

# The “Well Dressed” Colonist on the 1559 Luna Expedition

By

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People of the past were not that different from the peoples today when it comes to their personal wardrobe and public appearance. The proverb that how a person dresses is indicative of one’s wealth and social status, or, succinctly put, “clothes make the man,” can be traced back well over two thousand years to the Greek and Latin worlds. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the continued rise of a middle class, clothes once again became a symbol of ones status.

Thus, it was not unusual—especially in the world of New Spain in 1559—that colonists wanted to mimic as much of the Old World as possible to elevate their inferior positions and status as “newcomers” into society. Indeed, most conquistadors originally wanted to find wealth in the New World and return to Spain with that wealth and accede into the echelons of higher society, if not the nobility. Men of action in the conquest made themselves “dons” even though only a handful of those men were actually of nobility and allowed the prefix “Don” with the capital “D.” Most commoners, especially those associated with the new rising middle class, had dreams of “moving on up.” It was a reward typically of sacrifice and hard work, (and perhaps a little luck) to increase one’s economic position in order to gain respect and power no matter what level that new “economic status” reflected. A laborer getting served first or with the best brew at a local pub strokes the human psyche in a manner that enhances one’s self esteem or even aggrandizement. This was also true of the colonists on the Luna Expedition on the adventure to la Florida.

Therefore, for the Luna colonists, it was wearing nice clothing accented by jewelry that “enhanced” what was really a cadre of modest if not poor peoples’ grabbing at the opportunity to better themselves in a “rich land.” The Soto survivors had told them of such lands in la Florida for almost twenty years, and apparently la Florida offered hope for a better life than

what most were experiencing in New Spain (today's Mexico) Otherwise, why would one want to leave a sure thing for an unknown?

One of the passages that informs of the clothing expense the colonist opted for — in order to show off their up and coming “new status” as voyagers to la Florida — is found in a letter from Viceroy Velasco to the king. It was written as Velasco was waiting word of the navigation and arrival of the Luna armada to the port of Ochuse (today's Pensacola Bay). The viceroy discusses the need for a modification of the timeline of when the colonists could finally obtain tribute from Indians they would pacify and obtain obedience. He proposed reducing the ten-year exemption of the Natives and that until that time there was the need for the royal crown to subsidize the settlements with food and supplies. However, the viceroy asserted that once the settlements were operational it would not be hard to recruit new colonists and that **they would be able to pay for themselves** in lieu of support from the royal treasury.

With this said, it is also possible that in order to help recruit colonists for the Luna Expedition, Viceroy Velasco had authorized a small stipend to help prepare each colonist for the journey to la Florida.<sup>1</sup> However, some of those monies were apparently spent on fashion clothing and accessories instead of more appropriate items suitable for living (and surviving) in an undeveloped land. Correspondingly, it also becomes evident that Velasco might have underestimated the economic status, resources, and settlement expectations of the colonist, which became apparent when he gave his farewell speech to them at Tlaxcala. That event would have been a unique happening for most of the peoples to be personally addressed by the honorable Viceroy and Captain General of New Spain and probably the closest most would ever get to their king, Philip II. Dressing up in their finest and perhaps new clothing and jewelry was most appropriate. However, it apparently became more of a festive fashion show than a time of hardy reflection to hear Velasco's words of wisdom and warnings in his fond farewell speech.

After the event, Velasco wrote to the king:

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<sup>1</sup> In AGI. *Contaduria 877* (trans. by R. Wayne Childers) it mentions the existence of another accounting book or *contaduria* kept by Antonio de Spilla, which probably contained other supply expenditures, salaries, and allocation of supplies to be carried in each ship to la Florida. However, this record appears to have been lost in one of the ships that was sunk in the hurricane of September 19-20, 1559, which had been destined to sail to Spain for crown approval.

If the letter arrives to your Majesty before that of the armada more people will be offered to go their and will be made with some less cost: **those that went they spent on dressing up [from] the assistance that they were given and which they had and have of their family's monies that was of a good amount;** if it is convenient to send more people it will cost little or not much of the royal treasury in trust of the mercy that is done to them on earth.<sup>2</sup>

Another document that also speaks to the finery of clothing and jewelry the colonist brought is Agustín Dávila Padilla's *Historia* first printed in 1596. His narratives of the Luna Expedition derive mainly from written works and personal interview with one of the main Dominican frays on the expedition—Domingo de la Anunciación. Dávila writes the following passage as if the colonist were at a Sunday outing in a park, all dressed up, and parading as peacocks in front of each other and showing off:

When the new settlers saw themselves in such a peaceful place, for some days they enjoyed the freshness of the place and the gift of the tide. Some sat down on the sand before the Sun could heat them and others when the evenings after the sunset, made them cool, **exercised the horses, showing off their finery and dexterity: others went in the barks and coasted the shore.** Others considered it from the land, regaling themselves with the view of the meek waves, which as they were peaceful and gentle, arrived calmly to the shore and without going astray, they returned to the sea. They arrived as if to greet those on the land, retreating from them without disturbing anything. Finally, {those that had gone in the barks, and}<sup>3</sup> those that crewed them all rejoiced together because it is not only an entertaining thing to go together to the sea but also to sail close to land.<sup>4</sup>

