Review/Reseña


Fighting “Indians” in the New Granadan Backcountry,
1580-90s

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Once again, Kris Lane (this time, along with translator Timothy F. Johnson) has taken on a difficult project that others might consider too much of a challenge, and unlikely to produce anything in the way of “academic splash.” And, once again, he, together with Johnson, has turned the project on its head, through careful research and a skilled writing style, to generate a first-rate example of a second-rate “conquistador.” Captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca arrived on the scene too late (1580s) to achieve notoriety or accumulate significant rewards. He was only one of many disillusioned conquistadors of this period, who were responsible for mop-up operations—expeditions that were often very difficult and
dangerous, but poorly, if ever, compensated by the Crown. Although he spent 5 years on Spain's warfront in Italy, most of Vargas Machuca's experience was in the New World (28 years), especially in the interior areas of New Granada, much of which is current-day Colombia. This luckless Spanish soldier apparently participated in the many endless campaigns to pursue indigenous resisters and African maroons. These peoples often joined forces to raid plantations and towns, disrupted trade along important waterways, and sided with pirates, one of imperial Spain's worst nightmares come true. He was apparently a member of many expeditions in the Indies, but according to the authors' research, he only led a few of them.

In an excellent introductory study, written by Lane, in his now familiar, palatable style (but researched by both authors) he aptly points out all the important reasons for translating, editing, and publishing Vargas Machuca's *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies*. Documented not only by important secondary sources, both contemporary and current, Lane and Johnson also carefully plumbed New Granadan and Spanish archives to obtain biographical information on Vargas Machuca, and to both verify and contradict his accounts. *The Indian Militias*’s main purpose was to serve as an excellent and detailed manual of instructions to expedition commanders, who now had to adapt their battle strategies to indigenous warfare practices in backcountry areas that are currently referred to by anthropologists as “the tribal zone.” Besides being an excellent field manual, *The Indian Militia* is also a guide to indigenous herbal medicines and remedies, an ethnographic glimpse into Native American life, and may represent a new type of New World narrative, according to the authors, in a period when Spain was about to enter its literary Golden Age.

Lane also describes Vargas Machuca’s other writings, such as his guide to horsemanship, and his “Defense of Western Conquests,” which contains a rather belated opposition to Las Casas' views of indigenous peoples and how they should be treated as imperial subjects. He also emphasizes chroniclers’ frequent dependence on the ancients (the Greeks and Romans) to justify their wartime actions and perspectives. Vargas
Machuca’s chronicle is certainly an excellent example of how the New World writers of this period harkened back to history’s most famous warriors and intellectuals, using them as a “touchstone” in advising future commanders of just about every detail in preparing for and carrying out an expedition in the Indies. In *The Indian Militia*, there is hardly a page that goes by where Vargas Machuca does not cite a Greek or Roman warrior, author, or god.

In describing warfare practices of this period, Lane traces a dramatic change to “light and fast” strategies that imitate those of the indigenous peoples of the area, and are commonly described by the Spaniards as “a la ligera.” Gone are the days of armies of armor-clad knights, many on horseback, accompanied by large entourages of numerous scribes, priests, and thousands of indigenous allies. These were the characteristics of the primary conquests of imperial peoples like the Aztecs and Incas. I would argue, however, that there was also a type of expedition that can be situated in between the primary conquests and Lane’s “light and fast” fighting in the backcountry. These would be the secondary expeditions of conquest that were often made to areas that were contiguous to the Aztec and Inca empires, such as the forays into Central America, Chile, and Amazonian territories, just to mention a few. The ones with which this reviewer is most familiar are the expeditions to the region of Quijos, after the conquest of Quito by Benalcazar. The last one, in 1559, is typical of secondary expeditions, where men who felt cheated out of the rewards of the primary conquest, forged their way into contiguous areas in order to conquer non-imperial peoples, with the hope of eking out small encomiendas. These were composed of large crowds of disenchanted soldiers and non-soldiers, abducted women, camp followers, and thousands of forcibly drafted indigenous men, who often brought their wives and families along. The women would march behind the rearguard, functioning as supply carriers and tending to the wounded. This particular expedition was allegedly composed of four thousand people, perhaps an exaggeration by the colonists of Quito, who complained that secondary expeditions were leaving them unprotected and the conquered areas unpopulated.
In Lane’s introductory study, there is no mention of women at all, not even the ubiquitous “camp followers” so often chronicled on other conquest expeditions. Even Vargas Machuca’s chronicle makes no mention of women until pages 57-58, when he advises commanders to forbid their soldiers to take women along, since they have been the source of conflict on so many other expeditions. Again on page 108, he warns that soldiers who have taken indigenous women and children with them ensure that the women do not pinch their babies to make them cry during the night, thereby giving warning deliberately to the area’s indigenous population. So, apparently prohibitions did not always work.

