

15 Epilogue (1515-1521)

Aphonso de Albuquerque was for some time in charge of a part of Tristan da Cunha's large fleet, but he soon became an independent captain and contributed to the knowledge of Asia as a daring sailor and soldier. He was the first European to have sailed his ships into the Red Sea and establish contact with the Negus of Abyssinia. He reached and explored the Persian Gulf, a mythical place that for many centuries had been unreachable. He consolidated the tenure of the base of Goa on the west coast of the Indian peninsula, modelling it in his own way; from there he went further to the east, taking possession of the Malacca, the peninsula that juts out towards the Equator. As a soldier he was bold, but often cruel and ruthless; at the same time, he was a skilled and clever diplomat. Having reached Canton in southern China he established trade contacts with the great Ming empire. The year was 1513.

He was named Governor of Portuguese India. He went south of Malaysia to the mythical islands of Sumatra and Java, in short, great swathes of Asia opened up before the man who was now aiming for the Spice Islands. But when he returned to the base of Goa in December 1515, he had a terrible news waiting for him: King Manuel had deprived him of the office of Governor, giving his command to a rival of his, Lopo Soares de Albergaria.

Feeling destroyed, Albuquerque wrote a memorial in which he assured the King of his loyalty, asked clemency for his son Brás who had helped him with great courage, and begged the King to transfer all the honours and rewards that were due to himself to Brás and a little later, on December 16, he died of a broken heart.

On January 23, 1516, King Ferdinand of Aragon died. In his will he had ordered that Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros should assume the office of regent. The cardinal carefully arranged for the succession of Carlos of Habsburg, grandson of Ferdinand and of Maximilian I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and Carlos in September 1517 became King Carlos I of the whole of Spain at the age of 17.

The very young ruler neglected to summon the *Cortes* to legitimise his access to the throne, and apparently he took his mother Queen Juana from the convent - a prison in which she had been locked up; he had not seen her since he was seven.

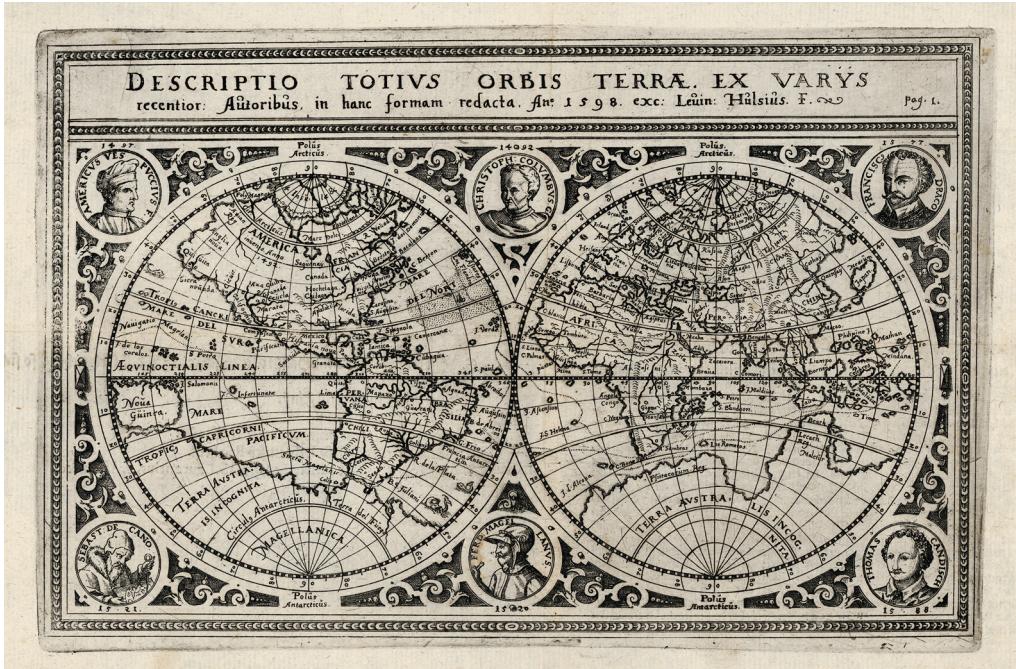


Figure 15.1 A hundred years after the success of Christopher Columbus, in this representation of the Earth's surface (1592) divided into two hemispheres, Levinus Hulsius has placed six medallions in which he shows the principal discoverers of the New World, Columbus, Vespucci, Magellan and the three men who circumnavigated the world, Juan Sebastián Elcano, Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish

Carlos I became familiar with his royal duties, and soon gave orders to the *Casa de la Contratación* to resume the organisation of a fleet that would reach the mythical Moluccas, which were rich in many treasures. He had heard about them during his adolescence, and he knew that his parents had taken care of the project. The urge to restart the trip was given, probably, both by his mother and by two people who had left Portugal following disagreements with King Manuel, who as he aged became increasingly bitter with his subjects and closed with his secrets: the cosmographer and astronomer Ruy Faleiro and Ferdinand Magellan. The Fugger bank said it was ready to participate in the financing of the project.

Resources were not lacking. In addition, the succession to Emperor Maximilian, now blind and very ill, was approaching. The office of emperor, however, was not hereditary but elective, and Carlos I of Spain succeeded in earning the esteem of the German Prince-electors with the gold of Spain and was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor. Moreover, he was of the same opinion as his grandfather Ferdinand of Aragon (and Machiavelli) that ‘nothing makes a prince so well esteemed as undertaking great enterprises and setting a fine example’.

He then restored the *Casa de la Contratación* for the implementation of the plan to reach the Moluccas by crossing the strait that would take the name of Magellan. It was the third time that this attempt was repeated, and this time it ended successfully, albeit at a very high price.

