An Analysis of "Lope de Aguirre's Letter to King Philip II" - 1651

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of "Lope de Aguirre's Letter to King Philip II," a pivotal document penned in 1561. While it appears to be a primary source, this study critically positions it as a secondary source due to the verifiable absence of the original manuscript. The analysis delves into the intricate historical context of the Marañones rebellion, framing Aguirre as a multifaceted and contentious historical figure frequently characterized as both a tyrannical rebel and a champion of freedom. It meticulously examines the letter's rhetorical strategies, discerning its dual nature as both a formal petition for redress and a vehement theological condemnation of the monarch's authority. By interpreting the letter within the broader scholarly framework of 16th-century "Indian letters" and the complex socio-political dynamics of the Old Regime, this research argues that Aguirre's seemingly irrational defiance was, in fact, a calculated and coherent strategic maneuver designed to justify his radical rupture with the Spanish Crown. This work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of colonial power dynamics and the nuances of rebellion in early modern Spanish America.

Keywords: Lope de Aguirre, Philip II, Marañones rebellion, Letter of Petition, Colonial Peru, Spanish Conquest, Vassalage, Old Regime, Denationalization, Historical Rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

This study undertakes a critical examination of "Lope de Aguirre's Letter to King Philip II," a significant historical document dated 1561. Despite its appearance as a direct communication from the historical actor, this letter is classified as a secondary source for scholarly analysis. As Huamanchumo de la Cuba (2018) elucidates, the original manuscript of this letter has not been discovered. Its content is instead preserved across multiple secondary and indirect historical accounts. While these sources generally demonstrate high consistency, minor variations exist, necessitating a careful, comparative approach to its interpretation.

The letter's drafting is commonly situated in Valencia, Venezuela, during August 1561 (Díez Torres, 2011), amidst the notorious events of the Marañones rebellion. Historical accounts suggest Aguirre dispatched the letter to the Royal Audience of Santo Domingo, utilizing a priest he had held captive during his passage through Margarita Island. For this research, the version of the letter found in the authoritative "*Colección de documentos inéditos… América y Oceanía LV, 274-282*" serves as the primary textual basis.

Lope de Aguirre remains a deeply controversial figure in the annals of colonial history. His life and actions defy simple categorization, as powerfully demonstrated by Ingrid de Armas's (1988) seminal work, *Lope de Aguirre, el doble mito: Tirano o príncipe de la libertad* (Lope de Aguirre, the Double Myth: Tyrant or Prince of Liberty). This duality highlights the divergent interpretations of his deeds and motivations at the time he composed this pivotal document. Born in the Valley of Araoz, Oñate (modern-day Guipúzcoa), around 1511 or 1515 (Euskomedia, n.d.), Aguirre traveled to Seville, drawn by reports of Francisco Pizarro's vast wealth from the Indies. Despite initial recruitment restrictions, he embarked at age 21 on an expedition to Peru between 1536 and 1537, where he served in various capacities, including horse tamer.

Although the existence of multiple copies and the letter's tone of collective grievance have led some scholars, like Poupeney-Hart (cited in Díez Torres, 2011, p. 205), to suggest it functioned as an "open letter to the king,"

this analysis treats King Philip II of Spain as the direct and intended recipient. This interpretation aligns with the explicit designation by the author and the textual direction of the letter.

Philip II, known as the "Prudent King" or the "Catholic King," inherited a sprawling empire from his father, Emperor Charles V (Kamen, 1997; Parker, 1998). By the mid-16th century, he ruled Spain, Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, vast territories in the Americas (1556-1598), Portugal (from 1580), the Duchy of Milan (from 1540), and the Low Countries (from 1555), among other domains. His reign was characterized by a zealous defense of Catholicism and the significant expansion of Spanish territory, which was then the largest European empire. Despite the immense wealth flowing from the Americas, which sustained an extensive governmental apparatus and ongoing wars in Europe (particularly in the Low Countries and against the Ottoman Empire), Philip II was compelled to declare bankruptcy three times (Thompson, 1993). At the time Aguirre's letter would have reached the king, Philip II was in his initial five years as King of the Indies, preoccupied with conflicts in France, the Low Countries, and England, as noted by contemporary biographers such as Álvaro González Díaz (n.d.), Altamira y Crevea (1950), and general historical accounts. This context illuminates the challenges facing the Crown and the potential impact of such a defiant letter.

