Encompassing the Earth: Magellan’s voyage from its political context to its expansion of knowledge

Matteo Salonia
University of Nottingham Ningbo, China

Abstract
Between 1519 and 1522, the Magellan–Elcano expedition completed the first circumnavigation of the world. This contribution offers a new interpretation of the political context leading to the voyage and, in particular, it considers the long history of Portuguese–Castilian rivalry in the Atlantic, reassessing the importance of the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479). The second part of the article clarifies the objectives and achievements of the voyage, arguing that a reading of primary documents concerning Magellan’s reward is necessary in order to understand the rationale behind the northerly route followed across the Pacific. It also sheds light on the momentous changes brought to Europe’s geographical and cosmographical frameworks by the realization that all the oceans are one and the shattering of previous limits to human mobility. Finally, the article considers the images of Asian maritime and human geographies produced by one of the few survivors of the voyage, Antonio Pigafetta, in his Relazione, proposing a reading of this text centred around the concept of genuine curiosity, even in a broader context of Iberian empire-building.

Keywords
Atlantic world, cartography, Iberian Asia, Magellan, Pacific navigation

Corresponding author:
Matteo Salonia, University of Nottingham Ningbo, 199 Taikang East Road, Ningbo 315100, China.
Email: matteo.salonia@nottingham.edu.cn
The 500th anniversary of the conclusion of the Magellan–Elcano voyage (1519–1522) was not marked by much interest, either from academia or from the media. This is unfortunate because the first circumnavigation of the globe was not an isolated, extraordinary event but rather the end and crowning achievement of a period of sustained, intense and systematic exploration of the oceanic routes connecting the different continents and macro regions of the Earth. European captains could rely on already existing maritime cultures and trading networks, from the Caribbean to the China Sea, the Indian Ocean to the Marianas. Yet, the Europeans were the first to unlock the complex system of winds and currents of the Atlantic, and the first to map capes and straits, which would show how all the oceans are one.

The kingdoms of Portugal and Castile were at the forefront of this process. The importance of early Iberian struggles with the problems of long-distance communication, trade and...
empire-building, as well as the Mediterranean contributions to the institutional and mental capital characterizing the first transatlantic economies and colonies, has been the subject of much discussion since a 1950 seminal article by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, and even more so since the 1970 collection of essays by Charles Verlinden. Therefore, more emphasis on the two centuries of encounters, integration of markets and colonization preceding the birth of a British Atlantic has been one of the major trends for many decades, progressively correcting an earlier focus on a supposed ‘north-western Europeanization’.

Admittedly, this scholarship on the Iberian and Mediterranean origins of the Atlantic world has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the figure of Christopher Columbus, as evidenced by excellent works such as those penned by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Luis Arranz Máquez, Carol Delaney and Antonio Musarra. However, Columbus has been an exception, and other explorers have received less attention as scholars have continued to

4. Godinho’s article has been translated and republished in Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, ‘Portugal and the Making of the Atlantic World: Sugar Fleets and Gold Fleets, the Seventeenth to the Eighteenth Centuries’, Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 28, No. 4 (2005), 313–37; Charles Verlinden, The Beginnings of Modern Colonization (Ithaca, 1970). Charles Boxer has of course been another important scholar from that generation; see, in particular, The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825 (London, 1969). Among more recent contributions, see the essays in Pedro Cardim et al., eds., Polycentric Monarchies: How Did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony? (Brighton, 2012), which cover many aspects of the institutional experiments across the global Iberian monarchies; Jorge Nascimento Rodrigues and Tessaleno Devezas, Pioneers of Globalization: Why the Portuguese Surprised the World (Lisbon, 2007), which focuses on Portugal and is a good introduction also for the lay reader; and my own Genoa’s Freedom: Entrepreneurship, Republicanism, and the Spanish Atlantic (London, 2017), where I trace the movement of some key aspects of late medieval merchant capitalism from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

5. Two fundamental readings on this point, besides the already mentioned article by Cañizares-Esguerra and Breen, are Eliga Gould, ‘Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery’, American Historical Review, 112, No. 3 (2007), 764–86 and Francisco Bethencourt, ‘The Iberian Atlantic: Ties, Networks, and Boundaries’, in Lisa Vollendorf and Harald Braun, eds., Theorising the Ibero-American Atlantic (Leiden, 2013), 15–36. The importance of southern Europe and the Iberian world appears clear also in the detailed comparative history written by John H. Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830 (New Haven, CT, 2006). And for an even more forceful argument, tracing mutual influences from the very start of exploration and expansion, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, ed., Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830 (Philadelphia, 2018).

6. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Columbus (London, 1996); Luis Arranz Máquez, Cristóbal Colón: Misterio y grandeza (Madrid, 2006); Carol Delaney, Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem (New York, 2011); Antonio Musarra, Processo a Colombo: Scoperta o sterminio? (Viareggio, 2018). For nuanced discussions on the interest surrounding the fourth and fifth centenaries of Columbus’s voyage, see, for example, Chad Black, ‘Lineages of Columbus: San Antonio, Ethnicity, and October 1892’, The Latin Americanist, 64, No. 1 (2020), 9–27 and John Noble Wilford and Carla Rahn Phillips, ‘Columbus and the Labyrinth of History’, Wilson Quarterly, 15, No. 4 (1991), 66–86.
move away from narratives centred around the lives and individual agency of great navigators in order to stress the broader socio-economic and political processes causing and sustaining Iberian explorations and European expansion.