Five brigantines, two of about 130 tons, two 90-ton whalers and a 60-ton caravel, loaded with enough food (biscuits, smoked meat and more) for two years for a crew of 234 men, took part in the enterprise. Two stops were planned in the New World: the first in the great gulf of Rio de la Plata and the second in the Gulf of San Julian at 49°S, where the fleet piloted by Vespucci had stopped in 1501.

It was a programme based on the one that failed ten years earlier, but with the explicit goal that the latitude of the Moluccan islands would be checked to determine whether, according to the Treaty of Tordesillas, they belonged to Spain or Portugal. The task of establishing the correct coordinates was entrusted to Ruy Faleiro, a Portuguese man who was also very angry with his country; he, however, fell ill before leaving and was replaced by Andrés de san Martin.

Another innovation was that the crew was not exclusively Spanish but international, including many Portuguese people and sailors from the Venetian and Genoese Republics.

During the ocean crossing, the first tensions began to emerge between Magellan and the Spanish captains. The ships reached the bay of Rio de Janeiro and lingered to explore the estuary of Rio della Plata, reaching the base of San Julian in December 1519, where the disagreements between the major captain and the other captains escalated. Some of these captains hatched a plot; Magellan became aware of it and reacted with extreme violence: the rebel leader was stabbed and his body was quartered; another was killed and two others, including the *veedor*, the supervisor of the expedition, were transported to a deserted place, and abandoned. In the end, the main captain had his way.

Another tragedy occurred when the ship *Santiago* was wrecked and the crew was saved with great difficulty. Due to all these troubles, the season suitable for crossing the strait was now over.

The sailors had to winter with reduced rations, the cold was intolerable, and many were eager to return to Spain. Finally the four ships entered/approached the strait; but the brigantine *San Antonio* disappeared. The searches for it were useless: it had deserted. Only three ships made their way into the Southern Ocean.

In November 1520, a year late, they crossed the strait later dedicated to Magellan, and faced the Ocean which was baptized with the name of Pacifico. The course through the ocean was completed in three months and 20 days, but the sailors paid a high price from hunger and scurvy: nineteen of them lost their lives.

When Magellan arrived at the islands - which would later be called the Philippines in honour of the infant Philip - he stopped in a city, Cebu, whose king welcomed him amicably. Magellan hastened to convert him and his people to Christianity and would have liked to convert the surrounding populations too, but found himself involved in a skirmish in which he was killed along with seven sailors.

The survivors elected a new captain and returned to those who had welcomed them, but this time a trap had been set and another 28 of them, including Captain Serrano who had succeeded Magellan, were slaughtered. The Basque pilot Sebastian Elcano took the lead, burned the ship that no longer had any crew, and with only two surviving ships, fled to the Moluccas. When he arrived he made no claim whatsoever, loaded the ship *Victoria* with spices and sailed with it towards the south-west, boldly pointing to

the south of the Cape of Good Hope, to then sail northward without stopping up to the Cape Verde Islands.

There he took on fresh supplies and resumed the journey, escaping by a whisker from the Portuguese, but the 13 sailors who did not arrive in time to embark were reduced to slavery. Sebastian Elcano returned to Seville after exactly three years; eighteen survivors remained with him, including the chronicler of the expedition, Antonio Pigafetta of Vicenza, who had embarked at his own expense on behalf of the Venetian Republic. The other ship, the *Trinidad*, which had been left in a poor condition, was repaired by survivors of the crew who attempted to cross the Pacific eastwards, but it was intercepted by the Portuguese and the crew were also enslaved; only two sailors ever saw Europe again.

On November 7, 1523, Pigafetta reported this enterprise to the Council of Ten in Venice and the following year he obtained the privilege of printing his own narrative, which was published in 1524. It is a precious account of the very long and troubled navigation.¹ Accidents, hunger and scurvy are reported, but there is also detailed technical information on all the places they reached. In the manner of Marco Polo, Pigafetta described how cities and islands were governed, which currencies were used and what their values were, the useful products to buy, the most requested goods, and what could be bartered. In addition to this, imitating Vespucci, he described in lively detail the appearance and behaviour of the populations he met, how those people ate, how they lit their fire, which weapons they used, how they adorned themselves, and their funerals and sexual habits. He also compiled long lists of words used in various indigenous languages, lists which later became precious to missionaries and linguists. In short, he was an observer free from prejudices and superstitions, who, however, sometimes exaggerated.

He described exotic plants and animals and even the beliefs of the populations he visited, always careful to specify what he saw with his own eyes and what he was told. He described the 'clouds of Magellan' (the small satellite galaxy of our galaxy, already seen and described by Vespucci), but he was not good at astronomy nor in the art of navigation: the geographical co-ordinates he indicated are often erroneous.

The astronomer and cosmographer of the expedition had been killed in Cebu, and the indications by the other survivors of the long journey regarding the position of the Moluccas were very vague and were not sufficient to clarify the question that had given occasion to the enterprise: did the Spice Islands fall within the limits of the Treaty of Tordesillas? However, Carlos I, by now Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, had other major problems in those years, and renounced his claims (legitimate but not fair) on the Moluccas against a payment by the Portuguese of 350,000 gold ducats, while the Philippines remained with Spain. The sun never set on the empire of the twenty-one year old emperor.

¹ Pigafetta's report was edited by Manfroni, *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo di Antonio Pigafetta*. Another excellent critical edition is the one edited by Andrea Canova (*Antonio Pigafetta, Relazione del primo viaggio attorno al mondo*). A complete documentation appears in: Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas, *Colección general de documentos relativos a las Islas Filipinas etc.* A modern reconstruction, also based on other reports that have come to us, is provided by Bergreen, *Over the Edge of the World. Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe*.