Historical Context of the Letter and the Marañones Rebellion

To fully comprehend the circumstances surrounding the creation of Lope de Aguirre's letter, it is essential to contextualize it within the volatile political landscape of mid-16th century colonial Peru. This period was marked by the arrival of Viceroy Blasco Núñez Vela in 1542, whose dual mission—to establish the Viceroyalty of Peru and enforce the New Laws—profoundly disrupted the existing power structures. These laws aimed to significantly curtail the power of the *encomenderos* and regulate the forced labor of indigenous populations. This sparked a fierce backlash from the conquistadors, who, under the leadership of Gonzalo Pizarro, deposed and executed the viceroy, seizing control for four years (1544-1548). The rebellion was eventually suppressed by the clergyman Pedro de la Gasca, dispatched by the Crown, who ultimately executed Pizarro in 1548 (Ayala Tafoya, 2016; Lockhart, 1968).

During this tumultuous period, Lope de Aguirre maintained his loyalty to the Spanish Crown, actively participating in military campaigns against Pizarro. His unwavering allegiance, however, did not prevent his subsequent personal misfortunes. He endured a period of exile in Panama and, upon his return to Peru, was imprisoned on charges of mistreating indigenous peoples by Judge Francisco de Esquivel. Aguirre's subsequent relentless pursuit of Esquivel, culminating in the judge's death three years later, underscores his fiercely independent and vengeful nature. He was eventually pardoned in 1554 by Alonso de Alvarado, who was then recruiting forces to suppress the rebellion led by Francisco Hernández Girón. Aguirre participated in the Battle of Chuquinga, where he sustained a permanent injury to his right foot, resulting in his characteristic limp (Díez Torres, 2011; Means, 1928).

By 1560, Lope de Aguirre was a participant in the ill-fated expedition led by Pedro de Ursúa. The expedition's primary objective was the pursuit of the legendary golden lands of Omagua and El Dorado, driven by the allure of immense riches. From the Viceroy Marqués de Cañete's perspective, the expedition also served a pragmatic purpose: to divert and remove a considerable number of conquistador soldiers whose insatiable thirst for wealth rendered them ill-suited for the settled, peaceful life of established cities (Hemming, 1978).

As articulated by Ayala Tafoya (2016):

> Ursúa's expedition—which would later become Aguirre's rebellion—was another one of those Spanish expeditions where a hostile and unknown natural scenario, as well as the frustration in achieving the objectives of appropriating riches and populations, brought everything to naught. (p. 15)

The expedition, which set sail in September 1559, was plagued from its inception. Poorly constructed ships, inferior timber, and the constant struggle to maintain adequate provisions, coupled with the inability to conquer territories along the Marañón River (which ultimately flowed into the Amazon), fostered widespread discontent. Criticism of Ursúa, particularly regarding his alleged preoccupation with his mistress, the mestiza Inés de Atienza, escalated tensions. By January 1560, a mere four months after their departure and without

having reached the sea, a rebellion erupted. The mutineers assassinated Juan de Vargas and Ursúa himself. The assembled contingent then proclaimed Fernando de Guzmán as "Prince of Tierra Firme, Chile, and Peru," an act signed by 186 captains and soldiers, who appointed Lope de Aguirre as their *maese de campo*, or chief officer (Guzmán Palomino, n.d.; Zafra, 2014).

This event marked a profound shift in the nature of the rebellion. As Ayala Tafoya (2016) keenly observes:

> Ursúa's death changed the nature of the uprising, and the rebels sought to legitimize it by arguing that they had removed a bad representative of royal authority, in order to replace him with a more just one. Among the insurgents, there was a redistribution of power, without questioning the established order, although the situation would soon transform radically. (p. 16)

This proclamation constituted an explicit and unprecedented break with the Kingdom of Castile, implicitly carrying the declaration of treason and severing the ancient bond of vassalage—a sacred covenant since the medieval period. Consequently, given the prevailing belief that divine authority vested power in the king, such a transgression held not only criminal civil implications but also profound spiritual (sinful) repercussions (Ayala Tafoya, 2016; Elliott, 1963).