As for Ferdinand Magellan, it is still possible to say what Martin Torodash was already noting in his invaluable 1971 bibliographic essay: the Portuguese captain has never generated the same amount of interest as that surrounding Columbus, and relatively few works have been produced that discuss him. This is surely due, in part, to the damnatio memoriae suffered by Magellan, both in Portugal, where he was perceived as a traitor, and in Castile, where he was blamed by the few survivors of the voyage and, after the death of his wife and children, no heir could defend his memory. The chapters dedicated to Magellan in Samuel Eliot Morison’s famous yet quite dated book still offer an unsurpassed step-by-step reconstruction of the voyage, containing both lively descriptions of the mutinies and accurate details about the navigation and the routes explored by the fleet. Morison’s study can be integrated with other more recent non-English works, such as the monograph by David Salomoni and the fine book by Guadalupe Fernández Morente and Ignacio Fernández Vial. José Manuel Garcia is another scholar whose work is interesting, both for his original arguments on some key aspects of the enterprise – such as whether Magellan had imagined a complete circumnavigation when planning the voyage – and for his thoughtful assessment of Magellan as a figure who embodies the origins of globalization.

In this contribution, I will not attempt a comprehensive and minute reconstruction of the voyage. Instead, I would like to consider three issues. The first is how, by 1519, a relatively long history of rivalry between Castile and Portugal determined the alternative routes for exploration and the way proposals for expeditions would be evaluated at each court. In particular, I wish to focus on the fundamental yet often forgotten 1479 Treaty of Alcáçovas to argue that it had forged much of the political context in which Magellan and his backers moved. Second, I would like to reflect on the actual achievements of Magellan’s voyage in terms of the expansion of knowledge, which includes not only the maritime sciences with disciplines such as geography and cartography, as well as social sciences such as anthropology, ethnography and political science, but also

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7. Martin Torodash, ‘Magellan Historiography’, Hispanic American Historical Review, 51, No. 2 (1971), 327.
8. Torodash, ‘Magellan Historiography’, 313.
9. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Great Explorers: The European Discovery of America (Oxford, 1986), 549–673.
10. David Salomoni, Magellano: Il primo viaggio intorno al mondo (Bari, 2021); Guadalupe Fernández Morente and Ignacio Fernández Vial, Fernando de Magallanes: Expediciones marítimas (Seville, 2021). See also Luiz Filipe Thomaz, O drama de Magalhães e a volta ao mundo sem querer (Lisbon, 2018). In French, see the non-scholarly but enjoyable book by Patrick Girard, Fernand de Magellan, l’inventeur du monde (Paris, 2012). Of the same genre, in English, see Laurence Bergreen, Over the Edge of the World: Magellan’s Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe (New York, 2003).
11. José Manuel Garcia, Fernão de Magalhães: Herói, traidor ou mito? (Lisbon, 2019); see especially 266–9 for the discussion on planned routes and the issue of circumnavigation, and 271–2 for the assessment of Magellan as one of the greatest figures in world history for his role in the process of mundialização, which preceded globalization.
something much more fundamental – that is cosmography and metaphysics. Finally, in the third part of this article, I argue that the images of Asia reaching Europe thanks to a book written by one of the survivors of the voyage, Antonio Pigafetta, contributed to a positive view of eastern islands and polities, and are an example of Europe’s genuine curiosity about ‘the Indies’.

The Treaty of Alcáçovas and the political contours of Magellan’s world

The Canary Islands off the coast of West Africa functioned as the springboard for the first phase of Atlantic exploration, led by Iberian kingdoms with the aid of foreign captains, entrepreneurs and bankers – in particular, the Genoese and the Florentines, but also French knights like Jean de Bethencourt.12 Rivalry between the Iberian kingdoms had been ongoing at least since 1424, when the Portuguese Prince Henry had armed and sent a fleet to the Canary Islands, causing a strong protest from the Castilian court.13 Later, with the settlement of the uninhabited archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores, the Portuguese demonstrated the possibility to turn deserted territories in the Atlantic into profitable economic areas, producing a variety of goods from wine to timber, dye to grain, and, from the 1470s, sugar.14 Portuguese success on these islands and penetration in the gold markets of Guinea caused Castile to pay more attention to these developments in the Atlantic, even as it still struggled to complete its own Reconquista. It is difficult to determine if, and at what point exactly, the idea of reaching the Indies through the Atlantic emerged.15 But what I want to point out is that the Canaries, Madeira and the Azores rapidly became pivotal maritime outposts for any ship or fleet wishing to expand the mapping of the Atlantic zone. In the words of J. H. Parry: ‘The island settlements were essential factors in the discovery of the sea’.16

It is this background that we need to keep in mind when we consider the violent and prolonged conflict known as the War of the Castilian Succession (1475–1479). Harald Braun has recently written an essay that details the political crisis affecting Castile, and I will not get into the complexities of the succession here.17 Rather, I am interested

12. For good introductions to these developments, see David Abulaafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 65–89 and Kenneth Maxwell, ‘Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System, 1415–1520’, *Portuguese Studies*, 8 (1992), 3–16.
13. Thornton, *Africa*, 30.
14. J. H. Parry, *The Discovery of the Sea* (London, 1974), 112–17.
15. In *Columbus*, Delaney has beautifully reconstructed how this vague idea turned into a plan, at least in the mind of Columbus. With regard to the multiform objectives brought together by the idea of finding a western route to Asia, see also Abbas Hamdani, ‘Columbus and the Recovery of Jerusalem’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99, No. 1 (1979), 39–48.
16. Parry, *Discovery*, 117.
17. Harald E. Braun, ‘Laying the Foundations for a Spanish Renaissance: Late Medieval Politics and Government’, in H. Kallendorf, ed., *A Companion to the Spanish Renaissance* (Leiden, 2019), 31–60. See also John H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain: 1469–1715* (London, 1972), 15–24 and Nuria Corral Sánchez, ‘Dios salve a las reinas: Propaganda y legitimación en la Guerra de Sucesión castellana (1475–1479)’, *AMMENTU*, 12 (2018), 35–48.
in the Atlantic front of the conflict. Portugal and Queen Isabella’s Castile were not only fighting across the peninsula with pitch battles and sieges of fortresses; they were also regularly arming fleets and encouraging private captains to attack each other’s positions. The War of the Castilian Succession increasingly became, over the years, a string of episodes in maritime warfare. Even after Isabella and her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, had seemingly secured their position in Spain, piracy and naval battles continued from the Mediterranean to Guinea, the Cape Verde Islands to the Canaries. As late as March 1478, the Spanish monarchs issued a cedula encouraging Spanish sailors from Palos to go to Mina del Oro and trade Guinean goods.

