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Rodrigo Río de Losa to the Viceroy, Count of Monterrey, 13 January 1602, Concerning the Geographical Situation of New Mexico in North America

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**Rodrigo Río de Losa to the Viceroy, Count of Monterrey, 13 January, 1602
Concerning the Geographical Situation of New Mexico in North America**

Archivo General de Indias, Audiencia de México, legajo 25, n. I-10

**Transcribed and Translated
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Preface

The letter presented here was written by one of the richest hacienda owners (*hacendados*) to come out of the wave of conquistadors who pushed north from Nueva Galicia, seeking routes to the promised land of Cibola, and inspired by the success of Zacatecas, in search of mines of silver. In the 1560s, Rodrigo Río de Losa accompanied Francisco de Ibarra from Zacatecas, on a series of incursions into what came to be known as “Nueva Viscaya.” For the next two decades he participated in *correrías* with de Ibarra through present-day Sinaloa, Sonora and Chihuahua.

He had a successful military career, helping found and then exploit some of the first mining districts: the *Reales* of Indé, Santa Bárbara and eventually Guanaceví. The Ibarra expeditions never managed to reach New Mexico but reached as far north as Paquimé, the famous Casas Grandes of Chihuahua.

Río de Losa retired to Durango to amass a fortune in a second career that has been called “apoteótica”(Saenz Carrete, 12). While some other conquistadors may not have felt adequately compensated for their services to the king, Rodrigo del Río de Losa, was one of the most richly rewarded beneficiaries of the “mercedes de tierras.” Chevalier names Río de Losa and Francisco de Urdiñola (mentioned in the letter) among the “men rich and powerful” of the north, and details their lavish lifestyles (154-159). Saenz Carrete goes into some detail about the extent of Río de Losa’s holdings, estimating that he controlled some half a million hectares, and that he had sold 60,000 head of cattle by the end of his life.

He served as lieutenant-governor, and then in 1590, became the sixteenth governor of Nueva Viscaya. In 1591 he was put in charge of relocating 700 Tlaxcalteca families to regions occupied by indomitable, nomadic Chichimecs in hopes that the sedentary lifestyle of the Tlaxcalteca allies would encourage the “pacification” of the latter group (Bakewell, 35). He is also credited with fortifying outposts and missions in neighboring Sinaloa, and increasing the Jesuit presence in the northern territories.

Perhaps it was because of this wealth and power, along with his military experience, that Río de Losa was consulted on two occasions on matters pertaining to the northward expansion.¹

The first time was in 1583, when he was lieutenant captain-general of Nueva Galicia. He was asked to advise on how best to outfit and prepare Father Beltrán’s rescue mission of two Franciscan friars from the Rodríguez-Sánchez expedition of 1581-1582, who had remained behind to evangelize the natives, and later perished. The letter is included in the dossier of the Espejo-Beltran expedition, which also includes a note that he was “consulted as a man ‘de mucha experiencia en entradas,’ having served with Arellano in Florida and with Ibarra in Nueva Vizcaya” (Bancroft,92-93).

The letter that we publish here is from about ten years later. Rio de Losa apparently has been

¹Foin published two earlier autograph letters, with facsimiles, from AGI Guadalajara 28 dated October 25, 1591 and December 8, 1592 (37-43).

asked to relay the information contained in another document, a chart or map, relating to the geography of the north, correlated with his own experience in Florida and with what he knew from speaking with deserters returning from Oñate's struggling New Mexico outpost.

The matter at hand is to determine the best route to New Mexico. Was it better to go through the north, and contend with rugged terrain and defiant natives or to approach via the Caribbean? Hence he provides a peculiar verbal map, a strange itinerary with New Mexico as its point of reference, and provides his reckoning of the distances from New Mexico to other locations, in New Spain, in the Caribbean, and all the way to China.

He takes for granted the existence of the "Strait of Anían," a supposed northern waterway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific, for it was still believed that a route to China and the East (*Tartarea* = Tartary) could be found through North America.

Río de Losa also weighs in on the tacit question of whether the New Mexico enterprise was worth the cost and danger. He offers words of encouragement: the land is so vast and promising that the fabled riches would inevitably be discovered, but the suffering colony would only survive if supported materially by the Viceroy of New Spain and the Crown.

