

CHAPTER ONE



MAGELLAN FINDS HIS STRAIT

Ferdinand Magalianes, a Portuguese Gentleman, upon some disgust taken at his Master King Emanuel, applied himself to the Court of Castile, offering to make great Discoveries of the rich Spice-Islands to the West, and to sail round the Globe.

Voyages & Discoveries to the South and North, 1694

SOME AT THE COURT OF CASTILE regarded lands newly discovered by Christopher Columbus not so much as a “new world” but as a barrier to the eastern shores of an old world already known to them. The spice islands of the east were held in particular esteem, and a westward route to their shores would save much time. Or so it was thought in the early years of the sixteenth century, when the breadth of this new world was severely underestimated.

It was suspected that a passage to the west did not exist within the land which was largely terra incognita from its northern extremity to Terra Firma—the area which marks the beginning of the southern continent. And of that continent, little was known but that “its southern part trended southwards and afterwards westwards.” Was this land also a complete barrier? Or might there be some southern passage here, patiently awaiting discovery?

A Portuguese navigator was sure he had the answer; so sure, in fact, that he wagered his life on it. Rebuffed in his native land, Fernão de Magalhães, better known to English-language readers as Ferdinand Magellan, placed himself in the service of Spain. He put the following proposal before those who attended Cæsar—His Majesty Carlos I, also crowned as Holy Roman Emperor Carlos V:

Magellan said to them: “If you would
give me ships and men, I would show you
navigation to these parts, without touching
any sea or land of the King of Portugal”
and if not, they might cut off his head.

The plan was bold; Magellan would find his way westward into the great southern sea, and then onward to the spice islands. Not only would he do that, but he would do it without trespassing on that part of the globe apportioned to the Portuguese by the Pope.

A fellow exile from Portugal, Christóbal de Haro, offered to fit out a fleet at his own expense. His Majesty had other plans.

Cæsar himself equipped a fleet of five ships,
and appointed Magellan its admiral. Their
orders were, to sail southwards along the
coast of Terra Firma till they found either its
termination or some channel through which
they might reach the spice-bearing Moluccas.

A patrician of Vicenza heard news of the expedition and finding himself in Spain at the time, made his way to the fleet, there to apply for a berth on Magellan’s flagship. Fortunately for the historical record, Antonio Pigafetta was welcomed aboard, and thus we have his day-by-day account of the voyage. Magellan himself wrote nothing, or if he did, then like Magellan himself, it did not survive the voyage around the globe.

There are also a few fragments written by other participants of the voyage, including a brief report by an unknown “Genoese Pilot,” a “Narrative of a Portuguese” known only as a companion to Magellan’s brother-in-law Duarte Barbosa, and a few other sources. From these, we may follow Magellan as he made his way across the Atlantic and down the eastern coast of South America.

The five ships of the expedition set sail from Seville on the tenth of August, 1519, with Magellan and Pigafetta in the flagship *Trinidad*, followed by *Concepción*, *Santiago*, *San Antonio* and *Victoria*. A month later they watered at the Canary Islands, and there Magellan received a letter with intelligence that he should expect trouble before too long. His father-in-law wrote that several ship captains had been heard saying that if they were annoyed by their admiral, “they would kill him, and rise up against him.” But Magellan was confident; he wrote back that “he would do them no injuries so that they would have reason to act thus.”

The expedition made its way across the Atlantic, and after passing a bit of time with some cannibals in what is now Brazil, continued southward into the face of the approaching polar winter. Magellan considered his options and decided to wait out the worst of the weather in a sheltered inlet known today as Puerto San Julián. The five ships arrived here on March 31st. On August 24th, four departed. The Genoese pilot explains the fate of the *Santiago*, as it attempted to carry out Magellan’s orders:

He had sent it to reconnoitre, and the weather had been heavy, and had cast it ashore, where all the crew had been recovered along with the merchandise, artillery and fittings of the ship.

