

Spanish army attitudes to the Irish at Kinsale

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A close examination of the Spanish soldiers' opinions and criticisms of this particular military operation, of their specific perception of the Irish territory and of the Gaelic war tactics, can help us not only to better understand the results of this operation but also to outline and define the general Spanish army's position on anything involving the 'Irish question' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The topic is not easy as traditionally military history has not borne in mind 'feelings' and 'perceptions' but rather 'facts'. The military context is seen as subordinated to well-known rules, in the form of a rigid hierarchy wherein the commanding officers and their soldiers simply carry out the orders of the 'Establishment'. It is a history often presented in a manner reminiscent of the French firing squad depicted by Goya in his famous work on the executions in Madrid on 2 May 1808. These soldiers, having their backs turned to us, have no faces, since they do not matter as individuals: they are only a 'death machine' carrying out orders. Nevertheless, if we had asked each of these anonymous French soldiers about their stay in a poor, hard, dry land like Castile, where they had to confront an 'enemy' who knew the territory intimately and carried out a guerrilla warfare which was impossible to stop, what would they have replied?

Since I started to study the Kinsale expedition I have asked myself what the Spanish soldiers landed in Ireland may have thought in such a different theatre of war, far from the scenarios they were used to. What did they think of their Irish allies? Could the attitude of the Spanish soldiers in some way have affected the final result of the battle in 1601?

Before I give an answer to these questions, or at least try to, let me outline a general conclusion, which could be softened in some of its extremes but which, generally speaking, I think would fit the Spanish army's theoretical position on Ireland and the Irish. The army was not interested in carrying out a direct attack in Ireland, and even less so in view of the conditions under which the operation was projected in 1601. This attitude was based on both external and internal reasons. The former did not involve Ireland but rather the general Spanish strategy in Europe and the Spanish monarchy's domestic exhaustion. The internal reasons, on the other hand, relate to Ireland itself.

Ireland not a primary military target

As regards the external reasons, I think that the Spanish army never considered Ireland as a primary military target. This was particularly evident in 1601. When Philip III ascended the throne in 1598, he required the monarchy's military engine to make a huge war effort on different fronts. Besides Kinsale, Spanish armies attacked Algiers and besieged Ostend. This citadel on the Flanders coast resisted from June 1601 until September 1604, and reminded the Spaniards of their real political, economic, military and religious priorities in northern Europe. Each time the Spanish officers reported the waste of time and resources in Ireland, they drew attention to the -ritical

situation in the Low Countries. For no less than 80 years—from 1568, when the insurrection broke out, until the full recognition of the Dutch Provinces in 1648—Madrid's greatest problem in Europe was the Low Countries.

Nevertheless, this new war effort placed huge demands on the Spanish army after the 42-year reign of Philip II, during which it had experienced only five years of peace. When the old king died in 1598, the once-beating 'heart of the monarchy', i.e. Castile, began to show some worrying symptoms of weakness. The routine precarious state of the Treasury—which eventually resulted in a general stoppage of payments in 1607—was now exacerbated by a serious and progressive demographic crisis. The plague devastated Castilian lands between 1596 and 1602, causing the deaths of 500,000 people and warning the king of Spain, in a macabre way, that the traditional recruiting region of the Spanish army was about to be exhausted and that new soldiers needed to be enlisted from new territories in Ireland, for instance.

In these circumstances, and we are now considering the Spanish soldiers' opinions and ideas about Ireland and the Irish, the lack of both human and material resources to conduct the military

operation in 1601 was even more evident. Even before Kinsale there had been some criticism of the way in which the Spanish court dealt with these important matters. In 1597 the naval commander and *adelantado* of Castile, Martín de Padilla, did not disguise his relief when he realised he could not land with a fleet at first bound for the British Isles. As he went into the Channel, the worsening of the weather obliged them to give up the assault. Faithful to tradition, Padilla repeated the well-known Spanish motto according to which 'against God's will you cannot or should not do anything'. Nevertheless, immediately afterwards he warned Philip II that

'if Your Majesty decides to carry on with this affair of England, please arrange to order and organise everything in time and everything should be right for such an important purpose. Thus, we could carry out extremely well and once and for all the whole operation. In this way, and with God's help, we will achieve what we really want. If not, it will be more advisable to make peace with the enemy who, with such advantages, make war against us.'¹