Río de Losa knew firsthand the suffering of the soldiers he describes; similar travails had forced his own expedition to turn back from Paquimé some 30 years earlier. He takes his best stab at understanding and conveying the geography of the north, within the limitations of the information at his disposal. He is correct, at least, that it is a vast land, and he reasons that such an immense territory should house the riches they sought. He suspects that the failure to find them is due to a combination of human shortcomings ("cortedad") and divine retribution ("por nuestros pecados"). He recognizes that greed was the prime motivating factor for the exploration of the north, but he did affirm that "fuera justo lo fuera solo la conuersion de los naturales de ellas y procurar la saluacion de sus almas ('It would be better if we were motivated *only* by the conversion of the natives and salvation of their souls').".

Two years after writing this letter, Río de Losa made his will, and shortly after signing it, died, without a direct heir, at his hacienda de Santiago, valle de Magdalena, jurisdicción de la Villa de Llerena y San Martín en el Reino de Nueva Galicia. (October 15, 1604). He left to his wife and his cousin many silver mines and haciendas, and as many as 20,000 Native servants and slaves.

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Rodrigo Río de Losa al virrey conde de Monterrey
sobre la situación geográfica de Nuevo México
13 de enero de 1602

[fol. 1r]

†

Copia de carta escrita por *Rodrigo Río de Lossa*, cauallero del aui-
to de *Santiago*, *gouernador* que fue de la Nueva Galizia, desde su estan-
cia a 13 de henero de 1602 al conde de Monterrey, virrey de
la Nueva España.

- 5 ~ La que *vuestra señoría* me hizo *merced* de tres de *octubre*
del año passado con el treslado del *capitulo* de carta que se
escriuio a su *magestad* de la Florida *recibi* a 4 de este
de henero. Mandame *vuestra señoría* rresponda con el correo.
Yo no le vi; imbiomela *Alonso ?? Diaz*, tinien-
10 te de *gouernador* de la Uiscaia, que pues el me la em-
bio tan tarde deuio de benirlo a su poder. Por
ella me manda *vuestra señoría* ynforme / sobre lo de la Florida
se escriuio a su *magestad* / esta caussa mas es de cos-
mografos que de soldados pero acudiendo a lo *que*
15 *vuestra señoría* me manda y huiendome informado de
soldados que an salido del Nueuo Mexico
segun la derrota que dizen lleuaron por tierra
desde Guadiana, tomado el punto en vn mapa
como mejor yo pude ay las alturas y derrotas
20 siguientes:

~ Guadiana esta en 25 grados

segun *dizen* poco mas a menos.

~ Dista de la Mar del Sur 52 leguas casi

leste a hueste por el camino de la uilla

25 de *Sant* Seuastian hasta la boca del Río

[RM] 25

del *Spiritu* Sancto que esta entre los
rrios de Chametla y Rio Piastla

~ En el pueblo de los teguas Nueuo

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[fol. 1v]

Mexico segun dizen en 37 *grados*.

[LM] 37

~ Desde Guadiana al Nueuo Mexico dizen
caminaron cassi al norte dexando el
norte algo sobre el ojo yzquierdo; ay
5 por la altura 236 leguas pocas mas
o menos aunque los que del alla bien
nen hechan muchas mas en las
torceduras del camino que hazen.

[RM] 236

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico *que* esta en 37
10 *grados* al ancon de la California en
la Mar del Sur en lo ultimo de-
l ancon ay 227 leguas.

[RM] 227

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico al cauo Men-
docino en la Mar del Sur ay 1190
15 leguas.

[RM] 1190

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico a la punta del
estrecho de Anian, frontero de la
Tartarea, ay 1435 leguas.

[RM] 1435

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico hasta el
20 mar y laguna de Caribas ay 415 leguas
que cae a la *parte* de la Tartarea.

[RM] 415

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico hasta la boca
de rio del *Spiritu* Sancto en el seno

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mexicano que confina con la Florida ay
271 leguas.

[RM] 271

25 ~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico hasta la punta de
Santa Elena que cae a la parte de la canal
de Baama ay 577 leguas.