When, in 1479, the Iberian kingdoms finally put an end to the war, navigation in the Atlantic featured prominently in the Treaty of Alcáçovas. In fact, one of the longest and most important clauses of the Treaty of Alcáçovas contained the following:

Moreover, the aforesaid King and Queen of Castile, Aragon, Sicily, etc., willed and resolved, in order that this peace be firm, stable, and everlasting, and promised, henceforth and forever, that neither of themselves nor by another, publicly or secretly, or by their heirs and successors, will they disturb, trouble, or molest, in fact or in law, in court or out of court, the said King and Prince of Portugal or the future sovereigns of Portugal or their kingdoms, in their possession or quasi possession all the trade, lands, and barter in Guinea, with its gold-mines, or in any other islands, coasts, or lands, discovered or to be discovered, found or to be found, or in the islands of Madeira, Porto Santo, and Desierta, or in all the islands of the Azores, or the islands of Flores, as well as the islands of Cape Verde, or in all the islands hitherto discovered, or in all other islands which shall be found or acquired by conquest [in the region] from the Canary Islands down toward Guinea. For whatever has been found or shall be found, acquired by conquest, or discovered within the said limits, beyond what has already been found, occupied, or discovered, belongs to the said King and Prince of Portugal and to their kingdoms, excepting

18. Musarra has recently published an interesting book discussing precisely how often the importance of the sea and maritime warfare in the medieval period has been overlooked. Antonio Musarra, Medioevo marinaro: Prendere il mare nell’Italia medievale (Bologna, 2021). Most of the chapters focus on Italy, but the broader point can be applied to the historiography of the Iberian Peninsula as well.

19. Vicente Ángel Álvarez Palenzuela, one of the most important scholars of Spanish political history in the Middle Ages, summarized the situation as follows: ‘La guerra entre Portugal y Castilla, superado el problema sucesorio que la diera origen, se recrudecía en Galicia, Extremadura y La Mancha, reavivando viejos conflictos, y, muy especialmente en el mar: además de la rivalidad en las nuevas áreas de navegación, daba paso a una durísima actividad pirática, perjudicial para el comercio, que recordaba la situación de los primeros decenios de siglo, a la que se había puesto término con las paces de Almeirim’. Vicente Ángel Álvarez Palenzuela, La guerra civil castellana y el enfrentamiento con Portugal (1475–1479) (Alicante, 2006), chapter 4.

20. ‘Seguro d los Marineros de Palos para contratar libremente por mar y tierra con las mercaderías que llevaren y trajeren en su viage d la Mina del Oro’, in Martín Fernández de Navarrete, ed., Coleccion de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde fines del siglo XV, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1825), 386–9.
only the Canary Islands, to wit: Lancarote, Palma, Forteventura, Gomera, Ferro, Graciosa, Grand Canary, Teneriffe, and all the other Canary Islands, acquired or to be acquired, which belong to the kingdoms of Castile.\textsuperscript{21}

This document was of fundamental significance because here, for the first time, Castile and Portugal both agreed on their respective spheres. The Treaty of Alcâçovas was therefore more important than the earlier papal bull, the Romanus Pontifex issued in 1455, because that intervention by the Pope was not mutually agreed on by the Iberian kingdoms and was not recognized by Castile. Instead, with the Treaty of Alcâçovas in 1479, a broad framework for Iberian expansion was finally agreed and endorsed by both courts. It was from this year, also, that Iberian rivalry coexisted with diplomatic cooperation, since the legitimacy of Portuguese claims rested on Castilian claims, and vice versa. In a sense, this was the beginning of the Iberian world as traced and described by Francisco Bethencourt.\textsuperscript{22}

