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NOTES ON THE LINEAGE OF DON DIEGO DE VARGAS, RECONQUEROR OF NEW MEXICO

By J. MANUEL ESPINOSA

THE exploits of Don Diego de Vargas, governor of New Mexico during the critical years 1691-1697, and again in 1703-1704, are well known—the prodigious story of how with a handful of men he reconquered and recolonized the region for Spain following the bloody Pueblo Indian uprising of 1680, and its twelve succeeding years of Pueblo Independence, and planted there for all time the seeds of Spanish culture. The “De Vargas Fiesta” held each year at Santa Fé brings these heroic deeds to memory. But Vargas, the man, has remained little known. Something of his ancestry and early life is brought together here for the first time. The interesting lineage of Vargas is worth recording, for his background explains much of his own life. Persistent ransacking of the archives of Spain and Mexico will some day reveal a fuller story.¹

The history of the Vargas family of Madrid, the one to which The Reconqueror was born, is much of the history of Spain, for it sent forth some of the greatest figures in the annals of the kingdom. The family genealogy was elaborately worked out and published by Don Diego's grandson, Diego López de Zárate, in a work in two parts entitled *Breve descripcion genealogica de la ilustre quanto antiquissima casa de los Vargas de Madrid . . .* (Madrid, 1740).² He

1. I am especially indebted to Señor José Pérez Balsera for having placed at my disposal a copy of his volume entitled *Laudemus viros gloriosos et parentes nostros in generatione sua* (Madrid, 1931), as well as other data. This book, a family genealogy privately printed by him for his children, is a mine of documentary material pertaining to the house of Vargas. It contains photostatic reproductions of many pertinent documents. Señor Balsera is a co-relative of Don Diego de Vargas, and now occupies the old ancestral home in Madrid.

2. The complete title is as follows: *Breve descripcion genealogica de la ilustre quanto antiquissima casa de los Vargas de Madrid, cuyo poseedor actual, o legitimo tronco verdadero es Don Diego Joseph Lopez de Zarate Vargas Pimentel Zapata y Lujan Ponzé de Leon Zepeda Alvarez Contreras y Salinas, Marques de Villanueva, y de la Nava de Varcinas, Capitan vivo de infanteria, agregado al estado mayor de*

traces the family back to the noble Roman senator Lucius Barguntus.³

It is well established that Don Diego descended in direct male line from the eldest of the three Vargas brothers who served under King Alfonso VI in the conquest of Madrid and Toledo in the years 1080 to 1083.⁴ Of this same family was the knight Juan de Vargas, wealthy landowner of Madrid at the turn of the eleventh century, the master of San Isidro Labrador, patron saint of Madrid. Most of his lands were in Torrelaguna and Madrid, and in Eraza, near Salamanca. It was in those fields between the present bridges of Toledo and Segovia, at Madrid, cultivated by him, that the saint performed the miracle of the spring, well known in Spanish tradition. The blue and white waves on Vargas' devise represent this miracle.⁵ And among the other miracles for which San Isidro was canonized was the attested resuscitation of Don Juan's daughter María.⁶ On the spot where San Isidro lived with his wife Santa María de la Cabeza, and where he kept his oxen, a shrine was built, contiguous to the ancestral Vargas home, formerly Don Juan's ranch house. The home and the chapel have remained in the family's possession to this day.⁷

During the Christian reconquest of Spain from the Saracen infidel, other Vargases equalled the valor of the three

3. Of the house of Vargas, Soto writes in his *Casas solariegas*: "Among the families of the province of Castile, in the city of Madrid there is a very illustrious one named Vargas, for which praise is almost offense, its nobility is so great, and so ancient that it could almost be called immemorial if it were not for the histories that recall its memory." (Balsera, *op. cit.*, 92.)

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.* Cf. also Vargas' devise reproduced in Ralph E. Twitchell, *The Spanish Archives of New Mexico* (Cedar Rapids, 1914, 2 v.), I, 64.

6. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII, 189.

7. This experience was not the only claim of the Vargas family to the title of protector of saints. A century later, when Saint Francis of Assisi was travelling in Spain, probably in the winter of 1214-1215 (*ibid.*, VI, 224), it is known that the place in Madrid where he was granted land on which to build a convent, near the Puerta de Moros in the old part of the city, was Vargas property. (Balsera, 1104.)

la plaza de Cadiz, y Alfez en las reales guardias de infanteria española de su Magestad. Dividida en dos partes. En la primera se justifica la legitimidad del referido Marques de Villanueva, y ser tronco de dicha casa de Vargas. En la segunda se da una sucinta recopilacion de varias noticias de las hazañas y empleos de diferentes cavalleros del apellido de Vargas. Madrid, 1740.

