Quarequa³, governed by the cacique of the same name. The cacique came to meet them, with his people armed the native way with bows and arrows and with *macanas* which are broad and long wooden clubs handled with both hands. They also have sticks with fire-hardened tips, and also spears which they throw with much skill. Quarequa received them with pride and hostility, ready to block their passage with a big crowd of his subjects. He asked where they were going and what did they want. Through the interpreters and with a ferocious aspect, he intimated that they should turn back if they did not want to be killed to the last man. While saying this, he came out into the open. He and his lieutenants wore clothes, but everybody else was nude. As our people did not want to turn back, he attacked them. The battle did not last long. Soon they felt the arrows from our "scorpions" [i.e. crossbows] and the shots from the

1 Ed. note: The Spanish had raided his territory and found gold among the possessions the Indians had hidden inside wild rose thickets.

2 Ed. note: Balboa's letters indicate that he had begun the climb on 6 September and left Poncha's village on 20 September.

3 Ed. note: Pronounced kwarekwa.

muskets; upon hearing the latter, they thought we controlled lightning and thunder. They then turned their backs and took flight. Just like butchers cut into pieces the flesh of bulls and sheep before exhibiting them for sale, the same with the Spanish who chopped with a single blow the buttocks off one, the thigh off another, the shoulder off yet another. Treated so furiously, the cacique along with 600 others perished.

Vasco found Quarequa's home and in it an infamous vice. He found there the king's brother dressed like a woman, and around him many similarly-dressed attendants who, according to their neighbors, shared the licentious customs. Vasco ordered his dogs launched against them; they destroyed about forty of them. The Spanish indeed use fighting dogs against those naked peoples and the dogs attack furiously as if they were wild pigs or fleeing deer. The Spanish have found the dogs to be loyal allies, always ready to share the dangers, like the inhabitants of Colophon and those of Castabala who had trained canine troops to fight in wars, and had found them always ready to fill the first rank, never refusing to attack.

When the natives heard about the severity of our treatment of that obscene sort of beings, they gathered around Vasco as if he were Hercules. The people were shouting and pointing out those whom they believed were infected of that contagious vice, were spitting in their direction. Obviously, the contagion that had spread to the court people had not reached the common people. Raising their hands and eyes heavenward, they were indicating that God abhorred such a big iniquity. That was the reason why He had sent thunder and lightning, and floods that had destroyed their crops. They complained that as a result, they suffered hunger and sicknesses.

The natives do not worship any God except the Sun. They think that only He can give or take away the crops. They are, however, docile. They will be easily instructed in our true faith, if teachers can be found to go there. As far as their language goes, there are no sounds difficult to pronounce in it, so that all the terms of their vocabulary can be written and rendered in our Latin alphabet, as I have already said regarding the [language of the] natives of Hispaniola. It is a warrior race that up to now had been molesting their neighbors. The province is neither rich in gold nor noteworthy by its fertility. It is hilly and sterile. It is cold on account of the bareness of its mountains. For this reason, the leaders of this nation cover themselves, although the mass of the people must content themselves with what nature provides.

[Some negroes were native to America]

They found there some black slaves.¹ They inhabit a region only about two days distant from Quarequa, in which there are nothing but negroes. They are ferocious and very cruel. It is believed that a long time ago, some negroes from Ethiopia² were out as pirates and, following a shipwreck, established themselves in those mountains. The natives of Quarequa are having continuous warfare with those negroes; both sides mutually make slaves or kill one another.