To conclude this first section, the contours of competition and cooperation between Castile and Portugal, and their respective trajectories of expansion in the Atlantic, had already been determined in 1479. Fourteen years later, with the more famous Inter Caetera bull, the Pope acted merely as an arbitrator – in the tradition of papal overlordship, which has been recently fleshed out by Benedict Wiedemann.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, when Columbus proposed his idea of reaching the Indies by going west, it is clear why the King of Portugal, John II, was alarmed at such a prospect, which would undercut the Portuguese monopoly of the southerly route to the eastern markets.\textsuperscript{24} This monopoly had been obtained by Portugal (and recognized by Castile) many years before the Inter Caetera bull and the Treaty of Tordesillas, and, in this sense, I would suggest that the route followed by Magellan to the Philippines was still influenced by the forgotten Treaty of Alcâçovas. In fact, even the very shape eventually taken by Iberian Asia was partly a consequence of the 1479 mutual agreement. As explained by Manuela Mendonça, the Treaty of Tordesillas respected the framework established by the Treaty of Alcâçovas.\textsuperscript{25} It amounted to a mere update, made necessary by Columbus’s voyages, which did not question the principles and traced a meridian of demarcation whose main objective was still (from the Portuguese perspective) to keep Spanish ships as far as possible from the southerly route to the Cape of Good Hope.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} This clause is actually in the list of additional articles attached to the second of the two documents comprising the treaty. It is numbered as the eight of the articles. Frances Gardiner Davenport, ed., \textit{European Treaties Bearing on the History of the United States and Its Dependencies to 1648} (Washington, DC, 1917), 33–48.
\textsuperscript{22} Bethencourt, ‘The Iberian Atlantic’.
\textsuperscript{23} Benedict Wiedemann, \textit{Papal Overlordship and European Princes, 1000–1270} (Oxford, 2022).
\textsuperscript{24} As noted by Nicolás Wey Gómez, the Spanish monarchs explicitly forbade Columbus from sailing south of the Canaries into what, since 1479, were considered Portuguese waters. Nicolás Wey Gómez, \textit{The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies} (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 10.
\textsuperscript{25} Manuela Mendonça, ‘De Alcâçovas a Tordesilhas: A terra de Vera Cruz’, \textit{História Revista}, 9, No. 1 (2004), 21–34 (especially 29).
\textsuperscript{26} Parry, \textit{Discovery}, 160.
This reassessment of the Treaty of Alcáçovas is necessary to reconstruct the political framework within which the Magellan expedition took shape. The pace of European exploration was sustained by a context of geopolitical and economic competition in the Atlantic, but from 1479 the mapping of new routes had been ordered towards specific geographic directions. In 1519, Magellan had the opportunity to offer his vision to more than one court, but open warfare had been followed by ordered competition within a mutually agreed framework. From Alcáçovas to the discovery of the strait, we can trace a process of guided exploration of major Atlantic routes, where the division of spheres was at least as important as currents and natural resources, while the race to ‘the Indies’ acquired progressively more importance.27 The Spanish court of Charles V – the grandson of Isabella – backed Magellan’s plan, and he sailed under the Castilian flag to complete the mission that had been Columbus’s.

**Objectives and achievements**

In the scholarship, there is some confusion about the objectives of the expedition from the perspectives of the Spanish court and of the Portuguese captain himself. Primarily, Charles aimed to find a strait through which Castilian ships could quickly reach the Moluccas, known as the Spice Islands. The Spanish court was eager to demonstrate that this archipelago was situated so far east of Malacca that it in fact fell within the Spanish zone – a continuation of the west wing of Atlantic expansion. Magellan and, as a consequence, Charles had been deceived on this matter by Francisco Serrão (died 1521). Serrão was the first Portuguese man to establish himself at Ternate in the Moluccas, and he did not wish to be joined by too many of his compatriots. Magellan and Serrão were good friends and probably in touch through letters, where the latter greatly exaggerated the distance of the Moluccas from Malacca, which in turn meant that they could be supposed to be just around the corner for a fleet that could find a passage through the American coastline.28

This idea – itself a re-elaboration of Columbus’s – was widespread among cartographers in the 1510s, and the 1520 map by Johannes Schöner (1477–1547) is a good example, which Magellan himself might have used in its earlier version from a 1515 globe.29 As can be observed in Figure 1, Schöner placed Japan just off the

27. That Alcáçovas could be so pivotal even at a moment when the objectives of the Iberian courts were not yet particularly clear has also been noted by Mendonça: ‘Numa palavra, era o Atlântico que importava dominar. Esta era a única certeza, mas a dúvida está em saber qual seria o objetivo de cada reino nessa tentative de domínio’ (‘Alcáçovas’, 28). Another good examination of this context can be found in Paulino Castañeda Delgado, ‘Las exploraciones castellanas y los problemas con Portugal antes de 1492’, in Luis Antonio Ribot García, Adolfo Carrasco Martínez and Luis Adão da Fonseca, eds., El Tratado de Tordesillas y su época, vol. 2 (1995), 913–34.

28. Parry, Discovery, 279.

29. It is true that other contemporary maps contradicted this idea and showed a larger Mar del Sur, but it is difficult to deny that the vastness of the Pacific came as a surprise to both Magellan and his crew; it is, moreover, very likely that Magellan used a version of the Schöner map for the painted globe that he showed during his visit at court. Morison, The Great Explorers, 600.
It is therefore not difficult to see why Charles would have been interested in Magellan’s project, especially when we consider that this Portuguese captain had first-hand experience of Asian waters and geography, having lived for some years on the Malabar coast of India and participated in the 1511 Portuguese conquest of Malacca. It is even possible that Magellan had travelled as far east as Ambon. Simply put, no Castilian captain came even close to such a curriculum vitae.

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30. The best source on Johannes Schöner is Chet van Duzer, Johann Schöner’s Globe of 1515: Transcription and Study (Philadelphia, 2010). This is much more than a simple introduction to the life and work of the German mathematician and cartographer; it is a detailed study of the two 1515 globes (and fragments of a third one) that are still in existence today, reconstructing their history and investigating the sources used by Schöner for toponyms and iconography.

31. On Magellan’s career before he appeared in front of Charles V, see Morison, The Great Explorers, 549–56.
If we shift our attention to Magellan’s own, more personal, objectives, it is necessary to clarify why he spent so much time and effort in the Philippines rather than heading directly to the Moluccas. According to the Agreement signed by the King of Spain and Fernando de Magallanes in March 1518 at Valladolid, the first six islands discovered by the expedition would belong to the Crown. If the expedition were to discover more than six islands, the King would select six for himself first and then Magellan could choose two, where he and his business partner, Rui Falero, could set up a warehouse and obtain revenues. This understanding was not a secret, and it was also reported verbatim in the instructions given to one of Magellan’s great enemies in the fleet, Juan de Cartagena. In particular, the document signed by the King stated:

Moreover, it is our will and pleasure that if the islands, which you [Magellan and Falero] shall discover in this manner, exceed six in number, having first chosen six [for us], you may assign to yourselves two of those that remain.