brothers by memorable deeds in the decisive Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1192, and at Jeréz.⁸ Then there was Garci Pérez de Vargas, that famous captain who showed such valor in the conquest of Córdoba in 1236, Jaén in 1246, and in all Andalusia in the service of the Saint King Ferdinand (Ferdinand III of León and Castile, 1198-1252), and who played such an important part in the capture of Sevilla in 1248 that his name was engraved in marble with those of Hercules, Julius Caesar, and Saint Ferdinand. This inscription, which may still be seen on one of the gateways to the city of Sevilla, reads: "Hercules built me—Julius Caesar surrounded me with high walls and towers—and the saint king conquered me—with Garci Pérez de Vargas."⁹

Don Diego's paternal grandfather was Don Lorenzo de Vargas Zapata, knight of the Order of Santiago, baptized at Madrid on May 31, 1589. He fought in Italy as an officer in the Spanish army for fifty years. First in the galleys of Naples; in 1611 with the Marquis of Santa Cruz at the Battle of Querquenes, where he jumped to shore and fought valiantly in the front lines; in 1612 helping burn the ships that were attacking the fortress of La Goleta, Tunis, and in other engagements while protecting the isles of Gozo and Malta from the Turks; and in the Levant with Prince Filibert. Later he served at different times as governor and captain of war of the principate of Citra and Basilicata, the county of Molise, and Rijoles. In all of these posts he is said to have accredited himself in a manner worthy of his illustrious blood.¹⁰ Don Lorenzo was the eldest of four children. His father, captain of infantry for a long time under Philip II and Philip III, was also a knight of the Order of Santiago, and his grandfather served as procurator of the famous military order.¹¹

8. *Ibid.*, 113.

9. "Official statement of the consecration of the Chapel of San Isidro on Pretil de Santistéban Street as a place of public worship, Madrid, October 14, 1859," in Balsera, 113-114.

10. José Antonio Alvarez y Baena, *Hijos de Madrid ilustres en santidad, dignidad, armas, ciencias y artes* (Madrid, 17789-91, 4 v.), III, 377.

11. *Ibid.*, II, 113.

Among the contemporary relatives of Don Lorenzo's paternal grandfather, and those of the generation just preceding, there were numbered a host of renowned Vargases: the Don Diego's and Don Francisco's, and Don Gutierre de Vargas. One Don Diego de Vargas, corregidor of Toro, Spain, served loyally under King John II of Castile (1406-1454) in the Battle of Olmedo.¹² His son, another Don Diego was regidor of Madrid in the time of the Catholic Kings; and a son of the latter, Don Diego de Vargas y Vivero, was a royal page of Charles V.¹³ To Don Diego de Vargas y Vivero was born a Don Francisco de Vargas, who after taking part in the conquest of Granada served as alcalde of the Alcázar or Royal Fortress at Madrid, and for thirty years as regidor of the capital, after which he was succeeded by his son.¹⁴

Don Francisco de Vargas was held in such confidence as a councilor of the Catholic Kings and Charles V, that the statement "Averígüelo Vargas," or "Ask Vargas," came to be a popular saying, and even the title of plays by the great dramatist Tirso de Molina and others. In 1520 he served as governor of the kingdom during one of the emperor's sojourns in Germany. He owned much property in Madrid, including the vast grounds of the Casa de Campo across the Manzanares River from the royal palace. These grounds were later purchased by the king as a country estate, and when asked one time at court why he did not remove the Vargas coat of arms from the house there, Philip II answered: "Leave them, for those of such loyal vassals look well on the royal house."¹⁵ His son was Don Gutierre de Vargas, Bishop of Plasencia.¹⁶

Then there was the Licentiate Francisco de Vargas, at one time Spanish ambassador to Rome and Venice respec-

12. López de Zárate, *op. cit.*, 7ff.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Documentos del archivo general de la villa de Madrid, interpretados y coleccionados por D. Vicente Domingo Palacio* (Madrid, 1909), quoted in Balsera, 50-51.

15. Luis Ballesteros Robles, *Diccionario biográfico Matritense* (Madrid, 1912), 650.

16. Balsera, 53.

tively. With his secretary Alonso Zorrilla he was one of the two principal lay doctors of theology and canon law at the Council of Trent. His principal activities in the council were during the period from 1562 to 1563, as indicated by his copious correspondence with Philip II, the archbishop of Granada, the bishop of Lerida, the Marquis of Pescara, and other notables during this period.¹⁷