1 Ed. note: Gaffarel points out that most of the conquistadors have reported a similar fact.

2 Ed. note: The generic term for Africa, although the word Guinea was similarly used.



Balboa sighting the South Sea or Pacific Ocean. (*From Jules Verne's The Exploration of the World, f.p. 220*)

[Balboa reaches the Pacific]

Vasco left many of his companions in Quarequa, because they had become sick, not being used to this life of excessive fatigue and privations.¹ With guides from Quarequa, he headed for the mountains. Between Poncha's court and the place where the other ocean can be seen, there are only six days of ordinary walking.² Vasco was able to execute this crossing only after 25 days of difficulties and great privations. Finally, on the 7th day of the kalends of October [i.e. 25 September], the quarequans pointed at a peak and told Vasco that the other ocean could be seen from there. Looking at it with avidity, Vasco ordered the troop to halt, then went on by himself and was first to arrive at the peak. He throws himself down, bends the knees, raises his hands to heaven and salutes the south sea. He writes that he gave infinite thanks to God and all the saints to have reserved such a glory for him, who had only an ordinary genius, no expertise and no nobility. After he finished his prayers at the fashion of military men, he called his companions and, with his hand, showed them the sea, the object of their search. They again fall on their knees and beg Heaven, specially the Holy Virgin, to look with favor on the rest of the enterprise, and to allow them to reconnoiter the country lying below their feet. His companions do the same and then shout with joy. With more pride than Hannibal showing Italy and the Alps to his soldiers, Vasco promises his companions great wealth: "Here is the ocean we longed for! Here you are, who have shared all my labors, here is the country about which the son of Comogro and the other natives have told us so many marvels!" That said, as a sign of possession, they erected altar-shaped piles of stones right and left, so that posterity would not accuse them of being liars.³

1 Ed. note: Only 77 men remained fit at that time. Balboa led them forward on 26 September 1513.

2 Ed. note: An English engineer who surveyed that same region in 1852, for the purpose of building a canal, has reported a width of about 35 miles at most of the crossing points (See Lionel Gisborne, "The Ithsmus of Darien in 1852", London, 1853), but the necessity of cutting paths with machetes resulted in a progress of just over 1 mile an hour on average...

3 Ed. note: Here is the text of the official statement taken on the spot by the royal notary, Andrés de Valderrabano, and signed by all present: "The gentlemen, hidalgos and respectable men who were in search of the South Sea, in the company of the very noble captain Vasco Núñez de Balboa, governor in the names of their Highnesses of the Mainland, are as follows: firstly, Don Vasco Núñez who first saw the sea and showed it to the following: Andrés de Vera, priest, Francisco Pizarro, Diego Albitez, Fabian Pérez, Bernardino de Morales, Diego de Tejerina, Cristobal de Valdebuso, Bernardino de Cienfuegos, Sebastian de Grijalva, Francisco de Avila, Juan de Espinosa, Juan de Velasco, Benito Duran, Andrés de Molina, Antonio de Baracaldo, Pedro de Escobar, Cristobal Doza, Francisco Pesado, Alonso de Guadalupe, Hernando Muñoz, Hernando Hidalgo, Robio de Malpartida, Alvares de Bolano, Alonzo Ruiz, Francisco de Lucena, Martin Ruiz, Pascual de Malpartida, etc. etc. I, Andrés de Valderrabano, notary of their Highnesses at court and in all their kingdoms and domains, was present and attest to the truth of it all. I affirm that these 70 men are the first Christians to see the South Sea. I was with them and am counted among their number." While descending from the peak, they made incisions in the barks of many trees, writing the name of the King of Castile, and leaving here and there stone piles, until they reached the court of the southern cacique, whose name was Chiapes.



Balboa taking possession of the South Sea on 29 Sept. 1513.

Chiapes takes up arms and advances with a great crowd to stop them, not only from going through but also from stepping on his land. The Spanish, although few in number, form ranks and advance upon the enemy. They fire their muskets and launch their pack of hounds, commonly called *alanos*.¹ When they heard the echoes from the mountains as a result of the shots, when they saw the smoke made by the powder vomiting flames, and they smelled the sulphur, because the wind was carrying it their way, they gave up, terrorized as they were, or threw themselves upon the ground, thinking that lightning was hitting them. While they were thus prostrated, or fleeing, the Spanish, still in close rank advanced toward them, then they spread out to kill a few and take a large number of them prisoners. They had, in fact, decided to make friends of them and to explore in peace the country they occupied.