Insufficient numbers

Doubts about *socorro* (aid) to Ireland, along with the army's general criticism about the lack of resources, did not end, but neither did they help to postpone a military operation which Philip III wanted to carry out as soon as possible. A month before the departure of the armada, Juan Fernández de Velasco, *condestable* of Castile, reported that the estimated number of regular forces - about 6,000 - was insufficient; he calculated that a number between at least 10,000 and 12,000 would be more adequate. Below this number the operation would be, according to Velasco, highly dangerous.²

Juan del Águila himself, the commander of the infantry, confirmed the doubts about the number of soldiers, adding that not even the money was sufficient and 'ammunition is not enough, and without munitions you cannot fight. I plead Your Majesty for more ammunition and for a larger number of soldiers, as Your Highness told, since those who are about to leave are not sufficient'.³

Nevertheless the armada left Lisbon on 2 September 1601. On board there were not 10,000 soldiers, nor even the 'at least' 6,000 first estimated: only 4,464 soldiers went on board.⁴ Then a **storm** caused the separation from the rest of the fleet of two galleons and six reserve ships, with 1,075 men eventually returning with Zubiara to Spain. Following this unexpected loss, Juan del Águila could only rely on 3,700

men in Kinsale.⁵ Soon the situation appeared hopeless. Kinsale was besieged by 6,000 English soldiers and 500 cavalrymen, whereas 'the soldiers I am really in command of', Águila informed the king, 'consist of 2,500 men, naked and so inexperienced that it is a piteous thing to see'. They were also running out of supplies, 'and everyday more and more of them are dying because of hunger and exhaustion caused by many watches'.⁶ Besides, Spanish units were not exactly the monarchy's best task forces: 'most of these soldiers need everyday practice and Del Aguila makes them train as they could not even shoot with an arquebus'.⁷ In Spain the news about the situation in Kinsale would increase the criticism of this kind of chaotic military campaign.

The veteran Martín de Padilla was scathing not only about the idea that sending the refitted Zubiaur back to Ireland constituted a 'reinforcement' but also about the overall strategy of the campaign. His remarks in early December 1601 were eerily prophetic:

'I refer to both men and stores, for I do not consider as a reinforcement the expedition now being sent under Zubiaur. The reinforcement needed is one that will end the business once and for all, and not dribblets like sips of broth, that will only prolong the agony, and allow the invalid to die after all. Little reinforcements will only cause the loss to be greater, and will give the Queen an opportunity for sending with case larger aid than can go from Spain. If the Irish do not see the Spaniards the stronger party, even for a week, they will not declare themselves against the Queen. Unless they do so declare themselves, we shall not be able to finish our task with so small a force. The landing of the finen where they were landed was a great drawback, as I have already stated. If with God's help the Earls be able to effect a junction with Don Juan del Águila, a good result may be hoped for, but there is a great fear that they may be defeated on the way, which would be a grievous thing, for the loss of all these good Catholics would have been brought about in consequence of the succour sent being so small and landed in an inconvenient place. I have been much grieved for some years past to see that, from motives of economy, expeditions are undertaken with such small forces, that they principally serve to irritate our enemies, rather than to punish them. The worst of it is that wars thus become chronic, and the expense and trouble resulting from long continued warfare are endless.'⁸

Hostile conditions

In another report from Kinsale, Juan del Águila mentioned the harsh Irish winter as one of the causes of the Spanish soldiers' sufferings.⁹ The Spanish began the operation in September 1601 and it continued until January 1602. What could be called the 'Irish scenic dread', as experienced by the Spaniards, can also be explained by considering the harsh environment and a territory mostly unknown to the Spaniards, as well as the apparent chaos and violence that ruled the country. Already in 1597 Pedro López de Soto, the future Kinsale *veedor* (the Spanish officer in charge of controlling the finances in a military operation), had warned about the evident logistic difficulties of a direct attack in Ireland, a 'miserable' territory and difficult to defend, 'so I do not know who can give advice to carry on a military campaign in Ireland'.¹⁰

Strange, extraordinary stories about the island had been circulating in Spain since 1580. In that year 200 Spanish and 400 Italian soldiers had taken part in the Smerwick papal operation. After an intense naval bombardment, the English broke into the fortress and slaughtered the survivors: only six Spaniards and nine Italians survived. In his report, Bastiano di San Giuseppi, the colonel in command of the campaign, accused the Irish of not providing the supplies nor a sufficient number of men, as agreed in order to defend Smerwick, despite the 5,000 ducats given them.¹¹ Official reports were sent to Madrid and Rome, but the dreadful tales about what had happened went even further.¹² Andrés López de Valencia, a military officer, had met some of the Italian survivors. What they related persuaded him to address a dispatch to Philip II in 1596 in order to dissuade the king from any military attempt in Ireland.¹³



Philip III (1598-1621) wished to continue the imperial and religious policies of his father Philip II but was constrained by lack of money. (Museo del Prado).