With this key piece of information, it is possible to appreciate once more how the spirit and reality of international and personal competition among Europeans continued to push the boundaries of geographical mapping. Magellan directly contravened the instructions received from Charles because his most urgent objective was not to touch the shores of the Moluccas – which were already claimed by Portugal and which, even if taken by Spain either diplomatically or manu militari, would anyway have surely been picked by the King for himself. Instead, his prime aim was to find a new archipelago and evaluate which islands within it seemed more economically promising. This was again a pattern that had been established in previous centuries in the context of Iberian rivalry in the Canary Islands.

Having clarified the objectives of the voyage, it is possible on this 500th anniversary of its completion to evaluate its achievements. After difficult months in the Atlantic and along the coast of South America, where Magellan had to ruthlessly put down a

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32. ‘Instructions to Cartagena’, in Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 1493–1803, vol. 1 (Cleveland, OH, 1903), 280–92; the text of the Agreement can be found on 280–5.
33. ‘Instructions to Cartagena’, 283.
34. Richard J. Field, ‘Revisiting Magellan’s Voyage to the Philippines’, Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society, 34, No. 4 (2006), 313–37. Field is one of the few historians who correctly interpret Magellan’s intentions. An article by Scott Fitzpatrick and Richard Callaghan laboriously attempts to understand why Magellan did not follow the most direct route to the Moluccas. Scott M. Fitzpatrick and Richard Callaghan, ‘Magellan’s Crossing of the Pacific: Using Computer Simulations to Examine Oceanographic Effects on One of the World’s Greatest Voyages’, Journal of Pacific History, 43, No. 2 (2008), 145–65. The authors do not reach any convincing conclusion, and this is not surprising since the very question they ask is based on a wrong assumption. If they had read the Agreement signed by Magellan and King Charles, they would have realized that Magellan did not want to reach the Moluccas by the shortest route but aimed to first find at least six new islands that were previously unknown to the Castilian court. When one reads the archival documents, the northerly route across the Pacific is understandable, and there is no mystery to be solved.
mutiny by Spanish officers who were unhappy with taking orders from a foreigner, the fleet approached the end of the American landmass in October 1520. Here, the strait was discovered in the midst of a storm. Carefully exploring the different passages and dangerous waters of the maze of land and sea forming the strait, Magellan was able to guide his fleet to the other side. Some European geographers, underestimating the size of the Earth, had formed in their minds and represented on their maps the hypothesis of a small sea connecting the Americas to Japan and China, and of course the Spice Islands. But what Magellan and his men discovered was the Pacific, the largest stretch of water on the planet, and a vast and apparently endless ocean for which they were materially and psychologically unprepared. With his men suffering from starvation, dehydration, scurvy and despair, Magellan pushed through, sailing for a while along the coast of Chile, and even when he turned west, he did so well above the latitude of the Moluccas.

Due to the limited space and scope of this contribution, I will here only note that after exploring the Philippines, baptizing many natives, initiating trading relations and forming an alliance with the chief of Cebu, Magellan was eager to demonstrate Iberian military skills. On 27 April 1521, his involvement in local politics would cost him his life, as he was killed during a battle on the beach of Mactan, a nearby island whose chief had refused to submit to Cebu. As Juan Sebastián Elcano (1476–1526) sarcastically remarked, Magellan had died ‘to make the king of Mactan kiss the hands of the king of Cebu, and because he did not send him a bushel of rice and a goat as tribute’.35

From that moment, his crew would begin wandering around the archipelago, without a leader and without a clear objective. One of the ships had to be burned for lack of men. Slowly, the survivors made their way to the Spice Islands, visiting several markets and sophisticated societies including Brunei, and in November 1521 they finally anchored at Tidore, an island producing enormous quantities of cloves. From there, the two remaining ships separated: the Trinidad attempted to go back to Spain by way of the Pacific and Mexico, but met with heavy storms, was damaged, and in the end had to return to the Moluccas and surrender to a Portuguese fleet; most of its men were arrested and forced to labour for many years, never seeing Spain again.

The other ship, the Victoria, commanded by Elcano, crossed South Asia, constantly hurrying onwards and afraid of being intercepted by Portuguese warships. Taking a southerly route across the Indian Ocean precisely to avoid the Portuguese – whose officers in India had been alerted and knew about the presence of Spanish intruders – this ship eventually rounded the Cape of Good Hope and found its way back to Seville. A handful of famished, sick and exhausted survivors completed the circumnavigation of the globe by entering the port of Seville on 6 September 1522. They immediately proceeded to walk barefoot, each man holding a lighted candle, to the church of Santa María de la Victoria, to do penance for their sins and thank the Virgin Mary.36

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35. Cited in Parry, *Discovery*, 292.
36. For a more detailed account of this and other parts of the voyage, I recommend again Salomoni, *Magellano* and Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 549–673.
What had ultimately been accomplished? Little of what either the Spanish monarchy or Magellan had hoped. After all, as succinctly put by Carla Rahn Phillips:

Although Magellan had discovered that route, it was not viable without the knowledge of how to return across the Pacific. Otherwise, any Spanish voyages that reached Asia would remain at the mercy of the Portuguese, who had established several bases in Asia.37

In the 1520s, at least three other Spanish expeditions attempted to find a return route across the Pacific, but they all failed. So, in 1529, Charles V gave up his claims on the Moluccas, receiving from Portugal only 350,000 ducats.38 The Spanish would have to wait until 1565 before a good route between Mexico and Asia could be found, thanks to the Augustinian friar, explorer and geographer Andrés de Urdaneta (1508–1568).39

With regard to Magellan’s objectives, they were never accomplished, not only because of his death, but also because of the death of his wife Beatriz and their two children, meaning that no relatives were ever able to receive Ferdinand’s salary from the royal coffers, let alone the wealth from a Spanish trade in spices that never materialized. Magellan’s business partner, Falero, apparently suffered from mental illness and died in poverty.40

Nevertheless, if we forget about the geopolitical and personal objectives for a moment, we can argue quite compellingly that the Magellan–Elcano voyage was the crowning achievement of the first phase of European exploration. Of course, following the Magellan–Elcano expedition, the Europeans learned of the existence of the Marianas and the Philippines. But, more importantly, Magellan found the strait that so many captains after Columbus had looked for. This strait proved that all the oceans of the world are one. Crucially, Magellan’s determination to push through the dangerous waters of the strait and his extraordinary seafaring skills across the Pacific contributed to a more accurate measurement of the Earth—a major correction of Ptolemaic geography and contemporary European cartography.