Ayala Tafoya (2016) further distinguishes Aguirre's rebellion:

> In this sense, and distinguishing itself from the others, Lope de Aguirre's rebellion was not limited to the economic-reivindicative aspect nor to liquidating his commander, as so many others did, but went much further, daring to break with the Crown of Castile and proclaim itself, so to speak, "independent," an absolutely unusual and unprecedented situation until that moment in the new dominions. (p. 18)

From this point forward, Aguirre's strategic objectives centered on returning to Peru to depose the viceroy and establish a viceroyalty under the direct control of the conquistadors. He strategically employed the concept of "denationalization" to enforce this radical severance of ties with the Castilian Crown (Díez Torres, 2011). To consolidate his power, he ultimately eliminated the unassertive Prince Fernando de Guzmán in May 1561, assuming exclusive command of the expedition and proclaiming himself the "strong leader of the Marañones."

Upon reaching the sea, Aguirre sailed to Margarita Island, which he seized with extreme violence, leading to the deaths of at least 50 individuals, including Governor Villadandro. It was at this critical juncture that he felt compelled to formally articulate the justifications for his rebellion and to outline his audacious plan of denaturalization. Consequently, he first drafted a letter to the Dominican friar Francisco de Montesinos, who had provided refuge to several deserting *marañones* intending to commandeer his ship. In this initial correspondence, Aguirre explained his reasons for the uprising and exhorted Montesinos to join his faction, simultaneously reminding the deserters of their double betrayal and the impossibility of receiving pardon from either him or the Crown (Ayala Tafoya, 2016). Finally, in September 1561, he composed the more widely known letter that forms the core of this analysis.

Analysis of the Letter

Lope de Aguirre's letter to King Philip II, written amidst the turmoil of the Marañones rebellion, has long been a subject of contentious interpretation. Some scholars, like Dr. Pardal (cited in Jos, 1950), have cited it as evidence of Aguirre's mental instability, while others, such as Luis Guzmán Palomino (n.d.), have championed it as the manifesto of a "Prince of Liberty." This analysis seeks to move beyond such dichotomies by grounding the letter within its historical and epistolary context.

The letter is best understood within the broader genre of "Indian letters" (*carta indiana*) prevalent during the Spanish colonial period. More precisely, it aligns with the subgenre of the "petition letter" (*carta de petición*), which was formally recognized and accepted within the 16th-century Peruvian legal framework (Huamanchumo de la Cuba, 2018; Lohmann Villena, 1966). In the 16th century, conquistadors routinely addressed the king to assert their acquired rights and claim compensation for their substantial expenses incurred during the arduous processes of conquest and pacification of indigenous populations.

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As Huamanchumo de la Cuba (2018) observes, a consistent feature of these historical appeals is evident:

> In Spain, the right of petition was recognized by the king for his subjects, so in the Viceroyalty of Peru, colonial authorities also legitimised and promoted these judicial appeals, through the promulgation of laws and ordinances, for anyone who wished to make a request for rewards for services rendered. (2018, p. 233)

Huamanchumo de la Cuba (2018) analyzes Aguirre's letter within this specific framework, characterizing it as epistolary material primarily serving a historiographical or literary function rather than a purely administrative or pragmatic legal one. The letter actively asserts the veracity of its narrated events, offering a powerful, firsthand testimony. This analysis draws upon the version found in Diego Aguilar y Córdoba's chronicle *El Marañón* (1578). As such, the letter serves as a compelling illustration of the intricate and often fraught relationship between the monarch and his vassals during the Old Regime.

