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MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE SPANISH DOMINIONS IN AMERICA.

By F. A. KIRKPATRICK, F.R.Hist.S.

Read April 15, 1915.

AN official account of the Indies states that in 1574 there were 200 Spanish settlements or towns (*pueblos de Españoles*) in Spanish America, some of them ranking as cities, others as *villas* (*i.e.* boroughs or towns); 100 of these were in South America. Here is an extract from the book :—

‘The city of Popayan is 22 leagues from the city of Cali, which bounds it on the North; and 20 leagues from Almaguer, which bounds it to the South. It has 30 Spanish householders (*vecinos*), of whom 16 are *encomenderos*. Its district contains 32 villages or divisions of Indians, with 9000 tributary Indians, divided into 19 *repartimientos*, 3 of them tributary to the king, the rest to individuals.’¹

Another official report, of about the same date, yields the following extract :

‘The city of Guamanga is 55 leagues from Cuzco: the boundary between them is 19 leagues from Guamanga. The boundary towards Lima is 27 leagues distant.’²

The extent and boundaries of other towns are similarly given. Thus the territory of La Paz measures 40 leagues in one direction, 30 in another, 40 in another. Quito has 27 leagues one way, 32 another, 12 another, and so on.

Two centuries later, in 1764, appeared an official account

¹ *Geografía universal de las Indias*, by J. Lopez de Velasco, ed. by J. Zaragoza, Madrid, 1894, p. 409.

² *Relaciones Geográficas de Indias*, ed. by M. Jiménez de Espada, Madrid, 1881-97, i. 116.

of the province of Venezuela.¹ Its main part is a description of the seventeen principal towns, eleven of them cities, the rest *villas*, thus: 'The jurisdiction of the town (*villa*) of Cura touches the jurisdictions of Caracas, Calabozo, San Sebastian, Valencia.' . . . 'The jurisdiction of the town (*villa*) of San Carlos measures 130 by 90 leagues,' extending to the jurisdiction of other towns which are named. . . . 'The town of Fernando has never had its jurisdiction fixed, whereof the householders complain much.'

Thus, in the eighteenth century, as in the sixteenth century, each town is described as extending up to the limits of its neighbours in the more settled districts. In the less settled parts the jurisdiction of a town was regarded as covering a wide region. In short, as in the Roman Empire, so also in the Spanish Empire, the municipalities were the bricks of which the structure was compacted.

In the treatise on Indian (*i.e.* American) administration written by Solórzano² early in the seventeenth century at royal command, the account of the civil administration begins with a chapter on the municipalities, which are shown to be the base of the administrative pyramid both historically and actually. The rules concerning them are given in this treatise and in the 'Laws of the Indies,' published in 1681. They follow mainly a royal edict of 1563, which is accessible in print.³ The rules for their foundation may be here summarised first. Every duly commissioned *adelantado* or frontier commander was required to found at least three cities, with a province of villages depending on them. The governor of the district may decide whether the place is to be city (*ciudad*), town (*villa*), or village (*lugar*), and so to form the republic (*república*). The *adelantado* or leader of

¹ J. L. de Cisneros, *Descripción de Venezuela*, Valencia, 1764.

² J. de Solórzano Pereira, *De Jure Indiarum*, Madrid, 1629-39. *Política Indiana*, Madrid, 1649.

³ *Colección de documentos. . . América y Oceanía*, ed. by J. F. Pacheco etc., viii. 484.

discovery appoints *alcaldes*,¹ *regidores* or town-councillors, and other public officials in the first instance. Where he is not empowered to do so, the settlers may choose these officials. The *adelantado* assigns to each settler a building block in the city and a plot of land for cultivation outside. He has power to grant *encomiendas*, *i.e.* trusts or fiefs of Indians, to the settlers. Every *encomendero* is bound to build a stone house and live in the capital of the district to which his Indians belong. If any city sends out a new colony (*colonia*) only those may go who have no building site and no pasture or arable land in the city, in order to avoid depopulation.

In the absence of an authorised leader, ten married men may unite to form a settlement and may elect *alcaldes* and other officials.²

Minute directions are given for the choice of sites and for town-planning. Fronting the *plaza mayor* were built the church, the *cabildo* or town-hall, and the prison. Thence were traced straight streets intersecting at right angles and enclosing equal blocks of houses. This uniform chess-board plan, which is universal in Spanish America, atones for its monotony by its aspect of solidity, permanence, and deliberate design; contemporary accounts indicate that the constitutional form of foundation was followed with equal fidelity.