Our Don Diego's paternal grandmother, Doña Antonia de Cepeda Venegas Ponce de León, the wife of Don Lorenzo de Vargas Zapata, was of ancestry equal to that of her husband in nobility. She was born in Trinidad de los Mussos, Granada, to Captain Don Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, of Granada, and Doña Juana Venegas Ponce de León, of Santa Fé de Bogotá. Don Alonso was at that time governor and captain general of New Granada.¹⁸ Through her father Doña Antonia was closely related to Santa Teresa de Jesús, the famous Spanish mystic and celebrated literary figure of the Golden Age of Spanish literature. Santa Teresa was paternal grand-niece of Don Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda's great-grandfather, and Don Alonso's paternal grandmother was the sister of the saint's paternal grandmother; in short, Doña Antonia and Santa Teresa were second cousins.¹⁹

On her mother's side Doña Antonia's ancestors came to America with the first conquerors. Her great-grandfather, Don Pedro Ponce de León, was governor of Venezuela from 1565 to 1569.²⁰ His daughter Juana married Marshall Hernán de Venegas, a Cordovan who had come to the New World with the men of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada. Venegas was one of the principal leaders in the conquest of the Chibchas. In 1554 he was victorious as the leader of an expedition sent by Governor Luís Alonso de

17. *Encyclopedia universal ilustrada* (Espasa), LXIV, 121; Balsera, *op. cit.*, 51. The correspondence referred to, which is in the archives at Simancas and the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, is listed in Balsera, 52-53.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Cf. the genealogical chart compiled by Balsera, *ibid.*, 135, and documents from the National Archive, Madrid, cited in this same work, 7-39.

20. *Ibid.*, 45-46.

Lugo of New Granada to pacify the bellicose Panches and Pantayros, whose lands were believed to be rich in gold mines. On another occasion he was sent at the head of an army to aid La Gasca in Perú. In 1547 he was named by all the cabildos of New Granada as delegate to Spain for the purpose of bringing about the revocation or reform of the laws brought by Armendáriz. He succeeded in obtaining practically all that he asked for, all of which increased his fame in New Granada. On his death he left his children the heirs to rich encomiendas in the vicinity of Guatavitá, Sacheta, Chipasaque (now Junín), Tausa, Chuba, and Gachoncepa. He is buried in the cathedral at Santa Fé de Bogotá.²¹ His daughter Juana was Doña Antonia's mother.²²

The Reconqueror, Don Diego, last male descendant in the Vargas line, was son and heir of Captain Alonso de Vargas Zapata y Lujan, knight of the Order of Santiago, and his wife Doña María Margarita de Contreras y Arráiz, both of whom possessed many landed estates and ample fortunes. Don Alonso was born in Luggera de la Puglia, in the kingdom of Naples. In his youth he served for eight years as a noble page to Queen Isabel, the wife of Philip IV, and later became a soldier, in the footsteps of many of his ancestors.²³ On January 6, 1641, he married Doña María Margarita, who was seventeen years of age, in the Contreras chapel at Madrid. Her family was of a famous Segovian house, residing at Toledo.²⁴

After serving for some time in Spain as captain of cavalry in the royal service, Don Alonso came to America, where he held a government position and where he died. Besides his military and diplomatic services he was a man of some intellectual attainments, and on his death he left written some twenty volumes of general information of the

21. *Encyclopedia universal ilustrada* (Espasa), LXVII, 959; *Diccionario hispano-americano* (Barcelona, n. d.), XXII, 319; Balsera, 46-47.

22. *Signatura 2,700, Santa Fé de Bogotá, 1622*, National Archive, Madrid, quoted in Balsera, 45.

23. Alvarez y Baena, *op. cit.*, I, 39; López de Zárate, *op. cit.*, 12.

24. *Signatura 10, 641, año 1641*, National Archive, Madrid, printed in Balsera, 59, 61. Baptismal record of Doña María Margarita de Contreras y Arráiz; record of the marriage of Don Alonzo de Vargas with Doña María Margarita de Contreras.

period and an interesting treatise on the tax levied on the people of Messina by the Duke of Osuna.²⁵

In short, this was the house of Vargas. The blood of conquerors ran unmistakably in Don Diego's veins. Here was no "swineherd of Trujillo," but rather the élite of seventeenth century Spain. In culture and refinement, indeed on a number of other counts, Vargas the Reconqueror of New Mexico reminds one very much of Cortés the Conqueror of Mexico. Young Vargas could add little to the lustre of the family name, but he could at least try to live up to it, and this he did, even though his great wealth would have permitted a life of blissful leisure. His vast estate, the accumulation of centuries, included: the principal Vargas houses at Madrid, on Almendro Street, bordering those of the Count of Paredes, and an income of two thousand ducats rent from some houses on the same street; other houses on the Plaza Mayor; the Vargas altar, next to the main altar in the church of San Francisco el Grande;²⁶ the patronage founded by Doña Inés Venegas Ponce de León for the purpose of marrying orphans and feeding students, with its revenues of alcabalas from the salt works of Ocaña and its territory; the chaplaincy and patronage founded by Doña Aldonza de Luján. His estate also included the Vargas palace and estate in Torrelaguna, including grain fields, olive orchards, and arable lands; pasture grounds at Los Gariños and vineyards in the town of Buytrago; two fields and enclosures in the region of Miraflores in the Sierra Choca and between Querica and Guadix; the estate in the city of Granada; the crop lands in the neighborhood of Val de Prelagos, Salamanca, and Torre Mocha; the estate in the region of Camarma de Esteduella, with their olive orchards and pigeon lofts; the estate of the Vargas family in Mexico