Another passage, however, informs of their ludicrous attire of jewelry and how the then starving colonists were willing to trade their personal belongings in desperation for food:

Those on the land traveled a very rough road, and in places so much so, that it was necessary to open paths so that the poor women, and the people that were most heavy laden would be able to walk. Those that went by water went in caravels and barks against the current of the water, and those and the others suffered grand hunger. **They removed their most precious jewels and they offered them in exchange for some things to eat,** if some [bits of foods] had been guardedly kept, because they did not trust their weakness, to be able to arrive at Nanipacana, without having to loose one's life on the road. It was sad to see the

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<sup>2</sup> Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, (translation by David B. Dodson) *Epistolario de Nueva España, 1505-1818*, Tomo VIII, 1555-1559, Antigua Liberia Robredo, de José Porrá y Hijos, Mexico, 1940, 257.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase is in the 1596 edition, but the type setter made an error and omitted it from the more widely disseminated 1625 edition. This was not the only printing error that originally caused confusion in our first translation until I was able to compare the two editions word for word.

<sup>4</sup> Dávila Padiia, *Historia*, 1625 ed., 192.

poor women sustaining themselves with the roots of trees; and others that were forcing themselves to walk faster, so as to arrive more quickly to the town, remaining then overcome by hunger and fatigue, fainting on the road.<sup>5</sup>

One last document that informs of the importance that was given to the attire worn on the Luna Expedition is found in the filings of a lawsuit brought by the Natives in and around Mexico City against the Spanish. Apparently new clothes for the expedition had been in great demand, but someone forgot to pay for them. Some of the entries recorded in the suit read as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Item, in this year did the Indians from all four neighborhoods made **cloaks of cotton**, three field tents and six quilted *piernas de mantas*<sup>7</sup> for the said journey to la Florida; they were paid thirty-three pesos by the officials of its Majesty, and they received the money via the said elders of them which they said to be Francisco Daniel, Juan Alonso, Pedro Juárez, Pedro Daniel.

Item, this said year did the Indian craftsmen of all the four neighborhoods of this city made **cloaks of nequén**,<sup>8</sup> two quilted *piernas*, and they were given by the officials of its Majesty six pesos via the said elders that were said to be Pedro Moreno, Miguel Quautli, Martín Teyo Iitlacoa and Francisco Xochizana.

Item, in this said year the Indian craftsmen from all the neighborhoods, that are four, made **hats of silk** for the said journey, they quilted six *piernas de mantas*, and the officials of his Majesty paid them eighteen pesos, and the money [given] to the said elders of them, that they said to be Miguel Aquechol, Miguel Huyutl and Martín Yaotl and Graviel Matía.

Item, in this year they were to do the Indian craftsmen from all the four neighborhoods to make **buttons**, quilt six *piernas de mantas*<sup>9</sup> for the said journey, and the officials of its majesty paid them eighteen pesos, of which was received by the elders Juan Pérez and Miguel Diego and Miguel Quechoc, Gaspar Francisco.

## Conclusion

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>6</sup> *Memorial De Los Gastos Que Han Hecho El Governador Y Principales En Las Obras Públicas, Desde El Principio Del Año De 55 Hasta El De 65*. found in *Codice Osuna*, Ediciones Del Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, Mexico, 1947, translation by David B. Dodson.

<sup>7</sup> Approximately 72 square *varas* of cotton fabric.

<sup>8</sup> Nequen is a cloth derived from the weaving of maguey fiber and that of course palm leaves—*icxotl* and *izhuatl*. This nequen and the courser kinds of cotton were the materials with which the poor classes clothed themselves. See Otis Tufton Mason, *Woman's Share in Primitive Culture*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1911, 62.

<sup>9</sup> In this case, the total amount of cotton cloth made would equal 7 x 12 for 84 square *varas* of cloth.

How much new clothing and finery was actually brought and worn on the Luna Expedition will of course never be discerned with any sort of accuracy, but the documental records inform that not soon after the arrival of the expedition to la Florida the need for good, durable clothing and shoes became a paramount problem. The suffering due to the social stigma of having to have what was fashion and “inferior clothing” over functional attire stretched over the entire expedition. Indeed, there are many references to the peoples being half naked and barefoot desperately needing clothing to survive the elements and good leather shoes just to walk. And although the colonists initially were “looking good” when they departed the ports at Veracruz, a gentleman’s and lady’s attire was just not practical for the harsh hinterlands of la Florida. They all soon found this out shortly upon their arrival.

## Main References

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Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, (translation by David B. Dodson) *Epistolario de Nueva España, 1505-1818*, Tomo VIII, 1555-1559, Antigua Libería Robredo, de José Porrá y Hijos, Mexico, 1940, 257, *Letter of Viceroy Velasco to His Majesty*, Tlaxcala, September 1, 1559.