



Article

A Needle in a Haystack: Looking for an Early Modern Peasant Who Travelled from Spain to America

Sarah Albiez-Wieck ^{1,*}  and Raquel Gil Montero ²¹ Department of Iberian and Latin American History, University of Cologne, 51105 Cologne, Germany² CONICET, Instituto de Ciencias Humanas, Sociales y Ambientales, CCT Mendoza, Mendoza 5500, Argentina; raquelgilmontero@conicet.gov.ar

* Correspondence: s.albiez-wieck@uni-koeln.de

Abstract: Seventeenth-century travel accounts written by ordinary people are a rarity. In this article, we analyze the unusual travel report by Gregorio de Robles, a Castilian peasant (*labrador*) who travelled several European empires in Western Europe and America at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. The approach we offer is that of a global microhistory. The aim of this article is mainly methodological: we try to delineate the methodological steps we had to undertake to trace Robles in the sources. Looking for an early modern peasant traveler is comparable to searching for a needle in a haystack, but we argue that this endeavor is worthwhile because Robles offers a unique perspective on how ordinary people traveled in early modern times and on imperial frontier zones. We show that his convivial ties and the places he mentions were key elements in the methodology.

Keywords: global microhistory; travel accounts; Latin America; Spain; Gregorio de Robles; peasants; methodology; seventeenth century



Citation: Albiez-Wieck, Sarah, and Raquel Gil Montero. 2022. A Needle in a Haystack: Looking for an Early Modern Peasant Who Travelled from Spain to America. *Histories* 2: 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.3390/histories2020009>

Academic Editor: Jon Mathieu

Received: 27 January 2022

Accepted: 15 March 2022

Published: 8 April 2022

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1. Introduction

There is abundant historiography about travel accounts from Spanish conquistadors and missionaries departing for America from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as those left by scientific expeditions carried out by enlightened nobles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—in America and other parts of the world.¹ A travel account from the seventeenth century, on the other hand, is a rare thing, and even more so if it was not written by a noble, conqueror, missionary or high-level bureaucrat. The writing of travel accounts was predominantly an elite endeavor, especially in early modern times, due to the necessity of having both the ability and the time to write. Of course, ordinary people also travelled in their millions, and have always done so (Classen 2018, p. 4), but generally they left only occasional and momentary information about their travels. In this article, we want to deal with a unique source: It is not a typical travel account but an administrative document that relates the travels by Gregorio de Robles, a peasant (*labrador*)² who left Castile in the late seventeenth century and traveled through enormous portions of America and many Western European countries.

In our research project, we aim to reconstruct the context of Robles' life and voyage. However, this is not an easy task for two main reasons: on the one hand, it is inherently difficult to find information about a specific peasant from the early modern period, and on the other hand, he traveled through so many regions, that he could have left traces preserved in dozens of archives in America and Europe—or none at all, since he often did not stay long enough to leave traces.³ Searching for him is therefore like searching for a needle in a haystack. However, at the same time, this endeavor can provide us with rich information about those people that constituted the majority of the population at that time: peasants—even if Robles, with the enormous distances he covered as a traveler, was not an ordinary peasant.

In this article, we want to present the methodological approach we adopted in order to find this needle. With this, we hope on the one hand to provide useful tools for similar future analyses, and on the other hand to start a dialogue and receive feedback as to how to further improve our methodology in the future. This research project is a way of performing a global microhistory of ordinary people, with a focus on Europe and America (Gil Montero 2021; Mathieu 2021; Trivellato 2011). At the same time, it combines the study of social and spatial mobility, which have been two of the main topics of recent historiography and which conflate in the study of family trajectories (García González 2021, p. 27). Our case is a little more challenging since we do not investigate the trajectory of a family, but of a single man. As García González (2021, p. 33) has noted, more studies about these ordinary peoples are needed. We will show that rather than focusing on family trajectories, a useful method to trace his steps is to focus on the one hand on the places he went, and on the other on his convivial relations.⁴ Therefore, we are analyzing his conviviality on the move. Last but not least, we will also show how we dealt with the different logics and histories of the archives, which proved to be important in our methodological proposal.

In this article, we have been enthused by two wonderful books that reconstruct the life of Martin Guerre and Louis-François Pinagot, written by Davis and Corbin, respectively (Davis 1983; Corbin [1998] 1999).⁵ Although neither coincide with either the geographic space or the period of our study—and the protagonists were not, strictly speaking, travelers—the methodology employed by the authors has been very inspiring. Davis dealt with problems similar to ours, as she did not always find sources referring directly to Martin Guerre or the other characters in her book. She then appealed to other analogous documents and to the reconstruction of the contexts, creatively discussing the problem of historical truth and doubt. Corbin, on the other hand, reconstructed the life of Louis-François Pinagot, an ordinary, illiterate clog-maker from rural France, by searching regional archives for information about him in civil and parish registers as well as lawsuits, reconstructing both his surroundings and his convivial ties. We can also mention the well-known case of Domenico Scandella (Menocchio) (Ginzburg [1976] 1990), or the less-known case of Manuel María Giménez Sainz, a *labrador* born in La Rioja, who was obliged to fight in Cuba at the end of the nineteenth century (Gil Andrés 2010). Both books were, in their own way, also very inspiring, although in different ways, partly because of the great differences we find with the sources both historians used.

In addition to these inspirational books, what drove many methodological decisions were the difficulties we encountered in the actual archival search, difficulties and solutions that we will develop in the text. Finally, we were also guided by the need to find ways to verify the veracity of the account written on behalf of Robles, given the lack of sources that talk directly about him.

In this paper, after introducing the document which relates Robles' journey, we will first outline what methodological steps have to be undertaken when looking for a peasant, and then continue to deliberate about the investigation of early modern travelers before summing up our results in the conclusion.

2. The Account about Robles' Travels

The account about Robles' voyage is an almost 100-folio-long document which is located in a completely unrelated document bundle from the Charcas section in the *Archivo General de Indias* (hereafter AGI) in Seville (AGI, Charcas 233). The account is the result of an interview with Robles conducted by Manuel García de Bustamante, counselor of the Council of the Indies (Barrientos Grandon 2022), from whom Robles, according to the account, received an assistance from the King amounting to twenty *doblones*.⁶ The account is written and signed by Manuel García de Bustamante only,⁷ and it is stated at the end that Robles did not sign it, because he did not know how—a common phrase to indicate that he was illiterate. There are a few notes in the margins confirming, and in one case contradicting, Robles' account.⁸ No further information about the process of the interview exists. Both the fact that the account was recorded by García de Bustamante and that

it has notes in its margins are meaningful. It shows us that a high-ranking member of the colonial administration in Spain was interested in Robles' account. To conduct the interview and write down the account in its final form must have taken at least several days, if not weeks.⁹ The notes in the margin indicate that the account was passed on to another member of the administration who tried to corroborate its veracity and usefulness. Bustamante was suspended from his duties in September 1706 and banished from Madrid in February 1707 (Barrientos Grandon 2022).¹⁰ We think that these troubles could be the reason why Robles' account did not circulate more widely and has not had a visible effect in other documentation; at least as far as we know.

That he had access to a counselor on the Council of the Indies is quite unusual for a peasant. Robles himself explains in his account how he managed this: Bustamante interviewed him at the request of Abbot Etree, who had become aware of his trip through one of the letters Robles had carried to a noble lady in Madrid, wife of Don Sevastián Siliceo and mother-in-law of Don Domingo Capeceletro *enviado*, i.e., a diplomatic agent in Lisbon, Portugal (AGI, Charcas 233, f. 90r). This is a fine example of the convivial relations Robles managed to construct and which paved his way to meeting other members of the elite.