The *Santiago* loss was not the only thing that went wrong at San Julián. For it was at this place, and despite Magellan’s

professed good intentions, that apparently some captains felt sufficiently annoyed by their admiral to kill him and rise up against him—not necessarily in that order. But they underestimated their man, and when the fleet sailed on, several of the formerly-annoyed were left in the ground beyond Terra Firma. We shall hear more of them in another chapter.

The ships continued their voyage southward until they reached the mouth of Río Santa Cruz, covering the ninety miles from San Julián in about three weeks—on average, not quite five miles per day. Here they spent another month, watering, taking in fish and—as at their winter anchorage—again encountering “people like savages, and the men are from nine to ten spans in height.” But like the executions at San Julián, descriptions of the local population and the river itself are reserved for another chapter, so as not to interrupt the voyage onward.

That voyage proceeded at a brisk pace, at least in comparison to the previous segment. In about three days, the vessels ventured another 150 miles southward, taking not an entire day to span five miles, but doing it in just a bit more than two hours. And of course they sighted their next landmark on yet another day with religious significance. For it was none other than October 21st.

A short digression can't be avoided here: Some ten centuries before Magellan, the British virgin princess Ursula set out on a pilgrimage to Rome. Having little taste for unaccompanied travel, she performed her first—and perhaps, only—miracle; she found, and actually persuaded, eleven thousand local virgins to join her. At Rome, she persuaded Pope Cyriacus to accompany them to Cologne. Whether he joined the party out of piety, or a lack of it, is not part of the story. But His Former Holiness so angered the church fathers by his departure that his name was stricken from the catalog of popes. Thus, there is no record of a pope named Cyriacus. No record, that is, beyond the legend of Ursula and her virgins.



A modified view of Antonio Pigafetta's chart of Patagonia and the Strait of Magellan—called here *Streto Patagonico*. Originally sketched with south at the top, it is shown here reversed to conform with modern practise. Note that the land south of the strait is unnamed; further circumstantial evidence that, as mentioned later in the chapter, Magellan did not call it "Tierra del Fuego."

Near Cologne, they were accosted by the Huns, who did just what one would expect Huns *not* to do upon such an opportunity. They axed the entire lot of them, except the princess. The head man suggested something inappropriate, and Ursula said she preferred death. She got her wish, and sainthood followed. Thus we have the Feast Day of St. Ursula and her companions and, as Pigafetta tells us:

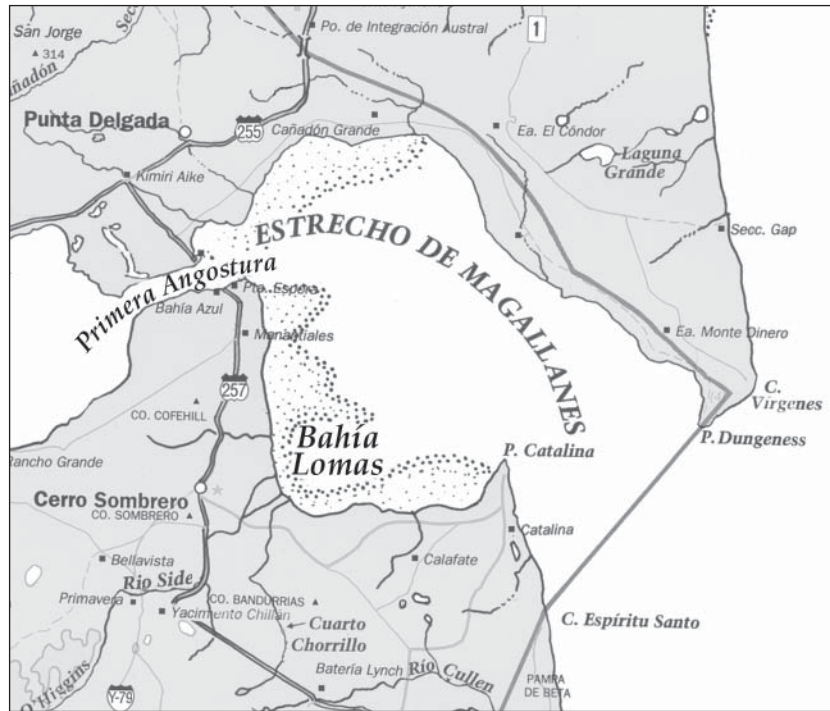
After going and taking the course to the fifty-second degree, on the day of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, we found, by a miracle, a strait which we called the Cape of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, this strait is a hundred and ten leagues long.

