

or five miles. The dimensions, as deduced from my observations are much less than those hitherto adopted by the natives. It might be thought that, to form a precise idea of the progressive diminution of the waters, it would be sufficient to compare the present dimensions of the lake with those attributed to it by ancient chroniclers; by Oviedo for instance, in his History of the Province of Venezuela, published about the year 1723. This writer in his emphatic style, assigns to "this inland sea, this *monstruoso cuerpo de la laguna de Valencia*,"* fourteen leagues in length and six in breadth. He affirms that at a small distance from the shore the lead finds no bottom; and that large floating islands cover the surface of the waters, which are constantly agitated by the winds. No importance can be attached to estimates which, without being founded on any measurement, are expressed in leagues (*leguas*) reckoned in the colonies at three thousand, five thousand, and six thousand six hundred and fifty *varas*.† Oviedo, who must so often have passed over the valleys of Aragua, asserts that the town of Nueva Valencia del Rey was built in 1555, at the distance of half a league from the lake; and that the proportion between the length of the lake and its breadth, is as seven to three. At present, the town of Valencia is separated from the lake by level ground of more than two thousand seven hundred toises (which Oviedo would no doubt have estimated as a space of a league and a half); and the length of the basin of the lake is to its breadth as 10 to 2·3, or as 7 to 1·6. The appearance of the

* "Enormous body of the lake of Valencia."

† Seamen being the first, and for a long time the only, persons who introduced into the Spanish colonies any precise ideas on the astronomical position and distances of places, the *legua nautica* of 6650 *varas*, or of 2854 toises (20 in a degree), was originally used in Mexico and throughout South America; but this *legua nautica* has been gradually reduced to one-half or one-third, on account of the slowness of travelling across steep mountains, or dry and burning plains. The common people measure only time directly; and then, by arbitrary hypotheses, infer from the time the space of ground travelled over. In the course of my geographical researches, I have had frequent opportunities of examining the real value of these leagues, by comparing the itinerary distances between points lying under the same meridian with the difference of latitudes.