That the account about Robles' travels was not written by himself and was the result of an interview has important consequences for its format. In fact, rather than resembling other travel accounts from the period, its form is more similar to a report of merits and services, a *relación de méritos y servicios*. It shares with these reports the self-promoting aspect and the addressing of the Council of the Indies but differs insofar as it is not written in the form of a petition. Additionally, the reports of merits and services were generally written down by the petitioners, often included a confirmation of the statements by one or several witnesses and the reports were first assessed by lower levels of the bureaucracy before they were sent to the Council of the Indies and ultimately to the King. We are not aware of any report of merits and services personally recorded by a member of the Council.¹¹ Some reports of merits and services reported specific travels, such as expeditions or conquests, but travels are not a common topic in this kind of sources.¹² It is not made explicit in what consisted the services of Robles rendered to the crown but we can infer them. On a more general level, he provided the crown with information about its dominions, thereby contributing to the crown's goal of "full knowledge", *entera noticia* about them, especially overseas.¹³ More specifically, we notice that the selection of the topics was probably guided by the interest of Bustamante, dwelling especially on the fortification of cities both in the Spanish and other empires visited, and trade and smuggling on the margins of the Spanish empire. Furthermore, some underlining and the notes on the margins of the document seem to order and evaluate the information received by Robles, as in the following example of a note on the margins: "From hereon he starts to deal with the provinces that comprise the New Kingdom of Quito and Popayan."¹⁴

Despite these formal similarities with the reports of merits and services, we still think that the document can be studied as a travel account since its only topic is the voyage by Robles, containing a lot of aspects which probably were not of direct interest to the crown such as the mentioning of all the peoples he encountered along his way. It is remarkable to note that the Crown was interested in more traditional travel accounts, too; both for their aim of expanding knowledge and making the achievements of Spanish colonialism known (MacLean 2019). Besides, literary scholars studying travel accounts have categorized both documents written on request of the crown as well as those written by the sole impetus of the traveler under this category and the *genre* of the travel account includes a broad variety of forms (Benites 2013, p 34; Keller and Siebers 2017, p. 24). Within the seventeenth-century travel accounts to Spanish America, Robles' report is unusual since most travelers in this period were administrators and missionaries and, in some, we can see an incipient interest in natural history; something Robles was not interested in (Lindsay 2019). Finally, the document is close enough to a travel account in order to permit us to analyze Robles as a traveler.

Robles' account was published by [Tau Anzóategui \(1980\)](#), preceded by a brief introduction and with comments to the text written as footnotes ([Tau Anzóategui 1980](#)).¹⁵ Previous to this publication, the only other mention is an article by [Torre Revello \(1930\)](#), which, however, is a mere paraphrasing of the document. The transcription by Tau Anzóategui has been occasionally referred to in publications about trade or smuggling, but mostly only in a brief footnote (see, e.g., [Martinic 2016](#); [Imbernón 1986](#); [Pietschmann 1980](#); [Orr 2014](#)). Besides this, there is a one-page entry in an Atlas of Spanish Explorers ([Sociedad Geográfica Española 2009](#), p. 56), and a popular scientific blog from the town of Moral de Calatrava which contains a lengthy article about Robles which is basically a paraphrasing of his account ([Fernández Moreno n.d.](#)). Summing up, both the account about his voyage and Robles as an individual have barely been investigated.

This is surprising, since reports about travels by peasants are highly unusual, as was the journey. The trip began in 1687 and ended in 1703, a voyage that took him from the Appalachian Mountains in North America to Caribbean islands, South American and European Atlantic ports, and remote towns in the Andes, to the Strait of Magellan as well as to the Cape of Good Hope, crossing the Spanish, Portuguese, French, British, and Dutch Empires. We divided the voyage into two, since he went back to Europe once before parting for America again (see [Figure 1](#)).

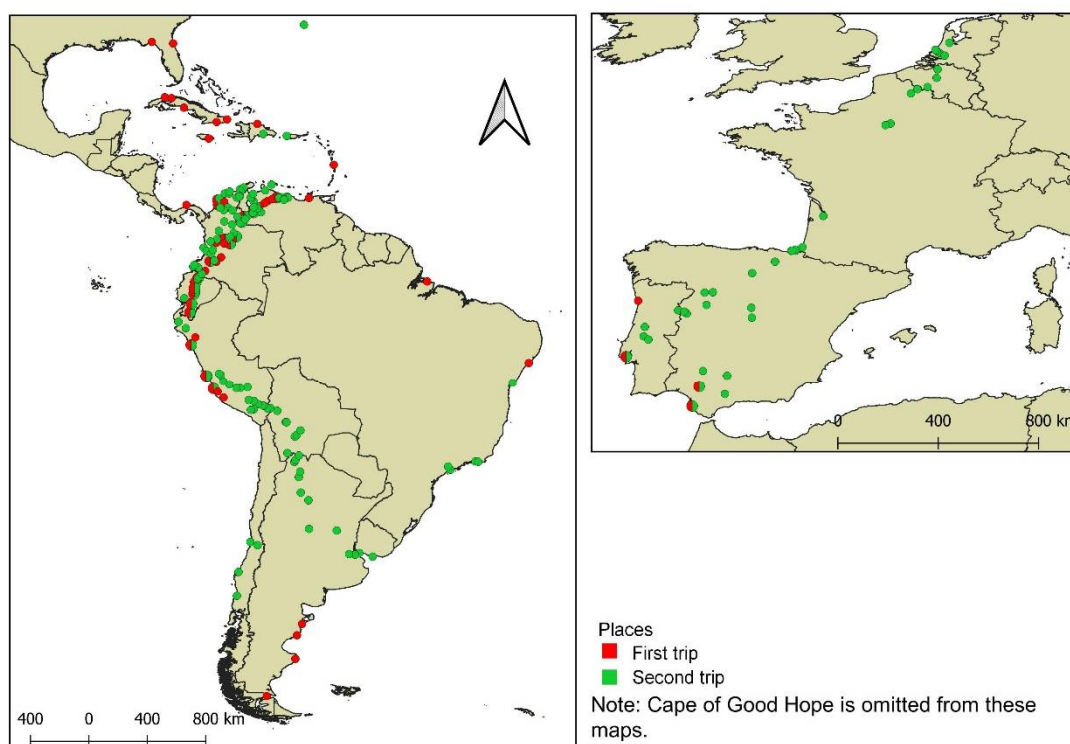


Figure 1. Places included in Robles' account. Map elaborated by the authors.

Summarizing his trip, he started in Andalusia in 1687, went to Florida and from there to Cuba. After a long stay in the Caribbean, he traveled through what are today Colombia and Ecuador and arrived in Lima, Peru in 1691. From there, he went back to the Caribbean and was taken prisoner by pirates, with whom he went to the Strait of Magellan. Touching down in Patagonia and Brazil, he arrived in Porto, Portugal, in 1696. From Portugal, he went back to Brazil; and from there, he traveled through the Río de la Plata to Lima. From Lima, he sailed to the south (to what is today Chile) and then again to Peru. He traveled back to the Caribbean through what would later be Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela (a part of the trip which is described in great detail), and was captured again, this time by the Dutch, and imprisoned in Curaçao, arriving in Amsterdam in 1702. From there, he

crossed Belgium and France and went to Spain; and after a brief tour that included Seville and Lisbon, he returned to Madrid and met with Bustamante in 1704.

In his travels, he engaged with French, English, and Dutch merchants and smugglers, black slaves as well as indigenous bonded laborers in silver mines, lived in the houses of wealthy Spaniards, and traveled with priests. He travelled and worked as a soldier, and a merchant, and also cured sick people. Those experiences are part of his particular view of America, which includes, among others, forms of travel and lodging, and a view of the labor relations different from that of the elite, as well as descriptions of relatively marginal spaces in which he was able to see and describe numerous transgressions. The experiences deserve to be discussed at greater length in another article. We will now return to his origins, which is that he started his travel as a peasant.¹⁶

3. How to Find a Peasant?

The information Robles provides in his account about his origins is very brief, but meaningful:

He declares that he is original [natural] from the said town [villa] of Moral, of the age of 45 years, more or less, legitimate son of Juan Ruiz de Robles and Ana de Montes his natural parents, his father from the said town his mother from that of Almagro where they were known as honest people in their sphere. Being in his homeland [patria] acting as a peasant [labrador], wishing not to limit himself to these narrow terms, see the world and serve his Majesty left his home last year in 1688 without further motives that the ones mentioned.¹⁷

In the very sparse bibliographical information about Robles, there is almost none which is preoccupied with him as an individual, as a peasant, and as a Castilian originally from Moral. When we have presented our research to the scholarly community, some colleagues have doubted that he really was a peasant. Whether or not he was a peasant is a key question, since his ability and tools, i.e., his social and cultural capital to organize a voyage like this, would have been very different from those of a nobleman or cleric. Besides, his perspective on the reality of the places he visited would have been quite different from that of members of the elite, as he was traveling in places that were not politically central, living with ordinary people, and observing what was significant or strange to a peasant. One example is his stay in Jamaica, which we will analyze later in this paper. Furthermore, we have hypothesized elsewhere that he experienced an upward social mobility throughout his trip due to his ability to relate to people from the elite (Gil Montero and Albiez-Wieck 2019). This was a more astonishing achievement if he was from the beginning not a member of the elite. The focus on biographies is a key component of microhistorical research and an important puzzle piece in Robles' biography is him starting his voyage as a *labrador*.

