

[Alexandro Malaspina to Ramón Ximénez \(\\*\)](#)

Cadiz, July 17 1789

Rereading your much appreciated [letters], in which now the candid address, now the soundness of thought and principle, and now the delicacy proper to a person of education seem to compete for prominence, delights me more than it does young Fabio, who, at this point unheeding of my requests, my commands, and the promptings even of his own spirit and conscience, confounds together the great advantages of a fine education with an unutterable love for idleness and superficiality (1). I leave it to him, should he read this letter – which before I seal it I will put in his hands – to justify himself with his mentor, his friend, his second father, in respect of the conduct he has demonstrated up to now. Perhaps he will then pay attention to the advice he has received and the need to put it into practice with due commitment, perhaps to the information he has been and will be given about our expedition, perhaps to the importance of taking advantage of the eight months that have passed since his academic studies ended, and perhaps even to the idea that, if he is judged worthy among the excellent officers among whom he has the good fortune to serve, they will vouch for him in the face of my well-intended accusations in the presence of a judge their respect for whom must surely prevent both accuser and accused from making any false or equivocal representation.

I make no complaint about his moral conduct, though in truth his idleness, the foundation of all the vices, is its direct polar opposite; on another point, he constantly avoids my company, which is sought by many other youths absolutely undeserving of general approval; yet although he doesn't attend the sacraments very often, and although his love for others is liable to evaporate at any moment, there are still good principles rooted in his heart. His idleness is nothing more than a false front, which can easily be dissolved if he truly so desires.

My method [of mentoring Fabio] – which follows yours, esteemed Father Abbot – is to cultivate as far as possible a good foundation of religion, coupled with true Christian charity; and in regards to his profession, the sure understanding that activity and practice, rather than study and theory, are the more necessary for distinguishing oneself in this service, the fewer there are who are so inclined; let me assure you that I note with much regret – through the love I profess for the service and for the nation that has adopted me – that [our young officers ], too inclined to the natural quietude that long hours of study have instilled in them, forget that the only true school for a mariner is hardship, the only one which sustains the vigilance and courage which come from rightly estimating danger, the only means of rivalling the powerful English nation.

But let us now move on to the expedition, in which, honoured Father Abbot, you have played so essential a part for us, and which at this time would already be under sail, except for the need to wait for a ship from Le Havre with some meteorological and chemical items sent from Paris. By the way, we received today the shipment you were kind enough to send us, and of which the books as well as the instruments will be the property of our Fabio, as long as you think this is useful; if not I shall buy them. It seems that he may need the money more than the books. Here is a brief account of our ideas and our resources. The vessels are of excellent design. We have tested them for five days, with the builder (2), various generals and Don Ulloa on board. Everyone was extremely happy with them, and in them we would confidently undertake whatever action we wished, given the fine characteristics they displayed. Their names are [Descubierta](#) and [Atrevida](#). They can carry twenty-two

cannon in the battery and four on the bridge; for our convenience, however, they will have only fourteen in the battery and two on the bridge. As to our general ideas, or rather the objects of the voyage, while I do not include here a full account, I can advise you notwithstanding that the goal of a new search for the Northwest Passage, if it ever takes place, will be adopted on new orders, which we do not yet have, and these will be founded on recent news (3), and assigned to us conditionally in the hope, arising from thoughtful conjecture, of finding more favourable conditions than those against which Captains Cook and Clerke struggled.

Whether or not the missing instruments arrive, we shall depart before the end of the month, and it seems to me that we shall be able to have forwarded to Italy the reports we send to Europe at the following approximate times. The letters will be written next October and January at Lima; in March and June following in Guayaquil; in January and February of '91 in Mexico, and in April of that and the following year, to be sent by way of England and Spain, in Canton and Manila. We would be very happy to receive letters from Europe at the Cape of Good Hope at the end of '92 or perhaps at the end of '93, according to your best advice.

We have been extremely busy with the use of fixed air to aerate the water; with the eudiometer, we shall undertake various experiments concerning the deterioration of the air exhaled by the crew in different climates (4), and also the evaporation from putrefying food. No more shall we neglect any of the physical and astronomical experiments that occur to us, whether or not they are directly relevant to our purposes.

Then, as to the kindness with which the observers in Brera have suggested to us some astronomical problems and at the same time offered to help with their solution, we have received their tables, in particular those for this year, during which the small difference in [specifying?] the meridians between the Patagonian coast and Europe will make it difficult for us to work together. Those most important to us are the lunar observations, so that we may correct the calculations of error in the tables; these will come into play when we ourselves are observing occultations of the stars by the moon, and though in this work we endeavour never to omit a single observation, the considerable number made at the Brera Observatory, one of the best known in Europe today, will be of the greatest utility.