Vasco then occupied Chiapes' house and released the majority of those made prisoners during their flight, and sent them onward to their cacique to invite him to come back with promises of peace, generosity and friendship. Otherwise, it would be the ruin and destruction of his kingdom. In order to be more convincing with Chiapes, Vasco gave a few of the quarequan natives who had served as guides to accompany Chiapes' people.

¹ Ed. note: Gaffarel has translated this word to mean greyhounds, whereas most dictionaries say mastiffs, usually of a large kind, like great Danes.

In this way, Chiapes was persuaded, either by the quarequans who gave him reasons on behalf of their cacique, or by his own people, and he accepted the promise that had been given. He came out of his hiding place and returned to where our people were. Hands were shaken all around, friendship promised and a mutual alliance sealed with gifts.

Chiapes gave Vasco some gold worth 400 pesos in gold coins (I have already said that one ducat exceeds one peso almost by one quarter).¹ In order to reciprocate, Vasco gave some of our [European] things to Chiapes. Thus, both parts being contented, they spent a few days there while waiting for the arrival of those who had been left behind at Quarequa. That done, they dismissed their quarequans with small gifts.

Now guided by Chiapeans, and accompanied by Chiapes himself, the Spanish came down the mountains and reached the shore of the desired ocean in four days.² Their joy was great. Before witnesses and royal notaries, they took possession, in the name of the King of Castile, of this whole ocean and adjacent lands.³