Obviously these rules apply mainly to the first foundation of towns. The right of assigning lands afterwards passed from the *adelantado* to the *cabildo*, and was later transferred from the *cabildo* to the higher authorities. The right of granting *encomiendas* was strictly limited, and in 1627 it is ordered that not even viceroys but only the Council of the Indies shall grant the rank of *ciudad* or *villa* to any settlement.

Legislation concerning the government of towns mostly

¹ The full title is *alcalde ordinario*, which distinguished these municipal officials from the *alcalde de Corte*, *alcalde mayor*, and *alcalde de la Hermandad*.

² *Leyes de Indias*, chiefly Lib. iv. and v.

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dates from the sixteenth century. The model is the Spanish city, or rather the Spanish city before the authority of the municipalities was infringed by the appointment of *corregidores* in Spain. The principal cities are to have twelve *regidores*, the smaller cities and the towns (*villas*) six. In fact these numbers were often exceeded. Every year the *cabildo* is to elect two householders as *alcaldes*, but not from their own number. No viceroy or royal official is to interfere with this free election. No *alcalde* may be re-elected until after three years' interval. The *alcaldes* possess criminal and civil jurisdiction as a court of first instance throughout the territory of the town, with an appeal to the governor, *audiencia*, or *cabildo*, according to local custom. But appeal to the *cabildo* is very unusual and, after the introduction of *corregidores*, appeal was usually made to the *corregidor*, who also exercised concurrent jurisdiction as a court of primary instance. No governor or judge is to interfere with the *alcaldes'* jurisdiction, and the dignity of their office is to be respected. The *alcaldes* sit and vote in the *cabildo*, taking precedence of all others. In the absence of the governor or his deputy, the *alcalde* presides.

The *cabildo* had the right, formally granted in 1519, of sending an attorney or agent to the king's court in Spain. In 1621 it is ordered that agents shall only be sent to court in serious cases, examined and approved by the viceroy or *audiencia*. But four years later a royal decree directs viceroys, presidents, and *audiencias* to grant permission freely for the dispatch of agents or attorneys to court, not being relations of any officials concerned. To discuss matters of general interest, the *cabildo* could summon the chief *vecinos* to a meeting known as *cabildo abierto* (open *cabildo*) or *cabildo pleno*—an assembly which in case of emergency might form a kind of constitutional convention. Upon the death of a governor, if there was no deputy governor, the senior *alcalde* was to act as interim royal governor. Solórzano and the Collection of Laws both state this without qualification. But comment is demanded.

Where there was an *audiencia*, that body assumed the interim government in case of vacancy. Moreover, it was customary that the *audiencia* or viceroy or both should provide for vacancies. Nevertheless it could and did happen that a householder, elected as a municipal magistrate for one year, should find himself acting as royal governor of an extensive province or kingdom until the arrival either of the new governor or of the *locum tenens* appointed by the *audiencia*.

The legal constitution of the *cabildos* has been sketched. It remains to touch their history, first during the period of conquest, down to about 1580, then during the more settled period which followed, down to 1810. The story naturally begins with Columbus. In 1493 he was authorised by the Crown to appoint magistrates and constables in any settlement he might make. If it were necessary to appoint town-councillors (*regidores*) and municipal officers, Columbus was to appoint them in the first instance and afterwards in every vacancy to name three persons for the king's choice.¹ Accordingly, on reaching the island of Española for the second time, Columbus founded the city of Isabela, nominating the first councillors and officials. The planting of these tiny but fully organised communities was pushed on in the Antilles. In 1509 the appointment of Diego Colón (or Columbus) as governor was notified by the Crown to the Councils (*Concejos*), justices, regidores, knights, squires and good men of all the Indies—a clear recognition of municipal authority.² During the thirteen years' government of Velasquez in Cuba (1511–24) eleven towns were founded; in Santiago, the capital, Hernan Cortés served the office of *alcalde*.

When Cortés, having been placed in command of an expedition by Velasquez, disobeyed repeated letters of recall and sailed westward in defiance of authority, he

¹ A. M. Fabié, *Ensayo histórico de legislación Española en Ultramar*, Madrid, 1896.

