Modern History Sourcebook:
Lope de Aguirre:
Letter from to King Philip of Spain, 1561

The following translation is by Tom Holloway, History, Cornell University, from the version published in A. Arellano Moreno (org.), Documentos para la historia economica de Venezuela, (Caracas: Univ. Central, 1961).

Letter from Lope de Aguirre, rebel, to King Philip of Spain, 1561

To King Philip, the Spaniard, son of Charles the Invincible:

From Lope de Aguirre, your lesser vassal, old Christian, of middling parents but fortunately of noble blood, native of the Basque country of the kingdom of Spain, citizen of the town of Onate.

In my youth I crossed the sea to the land of Peru to gain fame, lance in hand, and to fulfill the obligation of all good men. In 24 years I have done you great service in Peru, in conquests of the Indians, in founding towns, and especially in battles and encounters fought in your name, always to the best of my power and ability, without requesting of your officials pay nor assistance, as can be seen in your royal records.

I firmly believe, most excellent King and lord, that to me and my companions you have been nothing but cruel and ungrateful. I also believe that those who write to you from this land deceive you, because of the great distance.

I demand of you, King, that you do justice and right by the good vassals you have in this land, even though I and my companions (whose names I will give later), unable to suffer further the cruelties of your judges, viceroy, and governors, have resolved to obey you no longer. Denaturalizing ourselves from our land, Spain, we make the most cruel war against you that our power can sustain and endure. Believe, King and lord, we have done this because we can no longer tolerate the great oppression and unjust punishments of your ministers who, to make places for their sons and dependents have usurped and robbed our fame, life, and honor. It is a pity, King, the bad treatment you have given us.

I am lame in the right leg from the arquebus wounds I received in the battle of Chuquinga, fighting with marshall Alonzo de Alvarado, answering your call against Francisco Hernandez Giron, rebel from your service as I and my companions are presently and will be until death, because we in this land now know how cruel you are, how you break your faith and your word, and thus we in this land give your promises less credence than to the books of Martin Luther.
Your viceroy the marquis of Canete hanged Martin de Robles, a man distinguished in your service; and the brave Tomas Vasquez, conquistador of Peru; and the ill fated Alonso Dias, who worked more in the discoveries of this kingdom than the scouts of Moses in the desert; and Piedrahita, a good captain who fought many battles in your service. In Pucara they gave you victory, and if they had not, Francisco Hernandez would now be the king of Peru. Don't give much credence to the claims your judges make of services performed, because it is a great myth, unless they call having spent 800,000 pesos of your royal treasury for their vices and evil deeds, a service. Punish them as evildoers, as such they certainly are.

Look here, King of Spain! Do not be cruel and ungrateful to your vassals, because while your father and you stayed in Spain without the slightest bother, your vassals, at the price of their blood and fortune, have given you all the kingdoms and holding you have in these parts. Beware, King and lord, that you cannot take, under the title of legitimate king, any benefit from this land where you risked nothing, without first giving due gratification to those who have labored and sweated in it.

I am certain there are few kings in hell because there are few kings, but if there were many none would go to heaven. Even in hell you would be worse than Lucifer, because you all thirst after human blood. But I don't marvel nor make much of you. For certain, I and my 200 arquebus-bearing maranones, conquistadores and noble, swear solemnly to God that we will not leave a minister of yours alive, because I already know how far your clemency reaches. Today we consider ourselves the luckiest men alive, because we are in these parts of the Indies, with faith in God's commandments full and uncorrupted as Christians, maintaining all that is preached by the holy mother church of Rome, and we intend, though sinners in life, to achieve martyrdom through God's commandments.

Upon leaving the Amazon river, called the Maranon, on an island inhabited by Christians called Margarita, I saw some reports from Spain regarding the great schism of Lutherans there, which caused us to be frightened and surprised. In our company there was a German named Monteverde, and I ordered him cut to pieces. Destiny rewards the prudent. Believe this, excellent Prince: Wherever we are we ensure that all live perfectly in the Christian faith.

The dissolution of the priests is so great in these parts that I think it would be well that they feel your wrath and punishment, because there is now none among them who sees himself as less than governor. Look here, King, do not believe what they might tell you, because the tears that they shed before your royal person is so that they can come here to command. If you want to know the life they lead here, it is to deal in merchandise, seek and acquire temporal goods, and sell the Sacraments of the Church for a price. They are enemies of the poor, uncharitable, ambitious, glutinous, and arrogant, so that even the lowest of the priests tries to command and govern all these lands. Correct this, King and lord, because from these things and bad examples faith is not impressed upon the natives. Furthermore, if this dissolution of the priests is not stopped, there will be no shortage of scandal.

If I and my companions, by the correct position we have taken, are determined to die, for this and for other things that have happened, singular King, you are to blame, for not duly considering the labor of your vassals and for not thinking of what you owe them. If you do not
look out for your vassals, and your judges do not take care of this, you certainly will fail in government. Certainly there is no need to present witnesses, but simply to point out that each of your judges has 4,000 pesos of salary, 8,000 pesos in expenses, and after three years in office each has 60,000 pesos saved, along with properties and possessions! Despite all this we would be willing to serve them as we do, except that for our sins they want us to drop to our knees wherever we are and worship them like Nebuchadnezzar. This is insufferable. Just because I am an unfortunate man made lame in your service (and my companions long and weary in the same) I should not fail to advise you never to trust your conscience to these learned persons. It is in your royal interest to watch out for them, as they spend all their time planning the marriages of their children, and care for nothing else. The common refrain among them is: "To the left and to the right, I possess all in my sight."