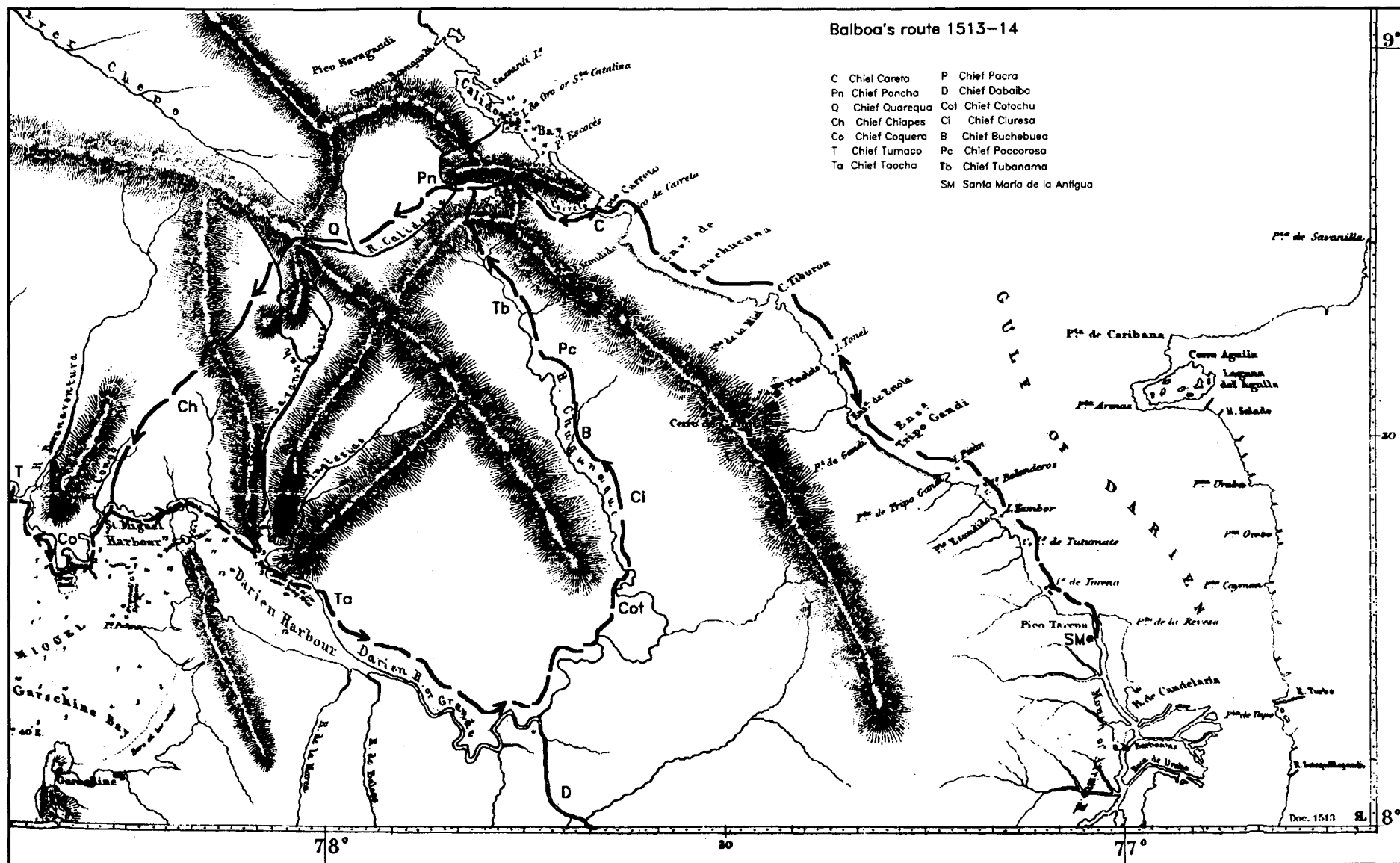
Vasco left part of his men with Chiapes, in order to be able to explore the surrounding country more freely. He borrowed from the cacique nine of those dugout canoes, which they call there *culchas*, and guided by Chiapes, with 80 of his men, he crossed a wide river to enter the land of another cacique named Coquera. This man, at first, wanted to resist and repel the Spanish. He tried, but with the same result as the other caciques. He was defeated and put to flight. However, persuaded by the Chiapeans, he returned. The Chiapeans had played the role of envoys from Vasco. "Those invaders are invincible, they had told them. Caress them and they are soft; resist them and they are cruel and severe. If you are their friends, our cacique and other caciques are there to prove it, they promise their assistance, protection and peace. If you refuse their alliance, watch out for ruin and death." Well then, Coquera was touched by these advances and came back toward our people, and gave to the Spanish 650 gold pesos worth of gold, and received from Vasco the usual presents, as he had done with Poncha.

1 Ed. note: So that 400 pesos was almost 300 ducats. This was no small amount, as 1 ducat was then worth exactly 375 maravedis, and 1 maravedi would buy about US\$1 worth of goods. Hence, about \$100,000 in all. This declared amount could indeed have bought Balboa a lot of pardon at King Ferdinand's court.

2 Ed. note: Balboa had sent 3 squads of 12 men each to scout ahead of him. They were commanded by Martin Alonso, Juan de Escaray and, the future conquistador of Peru, Francisco Pizarro. Alonso was the first European to reach the shore and one of his men, Blaz de Atienza, was the second.

3 Ed. note: Balboa himself reached the South Sea only on 29 September 1513, at the head of 26 soldiers. He immediately took possession of the ocean in the following terms: "Long live the high and powerful monarchs Don Ferdinand and Doña Juana, sovereigns of Castile, León and Aragon, in the name of whom I today take, for the royal crown of Castile, real, physical and actual possession of these seas, lands, coasts, ports and islands of the south, and all their dependencies, as well as of the kingdoms and provinces that are or may be dependent upon them, in any manner whatsoever, no matter what right or title that may be, old or new, in times past, present or future, without any contradiction," etc...

