

**Background information:** Potosi was a "silver mountain" located by an Amerindian in 1545, as the Spanish were beginning to consolidate their rule in the Andes. Quickly this site became the center of the economy of the Viceroyalty of Peru (see Ames, pp 81-2), and central to funding (Spanish) Habsburg ambitions the world round. Below are a few short pieces that give us a glimpse into the lives of colonists and subjects in this corner of the Spanish empire.

*Joseph de Acosta was a Jesuit (from age 15) who sailed to the New World in 1570 in his thirties. He joined the company of the Viceroy in Peru and witnessed government raids against Amerindians, though he probably spent the majority of his time at a Jesuit college on Lake Titicaca until 1587, when he returned to Europe and began publishing his writings. Here he describes Potosi and how the old Incan **Mita** system of forced labor had been reconfigured to take advantage of the discovery of this silver vein.*

## **Joseph de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 1590**

The mountain or hill of Potosi so famous.... The ground and soil of this mountain is dry, cold, and very unpleasant, yea, altogether barren, which neither engenders nor brings forth any fruit, grass, nor grain. ... But the force of silver, which draws unto it the desire of all things, has peopled this mountain more than any other place in all these Kingdoms... . [T]he mines of Potosi were discovered by the Divine Providence, who (for the felicity of Spain) would have the greatest treasure that ever was in this world discovered at such time whenas the Emperor Charles V ... held the Empire, the kingdoms of Spain, and the Seingiorie of the Indies. Presently after the discovery of Potosi was known in Peru, many Spaniards, and the most part the cities of the city of La Plata ... came thither to take mines: yea there came many Indians from diverse provinces ....

[The "Indians"] labor in these mines in continual darkness and obscurity, without knowledge of day or night. And forasmuch as those places are never visited with the sun, there is not only a continual darkness, but also an extreme cold, with so foul an air contrary to the disposition of man, that such as newly enter are as they are at sea.

The which happened to me in one of these mines, where I felt a pain at the heart, and heating of the stomach. Those that labor therein use candles to light them, dividing their work in such sort, as they that work in the day rest by the night, and so they change. The metal is commonly hard, and therefore they break it with hammers; splitting and hewing it by force as if they were flints.

Afterwards they carry up this, metal upon their shoulders, by ladders of three branches made of neats leather twisted like pieces of wood, which are crossed with staves of wood, so that by every one of these ladders they mount and descend together.

They are ten estados long [about 35 feet] apiece, and at the end of one, begins another of the same length, every ladder beginning and ending at platforms of wood, where are seats to rest

them like unto galleries, for that there are many of these ladders to mount by, one at the end of another.

A man carries ordinarily the weight of two arrobas [~25 lbs] of metal upon his shoulders, tied together in a cloth in manner of a skippe, and so mount them three and three. He that goes before carries a candle tied to his thumb, for, as it is said, they have no light from heaven, and so they go up the ladder holding it with both their hands; to mount so great a height which commonly is above 150 estados—a fearful thing which breeds an amazement to think upon it, so great is the desire of silver, that for the gain thereof men endure any pains. ...

[To smelt the ore, the "Indians"] built small furnaces where the wind commonly blew, and with wood and coal made their refining, the which furnaces in Peru they called huayras. ..

***Then a new method of extracting the ore, using the highly poisonous mercury was developed, probably by 1571.***

They first beat and grind the metal very small, with the hammers of the machinery, which beat this stone like unto ten milles, and being well beaten they 'searce' it in a copper 'scarce,' making the powder as small and fine as if it were horse hair; these 'searces' being well fitted, do sift 80 quintals [4 tons] in a day and a night; then they put the ponder of the metal into the vessels upon furnaces, whereas they annoint it and mortify it with brine, putting to every 50 quintals of powder, 5 quintals of salt.

And this they do for that the salt separates the earth and filth, to the end the quicksilver [mercury] may the more easily draw the silver unto it. Afterwards they put quicksilver into a piece of holland and press it out upon the metal, which goes forth like a dew, always turning and stirring the metal, to the end it may be well incorporated. ...

Then to separate the silver from the quicksilver, they put it into a violent fire which they cover with an earthen vessel, like to the mold of a sugar loaf, or unto a capuchon or hood, the which they cover wit coals, and set fire unto it; whereby the quicksilver exhales the smoke, which striking against the capuchon of earth, thickens and distills, like unto the smoke of a pot covered; and by a pipe, like unto a limbecke, they receive the quicksilver which distills the silver remaining without changing the form, but in weight it is diminished five parts of that it was, and is spongius, the which is worthy of observation. ...

When the melting is finished, they unstop the pots and draw forth the metal, sometimes staying until it be very cold, for if there remained any fume or vapor, which should encounter them that unstopped the pots, they were in danger of death, or to be benumbed of least to lose their teeth, their limbs, or fat.

**Source:** Joseph de Acosta, *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590), 197-201; 207-20.

