



GASPAR PÉREZ DE VILLAGRÀ

HISTORIA DE LA NUEVA MÉXICO

HISTORY OF NEW MEXICO __ 1610

EXCERPTS

Not until 1598 did the Spanish attempt to colonize Nueva México, when an expedition of 400 soldiers headed north from Mexico City, led by Don Juan de Oñate. More *conquistador* than colonial official, he was called back to Mexico City in disgrace, having neglected the isolated settlers, alienated the Indians with his cruelty, and squandered imperial resources by searching in vain for gold, silver, and the “western sea.” The official historian of the expedition, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, published *Historia de la Nueva México* in 1610, a thirty-four-canto epic poem that chronicles the goals, hardships, and, most notably, the warfare and brutality of the expedition. In this translation by Gilberto Espinosa, the cantos are rendered as prose.

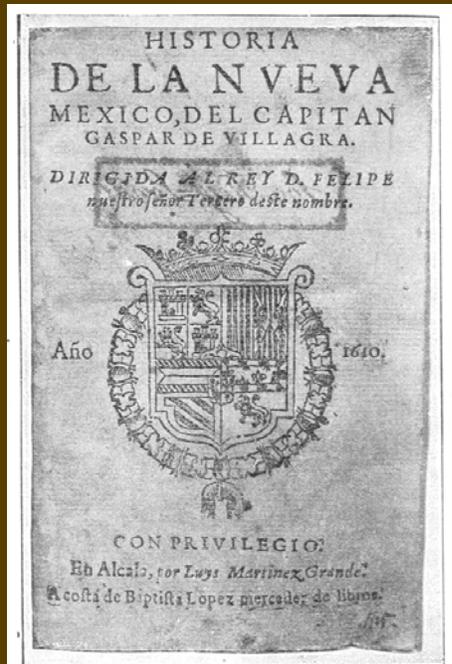
CANTO XIV

How the River del Norte [Rio Grande] was discovered. Of the hardships we endured, and of the other events. How Oñate took possession of the newly discovered land.

When a task has once been completed, the worthier and nobler it be, the more credit is due to those who made its accomplishment possible. I say this, worthy sir, that you may duly appreciate and honor those valiant soldiers who dedicate themselves to your service with the sole object of attaining for themselves the name of worthy soldiers. Whatever sufferings and hardships they endure are in vain if at any moment they falter and yield either to sufferings or to fear, and reach not the goal they seek. . . .

We advanced, and for fifty days we marched, enduring hardships patiently, trusting in God to bring us with safety to the river’s shore. At one time it rained unceasingly for seven days. We journeyed on and on until it seemed that we would never find our way out of these unpeopled regions, traversing vast and solitary plains where the foot of Christian had never trod before. Our provisions gave out, and we were

obliged to subsist on such edible weeds and roots as we found. But we went forward, sometimes through dense thickets which tore our clothes and left us ragged; at other times over rough stony passes where it was almost necessary to drag our tired mounts. Our shoes were worn out, and we suffered terribly from the burning sands, for our horses were scarcely able to drag their tired bodies along and pack our baggage, let alone carry us. The horses suffered most, poor dumb brutes; they were almost frantic with thirst, and their eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. After four days of travel without water they were well-nigh



frontispiece and title page

Excerpted and images added by the National Humanities Center, 2006, americainclass.org/sources/. In Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, *Historia de la Nueva México*, translated by Gilberto Espinosa (Los Angeles: The Quivira Society, 1933), pp. 125-127, 147-149, 262-267. Permission pending. Color photographs courtesy New Mexico Division of Tourism. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

blind, and could scarcely see where they were going, stumbling against the rocks and trees along their path.

However, led on by the certain knowledge that all things must some time end, we journeyed on, seeking the pass through the mountains, following the directions Milco [an Indian guide] had given us, like Magellan searching for the strait which would lead him through the pathless seas.