² *Id.*, p. 86.

and his men took the first opportunity of giving colour to their irregular position, by establishing a municipality. Cortés' first letter to the Sovereigns of Castile¹ is ostensibly from the *alcaldes* and *regidores* of the town of Vera Cruz, who had been nominated and sworn in by him, as founder of the town. These municipal functionaries inform their Sovereigns that they summoned Cortés before them, decided that his commission from Velasquez had expired, and then appointed the said Cortés as Chief Justice and Governor until the royal pleasure should be known.

This proceeding strikes one as being a vicious circle and a bold piece of effrontery on the part of Cortés. But it is also an example of the Spanish method of forming councils. Wherever a group of Spaniards settled, they at once became, as a matter of course, a constitutional government, and a handful of men in a collection of huts assumed the dignity and functions of an organised municipality. So the soldier of fortune becomes a citizen, and his *condottiere* a magistrate.

After the capture and destruction of Mexico, Cortés proceeded at once to rebuild and reorganise the place as a Spanish city. Four years afterwards, Charles V announced his approaching marriage to the council, justices, town-councillors, knights, squires, and good men of Tenus-titlan Mexico, and of all the cities, towns, and villages of the mainland called Golden Castile.² In 1530 he ordered that, in any congress of the cities of New Spain, Mexico is to have the first place and first vote, like the city of Burgos in Spain, but that no congress is to be held without royal order.³ No such congress was ever held in New Spain; but the decree is significant.

The proceedings of Pizarro in Peru follow similar lines. On obtaining a footing in the country, he chose a site for a new city, the city of San Miguel. Lands and Indians

¹ Juana and Carlos. 1

² Fabié, p. 191.

³ *Leyes*, Lib. iv. tit. 8, ley 2. A similar pre-eminence among the cities of Peru was granted to Cuzco. *Ibid.* ley 4.

were assigned to the settlers; *regidores*, *alcaldes*, and officials were appointed, and stone houses were speedily built. After the march into the interior and the captivity and death of the Inca sovereign Atahualpa, a Spanish city was established in the Andine valley of Jauja, which was for a time a kind of capital. When Cuzco, the Inca capital, was occupied, a Spanish municipality of the regular type was there established. But the most characteristic proceeding was the foundation of a Spanish capital. The minute-book of the *cabildo* of Lima from January 1535 to November 1539 has been published.¹ It contains a documentary account of the foundation of the place and of every meeting of the *cabildo* for nearly five years. Pizarro represented to the *cabildo* of Jauja that a site nearer the sea was preferable. The *cabildo* agreed, and summoned all the householders to consultation. This meeting decided that it was better to migrate in a body and make one city instead of detaching some of their number to found a second city. Commissioners were appointed to choose a site. Then twenty-eight Spaniards from Jauja and thirty from a neighbouring settlement founded, under Pizarro's leadership, the city of Lima. The *regidores* and municipal officers were first appointed by Pizarro and then assumed the authority of a regular government. At the beginning of each of the four years 1536-9, the *cabildo*, with long deliberation, elected two *alcaldes*, and also co-opted two *regidores* to serve for the year, the other *regidores* being appointed by Pizarro or by the Crown. Here is a summary of some of the proceedings of the *cabildo* during these first years:—Assignment of lands; regulations to protect Indians from negroes and from whites; the fixing of charges for tailor, shoemaker, blacksmith, armourer; receipt of letters from the Crown; appointment of an attorney at the Spanish Court; order that every householder shall plant trees; appointment of public trustees, also of a commissioner to

¹ *Libro primero de Cabildos de Lima*, ed. by E. J. Torres Saldamando. 3 vols. Paris, 1888.

correct robbery committed on Indians by vagabonds ; ordinances about mines and about assay of silver ; licence to a barber to practise surgery, but in important cases he must bring a companion of experience. Hernando Pizarro is forbidden to go to Spain, since his presence is necessary for the pacification of these kingdoms ; the lieutenant-governor is ordered to quell an Indian rising ; all householders possessing Indians are ordered to go to the war ; all the inhabitants are to be armed with sword, padded jerkin, morion, and cross-bow ; ships are licensed for Panamá, and certain persons are authorised to sail in them ; the Bishop of Cuzco is ordered not to exact fees for burying free Indians.