[RM] 577

~ Desde el Nueuo Mexico a los Ua-

[fol. 2r]

callaos ay 285 leguas.

[RM] (^2)[^10]85

~ Desde el *Nueuo Mexico* hasta la punta del
estrecho de Anian azia la Tartarea
atrauesando la tierra cassi leste
5 ueste digo desde la punta de los Ba-
callaos hasta la punta del estrecho
de Anian atrauesando la tierra cassi
leste a ueste ay 2485 leguas.

[RM] 2485

Esta es la claridad que yo he podido al-
10 cansar por el mapa acerca de lo que *vuestra señoría* me manda. El
capitan Pablo de Ordiñola que esta en Macapil me dizen
es diestro en estas alturas. Venido *que* sea, comunicare con el
lo que *vuestra señoría* me manda y podra dar a *vuestra señoría* mas rrazon
que yo de esta caussa, aunque en essa ciudad segun me
15 dizen tiene *vuestra señoría* a vn Enrrico Martinez, interpete
del Santo Oficio, que es hombre que en esta facultad alcança
mucho, de quien *vuestra señoría* se podra informar. La tierra toda
del Nueuo Mexico para adelante es grandiosa assi en latitud
como en longitud pues tiene 2,485 leguas cassi leste a hues-
20 te y atrauesando la tierra tiene 1,435 leguas. Y deue-
se creer que en tierra tan grandiossa y anchurosa donde
se dize que ay gente que trae corona de metal al modo

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de *nuestros* reyes y pueblos çercados y cassas de çinco, seis y siete altos y frutas tan buenas como las de España y pobladas de gente
25 y bacas como las de la Tartarea y Alemania que no la priuo *nuestro señor*
del bien y sustento y materiales de plata y oro como las demas
y de estas Indias, pues por ellos y la cobdicia de ellos pasamos los espa-
ñoles a estas partes que es lo principal del çeuo que aca nos trae,
aunque fuera justo lo fuera solo la conuersion de los natura-
30 les de ellas y procurar la saluacion de sus almas.
Y aunque los que agora bienen del Nueuo Mexico traen tan
malas nueuas de alla sea *vuestra señoría* çierto que en lo de adelante en
tierra tan grandiossa y anchurosa promete mucho. Y si agora

[fol. 2v]

no se a descubierto son la caussa *nuestros* pecados y la cortedad de los que fue-
ron alla en no pasar adelante que en lo que agora estuuieron y a los pasados lo bie-
ron y hallaron la tierra tan arenosa y falta de leña y aguas que aunque
ellos la quisieran poblar y perpetuarse en ella, ella no daua lugar porque de-
5 mas de faltarle la gente y la plata es falta de montes y pastos y tierra y a-
guas acomodadas lo qual les forço a salir de ella, que es lastima con
la penuria que algunos an llegado a esta de *vuestra señoría* y la da mucho maior oir-
les dezir en la que vienen los que quedan atras, de quien *vuestra señoría* es
justo se duela. Pues posible de uestuario y comida y cauillos les obliga
10 a pedirlo a quien dello les pueda socorrer que si de *vuestra señoría* no lo son dudo
ellos puedan acudir a cossa que sea de momento en seruicio de su magestad ni de *vuestra*
señoría
que la fuerça le a de obligar a pedillo por amor de Dios pues otro rremedio no
tienen si no es el pecho christiano y misericordioso de *vuestra señoría*.

[vertical text]

†

Copia de vn *capitulo* de carta escrita de Rodrigo Rio de
Lossa del auito de Santiago desde su estan-
cia a 13 de henero de 1602 al conde de
Monterrey, virrey de la Nueua España.

Duplicado Corresponde al *capitulo* 6º de
la carta de materias
de guerra fecha en
Mexico a 31 de
maio 1602.

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Río de Losa to Viceroy Monterrey 13 January, 1602

Translation and commentary by Heather McMichael 19 August, 2016

Copy of a letter written by Rodrigo Río de Losa, knight of the order of Santiago, former governor of New Galicia, from his residence on January 13, 1602, to the Count of Monterrey, viceroy of New Spain.