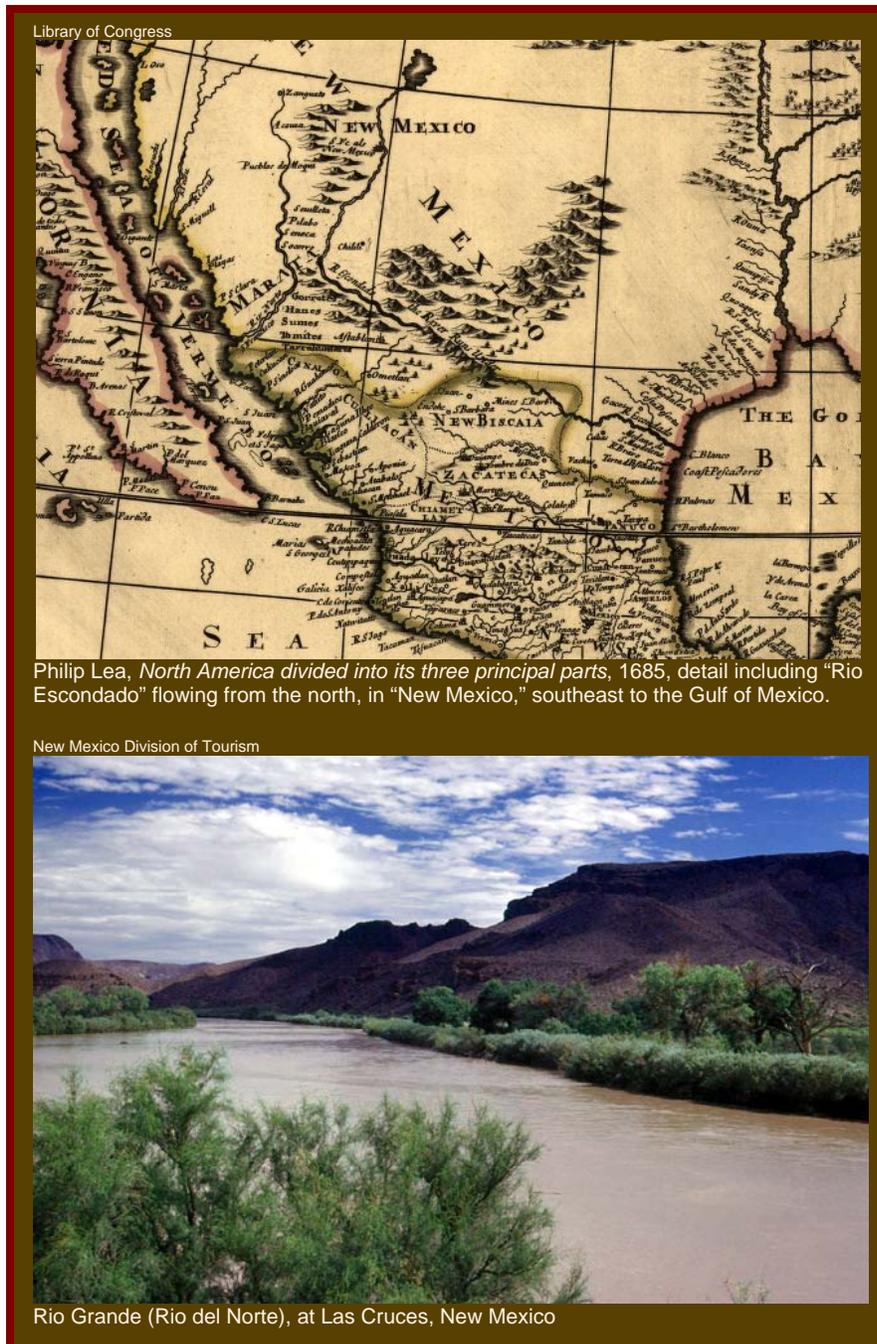
Our faith was finally rewarded. That Providence which never deserted us at length crowned our efforts with success! After journeying, as stated, for four days without water, on the morning of the fifth we joyfully viewed in the distance the long sought waters of the Rio del Norte.

The gaunt horses approached the rolling stream and plunged headlong into it. Two of them drank so

much that they burst their sides and died. Two others, blinded by their raving thirst, plunged so far into the stream that they were caught in its swift current and drowned.

Our men, consumed by the burning thirst, their tongues swollen and their throats parched, threw themselves into the water and drank as though the entire river did not carry enough to quench their terrible thirst. Then satisfied, they threw themselves upon the cool sands, like foul wretches stretched upon some tavern floor in a drunken orgy, deformed and swollen and more like toads than men.