In short, the *cabildo* of the capital acts provisionally as a kind of comprehensive authority for the whole of the newly-acquired kingdom ; and this provisional method of government, natural and spontaneous among Spaniards, was sanctioned by royal authority. Pending the establishment of a system of royal government, the crown and the settlers co-operated, through this municipal method, in winning and holding these new lands.

The end of the period of discovery and conquest brought a change. The *cabildos* sank to a subordinate position. Viceroys or captains-general now ruled in the great capitals. In the smaller towns, capitals of provinces or of districts, royal officers were appointed, generally with the title of *corregidor* ; and these *corregidores* appointed deputies in the inferior towns within their districts. *Audiencias* or Chanceries were also established, bodies of judges and councillors. At the end of the sixteenth century there were ten *audiencias* in Spanish America, of which five were in South America. Thus an official hierarchy grew up overshadowing the local authority, but never quite superseding it. In 1575 a royal order directed the Peruvian Viceroy that, where there were paid *corregidores*, there should be no *alcaldes*. This royal order was not obeyed except in some small places where multiplicity of magistrates was

inconvenient. In general the election of *alcaldes* continued throughout Spanish America.¹ But Philip II, in the latter part of his reign, introduced the Spanish custom of selling the seats on the town council (*regimientos*) to approved persons. At first the purchasers sat for life, but later they usually had the right of transferring the office to approved persons on such terms that the Crown made some profit out of the transaction. Most of the municipal offices were also made vendible one after another, including those formerly filled through election by the *cabildo*. But the annual election of the two *alcaldes* remained throughout. In certain places some of the *regidores* were still co-opted: but from the beginning of the seventeenth century the *cabildos* consisted mainly of paid permanent officials who had bought or inherited their posts. It remains to consider the activities of these bodies.

It is impossible to summarise or dogmatise, because municipal action was generally inconspicuous, and also because the *cabildos* differed widely in customs and privileges and in local or geographical conditions. So late as 1580, a picturesque contemporary account of the foundation of Buenos Aires brings before us the founder Juan de Garay, exercising all the pristine rights of an *adelantado* among his sixty-four companions.²

On the Indian frontiers, in remote and dangerous regions, many towns were compelled throughout their history to take measures for their own defence and for the maintenance of the empire, particularly in the south of Chile and in the savage neighbourhood of the Pampa and Chaco Indians. Moreover, in many parts it took weeks to get a reply from the distant *audiencia*. Thus, in emergencies, the *cabildos* might have their own way for a time.

Accordingly, since the activities of the *cabildos* varied

¹ Solórzano, *Pol. Ind.*, Lib. v. cap. i. 25-26.

² Pedro de Angelis, *Col. de obras . . . Río de la Plata*, B. Aires, 1836-7, vol. iii. The story is repeated by J. de Vedia in *Hist. del Mundo en la edad moderna*, xxiv. 71.

much, it seems best to illustrate these activities by examples. Some important capitals, by special favour, had no *corregidor*. In Guatemala the annually-elected *alcaldes*, by a peculiar privilege, were *corregidores* of the rich and extensive valley of Guatemala,¹ which contained in 1720 seventy-seven Indian villages. In Guatemala, to avoid contention, the *alcaldes* were chosen equally from European Spaniards and Creoles, or Spaniards born in America. But every election effervesced with rivalry between these two parties. One Padilla was a candidate for 1647. The *audiencia* represented to the Captain-General that Padilla, as *alcalde* three years previously, had proved a violent and unsuitable character, and requested that the election should be freely made, but that he should not allow the election of Padilla. The election was held, and Padilla was not chosen.² The incident illustrates those conflicts of authority which pervade Spanish-American administration. The *audiencia* and the governor both tend to encroach on the functions of the *cabildo* in other places also.

The mining town of Potosí was notorious for disorder. A royal edict of 1601 directs that certain violent *regidores* shall be deprived of their offices and the purchase-money returned to them. A little later, owing to sanguinary tumults over the election of *alcaldes*, it is ordered that the *alcaldes* shall be chosen by lot.³ Drawing lots was also once enjoined at Quito early in the seventeenth century, but this expedient was rare and exceptional. The confidential report of Juan and Ulloa, who were in South America from 1735 to 1744, describes the passionate animosity between Europeans and Creoles over the election of *alcaldes*. 'These elections,' they say, 'which should establish the government and maintain the commonwealth

¹ D. Juarros, *Hist. of Guatemala*, transl. by J. Baily, London, 1823, p. 36.

