

Balboa's letter to the King- Year 1515

Transcript

GENERAL ARCHIVE OF THE INDIES

SPAIN

Patronage, 26, Section 5

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa letter to the King, 1515

English Translation by

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REVISION C-1

To facilitate the reading, I have opted for a
Transcript modernization of this document

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Most Christian and very powerful Prince, King, our Lord

In the month of April 1 of fifteen hundred and fifteen I wrote to Your Majesty a letter, as I have done twice before, letting Your Royal Highness know, what is going on and what has happened since governor Pedro Arias de Avila (Pedrarias) came here with the navy. I also begged your Majesty to send a person to investigate and record what is happening on this land. This land is in such a disarray that it is the duty of Your Royal Highness to remedy this situation before everything is lost.

The situation is already in such a horrible condition that the person assigned to fix it should be very careful, and have his eyes wide open. Before, the caciques (native's chiefs) and natives were like sheep, now they have become like brave lions very daring. They used to come out to the roads and give presents to the Christians, and now they attack and kill Christians. This is due to the bad treatment that captains in these areas have been inflicting on the natives. Without cause or reason the captains kill caciques and natives, rob their estates, enslave their wives, sons and daughters, young and old.

They are doing a disservice to the Lord our God and also a disservice to you. Your Royal Highness you have lost a lot of their income, which before was hard to get, and now (if these atrocities had not happened) it would have been much easier to get. This land has great wealth, thank the Lord.

If the first captain who committed these crimes, Juan de Ayora, would have been punished for his actions, things would have not gotten so bad. The caciques who were at peace with us, had not done anything to deserve what these captains are doing to them. These captains continue committing crimes to the environment and its native people, destroying properties, stealing, robbing their wealth and enslaving and killing them for no reason at all. In many cases these captains have been given gold, as presents, and not being satisfied with the presents, they take the women and children.

I truly certify to Your Majesty, that this has happened and is happening. The caciques have brought gold presents once, twice and three times to these captains, then feed them, and the captains still send soldiers where the women and the gold were and steal everything, and make them slaves. These captains do not have any concern or respect for the natives.

There have been cases that a cacique brought eight thousand pesos in gold, and the captains not being satisfied, send another party and take another three thousand pesos in gold, then their women and children and make them slaves. These and other very serious cases have occurred without any punishment to the captains. This is the reason why there is no longer a peaceful cacique or native on this land, except for the cacique Careta who lives near us.

Please, all powerful Sir, it would have been good if Your Majesty had sent a person to observe and report these crimes. Once aware of what has happened, and having this knowledge, Your Royal Highness would have made the right choices, because, to tell you the truth, All Mighty Sir, if things continue this way, the way things are going right now, in a year, nothing will be left and the land will be so desolate that it would not be possible to remedy and return it to the way it was, even if Your Highness send another forty thousand gold pesos as they have already spent up to now in defending the coast, salaries and other expenses. Take into account that they have not made any progress since the navy arrived.

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/// [fol.33 v.] I would like to inform Your Majesty that the cost of keeping Your Highness' land in this area, is about one fifth of the sixty thousand pesos of gold, that you send each year. This area needs a better way of collecting income. I can assure Your Highness that you will receive very little gold from this area due to the way that is governed right now. There are many governors and each one of them seeks to assist and take care of their relatives, not caring of what is happening to this land. I am telling you this, Your Royal Highness, because you ought to know and make changes.

Earlier, I have written to Your Highness, informing you that there would be great confusion if Your Royal Highness' officials do not know and understand your orders of how to govern. It is better if you are specific in your orders and not give them room for different interpretations. If I would tell you all the things that are happening here, I would frighten Your Highness. They blame and say bad things about each other and there is very little agreement of what should be done. Each day there are thousands of changes made that contradict each other. Each one wants changes that are more convenient and beneficial for himself. Had it not been for the Bishop's involvement there would have been many more problems. The Bishop continues to fight for Your Royal Highness and for what belongs to you. He advises them and tells them what is on his mind, then from the pulpit he rebukes them a thousand times, to no avail.

I would like to inform Your Majesty that one hundred men who are paid salary, each one seeks to take the most that he can for himself, as does the governor as well as the officers. If they bribe some other people it is not known so far. Time will only tell. What is known is that they pay some gossipers, officers and some men to guard the governor, the rest is used among themselves. I am telling things that had to be told about them. I beg Your Highness, to send some solution soon before this land is wasted.

Very powerful Lord, what happened after I wrote Your Majesty, is that a captain left this area towards the Urabá sierras and walked inland for twenty leagues with up to one hundred and twenty men. The natives killed the captain and more than fifty other men drowned. The others came baffled and confused; they brought with them three thousand gold pesos.