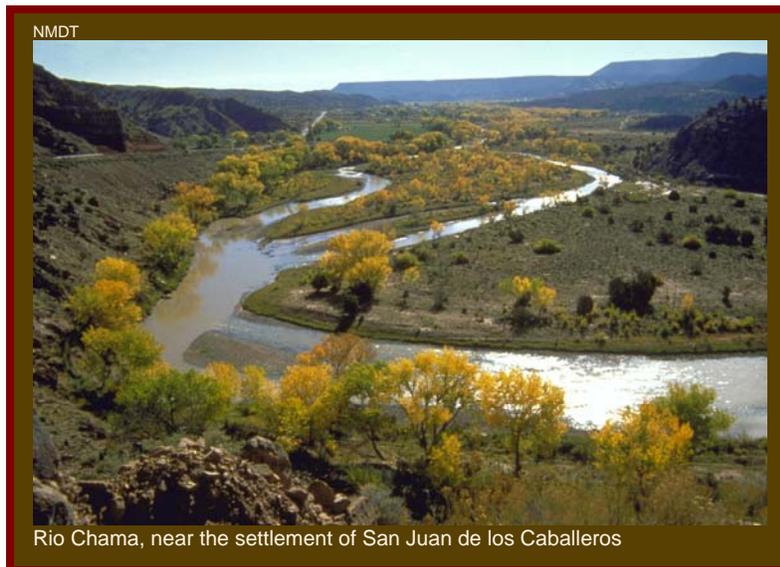
Joyfully we tarried 'neath the pleasant shade of the wide spreading trees which grew along the river banks. It seemed to us that these were, indeed, the Elysian fields of happiness, where, forgetting all our past misfortunes, we could lie beneath the shady bowers and rest our tired aching bodies, enjoying those comforts so long denied us. It was with happiness that we saw our gaunt horses browsing in the grassy meadows, enjoying a well-deserved



and needed rest. Happy, indeed, were we, as happy as the buzzing bees which flitted from flower to flower, gathering the sweet nectar for their winter's store; as happy as the countless birds of every size and hue which hopped from branch to branch among the leafy bowers, singing their sweetest peans of praise our good Lord, the Father of us all. . . .

To make our happiness complete, we saw our general and the rest of the expedition approaching in the distance. They had followed us, and it had now been several days since we had seen them. It was, indeed, a happy meeting. We built a great bonfire and roasted the meat and fish, and then all sat down to a repast the like of which we had never enjoyed before. We were happy that our trials were over; as happy as were the passengers in the Ark when they saw the dove returning with the olive branch in his beak, bringing tidings that the deluge had subsided.

When the strife of battle is over and once again we are enjoying the blessings of peace, it is pleasant to turn back the pages of time and live over again in memory the trials we have passed through. . . .



CANTO XVI

How the Governor made camp in one of the pueblos which was named San Juan de los Caballeros; of the hospitality shown by the Indians; of the desertion of four soldiers and their punishments; of the building of the first church.

There can be no greater happiness than that experienced by a shipwrecked crew, which, after being thrown about the winds and waves, finally finds a safe haven in a secure port.

Not unlike shipwrecked mariners, our army, after many trials and many sufferings, came in sight

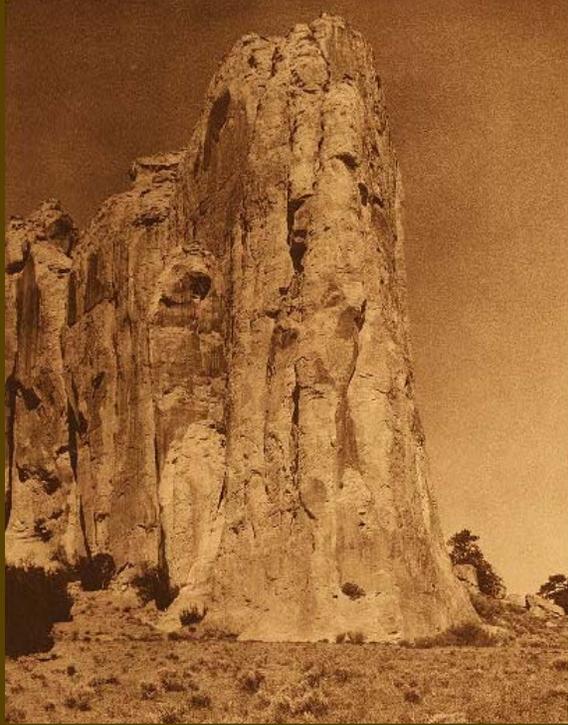
of a splendid pueblo. We gave it the name of "San Juan," adding "de los Caballeros" in memory of those noble sons who first raised in these barbarous regions the bloody tree upon which Christ perished for the redemption of mankind.¹

The natives of this pueblo came forth and gladly shared their homes with us. Here the entire army made camp. One day, while the general was taking his meal, the savages began to raise such a frightful wail that we all thought the final day of judgment had arrived, when we would be called before the judgment seat of God to give our final accounting. Astonished and confused, we inquired the cause of such dreadful lamentations. The people answered that for a long time they had been praying to their gods for rain; that despite their prayers not a single cloud appeared to darken the heavens, and that unless the drought were broken all their hopes would be gone, for not a single plant would yield its crop.