The confirmation that to set foot on Irish coasts would literally mean losing their heads reached the Spanish with the Armada of 1588. Certainly some Irish lords protected the castaways, but the survivors told stories of natives sacking the ships and their crews. The captain Francisco de Cuéllar was grateful to the Irish for their aid, but he concluded that

‘in this kingdom there is no justice nor law. Everyone does exactly what he wishes. These savages loved us as they knew we had come there to fight against the heretics and that we are such great enemies of them [the heretics]. Had it not been for them, who took care of us as much as of themselves, there would not be one of us left. For this reason, we held them in great esteem, although they were the first to rob those of us who had landed alive and to strip us naked. These savages stole from us and from the thirteen ships of the Armada-a great number of very important people arrived there with those ships, and many of them drowned-a great number of jewels and money.’¹⁴

The Spanish army's impression of Ireland as a hostile territory was also evident in 1601. When Philip III demanded from his viceroy in Lisbon a Portuguese *tercio* to reinforce the Spanish positions at Kinsale, Castel-Rodrigo replied that it was almost impossible, as Ireland was, 'according to the soldiers that returned from there, a very harsh and poor land'. Some months after Kinsale, the king wrote again to Lisbon, reproaching his viceroy for the lucky coincident that come commanding oficers did not board ship to Ireland on the pretext that they were 'ill' and with the licence of the viceroy himself. Besides, an Irish informer reponed at the court that

'he heard from an Irish pilot of the galleon *San Pedro* that they drilled the ship to let water in and, in this way, they could return to Spain without following the leading ship. And also that the crew was so reluctant to go to Ireland that if damaging the ship was not possible, they would wait for bad weather to return to Spain.'¹⁵



Spanish soldiers on the march from a tiled mural in the Palace of Viso del Marques.

The condition of the 840 Spanish soldiers who arrived from Kinsale at La Coruña in March 1602 confirmed the harshness of this traumatic experience: 'they all are naked and so weak that it will be necessary to caker care of them, as their misery is extreme and they are in danger of death'.¹⁶

Caracena, the viceroy in Galicia, also wrote to the king that 'I have no words to express the illness, nakedness and starvation of the survivors'.¹⁷ In May 1602, between 60 and 70 men were already in hospital, and those who were leaving it were still in a bad physical and mental condition.¹⁸

Irish military tactics

This image of Ireland shaped by Spanish military experience also influenced the attitude towards the Irish allied forces in Kinsale. In practice, the peripheral character of Gaelic society revealed itself in military tactics and in the mutability of the Irish policy. During the last decade of the sixteenth century, reconnaissance by Spanish military advisers to Ireland increased considerably as the possibility of a landing took shape. The Spanish studied the Irish military potential and classified their military tactics as guerrilla. In 1596 Alonso Cobos reported back that:

'as the enemy attacks them in squadrons, the Irish wait for them in narrow passages . . . mountains or in woods ... They need veteran soldiers to teach them how to form squadrons, as they are not used to this war tactic nor to the rest of those things which are so common in the military world. I have seen only one soldier who has served Your Majesty in Flanders for ten years. He is a gentleman and a very good soldier and he is very curious about every kind of military matters which he understands very well. He can also speak Spanish very well, as he has always served in the Spanish Tercios in Flanders . . . He is called Ugo David Hugo Boye MacDavitt], and all the lords of that kingdom ask his opinion.'¹⁹