Surely, this “light and fast” approach that relied on small, highly select bands of professional soldiers is a far cry from the earlier, more noted expeditions of conquest and from the secondary expeditions as well. Nevertheless, they may have played just as important a role in sustaining and expanding Spain’s foothold in the Americas. For as Lane states, at the end of the introductory study, Vargas Machuca’s Indian Militia conveys in no uncertain terms that “not only was the conquest of the Indies not over in 1599; it was unlikely to end” (page LXXIII). Considering the political and revolutionary movements involving today’s indigenous peoples, especially in Mesoamerica, the Andes and the Amazon basin, it may be that a “conquest” never truly happened.

Lane and Johnson also discuss the translation and the many problems they had making Vargas Machuca’s writing style understandable to the reading audience. Much of this had to do with run-on sentences and lack of punctuation, and although the authors desired to keep to the original as much as possible, they felt compelled to insert punctuation, and at times even new paragraphs. This reviewer is glad they made this decision, because Johnson’s translation is both excellent in terms of word choice, and it also reads so smoothly that it is like reading a narrative from the current day.

Before Book One of The Indian Militia, Johnson has translated the approvals, dedications, and sonnets related to Vargas Machuca’s work. Although four of the men who composed sonnets are men of letters, six are not. Four hold the title of captain, and apparently had experience fighting
in the Indies. The level of literacy and familiarity with humanistic education that these otherwise “rough-and-tumble” soldiers possessed (as well as Vargas Machuca’s) is surprising to this reviewer, especially since many of them marched off to war at early ages. Vargas Machuca himself was only 16 when he departed for Italy.

Book One addresses primarily the qualities that a good commander should possess. Vargas Machuca, however, starts out by describing the differences between the weapons used in primary conquests and the lighter ones that soldiers are forced to use now, as well as Indian weapons. He also emphasizes that because they are fighting multiple tribes in the backcountry, battle strategies must continually change in accordance with whomever they are fighting at the time. Here is where Lane begins to introduce his own drawings and photographs, as well as depictions of Caribbean warriors of the time. These definitely add a nice touch to a book that would otherwise be devoid of illustrations.

In this book and the one that follows, the reader gains some ethnographic glimpses into Native American life in the backcountry; however, they are mainly about warfare practices that he claims are all based on betrayal. His depiction of indigenous peoples is, of course, tainted by the attitudes of the times. They always come off as barbarians who are in need of Spanish tutelage. There is, however, a long passage in this book in which he describes in great detail the fortitude and diligence of the Indians during warfare (42–43). Afterward, he exclaims: “for the Indians are people who know well how to chase victory, and they reach it with neither hindrance or weariness, and all is born of the diligence and spirit they have; and in this they seem gifted and chosen” (43).

According to Vargas Machuca, a good commander should be: “a good Christian, noble, wealthy, generous, of good age (30-50), strong, diligent, prudent, affable, and determined, happy, discrete, cautious, resourceful, and honest.” Between pages 28 and 54, he gives a more detailed description of these qualities, always harkening back to the Greeks and Romans, and always slipping in criticisms of the current reward system that he claims favors new people instead of those of merit. For the crown’s sake, he ties this unfair reward system that disillusions the real
“conquerors” into an eventual decrease in imperial gains—that is, the wealth that arrives from the Indies.

In many ways, Vargas Machuca’s manual is a meticulous tale of caution, imploring the commander to be prepared for each and every eventuality. The detail is mind-boggling! In Books Two and Three, which are really the heart of *The Indian Militia*, he describes in minute detail how to select soldiers and priests (that the soldiers not be fat, old, syphilitic or agitated, and that the commander should favor the regular orders, especially the Franciscans). He then goes on to caution him to take along medicines for every injury and illness imaginable. Although these are a mixture of European and indigenous remedies, the weight is definitely on New World cures, which as Lane has suggested, he (or his predecessors) had to have learned from indigenous peoples, though, of course, he gives them no credit. This is where he also goes into great detail about the new, lighter weapons used in the battle strategy known as “a la ligera.” He even cautions the commander to bring enough fiber to make new sandals for his soldiers. They were now wearing hemp sandals, as opposed to boots, a good example of how different warfare was from that of the imperial expeditions.

Book Three is where he gives the commander the most important insights into this new warfare strategy. Once again the detail is incredible. Here he describes the myriad ways to cross a river, build a bridge, conduct ambushes, carry out night attacks, and impose at all times silence on his soldiers. He even goes so far as to warn that if someone falls off a precipice and has a head injury that he should be careful not to cry out, nor should any of the people who have seen him fall.

