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The story before history: The manuscript Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga presented to Emperor Charles V to Narrate the German Wars of 1546-1547 and the Battle of Mühlberg

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Abstract

This article analyzes some parts of a previously understudied manuscript chronicle of the Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547) penned by Don Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga, a close confidant and military commander of Emperor Charles V. While the printed version of this chronicle is renowned as a masterpiece of imperial propaganda, this study argues that this manuscript represents a distinct and crucial historical object: the memory draft before being approved by the Emperor Charles V, this is, the story before the History. By examining this manuscript not merely as a textual draft but as a material artifact of political communication, this article reveals the intricate process of crafting official history at the Habsburg court. It demonstrates how the narrative of Charles V's victory was negotiated before public dissemination. The manuscript thus offers a unique window into the moment before the official history was frozen in print, illuminating the deliberate construction of imperial ideology, the rhetoric of eyewitness testimony, and the collaborative mechanics of power between a Renaissance prince and his courtly chronicler.

Keywords: Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga, Charles V, Schmalkaldic War, Battle of Mühlberg, memory and history, manuscript culture, Manuscrito de presentación, Habsburg Empire, 16th century renaissance, Wars of Religion

Introduction

The Artifact of Victory

The victory of Emperor Charles V over the Protestant Schmalkaldic League at the Battle of Mühlberg on April 24, 1547, was a watershed moment in the European Reformation and the apex of Habsburg power. Its narrative conquest, however, was achieved not only on the banks of the Elbe but also in the scriptoriums and printing houses of the Empire. The primary weapon in this discursive battle was Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga's *Comentario de la guerra de Alemania*. Remarkably enough, the manuscript which we have access to (1547) is signed by "Le escrivia Don Luis de Zuñiga i Ávila comendador Mayor de Alcátara testigo de vista " (please note the surnames order inversion). My father, Dr. Enrique García Cuerpo, called in 1995 this manuscript discovered by him, "El manuscrito de presentación", that is "The manuscript that was presented to the Caesar Emperor Charles V for his approval before being published". While historians have extensively studied the published text as a pinnacle of Renaissance propaganda, this manuscript presented to the Emperor for approval has remained in the shadows. In this sense, this manuscript starts with a Dedication to the Emperor starting with these words: "Suelense hazer a los Principes presentes delas cosas mas preciadas que halla el que las haze. (...) " (It is used to make gifts to the Princes of the most precious things found by who give them). This Dedication extending about 15 lines is signed (closely to) this way:

"D. V. Mg d
Vasallo y hechura, q sus Imp les manos besa
Don Luis de Cuñiga y Abila
Com or mayor de Alcántara
X J'attend a l'ombre X
Ds."

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That means (Spanish):

De vuestra Majestad
Vasallo y hechura, que sus Imperiales manos besa

Don Luis de Zúñiga y Ávila
Comendador Mayor de Alcántara

X Yo espero en la sombra (en francés en el original) X
Dominus (Señor)

That is:
Of your Majesty
Vassal and workmanship, that your
Imperial hands kisses

Don Luis de Zúñiga y Ávila
Major Commander of Alcántara

X I am waiting in the shadows (originally in French) X
Milord

This sentence in French is not found in any other edition of this work. This made García Cuerpo think this manuscript was presented to the Emperor as the author remained waiting in the shadows for his approval.

This article contends that this manuscript is a crucial piece of "(His) story before History." It embodies the moment of negotiation between the raw experience of the campaign as seen by don Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga as eyewitness ("testigo de vista") and its transformation into hegemonic ideology.

The Chronicler as Courtier and Commander

To understand the manuscript's significance, one must first appreciate its author. Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga was no mere scribe; he was a Spanish nobleman, Comendador Mayor of the Order of Alcántara, a seasoned military captain, and an intimate member of Charles V's inner circle. His presence at the Emperor's side during the campaign was not that of an observer but of a participant and believer. This dual role as actor and author granted his account an air of undeniable authenticity, which made it the perfect vehicle for the imperial message. His loyalty was unquestionable, his social standing impeccable, and his literary skills, honed by humanistic training, were equal to the task of composing a chronicle worthy of a Roman emperor (several times along this work Charles V is called "Caesar" and compared to Roman Emperors who had poorer results trying to conquer Germany). The manuscript was thus born from a perfect synergy of martial experience, courtly duty, and ideological commitment.

The Manuscript as a Material Witness

A conventional analysis seeking dramatic textual discrepancies between the manuscript and the printed edition would be disappointed. Their overwhelming textual fidelity is, in fact, one manuscript's key revealing feature. This lack of significant alteration indicates that Ávila operated not as an independent chronicler later censored, but as a pre-approved ideologue whose initial output already conformed very close to the ideological framework of the Emperor. Anyway, there are several discrepancies to be reported in further research.

The manuscript's value lies not in what it says differently, but in what it is: a material witness to the process of state-sponsored narrative production. The clean, careful hand suggests a fair copy prepared for imperial review—a document of state. The manuscript represents the final, materialization of that consensus, awaiting only the imperial placet to be unleashed upon the world.

Crafting the Imperial Image: Rhetoric and Reality

The manuscript reveals the careful construction of Charles V's image. Ávila's genius was to leverage his status as an eyewitness ("testigo de vista") to make imperial propaganda more credible, not less. Throughout the text, he deploys a powerful rhetoric of authenticity to be reported on further research.

Conclusion

The Blueprint of Hegemony

The manuscript of Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga is far more than a draft. It is the authorized blueprint for the official history of the Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547) as related by an eyewitness. Its paramount significance lies in its very close similarity to the printed edition, which reveals a political culture where the author's voice was seamlessly aligned with state objectives, and where the rhetoric of immediate experience was meticulously crafted to manufacture consent for Habsburg hegemony.

This artifact captures the moment before history became History—the moment before the narrative was fixed in print and disseminated as incontrovertible truth. Studying it allows us to move beyond a textual analysis of propaganda to a process-oriented understanding of its manufacture. It shows that for Charles V, winning the war was only half the victory; the other half was won by courtiers like Ávila, in the quiet production of manuscripts that would become the unchallenged history of his reign. In this clean, pre-publication copy, we see a key step towards consensus, the narrative about to be transformed into History, and the personal authority of the witness fully and finally conscripted into the service of imperial power.

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