The term *labrador* in that time was often linked to the term *vecino*. However, what did it mean to be a *vecino labrador* in seventeenth-century Castile? Let us take a look at both terms separately. The changing meaning of the *vecino* in both Spain and Spanish America has been thoroughly studied by Herzog. According to her, in Castile, the term *vecindad*, often not entirely adequately translated as citizenship, referred to the rights of citizens and the relationship of locals to their community. These rights were enacted through practice and normally referred to Catholic heads of households living in Castile. More than just a legal term, the status was tied to one's social reputation (Herzog 2003, pp. 6, 15, 28, 61).

Vassberg (1984), who has performed the most complete study on Golden Age Castile, tells us that the Spanish term *labrador* could refer to a broad spectrum of economic means of a person and that there even existed noble peasants (*hidalgos*), but that the key criterion for denominating someone as *labrador* was that he was free and worked his own land. Vassberg translates *labrador* as an "independent peasant farmer" (see also López-Salazar Pérez 1986). García González and Gómez Carrasco (2010, pp. 110–12) also point to the wide array of socio-economic situations tied to the term *labrador*. *Labradores* could own huge or minuscule portions of land.¹⁸

Let us introduce a brief digression in this reconstruction. In the beginning of our project, we worked on the reconstruction of the regional context based on secondary sources, and, amongst other reasons due to the pandemic, with digitalized material available online from various American and Spanish archives. However, only a very small part of the documentation is digitalized. Besides, we gradually understood that it was essential to be more specific in relation to Robles' place of origin, Moral de Calatrava, and his personal information. We therefore needed to perform a detailed search in the local and provincial Castilian archives, in addition to the national archive and the general archive of the Indies. This kind of search had to be flexible, because some archives were closed, and we learned about the existence and importance of others only when we were on the spot. The cataloguing of some archives was also insufficient.¹⁹

Our endeavor was to determine both whether Robles was in fact a *vecino labrador* and whether he was a rich or a poor one. The only author who did try to find out something about his origins was [Tau Anzóategui \(1980, p. 14\)](#), but his information is limited to a single footnote in the edition of the document, in which he refers to having looked for Robles' baptismal certificate in the town Moral de Calatrava but that all this documentation had been destroyed in the twentieth-century Spanish Civil War.

Tau Anzóategui's failed attempt is important from the methodological point of view when looking for a peasant. In the Spanish and other early modern Christian empires, ordinary people generally left traces only in two types of sources: parish books, i.e., baptism, marriage, and death records; and fiscal sources, i.e., records of tax payments.²⁰ So, looking in these kinds of sources for Robles was a logical first step for us.

When Robles provided his account in 1704, he was very much alive, and he does not mention being married. We have no information about what happened to him after the report so we have no clues as to whether or where we could find him in marriage or death records. However, we could look for his baptism record and for all types of records about his parents in Almagro and Moral de Calatrava and try to determine what their social status was. When looking for historical parish books, there exist several options as to where they can be located: they might still be within the original parish, or they might have been transferred to the bishopric or archbishopric. Generally, bishoprics have historical archives. Additionally, historians are fortunate to be able to count on the digitalized and published ecclesiastical records of [familysearch.org](#), sponsored by the Mormon Church.

We then organized our visit to all the local and provincial archives in the region, in addition to the archives in Madrid. The parish of Moral de Calatrava was (and is) San Andrés. Moral de Calatrava belonged to the archbishopric of Toledo until 1850; thereafter, it was incorporated in the bishopric of Ciudad Real.²¹ By contacting the current priest of Moral de Calatrava, we could confirm that there are no parish books prior to 1900 located there.²² We corroborated that parish books from this period from Moral de Calatrava were also not located in the episcopal archives in Ciudad Real and Toledo, so it is most likely that they were indeed destroyed in the Spanish Civil War. The parish books from Almagro are kept in the *Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Ciudad Real* (hereafter AHDCR). Unfortunately, we could not clearly identify Robles' mother there. There are several Anas without surname or parents mentioned, but it is unclear whether any of them could have been Ana de Montes. In the *Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Toledo* (hereafter AHDTol), we had more luck. In marriage dispensations, we found a Juan Ruiz de Robles, i.e., a man with the exact same name as Robles' father, acting as witness in 1658 (AHDTol, *Dispensas Matrimoniales*, 1658a; AHDTol, *Dispensas Matrimoniales*, 1658b). It is stated that he was a *vecino* of Moral and that he did not know how to sign. The people getting married are also called *vecinos*. So far, this information would match with Robles' father. However, it is stated that he was 72 years old in 1658. Since Robles was presumably born in 1659, that makes the man's age very advanced for being his father. There is a chance he might have been his grandfather.

As to fiscal and population registers, the earliest census we have from Moral dates from 1750 and forms part of the *Catastro de Ensenada*, a general census carried out by the

minister of finances. Overall, we were surprised that we were not able to locate any *padrones* of *pecheros*—that is, registers of ordinary taxpayers—at all.²³

So, the next type of sources we could turn to, but which are difficult to work with, were notarial protocols. Again, since the documents of the Municipal Archive of Moral only start in 1800, we only had the notarial protocols in the Provincial Archive in Ciudad Real (*Archivo Histórico Provincial de Ciudad Real*, hereafter AHPCR) and they only preserve those of the neighboring town, Almagro, where Robles' mother was from. Here, for the seventeenth century, we have approximately 350 document bundles, each with hundreds of folios which we did not have time to go through in their entirety. In those we did revise, we were fortunate to find a person who relates to Robles' travels²⁴ but no information about him or his family.

The next step was to look for any sources about Moral from this period, and there were surprisingly few. However, we did find some in the Spanish National Archive (*Archivo Histórico Nacional*, hereafter AHNMa), which is partly digitalized. When looking for contextual information about the town, luckily we could identify another relative of Gregorio de Robles, a presumed older sister or maybe aunt. She acted as a witness in a criminal case which took place in Moral de Calatrava in 1662. Therein, the wife of Don Jerónimo de Mendiola, the second lieutenant and judge of the Inquisition (*alférez mayor y familiar del Santo Oficio*), had died, and he was suspected of having murdered his wife. One of the many witnesses testifying about her death, apparently caused by an illness, was an "Ana Maria Gomez daughter of Joan Ruiz de Robles maid who lives with her father" (AHNMa 1662, Inquisición, 50, Exp. 12) and more or less 22 years old. She had visited Mendiola's wife shortly before her death. Due to her age, it is feasible that she was the daughter of the Juan Ruiz de Robles acting as witness in the above-mentioned dispensations and might have been the older sister of Gregorio de Robles. In 1659, the presumed date of birth of Gregorio de Robles, she would have been 19 years old. That she was visiting the wife of one of the officials of Moral could imply that she was not among the poorest population of Moral but also not among the elite because she is not referred to as Doña and no title is mentioned.

This information about Robles' assumed older sister is of the kind one may find when starting to broaden one's search to include all kinds of documents from the town of origin of the peasant one is looking for. This contextual information can also help us to explain the background of where Robles spent the first decades of his life. The archival documentation available about Moral de Calatrava in the second half of the seventeenth century is surprisingly scarce. This might also have to do with the fact that the documentation in the municipal archive of Calatrava only starts in 1800, with the prior documents apparently having been destroyed.²⁵

From information scattered throughout several archives and in some published sources, we could, however, put together a picture of Moral in the mid-seventeenth century.