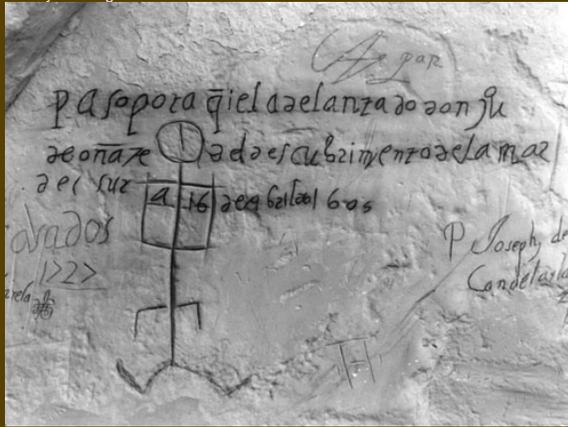
On hearing this, the commissary and the good Fray [Father] Cristóbal, trusting in God from whom all our needs must come, commanded the Indians to cease their wailing, for they would offer prayers to God in heaven, asking Him to look down with pity, and, though they were disobedient children, to send abundant rains that the dying plants might revive and yield plentiful crops.

The Indians were greatly pleased, and like little children who hush when they are given the things they have cried for, ceased their lamentations. Eagerly and anxiously they scanned the heavens, awaiting the promised rain. The next day at about the same hour in which they had set up their wail, the skies suddenly

¹ This vitiates the popular conception that the Tewa pueblo of Ohke, or San Juan de los Caballeros, received its Spanish appellation by reason of the politeness and hospitality of its inhabitants toward the newcomers. [Espinosa, footnote, p. 152]



Inscription Rock, New Mexico, on which Oñate and later Spanish explorers inscribed messages



Oñate's inscription on Inscription Rock

"Passed by here the Governor Don Juan de Oñate from the discovery of the Sea of the South on the 26th of April 1605"

became dark and the clouds of heaven opened and poured forth regular torrents of rain. The barbarians stood spellbound in awe and mute gratitude at the unbounding mercy of God. . . .

CANTO XX

Of the hardships endured by soldiers of new discoveries, and the incommensurate reward for their efforts.

The greatest honor and fame which a true soldier may achieve from his glorious triumphs in bloody war is to be held in grateful memory for his efforts. This fully requites him for the innumerable perils he undergoes.

We all know, most high and worthy king, that there is no suffering which is not worth while if only the efforts of those noble soldiers who serve us so well in war are but appreciated in the measure they deserve. . . .

There are no streams so swift or deep or wide that they do not swim; no difficulties too great for them to overcome; no nation so savage that they have not conquered it. These men fashion their own arms and all the accoutrements for their horses. They repair their arquebuses, fashioning for them beautiful stocks and boxes. They repair their own armor and shields, and adorn their helmets in beautiful manner. They are expert surgeons and treat their wounds of their comrades most skillfully. They are adept barbers.

Whenever it is required, they repair their horses' bridles and saddles, and shoe their mounts. They bleed their horses when necessary, and break the colts, for they are all excellent horsemen. In the many conflicts in which they have engaged, they have performed wonderful deeds of valor. There is not one among them who has not proved his mettle on many an occasion.

These men are forced at times to subsist on unsavory roots and unknown seeds, and even on the flesh of dogs, horses, and other animals whose flesh is most abhorrent to all civilized people.

Through the snowy passes they blaze their way as a plow cuts a furrow through the soil. Often in the mountain fastnesses they escape in snowdrifts only by clinging to the tails of their horses. . . .

What is most important to state is that they are now broken in health, old and decrepit, and find themselves in hospitals for the poor, suffering from incurable diseases brought on by their hardships. If they return to their homes, they find themselves unwelcome and unknown, like the great Ulysses who, after enduring the perils of war so nobly, returned to his old home aged and infirm, recognized and welcomed by none save his faithful dog.