Pigafetta is a bit mixed-up here; the name bestowed in memory of the unfortunate ladies marks only the approach to the strait. In fact, his map on the previous page shows "*Capo da le ij m. vir.*" applied to the cape, and not to the strait itself. Nor is this the first appearance of Ursula's virgins in the New World. Some years earlier on the second voyage of Christopher Columbus, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea made his way through a grouping of tiny islands—so many in fact, that they became the Archipelago of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. Today, the flag and coat of arms of the British Virgin Islands bear an image of Ursula and the motto "*Vigilate.*" Good advice, but a bit too late to do her much good.

To return to Magellan, he brought his fleet round the cape into a large bay, some thirty miles across, but which appeared to lead nowhere. Some of the crew thought this would be a good time to reverse course and head for home. But their leader would not hear of it.

The captain-general said that there was another strait which led out, he knew it well and had seen it in a marine chart of the King of Portugal, which a great pilot and failor named Martin of Bohemia had made.

might lead the way, or it might not; *Concepción* and *San Antonio* would return soon enough with news. If not, he would sail even farther southward. In any case, he retained the confidence he'd shown when he wagered his head.



Bahía Lomas and the narrow inlet now known as Primera Angostura (First Narrow) on a modern map

The two ships set out but were shortly caught up in a great storm which threatened to do its worst. The captains decided to return to their consorts, but the storm had other plans; they were driven to the northwest extremity of the bay and there discovered a narrow strait leading into another bay. And beyond that, yet another strait leading into yet another bay, larger than the other. But this was quite enough adventure for one mission; *Concepción* and *San Antonio* returned to Magellan with the news. Artillery salutes were exchanged, banners triumphantly raised, and the entire fleet passed through what are now known as Primera y

Segunda Angosturas—the first and second narrows—and on into the large bay separating the Brunswick Peninsula and Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego, both as yet unnamed.

A land mass (the modern Dawson Island) loomed due south, with a passage on each side which may lead to the peaceful sea, or to nowhere. Again, Magellan sent *Concepción* and *San Antonio* off on a scouting mission to see where the southeast passage might take them, while *Trinidad* and *Victoria* explored the southwest passage. But the men of *San Antonio* had enough. Captain Alvaro de Mesquita's stature as the captain-general's cousin was of no use; wounded in a scuffle, the mutineers placed him in irons and their pilot Estevan Gomes took charge. *San Antonio* made good its escape, back through the narrows and home to Spain. Their story must have been a good one, for most were acquitted of mutiny and poor old Captain de Mesquita spent the next few years behind bars, pending the return of the expedition.

Trinidad and *Victoria* moved down the southwest passage, then around the southernmost tip of the continent at Cape Froward and on to a "River of Sardines" where they awaited the return of the others. This anchorage was probably on the south shore of the Brunswick Peninsula, overlooking the group known today as the Charles Islets. While there, Magellan sent a small boat westward. It returned in three days with the news he had been waiting for.

They told us they had found the cape, and
the sea great and wide. At the joy which the
captain-general had at this he began to cry,
and he gave the name of Cape of Desire to this
cape, as a thing which had been much desired
for a long time.

