
Document 1542C

Villalobos—Letter from Fr. Santiesteban to Viceroy Mendoza, dated Cochin 22 January 1547

Sources: AGI Patronato, Est. 1, caj. 1. Navarrete's Colección ... de Indias, vol. 14, pp. 151-165.

Letter written by Fr. Gerónimo de Santiesteban to Don Antonio Mendoza, Viceroy of New Spain, relating the loss of the fleet that departed in 1542 for the Western Islands under the command of Ruy Lopez de Villalobos.

Most Illustrious Sir.—*Gratia tibi et pax a Deo Patre.*¹

When I communicate with my companions or reflect myself about the outcome of the fleet which your Lordship sent us in, having first recommended it so much to God with many sacrifices, prayers and good works, and having undertaken it after many consultations, and guiding it mainly for the service of God, I do not know what to say except what the apostle Saint Paul [blank] *o divitiarum sapientie et scientie Dei que incomprehensibilia sunt judicia ejus et inestigabiles vie ejus.*² According to human judgment, the causes of the destruction of the fleet and property which your Lordship sent to the Western Islands with Ruy Lopez de Villalobos—may he rest in peace—are many; on account of the short time remaining before the naos leave [for Portugal], I will not be able to give a separate account for each one.

On All Saints Day of the year 1542, we left that land at the port they call Juan Gallego's Port. Eight days later, we passed by a small, uninhabited island. Three days later, we anchored near another, which they named "la Ñublada", because it was so [i.e.

1 Ed. note: Latin phrase meaning: May the grace and peace of God the Father be with you.

2 Ed. note: Latin for something like: the wisdom and science of God is fathomless and should not be judged according to our norms.

clouded]. Here they took on little water and wood because there were rats that would cut the cables and they much feared to lose the ships. From there within 2 or 3 days we saw another island; we did not touch at it because it was up wind. From there until Christmas Day, we did not see any land, given that at sea we did not see many signs of land being near, except that, on the first Sunday of December, during the first watch, those who were watching saw the sea breaking ahead. They called the pilot; he looked and ordered the ship to be luffed and the sounding line out. The flagship, which until then and later too was bad at tacking, that time, through the mercy of the Lord, she did it well. The one with the sounding line first came out with 4 fathoms, and the second time 7. A signal was made with the lamp to the other naos which were about to fall into the same danger, and they took evasive action. They did not dare lie to, for fear that the currents would throw them onto the shoals.

The **islands** we arrived at on Christmas Day are low. They have a deep bottom near the land. The next day, they landed at a small **island** whose people fled to another, those who could board their canoes. Women and children were left hidden; they were well treated. The people are white, naked. The women wear some fine mats, less than a square yard, with which they cover the most indecent part. There was an old woman who, when she saw a painted chocolate cup, showed that she had seen one of those before¹ but the others did not pay any more attention to that than to the other things they saw. At this island were found chickens, coconut palms, and a tree that bore fruits that looked like pineapples² which, although they were big, they had very little that could be eaten. There were other trees that had the leaf like a fig tree and they are tall³; they were then without any fruits, but at another place we found some with fruits. The fruit is as big as the pineapples of that land [i.e. Mexico] and smaller; it is good food whether cooked or raw. It appears that there would not be much fish there. It was thought that they would be the [same as the] islands of Los Reyes.⁴ We stayed here until the day of Los Reyes [i.e. the Magi, 6th January, 1543].

After 13 or 14 days from here, we saw a small, low **island**, well covered with palm trees. We saw the houses and an effort was made to anchor at it but a way was not found. Its natives came out to us and told us by way of a salutation: "Buenos dias, matalotes".

Three days later, we saw another big **island**, well surrounded with shoals. They came out to us and they said the same salutation. We did not anchor here.

On 29 January, we saw the island of Bindanao, San Juan and San Antonio.⁵ They anchored at the mouth of a bay that seemed to them uninhabited. Those islands seem uninhabited because the bush is very thick along the sea shore and hides the houses,

1 Ed. note: Remember the woman who came aboard Saavedra's ship Florida at Eniwetok in 1529 and behaved like a witch (See Doc. 1547D). Would she have moved to Likiep?

2 Ed. note: A reference to the screw-pine or pandanus tree.

3 Ed. note: The breadfruit tree.

4 Ed. note: A reference to the name given by Saavedra to Ulithi.

5 Ed. note: Fr. Santiesteban is mistaken here, as they could not have seen San Juan [Candigar] Island and Antonio [Sarangani] at the same time they saw the northeastern coast of Mindanao.

even though they are near. Afterwards, I myself went overthere with the brig and saw that it is inhabited. The other naos could not come close to the shore and, although they lowered their sails, by morning the currents had carried them off 12 leagues to the vicinity of another bay, uninhabited, where we anchored and remained almost one month, waiting for better weather and repairing the naos and the boats.

Before we arrived at the Matalotes [i.e. Fais], during a storm one night, the galliot commanded by Pedro Ortiz de Rueda—may he rest in peace—was damaged and went to beach at Mazaua [i.e. Limasawa].