25. Alvarez y Baena. *op. cit.*, I, 39.

26. The Vargas altar was built in the thirteenth century. It is written that Saint Francis of Assisi selected the location where it was built in gratitude toward the Vargas family for a special favor. (Balsera, 104). The altar was improved in 1459 and 1510. It had eleven tombs elaborately sculptured in marble, alabaster and jasper as well as the tombs of other descendants until the nineteenth century. (*Ibid.*) 93, 99.)

City, comprising rents, houses, and revenues from the land.²⁷

Vargas the Reconqueror was born at Madrid, Spain, on November 8, 1643, his full baptismal name being Diego José de Vargas Zapata y Lujan Ponce de León y Contreras.²⁸ (He died at Bernalillo, New Mexico, in 1704, while attempting to save the sacred chalice from the burning church which had been set fire to by hostile Indians.)²⁹ On May 5, 1664, he married the wealthy Doña Beatriz Pimentel of Torrelaguna.³⁰ On February 19 of the following year was born their only child, a daughter, María Isabel.³¹ Vargas came to America soon after, making his residence in New Spain. In Mexico City he left two sons and a daughter, "not by legitimate wife," born between the years 1680 and 1685. Strange as it may seem, despite his family and property connections in old Spain, these three Mexican born children are the only relatives Vargas mentions in his will, and he died owing four thousand pesos to the royal treasury.³²

Prior to his appointment to the New Mexico post, Vargas held a number of responsible government positions in New Spain. During the viceroyalty of the Marquis of Man-

27. "Inventory of the Vargas estate, September 23, 1719," quoted in Balsera, 71; *expediente* of 1692 cited in Twitchell, *Old Santa Fé, The Story of New Mexico's Ancient Capital* (Santa Fé, 1925), 87-88, and his *Spanish Archives of New Mexico*, II, 133.

28. *Expediente de casamiento*, no. 10,461, año 1644, National Archive, Madrid, printed in Balsera, 65. (Contains the baptismal record of Vargas.) Later, for his services in New Mexico, he was rewarded with the title of Marquis of la Nava de Barcinas or Bracinas.

29. Based on the inscription on the Vargas portrait in the family chapel at Madrid. It reads as follows: "El Señor Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan Ponce de León, Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas, del Orden de Santiago, Gobernador, Conquistador, Pacificador, y Capitan General del Nuevo Mejico, perdió la Vida en Compañía Rasa por libertar las Vases Sagradas en el Sitio de Bernalillo, año de MDCCIV." The following is an English translation: "Señor Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan Ponce de León, Marquis of La Nava de Barcinas, of the Order of Santiago, governor, conqueror, pacificator, and captain-general of New Mexico; he lost his life in open battle while attempting to rescue the sacred vessels at the siege of Bernalillo, the year MDCCIV." (For a description of this portrait cf. my article in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 1, 1934, I, 6.)

30. *Expediente de casamiento*, no. 10,461, año 1694, *op. cit.*, Balsera, 71. (Reproduction of Vargas' marriage certificate).

31. Balsera, 65, 135.

32. Twitchell, *Spanish Archives of New Mexico*, I, 304. See below, editorial comment on this paragraph.

cera (1665-1673) he administered with credit the alcaldía mayor of Teutila, in the province of Oaxaca. And in the time of the archbishop viceroy Fray Payo Enríquez Afán de Rivera (1673-1680), he was named justicia mayor of the mining town of Talpujagua, in Michoacan. This mining camp had almost been lost in 1679, at which time the deputies and miners had all fled. Vargas also served as administrator of the royal quicksilver supply during this administration. He discharged these duties so meritoriously in the royal service that he was recommended to the viceroy of New Spain by King Charles II in a royal cédula of February 6, 1683, and thenceforward he was held in especially high esteem by all the viceroys. This was especially true in the case of the Count of Galve, who ruled during the critical years of the reconquest.⁸⁸

88. "Restauracion del Nuevo Mexico por Don Diego de Vargas Zapata," ascribed to a religious of the province of Santo Evangelio, in the General Archive of the nation, Mexico City, *Historia*, tomo 2; cited in Irving A. Leonard, *The Mercurio Volante of Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora* (Los Angeles, 1932), 31.