Moral de Calatrava was part of the huge *encomienda* of the religious-military order of Calatrava, which meant that the inhabitants of Moral had to pay their taxes to the order of Calatrava ([Unidad de Promoción y Desarrollo de la Excma. Diputación de Ciudad Real 2021](#), p. 4).²⁶ This applied especially to the *vecinos labradores*, as a royal decree from 1679 underlines (AHPCR Ayuntamiento Local, La Solana 1679, La Solana 1, 119337, Exp. 6-1). As we can see in the *Catastro de Ensenada* from 1750, a huge number of inhabitants of Moral were clerics, probably due to the presence of the order (AHPCR Catastro del Marqués de Ensenada de 1750b).²⁷ Compared to the clerics, there were relatively few nobles, called *hidalgos*.²⁸ In the National Historical Archive of Madrid, several applications to the order of Calatrava that were original from Moral are preserved. Members of the orders were part of the upper nobility. The applications are lengthy documents which detail a broad part of the genealogy of the applicants, certified by testimonies of other nobles who attest to their nobility and Christianity through several generations. In applications from inhabitants of Moral from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the surnames of Robles' parents, de Montes and Ruiz de Robles, never appear (AHNMa OM-Casamiento-Santiago,

Apend. 573; AHNMa OM-Caballeros_Calatrava, Exp. 1838; AHNMa Religiosos_Calatrava, Exp. 372). The surnames de Montes and de Robles, however, appear in a number of census documents from Moral and Almagro, where they seemingly refer to ordinary people.²⁹ All these are little puzzle pieces which indicate that Gregorio de Robles was probably not noble nor a member of the elite of Moral, but likely a not very wealthy *vecino labrador*.

As to the demography of Castilian towns, we have the *Relaciones Topográficas* carried out by Philipp II in 1575. He sent around a questionnaire that had to be answered by every town. Unfortunately, the account by Moral de Calatrava is not preserved. However, due to the answers by neighboring towns, we know that Moral de Calatrava had 600 *vecinos* in 1575 (Campos y Fernández de Sevilla 2004, p. 367). The reconstruction of the population of Moral de Calatrava by López-Salazar Pérez (1986) shows a decline during the seventeenth century.³⁰ In a series of petitions from the early eighteenth century which relate a plague of locusts in the town, it is mentioned that Moral had a little more than 500 *vecinos* in 1722 (AHNMa, Exp. 26, f. 1v).³¹ The population decline during the seventeenth century points to an economic and agricultural crisis. This coincides with the historiography, which has described a general crisis in seventeenth-century Spain (Vries 1976; Trevor-Roper 2009). For Castilla La Mancha more specifically, García González and Gómez Carrasco (2010, pp. 102–3) have shown that there were many ups and downs in the harvests, leading to constant supply problems. They detect an economic decline from 1625 onwards which reached its nadir in the mid-seventeenth century, followed by a timid recovery which was again truncated with a grave crisis in 1680 (see also Vassberg 1984, p. 184). It was in this decade of crisis that Robles left Moral.

4. How to Find a Traveler?

4.1. Traveling as a Soldier

Robles, like other peasants who wanted to escape the famine that was present in the towns and countryside of many of the poorest Spanish provinces at that time (Marchena Fernández 1985, pp. 94–95), went to Andalusia wanting to embark to America. He only registered that moment in his life in a brief paragraph:

*He went to Andalusia, arrived in Seville and because some levies were made there, he was induced to take a place as a soldier in a company that was raised on behalf of Captain Don Juan de Ayala for the fort [presidio] of San Agustín de la Florida.*³²

Gregorio de Robles briefly mentioned that he went to Seville, which was the place where a peasant could find the means to travel to Spanish America at that time. His account suggests that he did not have a plan, but that when he arrived some levies were taking place and he was “induced” to enlist as a soldier. It was, indeed, a good time and a good place for those who, like Robles, wanted to travel to America without resources: during the seventeenth century, most of the troops in America were recruited in Europe. While the recruited officers came from the disbanded troops of Flanders, the common soldiers were sought among the peasants coming from depauperized regions of the peninsula. In the eighteenth century, on the contrary, they were recruited mostly in America (Marchena Fernández 1985, p. 94).

The levies were carried out principally in the cities, although many of the men were peasants that went there for this purpose. Fewer levies were made in the countryside than in the cities, because many haciendas in Andalusia had workforce subject to service for several generations. Being free of servitude was a condition for the soldiers, together with being single, healthy, and young. In short, although we do not have personal information about Robles, his self-definition as *labrador* meets the conditions that the soldiers had to have during this period.

How can we find Gregorio de Robles in the process that encompassed his decision to enlist as a soldier and his journey to America? Passengers traveling to the “Indies” were listed in records called *listas de pasajeros* preserved in the AGI, Seville. There we find the names of the ships and their captains (although these data are not always in the records),

the year of the trips, and the names and other information about the passengers and their destinations. The names of people subject to servitude are not always listed. The list of passengers who traveled in the 1680s contains dozens of ecclesiastics, civil servants, merchants, women traveling to join their husbands, families with their servants, and single men returning to the “Indies”. One example, among others, is that of Don Juan Marques Cabrera, the former Governor of Florida (1680–1687), who was allowed to travel with his wife and daughter in June 1680 (AGI, Contratación 5540A L3). However, in those lists, there were no soldiers.

So, our question was not really where we can find Robles as a simple passenger, but where to locate soldiers in the archives.³³ How Robles made a living, or solved problems turned out to be central to initiating the documentary search, so we needed to identify the different roles he had taken on along his journey. We propose, then, a double transformation of Gregorio de Robles during his long trip: from *labrador* to soldier, and from soldier to assistant/helper of smugglers, or small trader. Both identifications were central for our search in the archives: the first, because the soldiers traveled differently; the second, because Robles did not remain a soldier, and that also meant a new change in our search. His occupation after being freed of his military obligations is a hypothesis born from the way he traveled alone “discovering” America, the people he associated with and the activities he reports. Once, he even openly states that he worked as a petty trader (*mercachifle*) in Lima. It was also important to identify the moments of those transformations as we will show in this section.

In general terms, soldiers traveled differently, because to be a soldier implied less documentation and regulations. That was one of the reasons many men chose to be enlisted. It is more difficult to find lists of soldiers made in Cádiz, than those made for other passengers as described previously. What can be found is the list of soldiers living in the American forts. However, although Robles traveled as a soldier, he did not remain one for very long, and we did not find him in Florida either. So, our needle was more difficult to find than a regular passenger that needed authorization and registers, or than a soldier that remained as such in the fort.

The guiding thread that allowed us to make a little more progress in this reconstruction was the name of the captain who recruited Robles: don Juan de Ayala. According to Gillaspie (1968, p. 153), Ayala violated almost every law related to commerce and military personnel, leading to an important number of documents that allow us to reconstruct the first part of Robles’ journey. In this reconstruction, the life of Ayala and the context of San Agustín were central.

Ayala was born in 1635 in Havana and spent his early adult life serving aboard merchant vessels in the Caribbean. He was assigned as lieutenant of the fortress (*castillo*) in San Agustín in 1683. The place had a small population that depended greatly on the supply from Cuba and New Spain. Ayala transformed his house into a store and sold products for the soldiers and their families, which is why Gillaspie considered him more of a merchant than a military man. He went three times to Europe looking for men, weapons, and supplies that San Agustín needed desperately.

In his report of merits and services (*relación de méritos y servicios*), Ayala wrote about his voyages to Spain, and specified that one of them was in 1687, and not in 1688 as Robles said (AGI, Indiferente 133 N187).³⁴ Florida, and especially San Agustín, was suffering from many pirate attacks and they needed more men and weapons. Ayala was authorized to recruit 100 men and was appointed captain of the infantry. Like many other voyages, this one involved desertion along the way, and according to Arana and Johnson (2021, pp. 14–15), only 80 men arrived in San Agustín—some of them being too young or crippled.