At that bay, hunger began to make itself felt and quite a few illnesses appeared, some of them unknown to us, like the swelling of the gums and legs, with purple spots. A place could not be found where to buy food. We embarked there, and many efforts were made to recover the lost ground and to go up to a higher latitude, many times, but it could not be done on account of the contrary winds and currents. We were forced to follow the wind and sailed along the coast of that island westward until some town could be found, but we did not see any until we came before two islands that are 2 or 3 leagues from the big island of Bindanao; one is called Sarrangan and the other Candigar.

We arrived at Sarrangan, which appeared to have more population and it was so. Martin de Islares went out in a boat to tell them to sell us some food. They understood him but did not want to sell us something to eat, of which we were in great need, specially the sick, who were many. Rather, they were shooting arrows at those aboard the boat, and the three or four times that they went to beg them, they wounded five or six men without our companions having done them any harm, although they could have with the arquebuses.

Then, when the General saw our extreme necessity and the inhumanity of those barbarians, he held a council of captains and leading persons aboard his nao and they decided to take the food by force. The first week of April, the companions landed and, although the islanders opposed the landing, they were expelled from the island. Thus owners of the whole island, we all stepped ashore and remained there until the first week of November. Ruy Lopez tried hard with prayers and talks to convince those people to make friends and return to their houses, but could not. After he had unloaded the naos there, he sent Bernardo de la Torre, in the **San Juan**, to Bindanao to buy food. He was told that yes, they would sell them some and they would find there father and mother, to just come into the river. He sent the boat with six men to take soundings; they killed one and wounded all the others, so that with one anchor missing they returned because there was to be food but could not get it.

Two days before the **San Juan** returned from Bindanao, the galliot showed up and said that above [i.e. north of] the eastern cape of Bindanao, there were some islands where there so much food, etc.

First return attempt

During the month of August, he sent Bernardo de la Torre with the ship **San Juan**, because the seamen said that the flagship and the **San Jorge** could not be made ready

to sail before the season. He sent Pedro Ortiz de Rueda with him aboard the galliot, so that he would buy food at those islands where he had made friends and buy sufficient rice for him. On 26 August [1543], Bernardo de la Torre departed from those islands, with Gaspar Rico as pilot and the Tarifeño as assistant pilot. They report that they sailed until they reached 29 or 30 degrees, where they met with such great seas that they turned back so as not to founder.

Shipwrecks and disasters

When Ruy Lopez saw that hunger was increasing and the people in the vicinity had conspired not to sell us any food and to evacuate the places along the sea, he sent men to gather rice from plantations at the big island of Bindanao. Over 60 soldiers went and stayed there three or more months. They brought some rice but not over 80 to 100 fanegas. The inhabitants defended their plantations. There died Francisco Merino from a very small wound from a poisoned arrow, as they use them in all those islands. They sent the ship **San Jorge** to bring back the people and the rice, but at one league from where the companions were it was wrecked. Part of the artillery was lost with a big bunch of the companions, because it was loaded to go where the schooner [i.e. galliot] had said there was food to be had, as they no longer looked for gold.

The schooner returned in October 20th or so, and within 5 days he sent it back with a small brig to go and buy food throughout the above-said islands.

While we were in Sarragan, the **San Antonio** and the fusta ran aground, but the flagship escaped with much difficulty...

...Those aboard the nao got to such an extreme situation that, according to what they told us, each man was not given more than four ounces of unhusked rice per day. The General shared in the same necessities and suffered as much as the rest, because he did not want to go to the Moluccas but go on with the discovery for which your Lordship had sent him. However, so that everyone would not perish, he decided to head for the Moluccas, with the intention that, if he found some island along the way where they would sell him food and he could repair the nao, he would stay there. They saw many but could not anchor at them, until they arrived at Batachina de Maluco which is a big island where are located Moro, Zuala and Gilolo.

The captain of Ternate sent once again someone to request the General to get out of the country and to go directly to the fortress. They tell me that much correspondence was exchanged. The General went to Gilolo and from there to Tidore, because the king of Tidore had sent someone to beg him [to come], promising him that he would give food to him and all the Spanish, because he had received news from Ternate to the effect that they wanted to capture him and send him to India, to prevent him from welcoming the Spanish at his island, as his father had done. The Spanish had no-one from whom to buy food; they went to Tidore in March 1544, and remained there until November 1545. I myself came from Tandaya [i.e. Samar], with my companion and all the others, in October 1544. That same day came from that fortress a gentleman named Jordão de Freitas. I myself went to talk to him, before the devil would engender some

quarrels that would end up in wars. It was agreed that an armistice would exist between Portuguese and Spanish, until he had heard from the Governor of India, hoping that the relief from your Lordship would arrive first, and in the meantime, the Portuguese could buy in Tidore the clove and the rest they wanted as usual, and so it was done.