Re-construction of Balboa's route to the Pacific in 1513. Superimposed upon the survey map drawn by Gisborne in 1852. (From Gisborne's Darien Journal)



[Concluding note]

To summarize the rest of the story, as told by Martyr, Balboa first explored the gulf nearby which he had named Golfo de San Miguel, because he discovered it on 29 September, the feast day of St. Michael. The small fleet of canoes followed the shore until they came abreast of the Pearl Islands. By trying to reach them, they were almost all capsized. They moved further along the shore until they came to the territory of a cacique named Tumaco. He too fought the Spanish at first, then submitted himself and gave as his share of gifts some large pearls. The Spanish learned that within the gulf there was an island bigger than the others¹ where only one cacique rules and big pearls grow. So, Balboa wanted to attack at once with the help of Tumaco and Chiapes, but the chiefs refused on account of the bad weather at that time of year.

On the return trip to the Darien colony, Balboa decided to go by a slightly different route through the mountains. With guides from Chiapes, they crossed a large river and entered the territory of a cacique named Taocha who received them peacefully and provided his own guides, much food and some slaves to act as porters. They crossed the territory of a cacique named Pacra. Jaguars were terrorizing the local population. So it was that this Pacra was ordered killed by Balboa at the request of his allies. Out of 190 men he had left the Darien with, says Martyr, Balboa never had available more than 80 men in fighting trim. They finally came upon the Comogro River² and went through the territories of two caciques, Cotochus and Ciuriza, both allies of Comogro. They provided new guides. More forests and mountains were crossed, until they came upon marshes and upon the village of a chief named Buchebuúa, where there was not enough food. Then their path took them near the territory of cacique Chiorisos, who sent them some gold presents and received iron axes. Through the lands owned by Chief Poccorosa, more gold and less food. Then they came upon the territory of Chief Tubanama who had a fierce reputation with the Comogro people. He was captured, reviled by his Indian enemies, then ordered released by Balboa who received a large quantity of gold in return. The date was the last day of December 1513. Tubanama gave his son to the Spanish to be raised by them and become a future interpreter. Balboa and many other soldiers became sick with fever and had to be transported in hammocks by slaves. They finally arrived at the territory owned by their friend Chief Comogro, situated in a valley near the source of the Comogro River. This place was said to be about 70 leagues west of the Darien. During their absence, the old man had died and been replaced by one of his sons.

Upon leaving this territory, they again came back to that of Poncha. Back in Coiba, Balboa took his brig back to the Darien colony, a settlement called Santa Maria de la Antigua, in February 1514. A ship had come from Hispaniola. It returned soon after, carrying Balboa's long letter to the King.

1 Ed. note: The largest of the Pearl Islands is called Isla del Rey.

2 Ed. note: Since it is said later by Martyr that this river empties into the South Sea, we can assume that it was a tributary of the Rio Grande or Darien River, quite probably the Chugunaque River (See Gisborne).

The fleet of Pedro Arias arrived the following June. We learn that the Darien settlement was situated 25 leagues by water from Port Comogro, the point nearest to Comogro's town inland. This town was apparently no more than 26 leagues in straight line from the mouth of the Bay of St. Michael. Also the port of Poccorosa was located no more than 7 leagues from the port of Comogro. Tubanama's town was 20 leagues from that of Poccorosa. The Spanish had also heard about a chief named Dabaiba whose territory was along the middle course of the Rio Grande.

Arias replaced Balboa as governor, while Balboa continued to cover the route to the Pearl Islands which he explored. All the time he was preparing himself to become conquistador of Peru. However, Arias and his men were jealous and, in 1517, they arrested him on a trumped up charge of treason, sentenced him to death and beheaded him. Pizarro is now remembered as the conqueror of Peru. As for the Darien colony, it disappeared after the settlement was moved to Old Panama in 1525. Over three centuries passed before Balboa's old route was surveyed as the possible route for a canal across the isthmus.¹

1 Ed. note: Gisborne in 1852, Prévost in 1853.