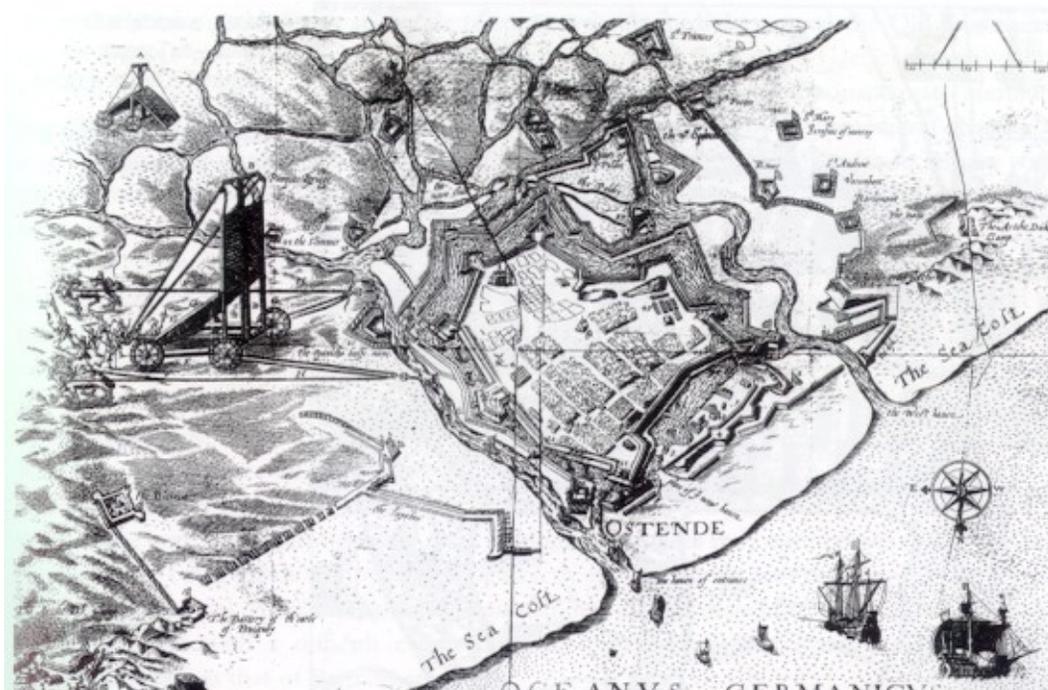
The defeat of Kinsale was, according to the Spanish, the logical consequence of a tactic inadequate to the needs of modern warfare. 'They make war [O'Neill, O'Donnell] as the outlaws and bandits of Catalonia and Calabria do', wrote Diego Brochero, the naval commander of Kinsale, to the king. So the Irish chaotic retreat from Kinsale was the result of their lack of organisation and of military discipline:

'If the Irish had resisted just half an hour without withdrawing that soon, we would have won a renowned victory, and this tirade we would have expelled once and for all the English from Ireland, because the Irish were much more numerous than the enemy. But there is no discipline among the Irish. They have made war so far by ambushes in tough territories, like people without order as they do not know how to make a squadron. And in this way they made war through eight years, giving false hopes to the Spanish.'²⁰



An arquebusier loading his weapon.