The letter with which your lordship favored me last October 3rd, enclosing a copy of a portion of a letter written to his majesty about Florida, I received on January 4th of this year. Your lordship asks me to reply by the courier, but I never saw him. The letter was forwarded to me by Alonso Diaz, lieutenant governor of New Viscaya, and, since he sent it to me after such a delay, he must have received it late also. In this letter, your lordship bids me to give a report on what was written to his majesty about Florida. This matter pertains more to cosmographers than to soldiers, but in obedience to your lordship's request, and having consulted with soldiers who have come from New Mexico, regarding the route they said they took overland from Guadiana, and following the map to the best of my ability, I find the following latitudes and distances:

Guadiana¹ is at 25 degrees, more or less, so they say.

The distance is 52 leagues from the South Sea², almost east to west by the route of the town of San Sebastián³, to the mouth of the Espiritu Santo river, which is between the Chametla⁴ and

¹Villa de Guadiana, founded by Francisco de Ibarra in 1562, near the old settlement of Nombre de Dios, soon to become Nueva Viscaya, named in honor of the Basque heritage of the Ibarra and many of the settlers. Guadiana was subsequently renamed Durango.

²Mar del Sur o Mar de Balboa, today known as the Pacific Ocean. Vasco Núñez de Balboa, is credited with being the first European to see and describe this "enorme extensión de agua" on the other side of the continent. He viewed it from a peak in the Panama Isthmus, Sept. 25, 1513. Fernando de Magallanes later called it the "Mar Pacífico."

³Real de San Sebastián, now called San Sebastián del Oeste.

⁴Chametla, Sinaloa, Mexico, is a small community 60 kilometers south of Mazatlan. Represented on Diego Gutierrez's *Americae sive quartae orbis partis nova et exactissima descriptio* (1562) as Chimatlan and Abraham Ortelius's *Americae sive novi orbis nova descriptio* (1570) as Chiametla. First recorded from Hernán Cortés's four expeditions to the Californias in search of a northern waterway between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, 1532-1536, it was the site of a stand-off between Cortes and Nuño de Guzmán in 1535. The river that empties into the Pacific there, is now called the Río Baluarte, but this may have been what RRL was calling the Río Espiritu Santo. The distance from Guadiana (near modern Durango) to Chametla is about 376 km.

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Río de Losa to Viceroy Monterrey 13 January, 1602

Translation and commentary by Heather McMichael 19 August, 2016

Piastla⁵ rivers.

The Tewa pueblo in New Mexico is at 37 degrees, they say.

They say that from Guadiana to New Mexico they traveled almost directly north, leaving the north a little to the left. By direct reckoning, there are 236 leagues, a few more or less, although those who return from there calculate many more on account of the winding of the road.

From New Mexico, which is at 37 degrees, to the gulf of California on the South Sea, the farthest point of the gulf, there are 227 leagues.

From New Mexico to Cape Mendocino in the South Sea, there are 1190 leagues.

From New Mexico to the tip of the Strait of Anian, bordering Tartary, there are 1,435 leagues.

From New Mexico to the Caribbean Sea there are 415 leagues in the direction of Tartary.

From New Mexico to the mouth of the Espiritu Santo River in the gulf of Mexico, which borders Florida, there are 271 leagues.

From New Mexico to the point of Santa Elena in the direction of the Bahama channel, there are 577 leagues.

From New Mexico to Bacallaos, there are 185 leagues.⁶

From New Mexico to the end of the Strait of Anian, toward Tartary, crossing the land almost from east to west, I mean, from the point of Bacallaos to the point of the Strait of Anian crossing the land almost east to west, there are 2,485 leagues.

This is the lucidity that I have been able to achieve from the map in regard to what you lordship asks me. Captain Pablo de Urdiñola, who is at Mazapil, is an expert in these reckonings, I am told. When he arrives I will consult with him about your lordship's query, and he will be able to

⁵Río Piaxtla begins in the western Sierra Madres and runs 220 km across Durango and Sinaloa, emptying into the Pacific near Dimas, Mexico, just north of the Cacaxtla Plateau Wildlife Refuge.