Yet this intellectual adjustment was not only cartographic; it was also cosmographic and cosmological. To appreciate this, we should remember that, only 60 years earlier, the beautiful mappa mundi produced by Fra Mauro in Venice still represented the known continents as surrounded by the forsaken islands and the tenebre—a vast area of impassable darkness that limited human mobility.41 This visualization of space and

37. Carla Rahn Phillips, ‘A Translation of Pedro de Alvarado’s 1526 Contract with the Spanish Crown: Pacific Exploration and Territoriality’, *Terrae Incognitae*, 51, No. 3 (2019), 237.
38. Parry, *Discovery*, 295–6.
39. José de Arteche, *Urdaneta: El dominador de los espacios del Océano Pacífico* (Madrid, 1943). This book is quite dated and the central chapters are very dry. However, Arteche’s detailed reconstruction of Urdaneta’s voyages demonstrates how impracticable the route across the Pacific remained for many decades.
40. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 673.
41. Angelo Cattaneo, ‘La mappamundi di Fra Mauro: L’idea di oceano e le direzioni di navigazione all’alba dell’espansione europea’, in Annalisa D’Ascenzo, ed., *Mundus novus: Amerigo Vespucci e i metodi della ricerca storico-geografica* (Genoa, 2004), 201–14. See also the more comprehensive study of the same map in Angelo Cattaneo, *Fra Mauro’s Mappa Mundi and Fifteenth-Century Venice* (Turnhout, 2011).
the cosmos had serious implications also for the metaphysical position of human beings. According to Angelo Cattaneo, even though Fra Mauro greatly expanded the navigable seas on his map, he maintained the ocean’s role as the physical and metaphysical limit to human action and knowledge. Even as late as the Cantino map (1502), the idea of measurable physical distances in a finite world open to the possibilities of uninterrupted (circum)navigation was arguably absent. After the Magellan–Elcano expedition, this perception of the cosmos changed and, in a map like Diogo Ribeiro’s 1529 update of the Padrón General (Figure 2), we finally see not only the contours of most of the continents but also the end of a first phase in the process of European maritime exploration.

A sense of closure can also be perceived in the words of Maximilianus Transylvanus (c. 1490–1538), who, soon after the return of Elcano and the other survivors, authored an account of the expedition based on interviews. In the introductory section of his work, ‘De Moluccis Insulis’, he declares: ‘the Castilians in their voyages westwards, and the Portuguese sailing eastwards, have sought out, discovered, and surveyed so many places even beyond the Tropic of Capricorn, and now these countrymen of ours have sailed completely round the world’. Similarly, Elcano himself stressed the idea of the completion of a historic process of discovery in a letter to King Charles, writing: ‘Furthermore Your Majesty will know that what we should especially appreciate and

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42. As nicely put by Wey Gómez in the context of a beautiful discussion on Columbus’s sources: ‘Because place was a key cosmological concept, geography was part of a broad network of interrelated sciences and arts that reflected the harmony and internal workings of the world-machine’. Wey Gómez, Tropics, 67.

43. Cattaneo, ‘Mappamundi’, 206.

44. Joaquim Alves Gaspar, ‘Blunders, Errors and Entanglements: Scrutinizing the Cantino Planisphere with a Cartometric Eye’, Imago Mundi, 64, No. 2 (2012), 181–200.

45. ‘De Moluccis Insulis’, in Blair and Robertson, The Philippine Islands, 307.
value is that we have discovered and encompassed the whole circle of the world, since going west we returned from the east.46 Even though Spain could not immediately take advantage of these discoveries from a political perspective, the voyage was consequential from a geopolitical point of view precisely because it tested the limits of Charles’s universal monarchy and influenced the shape of Iberian Asia. According Transylvanus, this voyage had been planned precisely to ascertain the gap between geographic reality and Habsburg claims to a universal monarchy:

And although there was a somewhat doubtful rumour afloat, that the Portuguese had advanced so far to the east, that they had come to the end of their own limits, and had passed over into the territory appointed for the Castilians, and that Malacca and the Great Gulf were within our limits, all this was more said than believed, until, four years ago, Ferdinand Magellan, a distinguished Portuguese, who had for many years sailed about the Eastern Seas as admiral of the Portuguese fleet, having quarrelled with his king, ... and Christopher Haro ... pointed out to the emperor, that it was not yet clearly ascertained, whether Malacca was within the boundaries of the Portuguese or of the Castilians, because hitherto its longitude had not been definitely known; but that it was an undoubted fact that the Great Gulf and the Chinese nations were within the Castilian limits.47

The oceanic voyage of 1519–1522 was therefore politically consequential beyond the issue of the viability of the route from the strait to the Moluccas because it qualified and reoriented the ambitions of an already overstretched global empire while streamlining the efforts of the two Iberian kingdoms, whose imperial claims had been inextricably intertwined since Alcáçovas and Tordesillas.48

Images of Asian islands and societies in Pigafetta’s Relazione

Before air and rail travel, long-distance cross-cultural encounters happened mostly thanks to maritime voyages, and indeed Magellan’s expedition was momentous also because of the images of Asian societies that it popularized across Christendom. Among the few survivors of the enterprise was Antonio Pigafetta (c.1492–1531), a nobleman from Vicenza. He had joined the expedition through curiosity and a desire for fame. After his return in Europe, he travelled round several Renaissance courts, attempting to make a name for himself