I very much like the idea, for finding the difference in the level of the two seas, of using a barometer enclosed within another tube of the same degree of heat, along with capillary tubes. The thousand demands on our attention now will perhaps prevent us from starting here, but then it is indifferent whether we relate the results we seek to observations made in advance or those made after the fact.

I now have before me the excellent memoir of the abbot de Castro (5) and we greatly appreciate the receipt of Carver's journal (6), each of which in its turn will be of great utility. How grateful I should have been to have with me as chaplains two scientific countrymen who, through their knowledge, their virtues and their writings, would serve both as adornments to the nation that produced them, and as instructive companions for our officers. I assure you that if the new reign had not begun so recently (7), I would have dared to propose this, and perhaps it would have been granted; it now seems to me axiomatic that the recall [of the Jesuits] will launch an era of good fortune for the nation, as the first step towards the spread, in both the capital and the provinces, of good education (8).

I end now (so as not to bore you) by reassuring you that I will not lose sight of the education, so well begun, of our Fabio, who goes from strength to strength, nor of the more detailed news of the voyage that it is possible to send you, nor of the cabinet in Cremona (9). Please give my greetings and gratitude to Marquis Gian Francesco and his son Daniele; I remind you again, though I believe it is superfluous, with what esteem and true respect and gratitude I am and will always be, as long as you – esteemed Father Abbot Ximénez – do me honour of so regarding myself, your

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(1) This is only the first letter in which Malaspina complains about Fabio's behaviour. In all probability the truth lies halfway between the disillusionment of the Commander and the repeated declarations of the young man of his desire for honour.

(2) Probably meant is either Ship's Captain Fermín de Sesma or Engineer Tomás Muñoz. However, Malaspina himself was not stingy with instructions and suggestions for the two of them about the corvettes; see his letters, of respectively January 2 and May 22 1789 in P. Novo y Colson, *Viaje político-científico alrededor del mundo por las corbetas Descubierta y Atrevida al mando de los capitanes de navío D. Alejandro Malaspina y Don José de Bustamante y Guerra desde 1789 a 1794*, Madrid, Imprenta de la Viuda e Hijos de Abienzo, 1885, pp. 19-22.

(3) The order to carry out the search for the Northwest Passage will arrive in 1791, while the expedition is in Acapulco; it will indeed be based on "recent news", namely the discovery of a copy of the account written by the sixteenth-century navigator, Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado; see M. Fernández de Navarrete, "Examen histórico-crítico de los viajes y descubrimientos apócrifos del Capitán Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado, Juan de Fuca and Admiral Bartolomé de Fonte," in M. Salvá & P. Sáinz de Baranda (eds.), *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España*, Madrid, Imprenta de la Viña de Calero, 1849, vol. XX, pp. 71-161.

(4) Frequent experiments were made using the eudiometer of Fontana. At that time, the theory of "noxious air" was widely accepted as the main causal explanation of the illnesses to which sailors were subject.

(5) Malaspina is here referring to the former Jesuit, Rafael Córdoba de Castro, who, like almost all religious of the dissolved order, lived in exile in Italy. Córdoba de Castro (1712-1798) was appointed second commissary of Fr. Lope Luis de Altamirano, first commissary of Fr. General Ignacio Visconti for the execution of the Treaty of Limits concerning the Jesuit withdrawal from Paraguay (1751-1756); his authority extended over all the Jesuit missions in Paraguay, Peru and Quito. He then travelled to Buenos Aires with the expedition of the Marquis of Valdelirios. Returning to Andalusia in 1757, he held various positions in his order, until – in 1767 – the issuance of the decree expelling the Jesuits from the Spanish Empire. He has left us many works, both published and unpublished, and many of these are stored in the library of the University of Seville. In 1798, in accordance with the royal order by which Charles IV allowed the exiled Jesuits to return to Spain, he went back to his native land (personal communication from Fr. Francisco de Borja Medina SJ, to whom grateful

thanks). Rafael Córdoba de Castro not only sent the expedition memoirs and books he owned, but also explained in which archives in the Americas there could be found other documents of interest to the expedition. See M.D. Higuera Rodríguez, *Catálogo crítico*, vol. III, 1994, p. 109-110.

(6) Jonathan Carver made a voyage to North America in 1787. His account (*Travels through the interior parts of North America*) was published the following year.

(7) Carlo IV ascended the throne in December 1788.

(8) In this somewhat obscure passage, Malaspina is saying, in essence, that if he had suggested to the government the recall of the expelled Jesuits to Spain, where their learning could have been of benefit to the nation, his suggestion might have been accepted.

(9) Referring to the cabinet of natural history that Ximénez had setup in the palace of the Ala family. A damaged inventory of this cabinet is preserved in [ACAM](#).

[Original Italian text](#) courtesy of the [Centro di Studi Malaspiniani](#), Mulazzo, Italy; notes by Dario Manfredi; translation by John Black.