But where were the *Concepción* and *San Antonio*? Magellan turned back and eventually found the *Concepción*. On inquiring what happened to the other, Captain Juan Serrano

said he knew nothing. *Victoria* was sent in one direction, *Trinidad* in the other, but *San Antonio* was nowhere to be found. Signs were posted at strategic locations, because of course no one knew that the missing ship was now homeward bound.

And now it was time to move on, for Magellan had an appointment with death on the opposite side of his peaceful sea. But first, we must settle a name on his passageway between the oceans. Antonio Pigafetta did just that, and recorded his impression of the land.

We called this ftrait Pathagonico. I think that there is not in the world a more beautiful country, or better ftrait than this one.

And according to the anonymous Portuguese,

We found ourefelves in a ftrait, to which we gave the name Strait of Victoria, because the ship Victoria was the first that had seen it: some called it the Strait of Magalhãns, because our captain was named Fernando de Magalhãns.

In a surviving document written by Magellan himself, he gives orders to Duarte Barbosa, recently appointed captain of the *Victoria*. The order concludes:

Done in the Channel of All Saints, opposite the river of the islet, on Wednesday, twenty-first of November, in fifty-three degrees, of the year one thousand, five hundred and twenty.

Given the details, Magellan's "Channel of All Saints" appears to have been in the general vicinity of the Charles Islets, with the larger Isla Carlos III nearby to the northwest. Yet some historians conclude that the captain-general wrote "Channel" when he really meant "Strait" and that "All Saints" applies to the entire passage, not just to the place

where he found himself in late November, one week before entering the great south sea. But if so, would Pigafetta have written that "We called this strait Pathagonico" in direct contradiction of his captain? Probably not.

Historians who prefer to ignore such little details go on to explain that Magellan's "All Saints" marks the date the fleet entered the strait—the first of November, or All Saints Day. Having passed all those virgins on October 21st, did it really take the rest of the month to sail another fifty miles to the first narrow? Perhaps, yet neither Pigafetta nor anyone else gives a date for entering the strait.

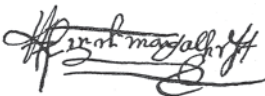
Before leaving the name of Magellan's strait, one other attempt at calling it something else deserves a brief notice. We shall read more of Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa in another chapter, and only mention here that he once made an attempt to strike Magellan's name from the strait:

Be it known to all men, that to make this Voyage and Discovery, we chose for our advocate and patroness, our most serene Lady the Virgin Santa Maria. For which reason, the name of the Strait de la Madre de Dios is given to this Strait heretofore called de Magallanes.

Naval historian James Burney had this to say in 1803 about Sarmiento's "Strait of the Mother of God."

It would perhaps be regarding this piece of vanity with too much severity, to suppose that it proceeded from a wish to detract from the reputation of Magalhanes; but it appears with peculiar ill grace in Sarmiento, who in this particular has been treated with great respect by subsequent navigators. Posterity, however, has not countenanced the injustice designed against Magalhanes, and the Strait continues, and will probably long continue, to be distinguished by his name.

History agrees; on the maps of today's world the passage between the oceans is known only as the Strait of Magellan.

Magellan's  signature

Popular folklore has it that Magellan saw many fires on his port side as the *Trinidad* made its way through his strait. He therefore called the place a land of fire, or *Tierra del Fuego*. Perhaps this legend may be traced to James Burney's account of the Magellan voyage, in which an incident at Puerto San Julián on the Atlantic coast is mentioned:

Some fires being seen on shore at night, at day-break seven Spaniards were sent to the place; but before they reached it, the Indians were gone.

But not permanently: After an unsuccessful search, the Spaniards were ambushed and one killed before the Indians were put to flight, leaving some half-dressed meat behind. The searchers buried their fallen shipmate, then lit their own fire and enjoyed a bit of supper before returning to their ship. Pigafetta mentions the latter blaze but not the former—nor for that matter does he say a thing about a funeral supper.

Later on Burney mentions other fires seen as the fleet made its way westward through the strait.