⁶ Bacallao, "cod" in Portuguese, may have referred to the northeast coast above Florida, which had not been explored by the Spanish. Diego Gutierrez's *Americae sive quartae orbis partis nova et exactissima descriptio* (1562) labels as Tierra de Baccalaos the region north and east of Florida and "Tierra Francisca" and south of "Tierra de Labrador." The text reads 185 leguas. In a marginal note, the distance is corrected to read 1085.

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give a better account of the matter than I. Although, I have been told that you have a certain Enrico Martinez in your city, an interpreter for the Holy Office, a man who knows a great deal about these matters, and your lordship could obtain information from him.

The land beyond New Mexico is vast, both in latitude and longitude, for it is 2,485 leagues from east to west, and in traversing the land, it has 1,435 leagues. We should well believe that in such a magnificent and vast land - where it is said that there are people who wear a metal crown in the style of our kings, and walled towns, and houses of five, six, or seven stories, and fruits as good as in Spain, and large numbers of people, and cattle like those of Tartary and Germany - that our Lord did not deprive it of abundance and sustenance, and resources of silver and gold, as in other lands and in the Indies. Certainly it is for these riches and the greed for them, that we Spaniards came to these parts, which is the main enticement that brings us here, although it would have been better if it were only for the conversion of the natives of these lands and to procure the salvation of their souls.

Although those who now return from New Mexico bring such bad news from there, your lordship may be assured that what lies ahead in such a vast and magnificent land promises a great deal. And if it has not been discovered yet, it is because of our sins and the short-sightedness of those who went there, by not going far enough. In what they have seen and traveled thus far they found the land to be so sandy, and lacking in firewood and water, that even if they had wanted to settle and remain permanently, the land would not permit it, because, in addition to lacking people and silver, it lacks woods, pastures, and suitable land and water sources, all of which forced them to leave. Some arrived here, in the province of your lordship in a pitiful condition, and it was even more grievous to hear those who came back tell of the plight of those who stayed behind, on whom your lordship would rightfully take pity.

The possibility of clothing and food and horses forces them to seek relief from the one who can provide it, and unless they are helped by your lordship, I doubt that they will be of any service to his majesty or your lordship, but will be forced to beg aid for the love of God, as they have no other recourse than your Christian and charitable heart.

Num. 10-I

Copia Decarta escrita Por R. D. D. Lasso, cavallero del au
 to de S. Tiago Cav. que fue de la nueva Galicia desde su elam
 cia aus. depp. de Lbor, al Con. de monte Rey Virrey de
 Lanueva España

Laquel día me Dijo mad. Detree de g.
 del Vanopassado con el treslado de la p. de carta que se
 el civio a sumag. de la florida. Dbi. a q. de esse
 depp. mandame v. s. a responde a con el correo
 go no le vi. imbrime la a. p. Diagonalmen
 te de Gu. de la uiscara que puse el me a em
 bio tanta de deuo de Bem. lo a supoder, por
 ella me m. da. v. s. a. y informe sobre lo de la florida
 se es civio a sumag. p. la causa. ma. es de eos
 mo grafo. q. de soldados para acudiendo. a lo q.
 O. s. mem. d. haviendome informado de
 soldados que an salido del nuevo me. p.
 segun caberá p. que dozen lleuaron por tierra
 de s. de Guadiana tomado de punto en un mapa
 como mejor yo pude ay. las alturas q. denota e
 siguientes

- r. Guadiana esta en 25 grado s
 segun dice poco mas o menos
- r. Dista de a mar de sur 5 2 leguas casi
 leste a sueste por el camino de la uiscara
 de s. seualcan. hasta la Boca del Rio
 del S. ju. santo que esta entre el or
 rios de Chamet la y Diopras la
- r. en el Pueblo de lo Tequae nuevo



