



CUBA
1608

Silvestre de Balboa,

Espejo de paciencia (Mirror of Patience)



Panorama of La Habana. Amsterdam, 17th century. Atlas Beudeker. British Library,
London. Source:

[https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_of_La_Habana_\(Amsterdam,_17th_century\)](https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_of_La_Habana_(Amsterdam,_17th_century).jpg)

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Espejo de paciencia [Mirror of Patience] is an epic poem written by Silvestre de Balboa (Gran Canaria, 1563–Puerto Príncipe, Cuba, c. 1649) in 1608 to commemorate an historical event of four years earlier: the kidnapping and freeing of the Bishop of Cuba, Juan de las

Cabezas Altamirano, near the town of Bayamo in Cuba. The poem is the first known work of Cuban literature. After being lost for two centuries, it was discovered in 1836 by the literary critic José Antonio Echevarría in the library of the “Sociedad de Amigos del País” in Havana. The first complete edition was published in the 20th century.

The poem contains two cantos. The first narrates the kidnapping of Bishop Cabezas by the French pirate Gilberto Girón on April 29, 1604, his subsequent captivity, and his liberation following the payment of an enormous ransom. The second recounts the combat between the creoles and the French pirates, which ends with the victory of the creoles.

Following their abduction of Bishop Cabezas, the French pirates ask the people of Bayamo for a ransom to liberate him. The villagers promise to pay the ransom but secretly prepare an ambush. Under the leadership of Gregorio Ramos, a group of twenty-two neighbors from Bayamo engage in a skirmish against the French pirates and defeat them. In this combat the African slave Salvador Golomón kills Gilberto Girón, and for this reason Silvestre de Balboa asks in the poem for the emancipation of the slave. This scene is the first literary representation of an African slave in Cuban literature.

The final section of the poem’s first canto narrates a scene with mythological beings and the offering of a tropical cornucopia to Bishop Cabezas Altamirano. This particular scene is considered the most relevant contribution of Balboa by the literary critics and writers José Lezama Lima, Cintio Vitier, and Roberto González Echevarría. It is both a realistic landscape because of its description of nature and a marvelous landscape because of the presence of mythological beings. This mixed landscape is a novelty of Balboa’s and constitutes a renewal of the topic in Spanish American colonial epic poetry (Marrero-Fente 2017).

The bucolic genre is the frame of the episode, expressed formally in the verse form of *octavas*. The scene begins with the woodland inhabited by various species of mythological beings. The fauns, satyrs and woodland deities enter and make the first offering of the tropical cornucopia: soursops, *jijiras* and star apples. The woodland nymphs subsequently appear and make their mixed offering of animals, plants, flowers, fruits and vegetables (more specifically, parrots, coffee flowers, maize, tobacco, mammees, pineapples, prickly pears, avocados, bananas, Spanish lime, and tomatoes). The hamadryads then appear with four dryads who present an offering of fruits, plants, flowers and trees (luffas, *macaguas*, dragon fruits, black berries, and jaguas), followed by the naiads, who offer seafood (crevalle jack, mountain mullet, mullet, shrimps, cichlid, and two-spot lebiasana). Then it is the turn of the epimeliads followed by the leimakids who give the turtles of Masabo. Finally, after the acclamation of the centaurs and sagittari, the orads offer iguanas, ducks, and hutias. The section concludes with the scene of a musical parade, one of the topics of the bucolic genre.

Balboa links the landscape with the classical tradition and mythology but gives a new dimension to the description of nature when he adds the flora and fauna of the tropics. In this way the meeting of the bishop and the mythological beings attains a new significance through the conjunction of the richness of elements of the classical tradition with the physical American referent. Balboa creates a new repertory based on the motif of the cornucopia, incorporating a new array of vegetable species, together with fruits and animals, each one of them related to sensory characteristics (color, smell, taste, touch), reworking the classical topos. We are presented with an arboreal catalogue of plants, vegetables, and animals endemic to America. Situating his description in the countryside

near Bayamo, Balboa at the same time describes the nature setting through mythological ornamentation and verbal exuberance.

This landscape is the most famous in the poem on account of the richness of the descriptions and the mixture of the classical and island world, which demonstrates the novelty of American culture. The representation of American nature recalls the technique of the *epyllion* in classical poetry, that is, a 'short epic' (Baumbach & Bär 2012, Kluge, 2014). The complexity of the noted models should not be understood as a series of superficial connections, but as a result of the inclusive tendency of the epic, which seeks to represent an encyclopedic vision of the culture which produces it (Beissinger, Tylus and Wofford 2).

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