Here it was that in the night they observed many fires on the Southern shore of the Strait, for which reason Magalhanes named the land on that side *Tierra del Fuego*.

Or perhaps not: Anthropologist Samuel K. Lothrop tells a tale that ...

Magellan called it Tierra del Humo, "Land of Smoke," and Charles V changed the name to Tierra del Fuego, jocosely remarking that where there is smoke there must be fire.

Since Antonio Pigafetta recorded so many names given to places along the expedition route, there's a rather good reason to distrust either version of this little legend. And that is, that Pigafetta says nothing of a land of smoke, nor of a land of fire, nor does a Tierra del Humo (or, del Fuego) appear anywhere in his reports. In fact, these phrases appear nowhere in any known first-hand account of the voyage of Magellan. Nor is there any known record of Carlos V saying anything about the matter.

The closest is an off-hand remark by a man whose name is not easy to forget; Maximilianus of Transylvania, secretary to the Holy Roman Emperor. On October 24th, 1522, he sent off a lengthy letter to Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg, cardinal-archbishop of Salzburg, a man who might be called "father" in more than one sense of the word. For in addition to his vocational calling, it turns out (according to some accounts) that the letter-writer was his son.

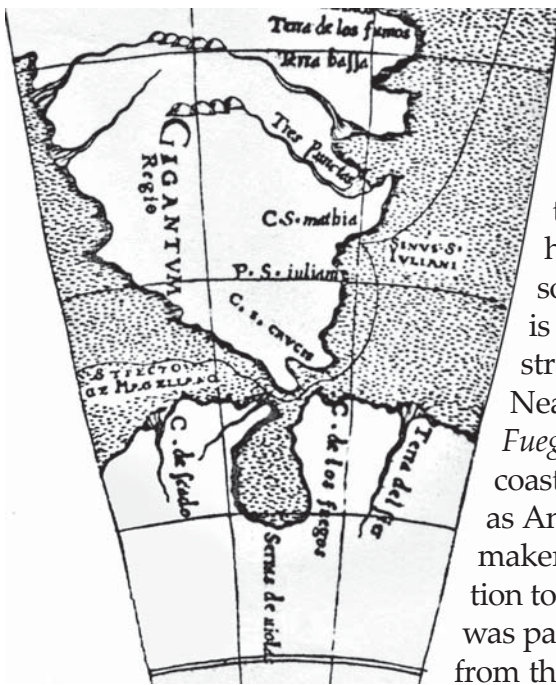
Maximilianus writes of his interviews with surviving members of the expedition crew on their arrival home at the end of the voyage, and assures His Grace of the accuracy of the relation:

I have taken care to have everything related to me most exactly by the captain and by the individual failors who have returned with him.

One night a great number of fires were seen, mostly on their left hand, from which they guessed that they had been seen by the natives of the region.

And that's all there is. After the unsuccessful search for the missing *San Antonio*, Magellan would waste no more time in the area, the expedition continued on its way, and if the captain-general had anything to say about a land of fire, no one thought to write it down.

Perhaps the cardinal-archbishop was not the only one who learned of fires on a distant shore. Within the decade, an anonymous cartographer produced



anonymous cartographer produced a set of globe gores showing the track of the Magellan expedition. A *Terra de los Fumos* ("Land of the Smokes") is at the top of the segment shown here, *P. S. Julián* is also seen, the southern portion of the continent is *Gigantum Regio* and Magellan's strait is named *Strecto de Magellano*. Near its eastern entrance, *C. de los Fuegos* is inscribed on the northern coast of the land mass now known as Antarctica. At the time, the globe maker did not have enough information to realize this "Cape of the Fires" was part of an island at some distance from the great white continent. But he did know about places of smoke and fire, and of other details brought home by survivors of the voyage.

There is something else in the letter to the cardinal-archbishop that escaped notice:

There is no doubt that the land which they had upon their right was the continent of which we have spoken, but they think that the land on the left was not a mainland, but islands, because sometimes on that side they heard on a still farther coast the beating and roaring of the sea.