- 37 me de segundogen en 37 pr.
 Desde quadrana al nuevo me de Dni
 Camnaroncasi al norte de cuando el
 norte algo sobre el q y querdo ay
 sea altura 236 leguas pocas mas
 o menos avnguelo que de cae abri
 nen bebban muerne mae de Lae
 torcedurre Del camino que dagan 236
- Desde el nuevo me de qbeta en 37
 pr. a Lancon de la califorma en
 La mar del sur en el ultimo de
 laneona ay 227 leguas - 227
- Desde el nuevo me de al cau mon
 docino de La mar del sur ay 1190
 leguas - 1190
- Desde el nuevo me de apuntade
 estrecho de amian frontera de cae
 Jastarea ay 1435 leguas - 1435
- Desde el nuevo me de Pastael
 mar y laguna de caribae ay 415 leg^{as}
 que cae de apite de la tatarica - 415
- Desde el nuevo me de hasta la boca
 del Rio del Spu. sando en el seno
 me de que confina con la florida ay
 271 leguas - 271
- Desde el nuevo me de hasta apuntade
 de Elena que cae de apite de la canal
 de baamba ay 577 leguas - 577
- Desde el nuevo me de al o Va



collas ay 185 leguas - 185
 Desde el nuevo me de hasta apuntade
 estrecho de amian ay a latitud de
 atraviesan de la tierra casi leste
 Veste Dijo desde la punta de los cha
 caeas hasta la punta del estrecho
 de amian atravesando la tierra casi
 leste a Oeste ay 2485 leguas. 2485.

Estas La Claridad que yo sepo dito al
 canear por el mapa de canales que es mem^{da} el
 Cap. de ordno la que esta en macapil me dizen
 es de esta en esta altura. Venido q. sea comunia se cone
 lo que v^o. mem^{da} q. podradar a v^s mae rrazon
 q. lo desta causa avngue en esta ciudad segun me
 dizen tiene v^o. avngue en esta ciudad segun me
 de lo. ofe. que es hombre que en esta facultad alcanca
 mucho de quien v^o. sepo drai informar. La claridad
 del nuevo me de para a delante es grandiosa assi en latitud
 como en longitud que tiene 20485 leguas casi leste a huf
 te q. atravesando la tierra tiene 10435 leguas q. de
 se cree q. Tierra tan grandiosa q.anchurosa donde
 se dice que ay gente que trae corona de metal a modo
 de nas. Reyes q. pueblos cercados y casae de cinco seis y siete
 tealtos y putae tan buenas como las de spnia q. pobladae de gente
 q. daae chogae de la q. da q. yaleman'a que no se pueno nado
 de l'bien q. sustento q. materia lee de plata q. oro como las de mae
 y de estas indias q. puellos y sacobdicia de ellos. pasamos los espa
 noles estas partes que es lo principal de lo que que cae n. trae
 avngue fueras de lo que se solo la conversion de los natura
 les de ellas q. procurar la salvacion de su alma
 q. avngue los que agora bienen del nuevo me de traentan
 malae nuevas de ella sea v^o. v^o. que es lo de delante en
 tierra tan grandiosa q.anchurosa promete mucho q. si a gora

guese descubiertos son la caussa de los Peccados y la caridad de lo que fue
 ron alla en no pasar adelante que nes que agora se viuen los pasados Sobie
 ron y Sallaron la Tierra tamazensis y falta de lena y agua que a Orque
 ellos la quisiere poblar y perpetuar en ella ella no en un lugar por que de
 moe de faliente la gente y la plata es falta de montes y pastos y tierra
 que a Comodidad lo qual sea forco a saber de ella que es la tierra con
 la penuria que agora an llegado a esta de V^{ra} y la damu y goma y oro
 sea de zar en la que Orenen lo que queda n^o atrae de quien V^{ra} es
 justo se duela. Pues posible deue ser uario y comida y cauallos le obliga
 a pedirlo a quien dello le pueda socorrer que si de V^{ra} no lo son dudo
 ellos que dan a uidir a cosa que se a demomento en seay^o de Sumag^o m de V^{ra}
 que la fuerza le a de obligar a pedirlo por amor de Dios que otro modo deo no
 tienen sino es el pecho Cristiano y m^ote de Dios de V^{ra}



Priado unap de marta escrita de Po Po de
 la casa de Lario de S^o Inigo desde su lara
 a la S^{ra} de Ben^o de Ben^o a la Comde de
 onate Rey Viny de la nueva España

Juan de
 la casa de Lario
 de la guerra de Ben^o
 de la casa de Ben^o
 Juan de