We still do not have Robles in the sources, but—as in the case of Martin Guerre, the context allows us to affirm that the story told by him is plausible. He was in Seville at the time when Ayala was looking for men to recruit. Although Florida was not a desirable destination (the crown had no money for recruitment and the Caribbean was under attack

by pirates), the levies were like a disguised migration. For the impoverished peasants, this was an opportunity to seek a better destiny, although this often implied desertion.

We also found documentation from another traveler who went with Ayala and was mentioned in Robles' account: don Diego de Quiroga y Losada, the newly appointed governor of Florida. Quiroga wanted to travel with his wife doña Mariana Teresa de Torrejon y Loyola, a female servant (*criada*), doña Ana Narujo Galindo, and two male servants (AGI, Contratación 5448 N107). They did not have time to go to their provinces to obtain certificates of purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) and bachelorhood, which were required for non-military passengers to the Indies, and Quiroga was looking for a dispensation. He was allowed to travel with his wife and Ana Narujo in Ayala's vessel. The haste of the steps taken by Quiroga and their dates—as well as other documentation quoted in the literature on Florida—confirm that the year of departure was 1687 and not 1688 as mentioned by Robles.

Ayala sailed together with the ships of the fleet bound for New Spain until the Canary Islands, from where they continued on their own. Robles reported in his account that there was an epidemic on the ship. Since he had some skills in assisting the sick and there was no doctor on board, he “dedicated himself to this with so much zeal, diligence and charity that he can say many were prevented from losing their lives.”³⁵ When they arrived, the condition of the sick was still very bad, so they were taken to the hospital, where Robles continued to help. Thanks to this dedication, the governor—who traveled with him from Cádiz and saw his dedication during the epidemic that broke out on the ship—and other officials decided to give him clothing and allowed him to go to Havana, freeing him from the obligation to continue serving as a soldier. He went there with the vessel of the fort as a free man.

4.2. Robles' Transformation into an Independent Traveler

We propose as hypothesis that his first steps in the Caribbean were central for Robles' transformation into an independent traveler in the sense that they defined his way of traveling and earning a living. Robles left Moral de Calatrava as a *labrador*, sailed to America as a soldier, and became an independent traveler after his first experience in the Caribbean. Although he occasionally mentioned some resources and abilities he had—for example, his ability to take care of sick people, skills to which he resorted on different occasions; or his willingness and honesty to serve as a courier—it was his activities helping tradesmen and smugglers that allowed him to travel and survive on many occasions. It is possible that some of his activities may have been illegal, hence the sometimes cryptic tone of his account, considering that his writing was addressed to the King and that he was asking for compensation for his services to the crown. Our hypothesis is based mainly on the fact that he stayed in the main smuggling centers, and that this not only occurred when he was taken prisoner by different pirates, but he also chose them as destinations during his voyages. He also had contact and convivial ties with smugglers, relationships that we can only sometimes discover because the people he remembered left subtle traces in the archive. That is why this section focuses on places and names, as the main methodology to reconstruct the context that allowed us to propose the way in which Robles became a traveler.

We want to stress, then, that the first space that Gregorio de Robles explored in his long journey was the Caribbean Sea, which had very special characteristics. At that time, the Caribbean was no longer exclusively under Spanish rule: Dutch, English and French colonizers had settled there during the first half of the seventeenth century, taking advantage of the opportunity they had when the Spanish focused on the conquest of the continent and on mining (Meniketti 2006). After being “a sort of great American Mediterranean” (Marchena Fernández 2019, p. 41) between ca. 1550 and 1650, the commercial system was suffering a long crisis. In this context, and when Robles arrived, the informal trade networks were vital to the development and survival of regional economies and the Caribbean was the center of piracy and smuggling (Schmitt 2019). It was a global space par excellence, rela-

tively decadent although still very dynamic. It was multicultural and multiethnic, where many languages were spoken, and networks of interpersonal relationships were important. Robles' account is excellent to understand the daily interactions and connections between empires in the Caribbean and therefore can be employed in an approach of "connected histories" (Subrahmanyam 2007).

The biggest island of the Caribbean Sea, however, remained under Spanish control: Cuba. This gateway of the Sea invited constant attacks by independent privateers, pirates, and freebooters thanks to her long unguarded shorelines and sparse population (Klein 1966). By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a major cluster of rural population around Havana—the capital city, located on the northern coast and close to Florida—small coastal towns, each with a surrounding modest rural cluster, and large livestock estates in the interior (González 1971). This was a contrast to the relatively dense settlement that had started to develop around plantations on the other islands. Havana was one of the most important cities of the region and provided a series of services to the fleets going to and from Spain, such as water supply, supplies for the transatlantic voyage, ship repair, and ship surveillance, among others. According to Moreno, there was no integration between Havana and the rest of the island (Moreno Friginals 1995, p. 44). The remaining villages communicated with each other laboriously and were dedicated to smuggling. Havana's relationship with the outside world was much more important than that with the rest of the island.

We do not know for certain how much time Robles spent in Cuba: there are two dates in the account, but the years are perhaps mistaken if we considered that he travelled in 1687 and not in 1688. He said he arrived in Havana coming from Florida in May 1689 after twenty days at sea, and that he left Santiago de Cuba in September 1690.³⁶ We can estimate, perhaps, that he stayed a little more than a year in total. From Havana he traveled almost the entire length of the island, visiting at least six places located along the coast, although he had to cross the interior of the island to access some of these points. He visited two ports among those places where smuggling was a daily occurrence and talked to the locals to understand why this was happening. The main problem, he argued, was the scarcity of Spanish ships arriving with—expensive—goods, so the population had to turn to foreigners who provided them with everything they needed at a fair price. Smuggling was, moreover, easy because there were many places to disembark which were difficult to protect, and few forts, a description that coincides with the cited bibliography.

For Robles, however, Cuba was only the starter of a very particular menu whose main course was Jamaica. Jamaica had been conquered by the British in 1655, although some Spaniards and, according to Robles' account, particularly some Spanish Jews still remained there, trading legally and illegally. This island, together with Barbados, had been designated to receive enslaved people arriving from Africa in English companies, to be traded from there by Spaniards and legally introduced to America. Furthermore, Portuguese merchants used Jamaica to avoid the monopoly's restrictions and sell some enslaved captives without paying any taxes. Since the late sixteenth century, French, Dutch, and English ships had arrived in Jamaica to trade enslaved captives and European manufactured goods (Schmitt 2019).

Robles sailed from Santiago de Cuba to Jamaica in a boat belonging to a Spaniard from Portobello, don Joseph de la Vega y Guzmán, who was traveling to Cartagena. On his way, De la Vega was to leave a document destined for Santiago del Castillo, who was responsible for the Spanish slave trade in Jamaica. Robles arrived in Port Royal, a city built by the English settlers after 1655 on sediments accumulated along a number of small cays. By 1692, when it was destroyed by an earthquake, the population was approximately 6500 people including 2500 enslaved Africans (Mulcahy 2008). Robles stayed there for 30 days hosted by del Castillo, who helped him and opened the way for him to tour the island pretending he was looking for enslaved Africans.

It is difficult to estimate how long Robles stayed in Jamaica, because he only specified the date of his arrival. It was, perhaps, a few months. However, this part of his account is

one of the longest, even longer than that for Cuba, and very detailed and accurate, even though it was one of the first places he visited. He talked to people living and trading in Jamaica and witnessed the circulation of Spanish currency and illegal trade. He also identified 230 sugar mills and 50 estates where they grew yucca, tobacco, and indigo. If we check with what the historiography says, his numbers were surprisingly accurate: in its early stages, the sugar plantations were close to the coast; and by 1684, they numbered some 246 (Craton 1978).

Robles described what he saw, but not really what he did to earn a living. He said that del Castillo instructed him to say that he was looking for enslaved Africans, but perhaps he was indeed looking for them—and not pretending—as part of his tasks helping his host.³⁷ As Moutoukias (1996, p. 43)—among others—proposes, illegal trade was an important part of seventeenth-century trade and could only function in a web of personal ties and allegiances. Robles was an unknown to del Castillo, but he was also a Spaniard on an island where there were few of them. After spending 30 days with del Castillo in Port Royal, going out to tour the island to assess the presence of slaves may well have been a way to pay for his stay.