The letter commences with Aguirre's formal self-introduction, adhering to established conventions, and emphatically asserting his fulfillment of the vassalage pact between the king and his subjects (Díez Torres, 2011). He states:

> King Philip, a natural Spaniard, son of invincible Charles: Lope de Aguirre, your most humble vassal, an Old Christian, son of humble parents, in my prosperity a hidalgo, from the Basque land, in the kingdom of Spain, a resident of the town of Oñate. In my youth, I crossed the Ocean Sea to the regions of Peru, to gain more standing with a lance in hand and to fulfill the debt that every good man owes; and thus, in twenty-four years, I have rendered you many services in Peru, in conquests of Indians and in populating towns in your service, especially in battles and encounters I have had in your name, always according to my strength and ability, without bothering your royal officials for payment or aid, as will appear in your royal books. (Letter from Lope de Aguirre to Philip II, 1561. In Colección de documentos inéditos… América y Oceanía LV, pp. 274-282)

Aguirre's self-portrayal in the letter meticulously conforms to the prescribed profile of an individual making a judicial appeal, as noted by Huamanchumo de la Cuba (2018). He strategically highlights his fidelity to the king, his status as a Christian, his noble (*hidalgo*) lineage, and his current state of poverty. This adherence to formulaic elements suggests a sophisticated understanding of the prevailing legal and cultural norms, contradicting any notion of the author's limited cultural background. Moreover, he explicitly delineates his significant services to the Crown, thereby establishing a legitimate basis for his subsequent demands for recompense.

However, as Ayala Tafoya (2016) observes, the letter's tone swiftly transitions, becoming overtly irreverent given the vast social chasm between the author and the monarch. Aguirre defiantly declares:

> I truly believe, most excellent King and Lord, that for me and my companions you have not been such, but rather cruel and ungrateful for such good services as you have received from us; although I also believe that those who write to you from these lands must deceive you, as you are very far away. I warn you, Spanish King, where you should have much justice and rectitude for such good vassals as you have in these lands, though not me. For not being able to endure any longer the cruelties used by these your oidores, viceroy, and governors, I have effectively departed with my companions, whose names I will state later, from your obedience, and denaturalizing ourselves from our homeland, which is Spain, and to wage against you in these parts the cruelest war that our forces can sustain and supply.

Within the epic Indian epistolary style, as identified by Huamanchumo de la Cuba (2018), it was customary to emphasize personal sacrifices, particularly wounds sustained in service to the Crown. Aguirre employs this convention to underscore his loyalty and suffering:

> And thus, with my right leg maimed, from two arquebus shots given to me in the valley of Chuquinga with Marshal Alonso de Alvarado, following your voice and name against Francisco Hernández Girón, a rebel to your service as I and my companions are at present and shall be until death.

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He then proceeds with a direct and admonishing challenge to the king's moral authority:

> Look, look, Spanish King, do not be cruel to your vassals nor ungrateful. For while your father was in the kingdoms of Castile without any worry, your vassals, at the cost of their blood and fortune, have given you so many Kingdoms and lordships as you have in these parts. And look, King and Lord, you cannot justly claim any interest from these parts, where you risked nothing, without first gratifying those who have labored and sweated in them.

Aguirre's claims transcend those of his predecessors in their audaciousness. While initially framing his grievances within established legal boundaries—arguing that the Crown's failure to respond to his rightful demands empowered him to dissolve the bond of vassalage—his actions went further than any previous rebellion. Even Gonzalo Pizarro, during his revolt, never fully embraced his most radical collaborators' suggestions for independence from Castile and denaturalization (Díez Torres, 2011). Aguirre, furthermore, pointedly reminds the king that, had it not been for the sacrifices of soldiers like himself, previous revolts, such as that led by Hernández Girón, would have triumphed. He starkly asserts that the kingdom's immense wealth is fundamentally dependent on the labor and blood of those who toiled for it in the Indies.

Beyond economic and honorific claims, the letter consistently adopts a second pervasive tone: admonition rooted in Christian faith. Aguirre consistently reaffirms his commitment to the holy church and to God. This moral high ground is evident in his bold assertion: For we have indeed already learned in these Kingdoms how cruel you are and how you break faith and word; and thus in this land, your pardons are held in less credit than the books of Martin Luther.

According to Ayala Tafoya (2016), "Aguirre thus constructs a moral authority with which he transcends the legal sphere where he had initially framed his complaint, to move it to the theological plane" (p. 210). He further elaborates on this point:

> This does not mean that Aguirre expresses himself here as a frustrated theologian, nor that conquistadors normally used these arguments to claim payment for their services. What happens is that Aguirre, without theological training, launched into discrediting the monarch's authority through the theological-political discourse used in debates about the American conquest and the Peruvian rebellions. (Ayala Tafoya, 2016, p. 210)

This theological condemnation culminates in a chilling conclusion to his letter:

For I am certain that few kings go to hell because there are few, but if there were many, none could go to heaven, for I believe that there you would be worse than Lucifer, given your ambitions and thirst and hunger to gorge yourselves on human blood.

