

REVIEW ARTICLE

The History of Potosí of Bartolomé
Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela

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Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela's History of Potosí. By LEWIS HANKE. Providence, 1965. Brown University Press. Illustrations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 81. \$4.00.

Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí. 3 vols. By BARTOLOMÉ ARZÁNS DE ORSÚA Y VELA. Edited by LEWIS HANKE and GUNNAR MENDOZA. Providence, 1965. Brown University Press. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 407, 501, 556. \$45.00.

"I am rich Potosí, the treasure of the world, the king of the mountains and the envy of kings." These words were inscribed on the coat of arms granted by the Emperor Charles V to that fabled silver center of colonial Peru. From 1572 to 1650 this extravagant motto contained more fact than boast. Potosí, the "imperial city," was the site of the most lucrative silver mine in the world. From its mountain came the tons of silver that financed the world-wide ambitions of the House of Hapsburg and indirectly stimulated the capitalist expansion of all western Europe. The *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* of Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela (1676-1736) recounts with abundant detail the pageant of that mining center where wealth and poverty, avarice and generosity, religiosity and bitter hatreds, cruelty, and intrigue all flourished and usually in extreme manifestations.

This chronicle of some twelve hundred pages is published for the first time in its entirety and in the original Spanish as a part of the bicentennial celebration of Brown University. After the author's death copies of the bulky manuscript were sent to Spain, and one came into the hands of a Paris bookdealer from whom Colonel George Earl Church purchased it around 1905. Upon the death of the famous explorer and promoter in 1910, Brown University acquired the manuscript when Harvard refused to meet Colonel Church's condition

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that his library be maintained as a unit.¹ In 1932 Lewis Hanke and France V. Scholes discovered another copy of the manuscript in the library of the royal palace in Madrid. The Church manuscript contains the first part or some four-fifths of the whole work. Only the Madrid version contains the second part, but the Church manuscript turned out to be more complete and more carefully prepared. According to Mendoza, both manuscripts are copies—the Madrid manuscript was begun in 1710 and the Church copy was of later vintage. The Church version is probably a revised and enlarged copy of the “texto primitivo.”

The most mysterious figure in this voluminous chronicle is the author himself. We know next to nothing about his family, his youth, and his intellectual formation. In that community given to endless disputes, both public and private, he apparently became involved in no litigations. He never appealed to the royal magistrates or to the cabildo for assistance in the writing of his history. We do not even know by what means he earned a living—only that he married a woman several years his senior. In the absence of further documentation we must assume that Arzáns passed a quiet, uneventful life, that he was largely self-educated, and that he probably read neither Greek nor Latin.

We do know that Arzáns was a first-generation creole and that he had no connections, either official or informal, with the royal bureaucracy or with the cabildo elite. While he lacked patrons, he enjoyed the friendship of several ecclesiastics, who undoubtedly lent him books and provided him with both information and encouragement. Arzáns was above all else a social critic who could separate himself from all sectors of society and view them from the outside. He criticized the social irresponsibility and the avarice of the rich. He deplored the endless bitter feuds between the creoles and Spaniards, which frequently erupted into violent and sadistic civil war. A deeply religious man who described with minute detail the sermons, the religious pageants, and the glitter of baroque churches, Arzáns could also be a severe critic of the many shortcomings of the clergy. With

¹ Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Colonel Church was an entrepreneur-engineer who played a vigorous role in the railroad age in Latin America. He helped to construct one major rail line in Argentina, but his dream to build a railroad in the Amazon country shared by Bolivia and Brazil proved abortive. A tireless traveler, involved in a wide variety of projects stretching from Mexico to Patagonia, he also wrote extensively on the geography and the history of various regions of Latin America. For Church's role in the Bolivian attempt to open communications between La Paz and the Amazon see *HAHR*, XLVI (1966), 261-262.

the same vehemence he flayed the vices of the rich and the corruption and arbitrary injustice of the royal magistrates.

Nevertheless as a devoted monarchist, he saw the king as the source of justice and legitimacy. Although he was an articulate social critic and attacked the king's servants, Arzáns was also a traditionalist. No shadow of the political doctrines of the Enlightenment ever touched these pages. He was a child of the neo-medieval world that Spain created overseas and judged society by the standards of neo-Thomism, not by the maxims of John Locke and Voltaire. Never exercising political responsibility himself, he was merciless in exposing the wide chasm between the law and its observance. As Mendoza has observed, the tensions in colonial society, which Arzáns graphically reflects, were an important factor leading toward political emancipation, and they merit much more study than they have received.