Another captain went to Pearl Island, in the Gulf of San Miguel, rich in pearls, with up to eighty men. The natives killed twenty-five of them and the rest came fleeing here; and in this adventure, Your Majesty has to know, that the greatest cruelty ever committed occurred, not even between Arabs and Christians, in any other generation has this been done. What happened was that on his return this captain with the rest of the Christians soldiers that were left, captured up to one hundred natives, the majority women and boys and they were tied in chains, and the captain, who it is said to be Gaspar de Morales, the servant of the Governor, ordered to decapitate them all, and

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stab them. That is the way it was done. No captured native survived except the natives who helped the captain and some native women from the rich Pearl Island; after this incident, on their way back, they ran into a cacique and his men and the soldiers killed as many of the natives as they could very-cruelly. All this, Powerful Lord, is allowed without punishment, this and many other similar incidents, is the cause for the natives to rise and do what they do, that is kill as many Christians as they can, due to the harm and cruelty that Christians do to them.

What happened to this captain at Pearl island is that he arrived with his followers and came upon a native village. They took all they could, the cacique with some of its people returned to the village to fight, but he turned around and was away from the Christians for a few days. During this period of time, the Christians burned half of the houses and the maize that was inside. Then came the cacique in peace and gave them fifteen of sixteen frames of pearls and four thousand gold pesos. The cacique showed them where they collected the pearls, and the captain made the natives collect some more pearls, then made peace. After all this, when the captain arrived here he, without any consciences, made all the natives that he had brought with him from Pearl Island, slaves.

I let Your Majesty know that a special pearl was brought from Pearl Island, among the others, which weighed ten tomines, perfect shape, without any marks or taint, very nice color, luster and size, which, in truth,

///[fol. 34. r.] this gem belonged to Your Majesty, since this is your land. It was auctioned for one thousand and two hundred gold pesos, it was bought by a merchant, then given to the governor. The officers of Your Royal Highness, it seems to me that they didn't want to have it, because they said they had no money; they could have bought it if they wanted to, but what we believe around here is that they want to continue receiving the payment of their wages of gold that they now have from the land. If they have to give account of their wealth before Your Highness, you will be able to discover their wealth, sooner than they realize. Your Highness, you will be able to see this with time.

The shape and size of the pearl is as drawn, and is highly pierced in the nipple area.

A captain is lost with one hundred and forty men in the area of the Gulf of Urabá. He entered via Caribana and went via of the Zenú; nothing is known of him or what happened to him; some have gone two or three times with a brig to the coast where he entered, and stayed there for two or three days. Then they returned with no news. I let Your Royal Majesty know that this was an adventure well out of reason and the cause is that the people were very skinny and most of them useless, more over they had been thrown out of this part of the gulf and they had no ship waiting for them to return. This is a land where they have to leave,



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within a few days or you do not have a chance to survive, unless God have pity on you. There is very little hope that they will get back the way things are in this land. This adventure has been like one who sends cattle to the slaughter. Our Lord have pity on their souls.

Another two captains are also lost, they went to the coast of Veragua, God Bless them, to get into the provinces of Coiba and Panama towards the South Sea; they left a long time ago and nobody has heard from them. May God guide them. Know Your Royal Highness that these two captains were sent with God knows what intentions, because they were sent on this adventure after Your Royal Majesty's provisions arrived, making me governor of those provinces. Your Royal Highness, they are doing God knows what.

Mighty Lord: in the month of June 1515 I wrote to Your Majesty, letting you know how I was going to go to the province of Dabaibe with two hundred men. The goal, God willing, was to reach where we believe that most of the wealth is located. Your Royal Highness will know that I left with one hundred and ninety men, and went to the province of Dabaibe. We came into a main village, and as soon as the saw us the natives fled. We caught some of the natives so that they could lead us by land to the village of the cacique Dabaibe. Likewise, when they saw us arrive, the natives fled. Again, we caught a few natives so that we could get information of the mines that are further inland. This is where the Dabaibe get their gold. They said that it is true, and that there are large mines further inland, some ten days' journey from here. That all the caciques get their gold from there. I sent messages several times to the cacique to come and talk with me, but even though I waited there for ten days the cacique didn't come.

Mighty Lord: the reason that I returned was that in all the land of Dabaibe there was no food to be found due to a locust infestation that destroyed the whole area. I wanted to go further inland, but to do that, I had to leave sixty or seventy men to take care of the ships, and there was no food to be found. That forced me to return to Darien, and it was the right thing to do because in all that land now there is nothing to eat, because of the locust infestation. Also, the natives are very wary and afraid of Christians and farm very little since they are not stable in their villages. This is due to another captain who came to Cuqueri and did a lot of damage to a cacique that is two days from Dabaibe. This is the reason the natives of Dabaibe were wary, afraid and jittery.

We left from there up the river to find food. We left the ships there to go inland, up the river. We agreed that /// [fol.34]. the majority of the people go to a province that is called Ibebeiba, up the river towards a fishing village that was two days away, and we went our way up the river. Luis Carrillo in a canoe, I was in another canoe and two other canoes. We were about fifty men altogether.