Robles spent long periods in the Caribbean and returned several times—although not again to Jamaica—so we found other interesting samples of his choices that reinforce our hypothesis. For example, that he went only briefly to the main—official—ports where the Spanish authorities lived, such as Cartagena de Indias or Portobello. Instead, he often stayed in tiny places scattered along the coast. We looked in the AGI for those peoples and places he mentioned, especially those people who were not working for the crown, aiming to reconstruct the context and—due to the lack of direct sources where Robles was present—to imagine how he traveled. We limited our search to the period between 1687 and 1704.³⁸

A copy of a judicial trial from Cartagena made in 1689 can perfectly illustrate the sort of documents we can find in the archive that allow us to reconstruct the environment of his voyages (AGI, Escribanía 580B). María, a fugitive enslaved woman from Angola, declared that five years ago she had been brought from Jamaica on an English vessel and left on the coast, where Juan Bernal, the Spaniard who bought her, picked her up. She stayed for five days with Bernal, who sold her to Francisco Arias, her master at the time of the trial. The document shows a *modus operandi* that Robles mentioned frequently in his account: the arrival of foreign ships on the coasts where they traded goods and enslaved people with the local population without the Spanish authorities being able to prevent it. The trial also mentioned briefly one of the hosts of Robles, Juan Bernal, who was living on a small island close to Baru on the coast of what today is Colombia. Robles stayed on his farm (*estancia*) from where he witnessed that two boats from Jamaica arrived during the night with “flour, slaves and prohibited trade goods”.³⁹

The trial we found in the AGI confirms Robles’ account—or at least part of it—and in addition it proves the existence of Juan Bernal and his occupations. Looking for places and names during a specific period was the center of our methodological strategy. The transformation of Robles during his voyage and the entanglements between empires he relates are typical topics of global history. However, by focusing on him as one single person and on the particularity of the places he visited in a microhistorical approach, we avoid generalizations which are typical pitfalls for global history (Trivellato 2011; Conrad 2016, pp. 64–65). These details in his account led us to our last question, developed in the following section.

4.3. *Traveling and Memory*

Gregorio de Robles did not sign the document, because—as Manuel García de Bustamante wrote—he did not know how.⁴⁰ However, the document has several dozens of names and several hundreds of places organized as part of a journey. How could he remember such a complex journey without confusing the places he visited? Was the account drawn from his memory, or from written sources? Did he manage to write down the names

of the places and people he knew during his voyage? Did García de Bustamante help him remember places and names based on written documents? Robles' account has only some small mistakes, the first of them being the year he shipped to Florida, although one could say that the errors make the story even more credible.

The names of the people he interacted with during the voyage were central for our strategy in the archives—names of both well-known and unknown people. There are some well-known names, for example, Juan de Ayala or Diego de Quiroga y Losada, that were essential for reconstructing the context of his voyage and also some of the data that are missing. An important example in this sense are the Spanish authorities he mentioned, whom we can easily find in the historiography and whom provide us with a more specific time frame. Some examples to be mentioned are the Viceroy of Peru, conde de la Monclova; the governor of Buenos Aires, don Agustín de Robles; or the archbishop of Lima, don Melchor de Liñán. Some of the people he mentioned were, in contrast, ordinary men and women that he met during the trip. We looked for them in the archive because we think that the names of the unknown people are the ones that give him most credibility, and we found several of them. One of them was Juan Bernal, as we have described in the previous section.

Although the names were important for our methodology in the archives, the places he remembered, their characteristics and the ability to place them in a logical sequence suggesting a plausible trip are details that stand out and allow us to test the credibility and the accuracy of his memory. We followed his trip using Google Earth and found over 220 places, almost all of them in perfect and logical order. He remembered part of the trip very well, with many details and places close by, and others only superficially. We already described Cuba and Jamaica, the first places he went to, which he remembered quite accurately. The same happened with other places regardless of the time he visited or the length of his stay. The names of a few places were impossible to find, for example a nameless “small island” (AGI, Charcas 233, f. 13r), and some were not entirely clear to us, for example the inland city Puerto Principe (currently Camagüey) that he described as a port in Cuba. Not all of the routes are perfect, and sometimes there are a few details that may be incorrect. For example, he said that he went from Buenos Aires to Córdoba, from there to Santa Fe “from the same province of Tucumán” (ibid. f. 29v.), and from there to Santiago del Estero. This does not make sense: given the locations of the cities and the roads of that period, the logical route should have been from Buenos Aires to Santa Fe, from there to Córdoba, and then to Santiago. It is interesting to note, however, that the details of the economy and landscape of all these cities are consistent. His mistakes are few and perhaps they are logical if one thinks that he was reconstructing the route from memory. Those that we have detected are in territories where he stayed for a short time and which are rather marginal, such as the Río de la Plata or the Strait of Magellan.

Other details that stand out in his account, related to memory, are the number of days he was sailing, and this not only in relation to the long intercontinental voyages, but also the small trips between the islands. Although we could go on listing the highlights of his recollections, we would like to end with one that relates to the local economy, which he recalls—usually—in great detail. The question here is how he managed this, and to answer it we have just a few clues.

Robles told Bustamante about his trip in 1704, in the context of a request to the King for a sort of compensation for services rendered. The idea of this service was aroused during the second part of his journey:

He arrived [in Quito] and having separated from his benefactor with due recognition, he went to an inn [posada], but having learned this the president of that royal tribunal [audiencia] Don Mateo Mata Ponce de Leon, his countryman, ordered him to go to his house where he made him stay and very well with great attention and fineness to which he responded submissively, telling him what he had walked, seen, and recognized in his long pilgrimages, seeming to be in the service of the king, which he had not done with anyone else.⁴¹

This is one example of the account where Robles mentioned that he used to entertain his hosts with stories from his voyage. Possibly, he created a narrative he repeated again and again during his trip which helped him to memorize it. As an early modern peasant, Robles had most probably grew up in a culture of orality in which stories were told with recurrent, yet varied motives and schemata; some of them he might have been able to apply when memorizing his voyage (Burke 2009, pp. 125–47). In the context of the interview by Bustamante, he could pull out from this narrative the elements which interested the Council of the Indies, underlining those elements which were usually highlighted in reports of merits and services. That the format of his account is similar to that of the merit and service reports is probably also due to the fact that García de Bustamante was a man accustomed to that kind of document. Perhaps it was during his conversation with Ponce de León that Robles started to rethink his voyage and give it meaning. Or, paraphrasing Pollmann and Kujpers (2015, p. 15), Robles gave his memories reliability for himself and his audience, enriching them with extra meaning and strengthening them. The account, however, is based on a solid collection of facts that he managed to recall in great detail. Some facts are more detailed than others, as we saw, perhaps because of the impact they had on his experience (for example, his first weeks in the Caribbean; the days he spent sailing), and also because of his own history (he was a peasant and he remembered agricultural details very well).

5. Conclusions

Following Trivellato (2011), the reconstruction of the life and voyage of a Castilian peasant from the late seventeenth century in America and Western Europe aims to understand the multiple and overlapping connections across cultures and groups from the perspective of an—admittedly, not entirely—ordinary man. Due to the given sources, we have proposed a methodology that allows us to reconstruct the context of Gregorio de Robles' travel and part of his individual life. Some details of his life, for example his origins, are central for our project because we think that he started as a peasant in a world in which he had a subordinate role, and then traveled to another world in which he was part of the Spanish estate (*estamento*), the privileged group of conquistadors. How he traveled is key to understanding this transformation, although it is difficult to concretize this reconstruction, as we have shown in this text.

The document of Gregorio de Robles' account provided us with some details that suggest that it is authentic, and that it began a bureaucratic path, though we cannot know if it ended or was truncated. Those details were, however, insufficient for our first analysis. We then looked for Robles in the archives and stated that he was difficult to find in other documents for two main reasons: first, ordinary people left few traces; and second, he traveled through many different territories so the traces may be in dozens of archives. During our search, however, we found a third difficulty, which is the complicated history of the preservation of documents. Two examples can summarize the relevance of this history: first, that those documents that are important for finding ordinary people are missing because of the Civil War in Spain; second, those who traveled as soldiers needed less documentation than other travelers. In short, this article tells the failed story of a search that forced us to rethink our methodology.