² J. Milla and A. Gomez Carrillo, *Hist. de la América Central*, Guatemala, 1879-97.

³ *Col. de doc. . . . América*, xix. 145. Solórzano, *Pol. Ind.* Lib. v. cap. i. 11.

(*república*) in peace, are in fact nothing but quarrels lasting the whole year.'¹ These contested elections seem to indicate a good deal of civic activity at a time when the Indies are generally supposed to have been slumbering under the heavy blanket of Spanish maladministration.

In the province and city of Caracas municipal history is remarkable. In 1556 the governor died, leaving the interim government to the *alcaldes* of each town in its own jurisdiction. A royal order confirmed this peculiar right, which upon the death of a governor divided the country into little city-republics—another indication of the fact that the city jurisdictions were regarded as covering the whole area of Spanish settlement. In 1675, upon the death of the governor, the *audiencia* of Santo Domingo, whose jurisdiction included Caracas, sent a substitute to Caracas. But the *alcaldes* resisted this authority. The city sent an attorney to Madrid, and the royal authorities decided that, during any vacancy, the *alcaldes* of Caracas should govern the whole province, and that the *audiencia* of Santo Domingo should never name a temporary governor. In 1725 the *cabildo* of Caracas, by order of the viceroy and *audiencia* of Santa Fé, which then held jurisdiction in Caracas, deposed and imprisoned their governor. A kind of little civil war followed. Finally the deposed governor was restored by royal authority, and the members of the *cabildo* were condemned to pay a fine. In 1792 deputies from all the towns of Venezuela met in Caracas to discuss certain fiscal proposals of the governor. At that time the *cabildo* consisted of two *alcaldes*, an attorney, four officials who had bought their posts, and twelve *regidores*, of whom eight bought their posts. The other four were European Spaniards, nominated gratis by the King.²

Asunción, capital of Paraguay, was extreme in its local activity. In 1537 Charles V authorised the River Plate

¹ *Noticias secretas de América*, p. 429.

² J. Gil Fortoul, *Hist. constitucional de Venezuela*, ch. 4. Depons, *Travels*, ch. 5.

settlers to choose their governor in case of vacancy.¹ This right was freely exercised, and vacancies were created upon occasion. Then, in 1591, the *cabildo* of Asunción, as the representative authority of the settlers, elected a governor. In the seventeenth century hostility to the Jesuits of the neighbouring missions constantly agitated this *turbulenta república*, as its historian Funes calls it. In 1648, upon the death of a governor who favoured the Jesuits, the populace acclaimed as governor the bishop, a bitter enemy of the Jesuits. The bishop ruled for a year, resisted the nominee of the distant *audiencia* of Charcas, and only yielded when troops surrounded his church. Again in 1675 the *cabildo* procured the deposition of their governor and ruled in his place until the *audiencia*, after due inquiry, reinstated him. Fifty years later came even more independent action, leading to civil war. Antequera, a visiting judge sent by the *audiencia* at the request of the *cabildo*, deposed an unpopular governor and took his place. Supported by the *cabildo* and also by a *cabildo abierto* twice assembled, Antequera held the post for three years, defied reiterated letters of recall, and defeated the first force sent to eject him. His fall was followed by a little civil war, in which the elected *alcalde* headed the loyal party and hoisted the royal standard on the municipal building. Finally, in 1735, the governor of Buenos Aires pacified the country by armed force and declared obsolete the royal decree of 1537, which had authorised the settlers to fill vacancies.

Asunción was exceptional. An example from Buenos Aires illustrates the local diversities in municipal history. In 1714 the governor died. The *cabildo* of Buenos Aires claimed the interim government for their senior *alcalde*. But their claim collapsed amid the clash of arms. The post was disputed by two soldiers, one of whom had been named as military and political chief by the deceased governor. His claim was confirmed by the *audiencia* of Charcas.²

¹ Angelis, *Colección*, vol. i. ; Funes, *Hist. del Paraguay*.

² Funes, ii. 189.