Such a direct theological questioning of the monarch's moral authority would have been sufficient grounds for an accusation of heresy. Indeed, the testimonies of former Marañones at Aguirre's post-mortem trial recounted numerous sins and cruelties committed by their leader, undoubtedly in a desperate attempt to secure their own salvation or the promised royal pardon. Ingrid de Armas (1998) also highlights the perception of Aguirre's demonic influence:

> To violence and sorcery, the character of being possessed by a demon is added, as the author recorded in a ballad included in the chronicle's text and as he stated when narrating the stage on the river; it was then whispered among the soldiers that Aguirre was assisted by the devil. (p. 142)

Despite the gravity of his words and actions, Aguirre concludes the letter with a chilling declaration that intertwines religious fervor with rebellion:

> I solemnly vow to God, and my two hundred Marañón arquebusiers, conquistadors, hidalgos, that I will not leave any of your ministers alive, for I already know the extent of your clemency; And behold, King and Lord, that there is God, with equal justice and reward for all, heaven and hell. May God, our

> Lord, always increase you in good, and exalt you in prosperity against the Turk and the French, and all others who in those parts wish to wage war against you. And in these parts, may God grant us wars, so that we may obtain with our arms the price that is owed to us, for by right what was owed to us has been denied. Son of your faithful vassals in Basque land, and I, rebel until death for your ingratitude.

Lope de Aguirre, the Pilgrim.

CONCLUSIONS

In the corporatist society characteristic of the Old Regime, political power was not singularly centralized; rather, it was distributed among various corporate bodies, including the conquistadors themselves, each demanding their respective share of authority from the Crown (Elliott, 1989). It is crucial to acknowledge that while the Spanish Crown formally sponsored the conquest of the Indies, its execution and, significantly, much of its financing were borne by the conquistadors themselves (Restall, 2003). These individuals effectively externalized the considerable costs of their endeavors onto an unregularly salaried army, which was instead compensated through the spoils and profits directly accrued from the act of conquest. This understanding is fundamental to framing Lope de Aguirre's actions.

This contextualization is vital, as it illuminates the broader environment in which Aguirre operated. While he undoubtedly pushed the boundaries further than any predecessor by embracing denationalization and openly seeking outright separation from the Spanish Crown, he was far from alone in protesting the arduous conditions and the perceived lack of recognition for the soldiers who dedicated their lives and shed their blood to establish Spanish dominion in the Indies (Restall, 2003). It is imperative to recall that, years prior, Gonzalo Pizarro had successfully seized control of a vast territory extending from Panama to the Río de la Plata, maintaining his authority for four years.

This study demonstrates that legality during this historical period was underpinned by a relationship that, though undeniably asymmetrical, could not entirely disregard a set of fundamental values expected even of the powerful monarch. Laws deemed unjust were subject to resistance or non-compliance, and kings who proposed such laws risked being characterized as tyrants.

Therefore, this research strongly concurs with Julián Díez Torres (2011), who argues:

> Aguirre in his letter follows a strategy aimed at justifying his particular "war of blood and fire" against Philip II. Aguirre, on the one hand, used the rhetoric of rights for unpaid services, and on the other, dismantled the monarch's political authority through the denunciation of his bad government, the mockery of his figure, and the adoption of a sermonizing and prophetic tone. None of this is characteristic of an irrational attitude. (p. 212)

Lope de Aguirre's letter, therefore, transcends the simplistic interpretation of being merely the ravings of a madman. Instead, it stands as a calculated and profoundly defiant political statement. It meticulously constructs a narrative of betrayal and injustice, strategically positioning the king as a violator of both divine and human law. This analytical approach reveals Aguirre not merely as a rebel but as a complex historical figure who articulated a radical critique of imperial power, fundamentally challenging the very foundations of royal legitimacy in the New World. His actions and words, though extreme, provided a unique and provocative lens into the inherent tensions and potential for rupture within the Spanish colonial system.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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