46. Cited in María Jesús Benites, “‘La mucha destemplanza de la tierra”: Una aproximación al relato de Maximiliano de Transilvano sobre el descubrimiento del Estrecho de Magallanes’, Orbis Tertius, 17, No.19 (2013), 200.
47. ‘De Moluccis Insulis’, in Blair and Robertson, The Philippine Islands, 309–10.
48. Even in the Philippines, where Spain would carve out its largest Asian colony, the distance and isolation vis-à-vis the relatively more encompassing network of outposts constituting Portuguese Asia had serious consequences for the social fabric and economic life. For example, as shown by Tina Clemente, Chinese merchants in the Philippines would continue for centuries to skilfully trade and prosper because of the invaluable and irreplaceable credit and commercial networks that they offered – notwithstanding threats and ostracism from the colonial authorities. Tina S. Clemente, ‘Spanish Colonial Policy toward Chinese Merchants in Eighteenth-Century Philippines’, in Lin Yu-Ju and Madeleine Zeilin, eds., Merchant Communities in Asia, 1600–1980 (London, 2015), 123–40.
as an expert on ‘the Indies’, and eventually wrote a book entitled Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo. This text, besides being an example of Italian courtly literature that harmoniously merges medieval and Renaissance themes and values, marked an expansion in ethnographic, anthropological and linguistic knowledge. In its original format, it also included an isolario or ‘Book of Islands’, which allowed the reader to visualize Asian spaces for the first time not through broad cartographic conjectures but through 23 detailed charts of the eastern archipelagos touched by the expedition.

The Relazione became very popular during the sixteenth century and, far from embodying an arrogant imperialist attitude or a rapacious obsession for spices and gold, it is actually a sensitive and colourful narrative that weaves together chivalric themes and sympathetic descriptions of Asian societies. Pigafetta does not condemn even the most unexpected or strange customs, and he often leaves his explanations of peculiar rites and traditions open-ended. He does this, for example, when detailing funerary rites and the ceremonial killing of swine in the Philippines, avoiding judgement and inviting the reader to draw their own conclusions.

Pigafetta’s keen interest and respect with regard to Asian societies is shown by his sober and delicate description of the relatively simple courtly life at Mindanao in the Philippines. Even though his visit there takes place after both the death of Magellan at Mactan and the subsequent massacre of many members of the crew at Cebu, Pigafetta depicts the local king as charming and amiable, and gives the reader an impression of tranquillity, as if he found himself among old friends:

At the conclusion of dinner, I asked the king by signs whether I could see the queen. He replied that he was willing, and we went together to the summit of a lofty hill, where the queen’s house was located. When I entered the house, I made a bow to the queen, and she did the same to me, whereupon I sat down beside her. She was making a sleeping mat of palm leaves. In the house there was hanging a number of porcelain jars and four metal disks for playing upon, one of which was larger than the second, while the other two were still smaller. There were many male and female slaves who served her.

When moving to wealthier polities such as Brunei, Pigafetta guides his European audience to recognize civility and political order. Pigafetta describes his audience at the court of the sultan, recalling the elephants and the precious gifts, the halls of the palace and the brocade curtain behind which the sultan sat, as well as the complex system to communicate with him – via a series of intermediaries and a speaking tube in a wall.

49. The best English edition of the Relazione is by Antonio Pigafetta, in Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., ed., The First Voyage around the World (New York, 1995). Pigafetta adds four vocabularies to his pamphlet: for Guarani, Patagonian, Bisayan and Malay. Alessandro Bausani, ‘The First Italian-Malay Vocabulary by Antonio Pigafetta’, East and West, 11, No. 4 (1960), 229–48.
50. The charts have been reproduced in Cachey’s introduction to Pigafetta, The First Voyage.
51. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 56–7, 58–9.
52. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 67.
53. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 68.
54. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 72–4.
Another example of how Pigafetta (and his audience) perceived Asian maritime civilizations comes in his account of an encounter between two Moluccan kings, the Sultan of Tidore (who was hosting the remnants of the Spanish fleet and whom Pigafetta calls ‘our king’) and the Sultan of Batjan (Bacan). The impressive scene is recalled in the following description:

On Sunday afternoon, December 15, the king of Batjan and his brother came in a prau with three tiers of rowers at each side. In all there were 120 rowers, and they carried many banners made of white, yellow, and red parrot feathers. There was much sounding of those metal disks, for the rowers kept time in their rowing to those sounds. He brought two other praus filled with girls to present them to his betrothed.55

The following section does not describe an encounter between an ‘Indian’ king and a European explorer, but rather the ceremonial and courteous meeting of two ‘Indian’ rulers:

Our king came to congratulate him as it is not the custom for any king to disembark on the land of another king. When the king of Batjan saw our king coming, he rose from the carpet on which he was seated, and took his position at one side of it. Our king refused to sit down upon the carpet, but on its other side, and so none occupied the carpet. The king of Batjan gave our king five hundred patols, because our king was giving his daughter to wife to the former’s brother. The said patols are cloths of gold and silk manufactured in China, and are highly esteemed among them. Whenever one of those people dies, the other members of his family clothe themselves in those cloths in order to show him more honor.56

There are other examples of Pigafetta’s sensitivity to evidence of civility and political legitimacy, as well as his interest and empathy towards the rites and traditions that he encountered during the voyage.57 But suffice here to say that the dissemination of such images of Asia across Cinquecento Italy and Europe responded to a long-standing and genuine curiosity about the world – a curiosity that characterized late medieval Christendom.58 The significance of Magellan’s voyage, from this perspective, is that it

55. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 98.
56. Pigafetta, The First Voyage, 98–9.
57. See my essay ‘Asian Ceremonies and Christian Chivalry in Pigafetta’s The First Voyage around the World’, in Christian Mueller and Matteo Salonia, eds., Travel Writings on Asia: Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge across the East, c. 1200 to the Present (London, 2022), 83–110.
58. This curiosity has been discussed by, among others, Marco Spallanzani et al., Mercanti fiorentini nell’Asia portoghese (1500–1525) (Florence, 1997); Joan-Pau Rubiés, ‘Late Medieval Ambassadors and the Practice of Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1250–1450’, in Palmira Brummett, ed., The ‘Book’ of Travels: Genre, Ethnology, and Pilgrimage, 1250–1700 (Leiden, 2009), 37–112; Kim M. Phillips, Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245–1510 (Philadelphia, 2014); and Giulio Busi, Marco Polo: Viaggio ai confini del Medioevo (Milan, 2018). See also my articles ‘The First Voyage of Giovanni da Empoli to India: Mercantile Culture, Christian Faith, and the Early Production of Knowledge about Portuguese Asia’, International Journal of Maritime History, 31, No. 1 (2019), 3–18 and ‘A Dissenting Voice: The Clash of Trade and Warfare in Giovanni da Empoli’s Account of His Second Voyage to Portuguese Asia’, Itinerario, 45, No. 2 (2021), 189–207.
concluded an important phase of an enterprise that was not merely political or economic, but also intellectual; the expansion of the sphere of human mobility resulted in a correction of physical and human geographies.

As clearly exemplified by Gian Battista Ramusio’s premise for his famous 1550 collection of travel accounts, late medieval and Renaissance humanists had embarked on a quest to participate in, integrate and harmoniously complete the knowledge of the ancients:

But the reason that made me willingly undertake this work was that, studying the tables of the geography of Ptolemy where Africa and India are described, and considering them very much defective, I thought it would be appreciated and quite useful to the world to put together the narratives of the writers of our times, who have visited and discussed in detail the abovementioned parts of the world, with which juxtaposing the information in the Portuguese maritime charts, it would be possible to draw new tables … contributing to what has been written by the ancient authors.59

Pigafetta’s Relazione, about the first voyage around the world, contributed significantly to this intellectual tradition. In fact, Pigafetta’s peculiar text was also on the threshold of a more systematic ethnographic approach to the description of the world, one that for Spanish Asia would be later exemplified by Martín de Rada (1533–1578) and Francisco Ignacio Alcina (1610–1674).60 Pigafetta’s witness account and the creation and dissemination of such a pivotal book in the history of travel writing on Asia and European literature was another consequence – though unplanned – of the Magellan–Elcano expedition, which we are commemorating in 2022.

**Conclusion**

On the 500th anniversary of the Magellan–Elcano voyage around the world, whose few survivors returned to Seville aboard the Victoria in September 1522, this article has offered a reassessment of the political context within which both Columbus and Magellan moved. While the historiography tends to see the Treaty of Tordesillas as a turning point, I have explained the importance of a longer history of rivalry and diplomatic cooperation between the Iberian kingdoms in the Atlantic. The 1479 Treaty of Alcáçovas constituted the true cornerstone of the Iberian world, determining, in broad strokes, geopolitical spheres and future routes of maritime exploration.

Second, it is necessary to reconsider the multiple achievements of the Magellan–Elcano expedition, beyond the mapping of the strait. Contrary to what is assumed even by recent scholarship on the subject, I have clarified why there is no mystery surrounding the northerly route followed by Magellan across the Pacific. I have concluded that even though the route across the Pacific remained unviable for many decades, a new conception of the size and shape of the world emerged, giving a sense of closure to the first phase

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59. My translation from the Italian text in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Primo volume delle navigazioni et viaggi* (Venice, 1550), ii–iii.

60. Charles Boxer, ed., *South China in the Sixteenth Century: Being the Narratives of Galeote Pereira, Gaspar da Cruz, Martin de Rada (1550–1575)* (Nendeln, 1967); Mercedes G. Planta, *Traditional Medicine in the Colonial Philippines, 16th to the 19th Century* (Quezon City, 2017).
in the opening of the Atlantic world and altering the very metaphysical position of human beings in European cosmography. This change was quickly absorbed in cartography as well as the minds of both Transylvanus and Pigafetta.\(^{61}\)

Pigafetta, a restless nobleman from Vicenza who was enamoured with the chivalric figure of Magellan, has been the subject of my third reflection. As already observed by Gabriel García Márquez, Pigafetta’s *Relazione* is the literary masterpiece of its age.\(^{62}\) Rather than just abstract ideas about a navigable but shapeless sea encompassing the Earth, European audiences devoured entertaining, puzzling and overall empathetic images of specific human geographies. Crucially, then, the most important account of Magellan’s enterprise shows how, even in a context such as Iberian expansion, European curiosity played a key role in long-distance maritime travel and East–West encounters.

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**ORCID iD**

Matteo Salonia  
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0065-8307

**Author biography**

Matteo Salonia is an Assistant Professor in European and International History at the University of Nottingham Ningbo. He is the author of *Genoa’s Freedom: Entrepreneurship, Republicanism, and the Spanish Atlantic* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), and his recent publications have focused on early Iberian Asia, travel literature and East–West encounters. In 2022, he co-edited the volume *Travel Writings on Asia: Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge across the East, c.1200 to the Present* (Palgrave Macmillan).

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61. ‘When we left that strait, if we had sailed continuously westward we would have circumnavigated the world without finding other land than the Cape’ (Pigafetta, *The First Voyage*, 27).
62. Gabriel García Márquez, ‘The Solitude of America’, *New York Times*, 6 February 1983.