The rule of the Bourbons, at all events during the latter part of the eighteenth century, brought a tightening of royal authority and a disposition to watch and check the municipalities. Some small and decayed places were deprived of their *cabildos*, and there was a reluctance to grant the rank of *villa* or *ciudad*, that is to say municipal rank, to growing places. Care was taken to safeguard the royal interest by appointing a good proportion of European Spaniards as *regidores*. This policy naturally led to some decrease in municipal activity. But the *cabildos* did not sink into lethargy. Among many examples of activity one may be quoted. In 1804 Demetrio O'Higgins, *intendente* or governor of Guamanga, reports that, owing to the contentions of parties, the elections of *alcaldes* lead to ruinous litigation. He adds the details concerning lawsuits in three successive years—1801, 1802, 1803.¹ Spanish America always preserved a strong medieval element. In the larger cities there were many religious confraternities, and the trades were organised into guilds, some of which furnished militia companies. In Lima and in Mexico was established a *consulado*, or chamber of commerce, on the model of those existing in five Spanish cities. The body of merchants annually elected a council and also a committee of three—a Prior and two Consuls. This *consulado* acted as an administrative authority in all matters concerning trade and communication, and also as a tribunal in questions of bankruptcy, freights, contracts and similar matters. These two *consulados* appointed deputies in other places. But in the later eighteenth century separate *consulados* were established in the chief capitals.

May I end by glancing at municipal history in one region, the kingdom of Chile? In 1541 the *conquistador* Valdivia, who was duly commissioned by Pizarro, set up, with the invocation of the Trinity, a stake to mark the *plaza mayor* of the city of Santiago. Placing his hand on

¹ *Noticias secretas de América*, p. 664.

the cross of his sword, he swore as a *caballero hijodalgo* to sustain the city in the name of his Majesty. He then administered the oath of office to the *regidores*, whom he, as founder of the town, nominated.¹ The council so formed then appointed Valdivia governor of Chile ; and he justified the appointment by founding six other cities or towns. In the early days the *cabildo* of Santiago exercised the kind of independent authority of which Lima furnished an example. But the vicissitudes of municipal history appear best in the southern cities—Concepción, on the borders of the Araucanian Indians, and Valdivia, a European outpost set far to the south in the country of the barbarians. Concepción was twice destroyed by the Indians and twice restored. Valdivia was destroyed in 1603 and restored in 1645. The city of Osorno, further south again, was founded in 1558, but destroyed by the Indians forty years later. Two centuries later it was restored by Maurice O'Higgins, captain-general of Chile, who made a treaty with the Araucanians and set up among them this Spanish outpost, which gave him his title, Marquis of Osorno. In 1655 the Spaniards in Concepción deposed Acuña, the captain-general, who had proved incompetent in the Araucanian War. The *cabildo* and chief householders elected another. Acuña was at first restored, but then removed again by the viceroy. Years after, the viceroy was censured by the Council of the Indies for removing him. The legal process concerning the affair covered 14,000 sheets. The case illustrates the necessity of local action and the consequent continuance of civic activity on the outskirts of empire.

In Santiago the foundation of the Mint in 1747 and of the University in 1750 was chiefly due to the *cabildo*. But in 1758 the captain-general of Chile reported that the *cabildo* of the capital was incomplete in number. He took measures to restore it. However, fifteen years later

¹ C. Gay, *Documentos . . . de Chile*. Paris, 1846, i. 212. The matter which follows is mostly taken from Barros Arana, *Hist. de Chile*.

it was officially reported that the *cabildo* was slack about its business, neglecting the provision of food and water, and that the members did not attend the sessions. Yet Barros Arana, the historian of Chile, declares that the *cabildos*, although reduced in power and importance in the eighteenth century, preserved much public spirit and utility. And he quotes another republican author, Andrés Bello: 'The *cabildos* never abdicated the position of representatives of the people, and often defended the interests of their communities.'

This paper closes where the greatest chapter in the history of the *cabildos* begins. In 1806 Beresford occupied Buenos Aires. The viceroy fled. The *cabildo* organised resistance and reconquest, and then summoned a Junta, which deposed the viceroy and appointed in his place another, who was recognised by the king. This was the prelude to a new phase of history. For when authority fell into confusion through Napoleon's aggression and the captivity of the Spanish royal family, and when nobody knew whom to obey, then the *cabildos* everywhere were the one constituted, regular, and well-understood authority which provided organisation and a means of local action and of self-government. In most places the *cabildo* acted as the nucleus of a Junta or Congress, through calling others into council in the manner already described. Such municipal action was everywhere the first step, and also the most orderly and dignified step, in the formation of independent republican government. Thus in the *cabildos* the Spaniards of America possessed a means of taking measures for themselves and initiating the control of their own destinies.