In this article, we focused on the first stage of Robles' journey, which was the most important because it shaped—according to our hypothesis—his way of traveling and seeing the world. For our strategy, it was central to identify some specific circumstances of his life. Two were particularly significant: Gregorio de Robles started as a *labrador* in Moral de Calatrava and sailed from Spain to America as a soldier but did not remain one. We then proposed, as a strategy, that instead of centering our archival work only on Robles and his family, we had to reconstruct his first steps based on a triple set of data: dates, places, and convivial ties.

We carefully analyzed all the places where he went; first, to evaluate the context of production of his story, and second, to analyze those places that seemed to have had

the greatest impact on his way of traveling and seeing America. The places were also helpful for our search in the archive since some of the people we were looking for were just marginal in the documents.

We also looked carefully for all his convivial ties and could identify even more people than those mentioned in this article, both those well known to the historiography, and others which have never been mentioned. For us, they are like bigger and smaller needles in the haystack. Robles explicitly mentions contacts with fellow countrymen from central Castile and with people who belonged to the order of Calatrava, but he also refers to other people with whom he had no previous relationship. Undoubtedly, he learned to relate to many different people throughout the trip, taking advantage of being a Spaniard in a continent conquered by Spain.

Why insist on searching for this small needle in the haystack? Because Robles' view allows us to see America (and Western Europe) in the seventeenth century from a rare perspective: that of an ordinary man who had to find his own way to travel. Because he gives us a view of the continent that is guided by his curiosity, written from the margins, from the places located on the periphery of power and the paths connecting different empires which at least in the official perspective remained separated. By connecting Robles to other needles in the haystack, by following his convivial ties, we can reconstruct his exceptional journey and learn about the way of life of a non-elite traveler.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; methodology, S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; investigation, S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; data curation S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; writing—original draft preparation, S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; writing—review and editing, S.A.-W. and R.G.M.; visualization, R.G.M.; funding acquisition, S.A.-W. and R.G.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) through the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America under the grant number 01UK2023B.

Data Availability Statement: The data underlying this research are all available to researchers in the archives mentioned in this article and in the acknowledgements part.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to the staff of the following archives: Archivo Histórico Provincial de Ciudad Real, Archivo Municipal de Almagro, Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Ciudad Real, Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Toledo, Archivo Histórico Nacional de España, Archivo General de Indias and to the staff of the administration of Moral de Calatrava, the priest of Moral de Calatrava, Miguel Ángel Jiménez, and to María Ángeles Herreros Ramírez, Subdelegada de Gobierno de Ciudad Real. We are also grateful to Christian de Vito, Francisco García González, Juan Marchena, and Philippe Castejón for their comments and suggestions. Finally, we are grateful for the profound and constructive comments of the anonymous referees of Histories, which helped to improve the initially submitted version of this work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ For America, this is visible at first glance if we look at the Index of the Atlas of Spanish Explorers, where 78 travelers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and 66 from the period between 1735 and 1802 are mentioned. For the seventeenth century, there are only eleven Spanish travelers, all of them missionaries, nobles or seafarers ([Sociedad Geográfica Española 2009](#)). One of the best and most cited books about travelers and travel accounts, by [Pratt \(\[1992\] 2008\)](#), focuses on the period from 1750 to 1850; but the bibliography about travel accounts is vast. For an overview about the bibliography on early modern travel writing, see also [Classen \(2018\)](#).

² The folios of the document are not numbered so we have made an artificial numbering observing recto and verso (Declaración de Gregorio de Robles, 1704, AGI, Charcas 233, f. 1r; hereafter, AGI Charcas 233).

³ An exception are his stays in Lima; when he went there for the first time, he stayed for two years.

⁴ On the concept of conviviality, see [Nowicka and Vertovec \(2014\)](#). [Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America \(2019\)](#) and [Freitag \(2013\)](#).

- 5 It should be pointed out that Corbin deliberately chose by chance a completely ordinary person without any special legacy and that Pinagot, quite differently from Robles, never left his home district.
- 6 In Robles' account, it is stated that Bustamante was part of the war council ("Consejo y junta de Guerra de Indias"). AGI Charcas 233, f. 1r. [Tau Anzóategui \(1980\)](#) confirms this last statement in his footnote 1 based on secondary sources.
- 7 We confirmed that the signature and handwriting is that of Bustamante by comparing it to other documents written and signed by him, such as AGI Filipinas, 204, N.1. In this document, the signature by Bustamante is visible in photos 68, 162 and 1007. Another example is Archivo General de Simancas (hereafter AGS) EST, LEG, 3,633,191. Here, the signature appears in photo 4 in the version digitalized in pares.mcu.es.
- 8 The one critical observation states that it is not true that there was a rich gold mine in the Cardeña mountains in Spain, as Robles states. It literally says "en esto habla con corta inteligencia porque no hay mina de oro que sea como supone". AGI, Charcas 233, f. 88r. Another note adds something: When Robles talks about his passing through the Hague, he mentions that he was looking for a minister there who he did not find. Here, the observation adds that the minister's name was Francisco de Quiros and that he had already left the Hague: "Este dice era don Francisco de Quiros que ya había salido del Haya". AGI, Charcas 233, f. 86r.
- 9 Philippe Castejon, personal information in November 2021. Charcas 233 is a collection of many documents related to that jurisdiction entitled "Cartas y expedientes de personas seculares del distrito de la audiencia años de 1690 a 1707". We reviewed one by one all the documents, and there is no other one related to Robles or to Bustamante. We also looked for all other documents in the archive signed by Bustamante, and Robles was nowhere.
- 10 The *Historia General de España* speaks very badly about Bustamante due to supposed corruption and greed. He was associated with the count of Oropesa who fell in disgrace in the War of Succession ([Lafuente and Valera 1889](#), pp. 119–224).
- 11 [Folger and Simon \(2011\)](#), pp. 29–30 list as defining elements of the reports of merits and services the self-promoting nature in order to receive a compensation from the crown and the channeling by bureaucracy to the Council of the Indies. They also report the bureaucratic steps these reports normally took, which are not at all followed in Robles' case.
- 12 One out of many examples is the following: Archivo General de la Nación, México (hereafter AGNMe). 1540. Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 5001, Exp. 66.
- 13 [Brendecke \(2009\)](#), p. 235 mentions that the *relaciones de méritos y servicios* constituted "the most impressive examples of unrequested information" contributing to the *entera noticia*.
- 14 "Desde aquí empieza a tratar de las provincias que comprende el nuevo reino de Quito y Popayan". AGI, Charcas 233, f. 57v.
- 15 The author added 41 footnotes with comments on the text, based principally on bibliography and a few edited sources. He commented also on the dates that he considered were wrong, on the names (of places and persons) and surnames he corrected because they were incorrectly written, and he also added information on some facts that Robles mentioned briefly. The notes that are on the margins in the manuscript are also transcribed as footnotes without personal comments. The book has also illustrations and titles that are not present in the manuscript.
- 16 What we have written in the next two sections took a lot of time, consultation with fellow specialists in Spanish history and travelers, doubts, and frustrated archival work.
- 17 "Declara es natural de la dicha villa de Moral, de edad 45 años poco mas o menos hijo legítimo de Juan Ruiz de Robles y Ana de Montes sus padres naturales, su padre de la dicha villa su madre de la de Almagro donde fueron conocidos por gente honesta en su esfera. Que hallándose en su patria en el ejercicio de labrador, deseando no limitarse a aquellos cortos términos, ver el mundo y servir a SM salió de su casa el año pasado de 1688 sin mas motivo que el expresado". AGI, Charcas 233, fs. 1r and 1v.
- 18 Both [Donézar Díez de Ulzurrun \(1996\)](#) and the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (Real Academia Española n.d.) agree with this broad definition.
- 19 In the Castilian archives, there were very few digital catalogues and they were not very detailed. Therefore, we had to go through all the documents of certain years and places box by box and document by document. This applied among others for baptismal records, marriage dispensations and notarial protocols. The national archive in Madrid (as well as the AGI) is integrated into the Spanish online catalogue PARES, which is very helpful but far from being complete. In the national archive, we additionally used more exhaustive digital catalogues available in the archive and catalogues on paper in order to identify documents about Moral de Calatrava and people in contact with Robles.
- 20 [Poska \(2005\)](#), pp. 15–16, looking for illiterate early modern peasant women in Galicia, employed a similar methodology. She tells us that nearly all the records about them were produced by "the Catholic Church and the Castilian legal system." She also rightly points to the fact that notarial records did often not contain information about the poorest members of the society, both for the fact that they had no money to pay notaries and not enough belongings to "lease, sell or pass down to their descendants". For specific occupational groups, there sometimes exist additional sources such as documents from guilds; these might even attest for mobility, such as in the travel books of early modern journeymen ([Barnert and Schlüter 2018](#), pp. 65–71; [Wiesner 1991](#)).
- 21 Personal information by Cristian Bermejo Rubio, the archivist of the historical archive of the archbishopric of Toledo, September 2021.
- 22 Miguel Ángel Jiménez, personal information via e-mail, el 11 July 2021. Here, it has to be noted that contacting local and even more local ecclesiastical archives is not always easy. Sometimes they do not have a webpage or the contact information