Although he mentions scouts, pathfinders, translators, and carriers, page 90 is the first time that he actually uses the word “Indian” in terms of expedition members. Later in the chronicle he does mention Indian soldiers, but warns not to trust them. It makes the reader wonder how many indigenous soldiers were really on these expeditions; was it that Vargas Machuca simply ignored them, or were their numbers scarce? This would, of course, put the translation of the chronicle’s title into question.

Although Vargas Machuca advises appointing officers, he warns not to trust them and puts all the expedition’s duties on the commander,
personally. He cautions him to leave nothing to chance and to insinuate himself into every facet of his soldiers’ lives. On page 108, he even cautions the commander to inspect everyone at bedtime, himself, to make sure that they do not sleep naked or without wearing their shoes.

Vargas Machuca points out repeatedly that it is imperative not to trust anyone, because warfare in the Indies is dramatically different from that of other places like Italy. This reviewer imagines that the differences must involve the reward system, some of which is centered on the distribution of encomiendas. This could translate into a larger number of mutinies. He also warns commanders not to bring the war to its final conclusion, because the aim in the Indies is to bring more loyal subjects under crown vassalage, through peaceful agreements and alliances. The final objective was, of course, to bring the Indians into the Spanish fold in order to indoctrinate them in the holy Catholic faith and to make them tribute payers and laborers.

Book Three also contains ethnographic data, but once again, it is mostly about indigenous warfare practices. Vargas Machuca describes how indigenous warriors dress for battle (naked, but painted in yellow, black, and red, and wearing all manner of bodily decorations); the various weapons they use; and what they do to captured Spaniards, including cannibalism. The tortures that he describes are quite gruesome, but it is difficult to know how much of this gory detail is lore and how much is true. According to Lane, the prevalence of cannibalism is certain, having been studied by several expert scholars of the area. Being a field manual, this chronicle contains very little in the way of indigenous lifeways, cultural history, or spiritual practices.

Book Four is dedicated to making peace, forming settlements, adhering to a fair reward system, and especially being kind to the Indians. Encomiendas and land should be distributed to those who have fought the hardest, even if of humble origins, and not necessarily to those who have familial and political connections. This is also an important difference from the primary conquests. Vargas Machuca shows a certain partiality to humble soldiers, who have sold everything they have in order to participate in an expedition, and have risked their lives many times in order to bring it
to a successful conclusion. He also emphasizes, repeatedly, the kindesses that encomenderos should show toward their Indians.

In Book Four, it becomes clear that this is not a chronicle intended solely to laud the “conquerors” and inform the crown of the lack of compensation embedded in the reward system. Vargas Machuca is quite willing to address the injustices and mistakes that commanders in the Indies commit on these expeditions. In some ways it is a brutally honest assessment of commanders in this particular historical period, as well as what should be done to remedy the poor conduct and lack of preparation that may be causing many expeditions to fail.

The *Indian Militia* is followed by Vargas Machuca’s *Description of the Indies* (165-212). He begins by naming the various provinces of the Empire, beginning with New Spain. However, when he describes South America, he begins his list of regions with the New Kingdom of Granada, followed by Peru, the River Plate, and Brazil. It is difficult to know whether Vargas Machuca is ignorant of the imperial division of administrative units, or whether he is privileging the New Kingdom of Granada for the crown’s sake. Later in the tract, he does mention that Lima is the capital of a viceroyalty.

In the same detailed manner as *Indian Militia*, he proceeds to portray the multiple types of geographic phenomena; lands and their climates; Indians and their habits; languages; epidemics; as well as enumerating the variety of fruits, trees, and animals; waterways, fish and other sea animals; birds, metals and stones. It is here, between pages 170 and 181, that the reader may gain some ethnographic knowledge of indigenous groups from various parts of the empire. However, because Vargas Machuca tries to cover too large an area, he ends up making many generalizations and mistakes.

His *Description of the Indies* is followed by four smaller tracts on hydrography, geography, a compendium of the sphere, and a declaration of proper names. These are followed by 2 appendices, the most important of which are excerpts from Vargas Machuca’s *Defense of Western Conquests* which, though written c. 1603, was not published until 1879. Here, the authors point out that this defense is one of the first “head-on challenges”
to Las Casas, and was at the forefront of a backlash that lasted into the 19th century.

Though the authors’ desire to translate the entire chronicle is understandable, it is really *The Indian Militia* that will be of most interest to scholars. Even though it is a tedious read, it is a very important contribution to the history of expeditions, especially after the glorified conquests of the imperial peoples of the Americas. It will be highly useful, especially to military historians, ethno-historians, and New World botanists interested in indigenous herbal cures. In conclusion, I would also advise the reader to be careful to read all the endnotes, since Lane and Johnson have put a tremendous amount of work into informing and explaining many parts of the chronicle that might otherwise be confusing or unintelligible.