

## Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

### *Democrates secundus, sive de iustis belli causis apud Indios*

(edited by Alejandro Coroleu)

Born in southern Spain in 1490, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda studied Greek and Philosophy at the University of Alcalá. Having received his first orders in 1515, he was recommended by Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros for the Spanish College of Bologna, where he studied until 1523. It was at Bologna that Sepúlveda met Giulio de' Medici, the future Pope Clement VII, who encouraged him to begin translating Aristotle's works, a task which Sepúlveda continued afterwards when he joined the papal curia at Rome, where he became a prominent figure in the mid and late 1520s. Pope Clement's death in 1534 and his appointment as the official chronicler and chaplain of Charles V were the main reason for Sepúlveda's return to Spain, which occurred two years later. His appointment in 1542 as one of Philip II's tutors was an incentive to complete his translation of and commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, which was published in 1548. Sepúlveda died in 1573.

In 1548 two of the most prominent theologians from the University of Salamanca, Melchor Cano and Bartolomé Carranza, were asked by the Crown to examine a work completed by Sepúlveda three years earlier in dialogue form and entitled *Democrates secundus, sive de iustis causis belli apud Indios*. According to its author, the American Indians were like 'pigs with their eyes always fixed on the ground'. Their brutish behaviour, cannibalism and paganism made them slaves by nature to their Spanish masters. Drawing on Aristotle's ideas on natural slavery discussed in his first book of the *Politics*, he concluded that war against the Indians was just on the grounds that they had violated natural law and were barbarous by nature. Given its inflammatory tone and the arguments it employed, the *Democrates secundus* was denied the royal licence without which no book could legally be printed in Spain. Convinced that Bartolomé de las Casas –who in 1542 had written a fiercest

critique of Spanish colonialism in the New World, published ten years later- was ultimately responsible for that decision, Sepúlveda pressed his case with the Council of Indies, which in August 1550 organized a debate between the two men. Although there was no formal outcome to the affair, the theologians refused to change their minds about the subversive nature of Sepúlveda's text.

### **Selected Bibliography**

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The Latin text is taken from Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Demócrates segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los Indios (Obras completas de Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, III)*, introducción filológica y edición de Alejandro Coroleu, traducción de Ángel Losada, Pozoblanco, 1997, pp. 65-66.

**Book I, Chapters 9, 3 – 10, 1**

[9, 3] Religio vero Christiana quam insita sit Hispanorum mentibus, etiam eorum qui vivunt in armis, multa vidi clara documenta. Sed illud mihi visum est permagnum, quod post urbis Romae direptionem Clementis septimi pontificatu in magna consecuta peste nemo inventus est ex iis, quos pestis abstulit, Hispanos, quin ablata cuncta civibus spoliatis testamento restitui mandaverit, nemo alterius nationis, quod equidem sciam, qui hoc officium ex 5 Christiana religione praestiterit, et erant Itali Germanique longe plures; et ego, qui ad exercitum et urbem affui cuncta diligenter perquirens, notavi. Cuius facti memini nos in congressu illo Vaticano memorare. Nam quid ego de ipsorum mansuetudine et humanitate dicam? Quorum in praeliis parat victoria nulla maior sollicitudo et cura est, quam quomodo victos quam plurimos servare possint et a sociorum truculentia vindicare. 10

[10, 1] Confer nunc cum horum virorum prudentia, ingenio, magnitudine animi, temperantia, humanitate et religione humunculos illos, in quibus vix reperias humanitatis vestigia, qui non modo nullam habent doctrinam, sed ne litteris quidem utuntur aut noverunt, nulla retinent rerum gestarum monumenta, praeter tenuem quandam et obscuram nonnullarum rerum memoriam, picturis quibusdam consignatam, nullas leges scriptas, sed instituta quaedam 15 et mores barbaros. Nam de virtutibus, si temperantiam et mansuetudinem quaeras, quid ab eis sperare liceret, qui erant in omne genus intemperantiae et nefarias libidines profusi, et non pauci vescebantur carnibus humanis, et bella, quibus inter se pene continenter agitabantur? Ne putes eos ante Christianorum adventum in otio et Saturnia poetarum pace vixisse; tanta rabie gerebant, ut victoriam nullam putarent, nisi carnibus hostium famem prodigiosam 20 explerent; quae immanitas hoc est etiam in ipsis magis portento similis, quo longius absunt ab invicta Scytharum, qui etiam ipsis corporibus humanis vescebantur, feritate, cum sint adeo ignavi et timidi, ut vix nostrorum hostilem aspectum ferre possint et saepe ipsorum multa

millia perpaucis Hispanis ne centum quidem numerum expleantibus cesserint muliebri fuga  
dissipati.

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**[9, 3]** As for Christianity, I have seen many clear signs of its deep-rootedness in the hearts of the Spanish, even in those who devote themselves, even in those who devote themselves to military life; and the greatest sign of all has been the fact that after the Sack of Rome, during the Pontificate of Clement VII, in the plague that followed there was not one Spaniard amongst those who died who did not insist in his will for the return of all stolen goods to those citizens stripped of them, and not one other nation that I know of complied with this Christian duty, even though there were many more Italians and Germans; and I, because I was following the army, was in the City observing everything conscientiously, was a witness to that. I recall that we already made mention of this fact in that Vatican meeting. What shall I say of their meekness and humanitarian feelings? Their only, and greatest, concern and preoccupation in the battles after securing victory is to save the greatest possible number of those defeated and liberate them from the cruelty of the allies.

**[10, 1]** Now compare these qualities of wisdom, inventiveness, magnanimity, temperance, humanity and religion with those little men in whom one can scarcely find the remains of humanity, who not only lack culture, but who do not even use or know of the written word, lack written law, have barbaric institutions and customs, and do not preserve monuments of their history, but only a certain obscure and vague memory of some facts recorded in certain paintings. As for their virtues, if you want to know of their temperance and meekness, what can one expect of men given over to all manner of passions and loathsome fickleness and prone to feeding on human flesh? Do not believe that before the arrival of the Spaniards they used to live in the Saturnian peace sung by the poets; on the contrary, they used to wage war

against each other continuously with such a fury that they considered the victory null if they did not satisfy their phenomenal hunger with the flesh of their enemies –an atrocity that is so much more magnificent let alone far removed from the invincible ferocity of the Scythians, who also fed on human bodies, since the former are so cowardly and timid that they can scarcely resist the hostile presence of our men, and often thousands and thousands of them have fled like women on being defeated by a small group of Spaniards whose numbers barely made up one hundred.

### Commentary

**Lines 2-3:** *post urbis Romae direptionem*: a reference to the Sack of Rome by the imperial troops of Charles V in May 1527.

**Line 3:** *Clementis septimi pontificatu*: Clement VII (Gulio de' Medici), Pope between 1523 and 1534.

**Lines 7-8:** *in congressu illo Vaticano*: a reference to a fictional meeting between the author and Leopold described in Sepúlveda's *Democrates primus* (Rome, 1535).

**Line 22:** *Scytharum*: the dwellers of Scythia, the broad term used by Greeks and Romans to characterize the lands to their north and east. Classical writers present Scythia as a chill wilderness, rife in savages and uncivilized practices.