

Bernardo de Vargas Machuca. *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies*. Edited by Kris Lane. Translated by Timothy F. Johnson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. lxxiv + 293 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4314-1.



Reviewed by Jesse Cromwell

Published on H-LatAm (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

First published in 1599, Bernardo de Vargas Machuca's *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies* is a fascinating manual of warfare in the sixteenth-century Americas. The work also functions as a none-to-subtle plea to the Spanish Crown to reinvigorate conquest on the wild frontiers of the Indies and reward its foot soldiers. As an underappreciated conquistador who spent decades fighting Indians in New Granada (present-day Colombia), Vargas Machuca (ca. 1550-1622) wrote from experience about the trials of martial life in the peripheral jungles of the New World and the militiaman's frustration with imperial apathy toward his accomplishments. Vargas Machuca's surly voice and firsthand knowledge of skills as diverse as setting an ambush and easing altitude sickness offer a unique perspective on the pacification of early Spanish America.

In a new edition of *The Indian Militia*, Timothy F. Johnson's translation and Kris Lane's introduction and footnote commentaries faithfully render the conquistador's viewpoint. This edition includes the approvals and dedications originally

introducing Vargas Machuca's work; the four books comprising its main content; and several separate chapters that the conquistador wrote on the flora and fauna, hydrography, geography, and astronomy of the Indies. Johnson and Lane have also added the posthumous record of Vargas Machuca's services to the Crown and an excerpt from his *The Defense of Western Conquests* (ca. 1603), an angry critique of the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Book 1 reveals the hardships and general characteristics of militia life in the Colombian wilderness. It also establishes Vargas Machuca's grievances over the scarcity of spoils and prestige allotted to longtime conquistadors. This book reads almost as if the author intended to strip doe-eyed young men of the chivalric hopes of gold and glory nurtured by an earlier and more fortunate generation of conquistadors. Book 2 offers advice on how to command soldiers through the often chaotic process of militia service and how to treat a plethora of ailments with both New and Old World herbal remedies. Central to Vargas

Machuca's advice on leadership are a number of strategies designed to prevent the discord and mutiny endemic to conquest expeditions. Historians of science and medicine will enjoy the conquistador's explication of his sixteenth-century field medicine chest. In book 3, Vargas Machuca's discussion turns largely to the best practices for warfare in the Indies as well as explanations of indigenous methods of fighting. In sum, the Spanish warrior advocated traveling fast and light, remaining armed at all times, employing stealth whenever possible, and avoiding any public displays of indecision. Although Vargas Machuca never doubted Spanish cultural superiority over indigenous peoples, he was quick to praise their cunning, courage, and adaptability in battle. Finally, book 4 provides instruction for founding towns and governing conquered tribute populations. In its approach to the construction and rule of new municipalities, the book displays a decidedly martial tone. Vargas Machuca emphasized that neither Indians nor fellow Europeans were to be trusted entirely to submit to authority without force.

The Indian Militia is a fascinating text in that, unlike many conquistador accounts, it does not attempt a linear narrative. Certainly, like many Iberian soldiers, Vargas Machuca meant for his written words to bolster his requests for administrative offices and land titles. Yet it is not a tale of his specific martial deeds, but rather a military manual. Even anecdotes from the author's experiences in raids and skirmishes served more for didactic effect than to further a storyline. This lack of narrative opens all sorts of textual possibilities for the work. What emerges is a renaissance man's rendering of the nuts and bolts of making war in the Indies. The reader learns to prevent fatigue on the night's watch by chewing coca leaves, to ease eye infections with dried tobacco grounds, to maximize combat efficiency in dense foliage by carrying short swords, and to employ spies to divide potentially rebellious native groups. All this minutiae provides a more complete picture of the

day-to-day demands of sixteenth-century pacification missions than chronicles of particular expeditions.

Vargas Machuca's writings also differ from those of more prominent soldiers of Spanish imperial expansion in their tone. Lane quotes military historian Geoffrey Parker, who called *The Indian Militia* "the first manual of guerrilla warfare ever published" (p. xi). Unlike, for instance, a commander in New Spain or Peru, Vargas Machuca could boast of few lasting conquests. He encountered no vast and wealthy indigenous empires. The veteran had mainly participated in punitive raids (*castigos*), inconclusive skirmishes, and brutal counterinsurgency operations. Vargas Machuca's manual thus reflects the desperate realities of a significant body of impoverished and neglected Indies soldiers who possessed a wealth of skills, but few spoils to justify their years of danger and discomfort. In a particularly bitter passage, the author described a militiaman who "having worked at a loss (as is often the case) is left with enough to find a piece of bread to eat when he goes out" (p. 35). This soldier provided the conditions by which the pampered governor continued "sleeping in his soft bed, eating when he wishes and in complete safety multiplying his wealth as quick as he may" (p. 36).

Johnson and Lane deftly distill the personality of a man who was vainglorious and cruel, but also piteous in his frustrated ambitions. For the most part, Johnson's translation of *The Indian Militia* makes few alterations to Vargas Machuca's long, unpunctuated sentences unless absolutely necessary. This method can leave the reader to decipher some unwieldy and cryptic passages. However, Johnson ultimately believes that it allows him "to remain faithful to the author's voice, however strained, shrill, or wooden" (p. lxxiv). Throughout the translation, Vargas Machuca's own words reveal a purposeful man who was ruthless as a dictator and unlucky as Candide.

Lane's deeply informative and humanistic introduction offers a detailed record of Vargas Machuca's globetrotting military career, his history of being passed over for prominent administrative posts, and an appraisal of his improvisational mind-set. Lane perhaps overestimates the extent to which Vargas Machuca borrows his military tactics from Native Americas (i.e., "that his *Indian Militia* manages to be so 'Indian'") (p. xii). Nevertheless, Lane sketches an evenhanded portrayal of an individual whom international courts would classify as a war criminal, but who also accomplished some extraordinary feats of human learning in the midst of his malevolence.

In short, this edition of *The Indian Militia* will be of interest to both specialists and general audiences. Historians of science and medicine, early imperial expansion, and Colombian history will find it informative for their research. Taken together with Lane's introduction, which offers general background on the history of the conquest, *The Indian Militia* could serve as a fruitful primary source in the classroom and a useful counterweight to standard conquest narrators like Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. The work is a nice complement to Johnson and Lane's recent edition of Vargas Machuca's more philosophical and political *Defense and Discourse of the Western Conquests (Defending the Conquest: Bernardo de Vargas Machuca's Defense and Discourse of the Western Conquests* [2010]).

[

]

s

-

of *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies*

,

,

[

]

One

Two

B

Three

s

s

is

B

Four

s

are

,

Kris&#160;

s

s

s

Timothy&#160;

Kris&#160;

Kris&#160;

-

i

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Jesse Cromwell. Review of de Vargas Machuca, Bernardo. *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33277>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.