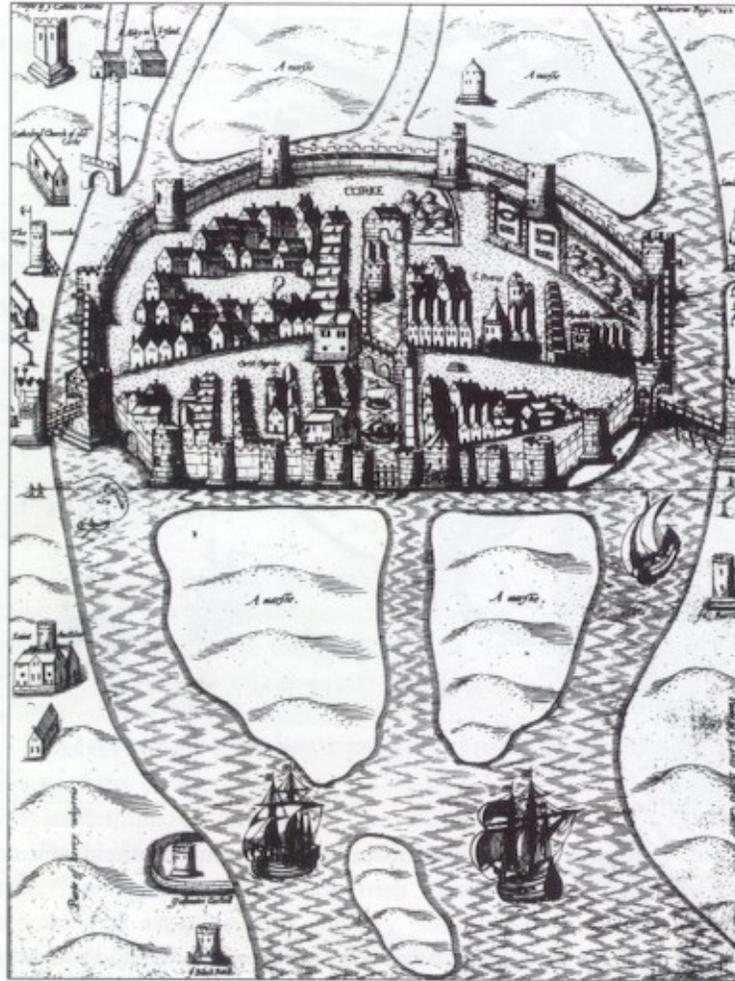
Old English problem



Spain's main military concern remained the Netherlands in spite of the Irish venture. The massive siege of Ostend depicted here, lasted from 5 July 1601 till 20 September 1604.

However, the result of the battle itself-dramatic though it was-did not irritate the Spanish as much as the lack of support fi-om the Irish southern coastal cides. In fact, Mateo de Oviedo, the Spanish Franciscan expert on Irish affairs, had pleaded the idea of heading the Armada for the south as there was the possibility of a general Catholic insurrection incited by the arrival of the Spanish. López de Soto accused the Old English of missing the opportunity of `showing their Catholicity'. Thus, while Gaelic lords of Munster-such as the O'Sullivan Beare or the O'Driscolls-voluntarily surrendered their castles of Bearhaven, Baltimore and Castlehaven to the Spanish, in Cork

`not even a house was given to the Counts [O'Neill, O'Donnell], not even in the narre of Your Majesty [...]. In order to punish this lacé of good will and to warn the other Irish lands (which seem to be always on the winner's side), we should strictly prohibir the trade between Ireland and all the territories under Spanish rule, under penalty of death and of the loss of their property. This has to be made public in every port and, most of all, in Ireland itself, so that they have enough time to correct their behaviour.'²¹



Cork city, as depicted in *Pacata Hibernia* - the Spaniards were disappointed in the lack of support they received from the overwhelmingly Catholic towns of Ireland. (Neptune Gallery)

Del Águila also complained that, in spite of the large number of English forces gathered in Kinsale, Irish towns did not lift a finger:

‘the small towns and fortresses could have risen in arms [as the English -were engaged in besieging Kinsale], since they found themselves alone with their inhabitants and the people living in the surroundings, but they didn't. On the contrary, they supported the [English] Viceroy as much as they could.’²²

We should not forget, however, that in the Irish southern port cities, such as Cork itself, an age-old tradition of colonial loyalty, although of political independence from London, still endured.

Therefore it was not that easy to decide to support the Spanish. In general, the Old English were not inclined to give up their loyalty to the English crown in favour of a Gaelic leader like Hugh O'Neill nor of a foreign power like Spain, especially if we consider the inadequate number of regular forces landed in Ireland. Since these cities were protected by their medieval charters and a solid municipal administration, the Old English were going to fight in order to remain within the system, exploiting the Dublin parliament as a means of dialogue/tension between the English king and his kingdom.

I will conclude by saying that it is my opinion that the Spanish army did not willingly agree to the *socorro* of Ireland in 1601, as they were well aware that it was a very hazardous and rash **operation** which required much greater human and material resources than had at first been estimated. The results of Kinsale proved what the Spanish already knew-that is, the harshness of the Irish environment. At the same time, the criticism of the Irish among some of the members of the expedition reached extreme levels. Drastic opinions were also exploited in order to hide Spanish incompetence and to divert attention from their inadequacy. A secret 'blacklist' of the mistakes and false steps made during the campaign was drawn up by the Spanish authorities, but it was not a very long list. Among the most astounding mistakes they omitted was that of the order for departure being given without knowing exactly where to land. Nor did they include the final choice of Juan del Águila as infantry commander of the expedition, a man of undeniable capabilities but with a difficult character which had caused him many problems in other campaigns, such as that of Brittany in 1591.

Yet in spite of accepting with little enthusiasm la *jornada de Irlanda-or* maybe for that very reason-the negative consequences of Kinsale affected the army directly. The Spanish court reckoned the expedition to be a very bad result, and moreover, as regards the lack of discipline and continual internal conflicts, a huge scandal. Various commanding officers, such as el maestro *de campo*, Antonio Centeno, were suspended from their duties and were urgently summoned to answer many accusations at court. This happened also to General-Admiral Pedro de Zubiaur and to the *veedor* of the expedition himself, Pedro López de Soto.²³ So, by what right could the Spaniards blame the Irish when their own orders and countermands led to complete chaos?