available there is not up to date. Sometimes, such as in the case of the Municipal Archive of Moral de Calatrava, they do not even have permanent staff attending the archive. It has to be pointed out, however, that we have been very fortunate to have met with people, some of them working in other parts of the administration who have been very kind and helpful with providing information about the archives, such as the current priest of Moral, Miguel Ángel Jimenez, the staff from the Tourism department of Moral de Calatrava, the director of the Municipal Archive of Almagro and María de los Ángeles Herreros Ramírez, who is currently *Subdelegada del Gobierno* in *Ciudad Real* but had once worked organizing the municipal archive of Moral.

- 23 In Spanish America, the equivalent tribute registers and the related visitations are abundant everywhere and are highly useful sources regarding the categorization of vassals of the Spanish Crown. See [Gil Montero \(2020\)](#) and [Albiez-Wieck \(2017\)](#).
- 24 In a notarial protocol from Malagón, dating from 1653, Don Bernardino de Mena y Balverde is mentioned as “absent in the Indies”. He was the husband of Doña Catalina de Balverde who hosted Robles twice in Mompós: AHPCR, Protocolos Notariales 1651-1659, f. 31r. See also [Gil Montero and Albiez-Wieck \(2019\)](#).
- 25 María de los Ángeles Herreros Ramírez, personal information, September 2021.
- 26 The *encomienda* was a tax-farming institution which was also exported to the Spanish territories in America and the Philippines. About the Spanish military orders in the seventeenth century, see [Postigo Castellanos \(1988\)](#). About the *encomiendas* of the military orders, see [Fernández Llamazares \(1862, chp. X\)](#).
- 27 The entire Catastro is also available online: Catastro del Marqués de la Ensenada de 1750a.
- 28 [García González and Gómez Carrasco \(2010, p. 106\)](#) tell us that the limited representation of the upper nobility in Castile La Mancha from the sixteenth century onwards was due to the fact that most of the land belonged to the military orders.
- 29 Eustaquio Jiménez Puga, the archivist of the Almagro archive kindly provided us with the only census (*padrón*) from the neighboring town of Almagro, from which Robles’ mother originated. It dates from 1695 and is only a part of the original census, containing a list of poor people and widows. This list does not contain the name Ana de Montes, but another person with the same surname: Phelipe de Montes, living in the Calle de la Claberia (f 3r). Additionally, the surname “de Robles” appears (f. 4vs, f. 5vs). Additionally, in the *Catastro de Ensenada* from Moral dating from 1750, the surname “de Robles” appears several times. There is a mention of a Francisco de Robles who was renting land; a mention of a Martin de Robles who owned a house in Moral, and Maria Ramona and Ysabel de Robles, single girls. It is said that they belong to the “general state” (“su estado el general”) (Catastro del Marqués de Ensenada de 1750c).
- 30 In his appendix I, the author shows data on the evolution of the total population of Moral in 1591 (2824 inhabitants), 1625 (2362), 1646 (2284) and 1690 (2525).
- 31 The petitioners, *labradores* from Moral and the neighboring Valdepeñas, asked for permission to temporarily rent out their commonly owned pasture (*dehesa*) in order that cereals might be grown there. Due to the plague, there was a famine in the region, and they needed the money from the rent to buy cereals for the starving population. Their request was granted and renewed after several years.
- 32 “se encaminó a Andalucía, llegó a Sevilla y por hacerse allí algunas levas le indujeron a que sentase plaza de soldado en una compañía que se levaba de cuenta del capitán Don Juan de Ayala para el presidio de San Agustín de la Florida”. AGI, Charcas 233, f. 1v.
- 33 Very helpful with our search were various talks with specialists, some of which occurred during the long waits for AGI shifts in the context of the pandemic. We are grateful to Juan Marchena and his long conversations about archives, pirates, and Caribbean Jews; to Christian de Vito and his enormous knowledge of *presidios* and global history; as well as to Philippe Castejón who guided us through the labyrinth of seventeenth-century bureaucracy.
- 34 [Tau Anzóategui \(1980, p. 28\)](#) reaches the same conclusion but based on bibliography that refers to the fleet of General José Fernández de Santillán, with which Ayala traveled.
- 35 “se dedicó a esto con tanto celo, diligencia y caridad que puede decir se preservaron muchos de perder la vida en fuerza de su cuidado”. AGI, Charcas 233, f. 2v.
- 36 [Tau Anzóategui \(1980\)](#) considered that Robles stayed in Cuba until 1693. He argued that Robles confused the date of a political disturbance that occurred in Santiago in 1693 (and not in 1690), a confusion that would have implied a longer stay in Cuba, something that cannot be inferred from his account. Furthermore, Port Royal—where Robles docked in Jamaica immediately upon leaving Cuba—was destroyed by an earthquake in 1692, after Robles’ passage through the island. For this reason, we do not take into consideration Tau Anzóategui’s comments regarding this and other dates.
- 37 The text literally states: “De allí volvió a Puerto Real pero antes reconoció toda la isla andándose de estancia en estancia con voz de que estaba recibido en el asiento de negros y que iba a examinar si había alguna de venta pues de otro modo no se la hubieran permitido”. AGI, Charcas 233, f. 10r.
- 38 The search methodology in the archive was threefold: in the digital catalogues (both those that are online and those that the AGI offers within the archive), we searched for (1) the names of the people with whom Robles interacted and (2) the places he passed through. We also requested and consulted (3) all possible files dated between 1687 and 1704, originated in the jurisdictions he visited. As AGI documents are usually in large folders along with many others, we reviewed one by one all the attached documents.

- ³⁹ “Desembarcose, fue al Pozo y quedose en aquella pequeña isla en una estancia de Juan Bernal y vio que aquella noche llegó allí un comboy de Jamaica con dos balandras que conducían harinas, negros y géneros de comercio prohibido”. AGI, Charcas 233, fs. 13r and 13v.
- ⁴⁰ As a peasant, it is completely expectable for Robles to be illiterate. Burke (2009, p. 251) has estimated that in early modern times, only approximately 20% of the European peasants could read and write, and that the probability of being illiterate increased among the Catholic peasants in Western Europe.
- ⁴¹ “Llegó a ella y habiéndose separado de su bienhechor con el reconocimiento debido, se fue a una posada pero sabido del sr presidente de aquella audiencia don Mateo Mata Ponce de León su paisano le mandó fuese a su casa donde le hizo albergar y mucho bien con grande atención y fineza a quien correspondió sumisamente comunicándole cuanto había caminado, visto, y reconocido en sus largas peregrinaciones, pareciéndose sería del servicio del rey, lo cual no había hecho con otro alguno”. AGI, Charcas 233, fs. 51r–51v.

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