Second return attempt

While we were in Tidore, the **San Juan** was again made ready and it left for that New Spain on 16 May 1545. Aboard it went as captain Iñigo Ortiz de Retes, senior lieutenant and master-of-camp, an honorable gentleman, loyal in heart and deeds, a lively man and great worker. The voyage was by the southern route. Having sailed for 300 leagues, we hit an island with naked people, as black as mulattoes and with frizzy hair. The ship followed the coast of that island NW—SE for over 250 leagues, according to the pilot. At a small island we made peace and it was lucky for us because out of the others—and there were many small ones around us— and out of the big one they came to skirmish with us almost every day. The first time they killed us a sailor from the Levant, with a poisoned arrow; on the other days, they would get the worse treatment. We did not see among those people any gold, silver, copper, iron, nor any other metal, no chickens, no pigs, no goats, etc. Coconuts there were plenty. [One day] there came from the big island, aboard a canoe with a few mulattoes, to the small island which had received us in peace and is called Mó and to another nearby there called Utiz [i.e. Urais], a man [painted] very white and with a red beard and hair, tall and completely naked. He was bringing in that canoe some sago to sell to us. During that voyage, we found the winds almost constantly behind us, except for the 5 or 6 days of tradewinds. At the end of five months we turned back to the Moluccas.

During the month of October 1545, there arrived at the Moluccas a very honorable gentleman named Fernando de Sousa de Tavara and he said that he brought with him from the Governor the power to make an agreement with the Spanish and that in India they would comply with what would be agreed with him. The captains held some talks and they agreed on the following: that the Spanish would go along with him to India and that he promised in the name of the King of Portugal to provide us with naos and necessities as far as Portugal.

While we were on the way, at the island of Ambon, God took out Ruy Lopez de Villalobos from this miserable world. I pray the Lord to let him into the better world, if he is not already there. He died of fevers, his hair being all white, after he had lost a lot of weight from grief. He died very poor and received all the sacraments. Out of the 370 Spanish who came out of that New Spain, only 117 of us arrived at Malacca. Thirty or so stayed behind in the Moluccas, and 12 remain prisoners among the heathens, because before the brig was wrecked, two men from it had been ambushed two or three leagues from Tandaya.

Here at Cochín, we caught up with the naos that go to Portugal. However, because Fernando de Sousa had not yet arrived to talk with the Governor, not one single Spaniard will embark this year. The Governor is at Diu, where a few days ago God gave

him a victory over the Moors who, some 7 or 8 years ago when he arrived at Goa, had taken the greater part of the fortress and the church with the help of some Turks, renegades and other white men. He threw them out of the fortress and regained the bulwarks, their artillery and the whole city of Diu, praise be to God!

A few will no doubt write to your Lordship to say that if their advice had been followed, no mistake would have been committed. He [i.e. Villalobos] always took advice about serious matters, not only in matters that your Lordship had pointed out, but also in many others, and the opinion of the rest was taken and what was judged more convenient was done then and there. Until now, I do not recall [an occasion in] which it could be said: If such and such advice had been taken, we would be all together or where we wished to be safe.

I stop here because I do not have enough time to narrate our voyages at greater length, as the Captain Major told me that he is going on board today. He has promised that he would give this letter to Lope Hurtado, to whom I have addressed it so that he may forward it to your Lordship. To our [Augustinian] brothers, I write only that other brief one drafted by someone else; for the love of God, please your Lordship let them read this one. Remember your Lordship what he had promised Ruy Lopez, according to what he told me, that he would become a father to his children. In the judgment of some men, Ruy Lopez did not do any service to your Lordship by which his children would deserve your favors. I know for a fact that in the eyes of God and of those who will look at his deeds without passion that he made everything possible to serve your Lordship, and that he was most afflicted by not having achieved the intention of your Lordship, in addition to all the other harms, afflictions and persecutions from which he suffered.

As we cannot sail to Spain this year, we [Augustinians] have talked about observing these gentiles carefully and if there is an opportunity to do some good to them, leaving it to the Lord and if our prelate wishes it to be, we will remain in these countries. Your Lordship will be advised of the outcome either by letter or in person, with the help of God. In all haste, I add this bit, so that Your Lordship will deign forgive me more.

When I saw, Sir, so much hunger and doing without, so many captivities and deaths suffered by these poor ones who came with the fleet of your Lordship, I was reminded many times of what the Apostle said: *Qui divites esse volunt, incidunt in laqueo diaboli, etc.* If the Apostle said that about those who gather riches in their country without any danger to their person, what would he say about those who gather them in a manner impossible to achieve without shedding Christian and infidel blood? He lies against his own soul whoever says that the work of discovery can be done with peace and that another law applies to these gentiles, moors and barbarians because they are so much traitors and ill-willed that they wish to do away with the Christians they come in contact with, or that the Christians should antagonize them until they stop being impudent against them, openly or by treachery. I pray the Lord to accept what has been lost in these fleets, and to give your Lordship the idea that the gains that come from discovery

be left to those *qui non proponunt Deum ante eos pectum suum, sed diligunt vanitates querentes mendacium et letantur capta preda.*

May our Lord keep your Lordship in his grace.—

From Cochin, in India of the King of Portugal, on 22 January 1547.—

Your Lorship, please forgive my badly-written draft, as I do not have time to make a clean copy.—

Your Lordship's minor chaplain,

Fray Jerónimo de Santistéban.