CANTO XXXIV

[the final canto]

How the pueblo of Acoma was burned to ashes; how the body of Zutacapán was found. Of the events which followed; how the news of the victory was carried to the governor, and of the death of Tempal and Cotumbo.

Oñate ordered an attack on Acoma Pueblo in January 1599 after the Indians had resisted the Spaniards' demand for provisions. Of 6,000 Acoma, six to eight hundred were killed and six hundred taken prisoner. Each captive man was ordered to have one foot cut off and to serve twenty years in forced labor.

. . . O worthy [King] Philip, you have listened most attentively to the song of this unworthy muse. I pray you, bear with me but a little longer, for I am about to reach the promised end.

Trusting in your most generous bounty, as a father to your warlike race, that you will open for me a safe and happy harbor, I again unfurl my sails to the breeze and guide my craft back to burning Ácoma; back to that frightful fire whose flames rage so savagely, belching forth clouds of sparks and cinders which envelop the lofty houses in an awe-inspiring conflagration.

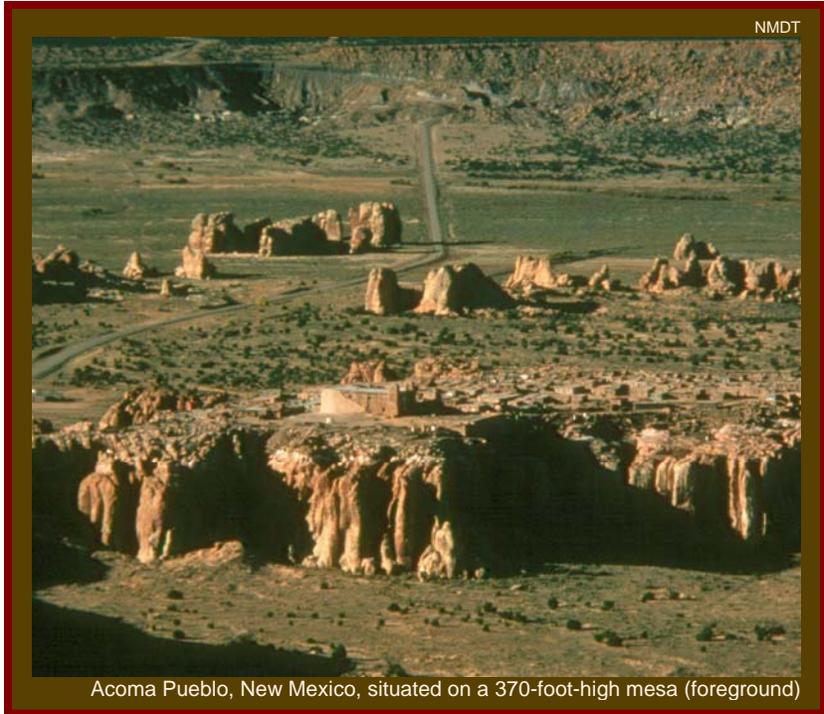
Note, most worthy lord, those high walls, roofs, and lofts, tottering and crumbling in a thousand parts, then crashing in an inferno of flames, engulfing the unhappy inhabitants. Note those wretched beings who in their last despair seek death by hurling themselves from those awful heights. See the savages, men and women, who with their little ones roast amid the raging flames, lamenting their misery and their fate.

The sergeant was moved to compassion by the terrible slaughter. Like the pilot of a ship which is about to founder, who rushes about shouting and urging the crew and passengers to take to the boats and leaves the doomed vessel to save their lives, so Zaldívar urged Chumpo and the other savages who had surrendered to plead with their people to yield and cease this terrible self-destruction. He assured them on his word of honor that he would spare them all if only they would end this awful sacrifice. . . .

All the Indians had surrendered, and at last the strife and battle was ended, when suddenly, without warning, all the women rushed forth with terrible cries, and threw themselves with fury upon a prostrate form, beating it with sticks and stones. The sergeant, furious at this breach of the peace they had sought, rushed a squad of soldiers to the spot, determined to punish them terribly were this man a Spaniard. When the savages saw the soldiers coming, one of the women called out:

O, noble men, if our surrender to you merits any consideration at your hands, pray allow us to finish this task which we have begun. There lies the miserable Zutacapán.² He is the cause of the death we inflicted on your comrades. He is the cause of all this unhappiness and misery, of all these bloody corpses.