Arzáns was acutely aware of the social tensions in that multi-racial society, and he depicted them with detailed profusion. His account of the mestizo revolt in Cochabamba in 1730, for example, shows a sensitive grasp of the explosive potentiality existing in that multi-racial society. Toward the Indians he showed a generosity of spirit not often exhibited by a creole. He never allowed his readers to forget that the glittering glory of Potosí rested on the sweat and and blood of the Indians. With un-baroque terseness he remarked, "Without Indians the Indies could not exist." He was lavish in his praise for the cultural achievements of the Incas to which he devoted considerable attention, and his attitude toward the contemporary Indians was equally generous. Denying that they were "brutes incapable of reason," Arzáns stressed their skill as artisans. He applauded the decision of Charles II to open the ranks of the priesthood to qualified Indians, arguing that most Indians were illiterate not because of stupidity but because "they did not concern themselves with these matters." He denounced with passionate sincerity the harsh and brutal life that the *mitayo* Indians endured in extracting silver from the mountain. His eloquent defense of the intellectual and artistic capacities of the Indians and his grim picture of their exploitation in the mines falls short, it is true, of Clavigero's Montesquieu-like conclusion that the social environment of Spanish colonial society was responsible for the brutalized life of the Indians. But Clavigero, an expelled Jesuit, lived a half-century later and was a child of the Enlightenment. Arzáns' mentality represents the Baroque world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

What brings unity and coherence to Arzáns' social criticism is his *criollismo*. A poor, first-generation creole, he resented the built-in privileges of the Spaniards from the Old World and expressed his displeasure against their shortcomings as bureaucrats. Yet his *criollismo* was not merely anti-Spanish. He seems to have regarded the creoles as potential leaders of the mestizos and the Indians, all bound together by their common birth in the Indies. A feeling of local patriotism and an emotional sense of identity between the creoles and the land of Peru permeate the whole chronicle.

Arzáns was no activist, however, but a timid, retiring scholar, who never dreamed of taking up arms or resorting to bureaucratic action to achieve his ideals. The real value of this voluminous chronicle is in its sensitive description of the tensions and conflicts which within a few generations would bring that world crashing down. A quality of gentle pessimism permeates the whole book—a sense of resignation born of the author's sad awareness that his beloved city has been in a state of economic decadence since 1650. That peculiarly Baroque quality of disenchantment with the world was very much a part of Arzáns' mood. Such an attitude scarcely encouraged him to be proto-revolutionary. The Potosí that emerges was proud and opulent, pious and cruel, torn asunder by bloodshed and dissension. The *mita*, for example, was a chamber of horrors. At the same time Arzáns shared the pride of all Potosinos in their city, for in his heart he believed that no other city in the world quite equalled it.

Historians will have to use the chronicle with care. Arzáns' account of his own lifetime reads like a modern reporter's copy, depicting with fidelity all the happenings of the day. It is a priceless primary source. The chapters dealing with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, are interlaced with imaginary happenings. They reveal much about the baroque world of the author, but many episodes will have to be checked against other sources. Yet his account of one of the most famous episodes in the history of Potosí, the civil war between the Basques and the "Vicuña's" (1622-25), is well-documented and remarkably dispassionate, given his creole prejudice. The introductory essays of the editors contain much valuable information about the literary and historical sources employed by Arzáns.

Although Arzáns paid only one harrowing visit to the mountain that provided Potosí with its fabled wealth, his work contains much material of interest to the economic historian concerned with mining. But the *Historia de la villa imperial de Potosí* may turn out to be as

rich a mine to the social historian today as Potosí itself was to the Spanish Hapsburgs. A careful study of this chronicle in conjunction with archival materials will reveal a much richer and broader mosaic of society than we have heretofore had.

The social history of the Spanish-American colonial world has scarcely begun to be written. This edition of Arzâns' *Historia* is therefore an event of capital importance, for it is an extraordinarily detailed primary source, and the learned introductory essays by Lewis Hanke and Gunnar Mendoza provide an invaluable guide.