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Suddenly seven or eight canoes with natives of war came our way. As Christians we are not very good with these canoes, especially those men that recently came from Castile. The natives gave us a melee with their weapons [in parenthesis: rods/sticks], and before we could react to the attack thirty men were wounded, many of them with four and five wounds. I was injured in the head so badly that I was in great danger of dying, now I am healthy again, thanks God. The canoe that I was travelling in was lost, because we were not able to reach land and was forced to abandon it. Luis Carrillo and the other two canoes were able to reach land and there they defended themselves. I pray to Our Lord for Luis Carrillo who died from a hit to his chest as well as two other men. After this happened, we went back to where the other people were and found them in much need of supplies and we were not able to help. Seeing the situation and the few supplies left throughout the land due to the locust, we agreed to move on. It may happen that most of the people here may not survive the hunger.

Mighty Lord: although this has happened, we do not have to lose the hope that we had before, because now we know with certainty the wealth in this part of the land, that we didn't know before, and with better planning, ships and supplies we can return to that area of the land, pleasing God. I believe that the governors and the captains will write to Your Majesty about this incident, and I implore Your Royal Majesty to give credit to reason where envy and malice dwells.

Mighty Lord: so that Your Majesty is not deceived, I, as a very loyal and very true servant and a person who is obliged to Your Royal service all the days that I have lived and that I may continue living. I am grateful to Your Majesty for all the favors that I have received, and I hope you will continue making with good health and long life of Your Royal Highness, by which I kiss your very loyal hands and feet. I would like to demystify and let you know, the things that are happening on this land, with respect to the things that Governor Pedrarias de Avila does, so that Your Majesty do whatever is appropriate. With regard to the governor, although he is an honest man, Your Highness will know that he is too old for this land and he has been ill with various diseases. He has never been in good health for a single day since the first day he arrived here. He is a man of fast action and excess. He is a man who has no pity for anybody, even if half the people get lost in the jungle. He has never punished anybody for the damage and deaths that his men have caused in the jungle to caciques and natives. He has ceased to punish very clear cases from theft of gold and pearls that his captains have stolen from the natives. There was a captain that gave the governor six hundred gold pesos from what he had stolen and nobody said anything about it or knows why. He allowed this captains and others to go back to Castile. Publicly they talked about these thefts. We have seen many times that if somebody of the people that went with the captains complained, they would be punished so badly that others would not dare to complain; in reference to stealing I will have to say that the truth is hard to get and nothing is certain. The governor is a person that very much likes to see discord between people; and

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if there is no discord, he will make it up, saying evil things of one to the other; this is his personality. He is a man who in his greedy mind will not remember that he is the governor, he does not understand any other thing but greed. He doesn't care about the people, as if he was not the governor.

In government and people matters it would be necessary for him to have more training and advice, but if you advise him, he believes that you are trying to trick him. He gives little credit to most people, unless he gets something of interest for himself from those people. He has demonstrated many times his hate for aldermen because they said things at the service of Your Highness and the common good of the republic. Also he is against any person that contradicts him.

As a matter of fact, in matters of Your Majesty's interests in this land, he cares very little nor he agrees with you. He is a man in who envy and greed runs the world. He greatly resents friendship between well to do people; it makes him happy see and hear tales and fables from others, He is a man who gives credit to the things of evil before he gives credit to things well done or the ones that could be credited. He is a person without any regiment and without any ingenuity in matters of governing. He is a man who clearly is delaying and forgetting everything to the service of Your Highness and things of his own honor in exchange for a single gold peso in his pocket. Finally, to be tidy, I wish to make it known to your Royal Highness that there are many other infinite things that are consistent of his bad behavior and he should not be in charge of such an honored position to govern and administer people.

I am begging Your Majesty, for me not to be blamed for the things that are happening here, please send people to take testimony of the things that I have been saying, from the people that return from this part of the world, and Your Highness will clearly see that everything that I said is true.

With regard to this land, I let Your Majesty know that it is very rich, and immensely large, as I have written to Your Royal Highness other times. We have seen this land with our own eyes, it is true. I believe that the governors and officers of Your Highness must have written otherwise about this land, and I let Your Majesty know that they are concealing their bad administration to Your Royal Highness. You should be certain and without any doubt that they have been disserving you to such a great extent that even if they were foreigners of the Kingdoms of Castile, they could not have done it any worse, even if they tried. By the way, Mighty Lord, even if they had many incomes sources, there would not be sufficient money to pay for what they have destroyed and consented to steal and destroy, because Your Highness they really have destroyed the best people, caciques and natives that there were in the Espanola Island, and other islands and lands of the Indies that were found. The most beautiful land, the healthier natural environment ever seen in the whole world; I certify to Your Majesty that is true, that this new land

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and the South Sea are the most beautiful, magnificent and healthy that has ever been seen in the Indies, in the islands and the mainland, I have seen it all, and I will be able to certify to Your Royal Highness because I know this land [...]. I pleaded earlier to Your Majesty, and I plead again for you to send people to investigate this information from the people returning from this part of the world to the House of Contracts (Casa de la Contratacion) in Seville or any other place where Your Royal Highness may be best served, to remove any doubts from your mind.

May Our Lord give Your Majesty life, prosperity and many more Kingdoms and Dominions.
Santa Maria de la Antigua, today Tuesday, XVI of October of the year MDXV.

I kiss Your Royal feet and
hands

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Vasco Núñez de Balboa', written in a cursive style with long, sweeping flourishes extending to the left and right.

Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Advance