The savages continued to beat the miserable wretch until they left him a mass of broken bones and gory flesh, scarcely recognizable as a human form. Having at last satisfied their wrath, the women returned to where we had gathered them. . . .



Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, situated on a 370-foot-high mesa (foreground)

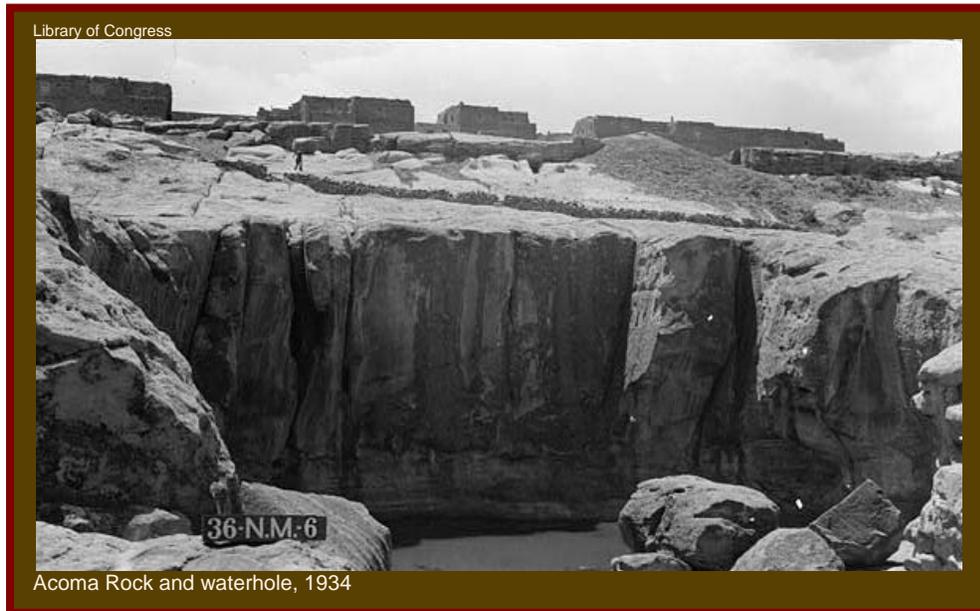
² Zutacapán: an Acoma leader of the resistance against the Spanish.

After all was quiet again, our men began to make inquiries of one another for a certain warrior who had been foremost in every fray. All had seen him, but none had recognizes him. In like manner the Indians scanned the features of every soldier they saw. Every newcomer was carefully examined. When a soldier emerged from some house they would gather about him like flies about a honeycomb, gazing at him intently and in amazement. We asked them for the cause of so much curiosity. Chumpo then answered for them:

These people seek a noble Spaniard who was foremost in every encounter. They say he was mounted on a white steed. He had a long white beard, bald head, and carried a flaming sword in his right hand. When he assailed them, they say he swept them before him like a whirlwind. This warrior was accompanied by a maiden of most wondrous beauty.

The sergeant was greatly astonished at hearing this. He realized that it had been a heaven-sent messenger who had aided us. He answered Chumpo, saying:

Noble father, tell your children not to seek the two further, for they have returned to their celestial home whence they came to aid us. Tell them they will come again to aid and defend us if needed. For this reason, tell your children to take lesson and be careful that such murders as they have committed do not occur again.



The gallant Trojan did not produce more astonishment and wonder when he related the details of the fall of Troy to his illustrious queen than did the sergeant when he spoke these words to the savages. They were spellbound and stood without uttering a word or making a single sign.

The effect upon our men was equally wondrous. We realized then that it was our most Holy Mother who had come from on high to aid us. Such wondrous deeds of Providence are beyond the understanding of so miserable a worm as I. . . .

After the rejoicings were over, some friendly Indians approached the governor and informed him that the two captives, Tempal and Cotumbo [caught after escaping from the Rock], were Ácomans and ringleaders of the rebellious Indians.