1. AGS, *E-Corona de Castilla*, leg. 180, n.º 'Letter from the count of Santa Gadea to the king. From the captain galleon in La Coruña, 28 October 1597'.
2. AGS, *E-Negociación de Inglaterra*, leg. 2511. The Council of State to the king, Valladolid, 4 August 1601.
3. AGS, GA, leg. 3145, n.º. Juan del Águila to Philip III, Lisbon, 16 August 1601.
4. AGS, *E-Negociación de Inglaterra*, leg. 840, f. 157.
5. AGS, GA, leg. 3145, n.º. A report from Diego Brochero de Anaya, Cascaes (Portugal), 6 November 1601.
6. *Ibid.*, leg. 3144, n.º. Letter from Juan del Águila to the king, Kinsale, October 1601. It was received in Valladolid on 25 November.
7. *Ibid.*, leg. 3143, n.º. A report on the state of Don Juan del Águila in Kinsale.
8. AGS, *E-Negociación de Inglaterra*, leg. 840, f. 16. The *adelantado* to Philip III, Puerto de Santa María, 10 December 1601.
9. AGS, GA, leg. 3144, n.º. Juan del Águila to the king, Kinsale, October 1601.
10. AGS, *E-Corona de Castilla*, leg. 180, n.º. 'On the next military assault to be done, on the supplies, money and other necessary things'. Pedro López de Soto, army *veedor*, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 23 June 1597.
11. AGS, GA, leg. 195, f. 230. 'A report on the Irish fort by Bastiano di San Giuseppi', Naples, 1 August 1586.
12. *Ibid.*, leg. 237, f. 49: 'A description of the loss of the fort in Ireland, made by the captains, officers and soldiers under the command of Bastiano di San Giuseppi', in a prison in England, the last days of December 1580; ASV, *Fondo Borghese, serie III*, 129-I), pp 253-7: a Spanish anonymous account on Smerwick; ASV, *Fondo Borghese, serie III*, 129-1), pp 155-7: 'A report by Niccolo Fagan, Irish priest, 28 November 1591'; ASV, *Segr. Stato, Spagna*, Vol. 29, ff 21-4: Official report on the operation from Bastiano di San Giuseppi to the Holy See, Voltan, 26 December 1580.
13. AGS, GA, leg. 459, f. 336. Andrés López de Valencia to the king, 'On the Armada that is ready to set sail and he advises not to go to Ireland', Lisbon, 26 September 1596.
14. Real Academia de la Historia (Madrid), Colección Luis de Salazar y Castro, N-7, ff 58-67. Letter from Francisco de Cuéllar on the Armadas disaster.
15. AHN, E-Libro 79-d, ff 108-9. Philip III to the marquis of Castel-Rodrigo, Tordesillas, 4 December 1602.
16. AGS, GA, leg. 601, n.º. The officer Legorreta to Philip III, La Coruña, 10 March 1602.
17. *Ibid.*, leg. 590. Luis Carrillo de Toledo, count of Caracena, to Philip III, La Coruña, 9 March 1602.
18. *Ibid.*, leg. 601. Caracena to Philip III, La Coruña, 28 May 1602.
19. AGS, *E-Negociación de Inglaterra*, leg. 839, f. 104. 'Report from Alonso Cobos on his visit to Ireland (1596)'.
20. AGS, GA, leg. 3144, n.º. Report on the campaign of Kinsale by Sebastián de Oleaga, Valladolid, 25 January 1602; another copy in Sal. Arch., S52/1/7: Salamanca, descriptions of Ireland, early 17th century; 52/7/3. Even Pedro López de Soto had no mercy on the Irish. He claimed that only 500 of the enemy had 'put them to flight, so that you cannot say that the English defeated the Irish, but rather that the Irish were defeated by only seeing their enemies': *ibid.*, leg. 591, n.º. Pedro López de Soto to Philip III, 6 January 1602.
21. *Ibid.*, leg. 3144, s.º. Pedro López de Soto to Philip III, La Coruña, 20 March 1602.
22. *Ibid.*, leg. 3144, n.º. Juan del Águila to the king, Cork, 11 February 1602.
23. *Ibid.*, leg. 640, s.º. Consulta del Consejo de Guerra a S.M, Valladolid, 12 May 1605. Later, Pedro López de Soto begged the king to provide for the 14 months during which he had not been paid his wages, as he was in prison: *ibid.*, leg. 645, s.º. Pedro López de Soto to Your Highness, 15 September 1605.