



# Spanish Renaissance poet revealed as a spy

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A manuscript written by Garcilaso de la Vega, the Renaissance poet and soldier, has revealed that he was also a spy  
ALAMY

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Garcilaso de la Vega, Spain's great Renaissance poet and soldier, who inspired Spanish literary giant Miguel de Cervantes, was also a spy for Emperor Charles V, a new study has found.

A manuscript written in his hand in 1534 has revealed that he gathered intelligence on the military expeditions of Barbarossa, the Ottoman corsair and admiral who was then the scourge of the Mediterranean, and reported it directly to the emperor.

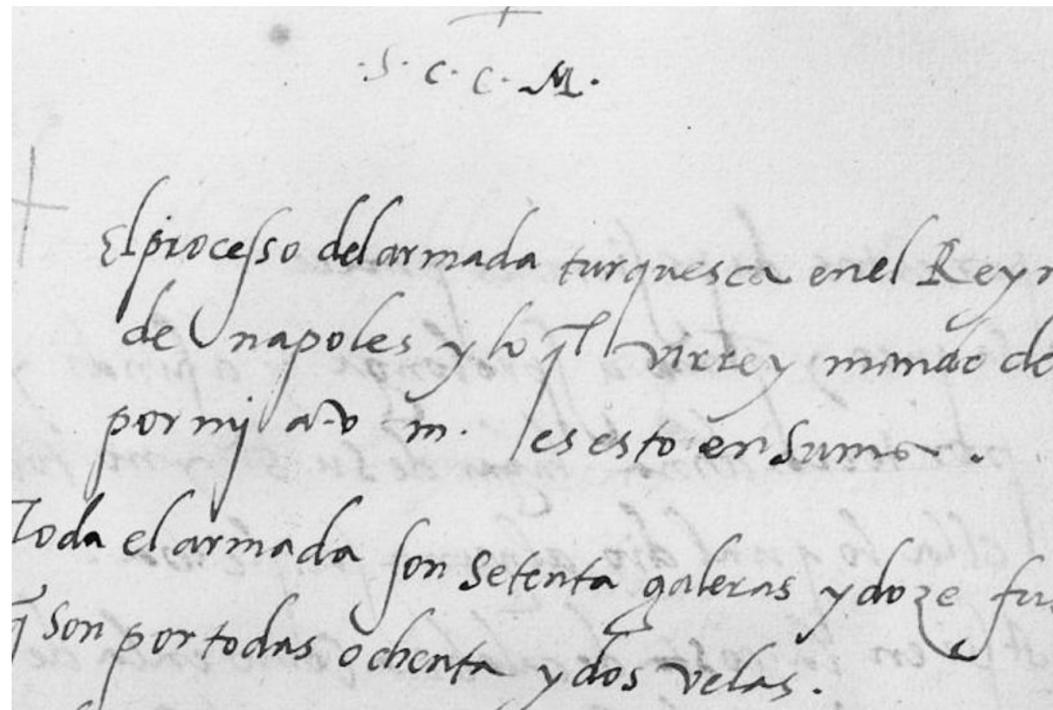
Garcilaso also conveyed sensitive information about how much [support Charles enjoyed](#) in Italy, where he was engaged in a power struggle with Francis I, the French king and his arch-rival. The study, which was led by Eugenia Fosalba, a professor of Spanish literature at Girona University, will soon be published by the Spanish Royal Academy, also concludes that he passed on confidential messages about [the intrigues surrounding Pope Clement VII](#).

“That was a [time of great tension](#) and Garcilaso was at the centre of everything: not only in the midst of a rich literary moment but also in the very centre of the geopolitical board,” said Fosalba.

The manuscript records details of a large expedition launched by Barbarossa against the Habsburg empire in the western Mediterranean, which the poet-soldier passed on to the monarch. Garcilaso was then based in Naples, among the entourage of Pedro de Toledo, the Spanish viceroy, who had wrongly predicted that the Ottoman fleet would not attack that year. Barbarossa set out from Constantinople with 80 galleys and attacked the Italian coast, including ports in the Gulf of Naples.

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“They passed the lighthouse of Messina and came along the coast of Calabria where they looted and burned Santo Lochito [San Lucido] and took the castle and did great damage,” wrote Garcilaso. “They found the helpless conditions of the local people and those whom the viceroy had sent to guard the place and burned the six galleys that were being made there and part of the land.”



A fragment of handwritten text by Garcilaso de la Vega, recording information he had given to Emperor Charles V about Turkish military attacks  
NOT KNOWN

Fosalba said that such was the sensitive nature of the intelligence that Garcilaso did not write it down until after he had personally communicated to the emperor. “Those quickly-written notes that we have now brought to light are the reports that he presents to Carlos V after giving an oral account of all the secret information collected,” she added.

Garcilaso met the emperor at his court in Palencia in northern Spain, where he was sent by the viceroy to explain the defensive failure against Barbarossa. He may have used the encounter with Charles to obtain a pardon as he had left the country in disgrace after a breach of protocol, when he attended a wedding that had not received the emperor’s approval.

The diplomatic mission appears to have worked, as he soon accompanied the emperor on several military campaigns. When Garcilaso was fatally wounded while besieging a small bastion in France in 1536, the emperor showed no mercy to the garrison when it fell. He hanged its twelve soldiers, whom he had promised not to send to the galleys as the terms of their surrender, and cut the ears off two boys.