When the two savages found they had been discovered, they barricaded themselves in the estufa and would allow no one to approach for three days, hurling stones on those who came near. At last, seeing that further resistance was useless, they cried out:

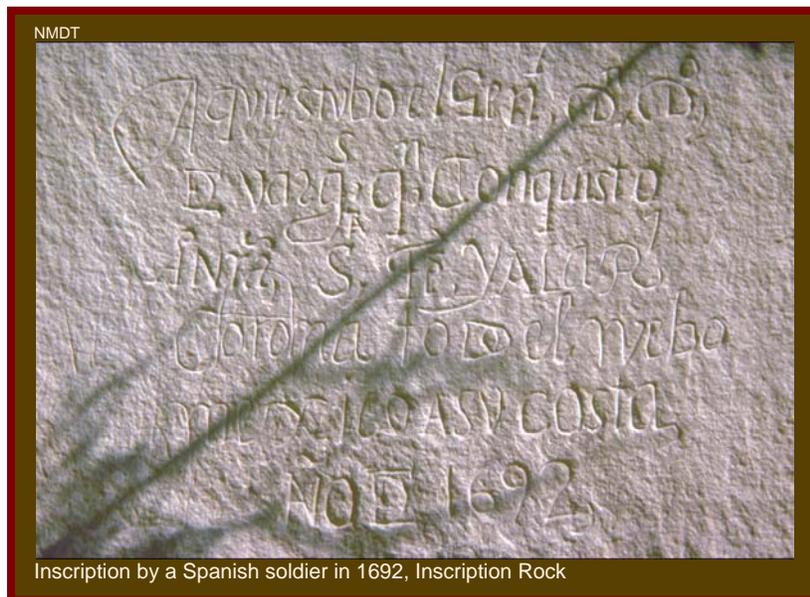
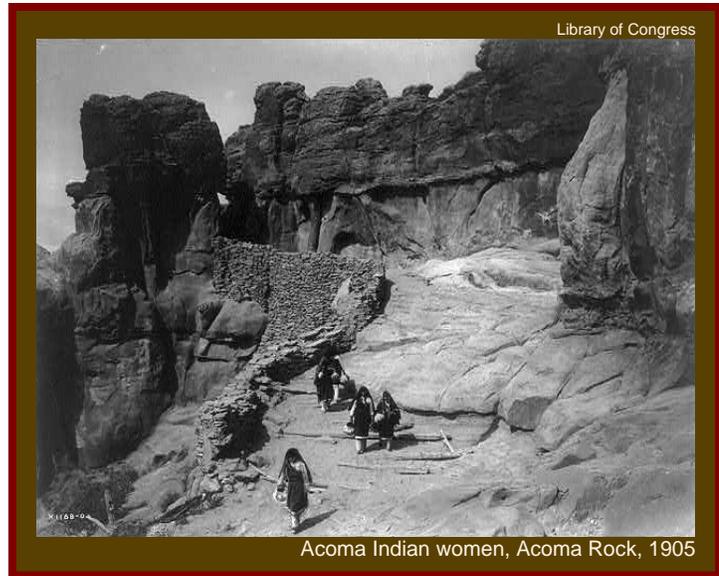
Castilians [Spaniards], if you are not yet satisfied with the blood you have shed, and if you must still wreak your vengeance upon us, we will grant you this satisfaction.

Send us two sharp daggers, and we will cut our throats and die here. We would prefer this rather than have it said that we died at the hands of such infamous dogs as you!

The general and others, including the Indians, urged these two to surrender and, confessing their sins, to embrace our holy faith. They reviled us for suggesting such a thing. When the general saw this, he ordered that instead of daggers they be given two ropes and told to hang themselves if they chose to die at their own hands. The two savages took the ropes and stood in silence for a while. Then they made a noose each and placing them about their necks, slowly came forth. Wending their way to a nearby tree, they climbed to its highest branches.

There they knotted the rope to the tree and paused a while. Then one of them spoke:

Take note, warriors, that here hanging from these branches you will have the miserable spoils of victory which you so desire. Here is the price of those unfortunate wretches to whom we gave death, whose remains now rot where they fell. Since such is our fate, gladly do we die, closing our doors on this miserable life. We leave you free. Yours are our possessions and our lands. You are secure from harm; for no one ever returned from this journey upon which we are about to embark. But, mark well, if it be possible for us to return, a terrible vengeance will be ours!



So saying, foaming with rage, they dropped from the branches and there they hung, strangled, their features swollen, their eyes bulging out, their tongues hanging from their mouths. There, on the Golgotha of their choice, they surrendered their immortal souls.

And now since they are gone, my story is also done.

O worthy king, if it should please your majesty that I should conclude this tale at a future date, I pray you will be patient.³ I have served you faithfully with the sword; the pen is a new and strange implement to wield.

³ So far as known, the second part of the *Historia* was never written. [Espinosa, footnote, p. 183, referred at p. 268]