The friars do not want to bury poor Indians, and they are lodged in the best estates in Peru. The life they lead is bitter and burdensome, as each one has as a penance a dozen young women in his kitchen, and as many boys engaged in fishing, hunting partridges, and bringing fruit! They get a share of everything. In Christian faith I swear, King and lord, that if you do not remedy the evils of this land, divine punishment will come upon you. I tell you this to let you know the truth, even though I and mine neither expect nor want mercy from you.

Oh, how sad that a great Caesar and Emperor, your father, should conquer with the power of Spain the great Germany, and should spend so much money from these Indies discovered by us, and that you should not concern yourself with our old age and weariness enough to provide for our daily bread.

You know that we know in these parts, excellent King and lord, that you conquered Germany with arms, and Germany has conquered Spain with vices. We over here are happier with just corn and water, to be removed from such a bad irony. Let those who suffer such an irony keep their reward. Let wars spread where they may, and where men take them. Never, no matter what adversity might come upon us, will we cease to be subject to the teachings of the Holy Mother Church of Rome.

We cannot believe, excellent King and lord, that you would be so cruel to such good vassals as you have in these parts. Your judges must be acting this way without your consent. I say this, excellent King, because two leagues from the city of Kings [Lima], there was discovered near the sea a lake where there were some fish God permitted to exist there. Your evil judges and officials, to profit from the fish for their pleasures and vices, leased them in your name, giving us to understand, as though we were fools, that this was done by your will. If this is so, master, let us catch some of the fish, because we worked to discover it, and because the King of Castile has no need for the 400 pesos they leased it for. Illustrious King, we do not ask for grants in Cordoba or Valladolid, nor in any part of Spain, which is your patrimony. Deign to feed the weary and poor with the fruits and proceeds from this land. Remember, King and lord, that God is the same for all, and the same justice, reward, heaven, and hell.

In the year 1559 the marquis of Canete entrusted the expedition of the river of the Amazons to Pedro de Úrsua, Navarrese, or rather, a Frenchman. He delayed the building of the boats until the year 1560 in the province of the Motilones, in Peru. The Indians are called Motilones because
they wear their head shaved. These boats were made in the wet country, and upon launching most of them came to pieces. We made rafts, left the horses and supplies, and took off down the river at great risk to our persons. We then encountered the most powerful rivers of Peru, and it seemed to us to be a fresh water sea. We traveled 300 leagues from the point of launching.

This bad governor was so perverse and vicious and miserable that we could not tolerate it, and it was impossible to put up with his evil ways. Since I have a stake in the matter, excellent King and lord, I will say only that we killed him; certainly a very serious thing. We then raised a young gentleman of Seville named Don Fernando de Guzman to be our king, and we made an oath to him as such, as your royal person will see from the signatures of all those who were in this, who remain in the island of Margarita, in these Indies. They appointed me their field commander, and because I did not consent to their insults and evil deeds they tried to kill me, and I killed the new king, the captain of his guard, the lieutenant-general, his majordomo, his chaplain, a woman in league against me, a knight of Rhodes, an admiral, two ensigns, and six other of his allies. It was my intention to carry this war through and die in it, for the cruelties your ministers practice on us, and I again appointed captains and a sergeant major. They tried to kill me, and I hung them all.

We went along our route down the Maranon river while all these killings and bad events were taking place. It took us ten and a half months to reach the mouth of the river, where it enters the sea. We traveled a good hundred days, and traveled 1,500 leagues. It is a large and fearsome river, with 80 leagues of fresh water at the mouth. It is very deep, and for 800 leagues along its banks it is deserted, with no towns, as your majesty will see from the true report we have made. Along the route we took there are more than 6,000 islands. God only knows how we escaped from such a fearsome lake! I advise you, King and lord, not to attempt nor allow a fleet to be sent to this ill-fated river, because in Christian faith I swear, King and lord, that if a hundred thousand men come none will escape, because the stories are false and in this river there is nothing but despair, especially for those newly arrive from Spain.

The captains and officers with me at present, and who promise to die in this demand like pitiful men are: Juan Jeronimo de Espinola Ginoves, admiral; Juan Gomez, Cristobal Garcia, captain of infantry, both Andaluz; mounted captain Diego Tirado, Andaluz, from whom your judges, King and lord, with great injury, took Indians he had earned with his lance; captain of my guard Roberto de Sosaya and his ensign Nuflo Hernandez, Valencian; Juan Lopez de Ayala, from Cuenca, our paymaster; general ensign Blas Gutierrez, conquistador for 27 years; Juan Ponce, ensign, native of Seville; Custodio Hernandez, ensign, Portuguese; Diego de Torres, ensign, Navarre; sergeant Pedro Gutierrez Viso and Diego de Figueroa; Cristobal de Rivas, conquistador, Pedro de Rojas, Andaluz; Juan de Saucedo, mounted ensign; Bartolome Sanchez Paniagua, our lawyer; Diego Sanchez Bilbao, supply; Garcia Navarro, inspector general, and many other hidalgos of this league. We pray to God our Lord that your fortune ever be increased against the Turk and the Frenchman, and all others who wish to make war on you in those parts. In these, God grant that we might obtain with our arms the reward by right due us, but which you have denied.

Son of your loyal Basque vassals, and I, rebel until death against you for your ingratitude.
Lope de Aguirre, the Wanderer

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I hereby grant permission for further dissemination by whatever means, electronic or paper, to any person or institution who might want to. Best regards, Tom Holloway thh1@cornell.edu Dept. of History, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-4601

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