The crew were not mistaken, for they had heard the waves of a great sea crashing against the southern shores of islands without number. It would take another half-century, and another chapter, for its discovery. But before that discovery, Gerard Mercator would publish his 1538 map of the world, inscribed with *Fretum antarcticum sive Magellanicum* (“Strait of Antarctica or of Magellan”), and with a large land mass—still part of the Antarctic continent on the southern side of the strait, but with nothing here to indicate a place of fires.

In about 1544, Battista Agnes prepared an atlas in which one chart shows fragments of North and South America, with *Terra a los humos* appearing twice (pointing hands) along the Patagonian coastline. *San Julián* is barely visible (arrow), *El Streto a maglanes* and Magellan’s *C. Deseado* are seen, but there is no indication of a *Tierra del Fuego*.



It was not until 1548 that Mercator’s *C. de los Fuegos* became *Tierra del Fuego* on Giovanni Gastaldi’s *Carta Marina Nova Tabula* (“New Sea Chart”).

And that leads us to a question: Was it Gastaldi who replaced the unknown globe-maker’s “Cape of the Fires” with a “Land of Fire?” So far, the historical record isn’t talking, but Gastaldi published his map in Venice. At various times Pigafetta described himself as a “patrician of Vicenza” and a “Venetian Knight of Jerusalem.” The distance between

these cities is about 40 miles. Pigafetta's whereabouts at the time of Gastaldi are unknown. Did he too recall fires that he had seen twenty years earlier and mention this to Gastaldi as a new sea chart was being prepared?

Or was it someone else? For there were others who saw the fires, as noted by the famous buccaneer-author William Dampier after passing the Horn in 1684:

I have heard that there have been seen Smokes and Fires on Terra del Fuego, not on the tops of Hills, but in Plains and Valleys, seen by those who have sailed thro' the Streights of Magellan; supposed to be made by the Natives.

There is the sense here that Dampier is referring to something he'd heard from a contemporary source. But alas, he gives no further details.

Perhaps we shall never know for certain who gave the name *Tierra del Fuego* to the big island on the south side of the strait. But we do know one thing for certain: it was not Captain-General Fernão de Magalhães.



Speaking of Magellanic names, and to conclude with a detour that takes us a bit north of Patagonia, there are at least two explanations for the name Montevideo—one, unlikely; another, inclusive.

One has it that an unknown Spaniard scribbled *Monte VI d. E. O.* on an unknown map; thus, Montevideo is “The mountain (*monte*) sixth (*VI*) from (*d*) east (*este*, abbreviated *E*) to west (*oeste*, or *O*).” This legend has taken on a life of its own: a Google search turns up more than 100 pages in which the “sixth mountain” explanation is offered. An additional 100-plus pages have “mountain” misspelled, as in “The Spaniards recorded the location of a fountain ...” followed by assorted variations on the *Monte VI d. E. O.* theme. It probably doesn’t need mentioning here that neither the reason for the odd annotation nor the identity of the map have ever been revealed.

Another explanation brings us back to Magellan. On his approach to Río de la Plata, the captain-general announced “*Monte video*” (“I see a mountain”). For reasons best known to himself, he spoke to his Spanish-speaking crew in Portuguese. Or did he? His Spanish pilot made the following entry in the log for January 10th, 1520:

Our latitude came to 35°, ... and the land is
fandy; we gave it the name of Montevidi.

Now, if “we” means Magellan himself, then the answer is “yes” and the citizens of Uruguay’s capitol can count themselves lucky that the captain-general did not see a cockroach.

Facing page: Adriaen Collaert’s ca. 1585 *Americae Retectio* (“America Revealed”) surrounds Magellan with fires on shore, a flying sun god, assorted sea creatures, and a native downing an arrow—only the latter reported by Pigafetta.



A NASA view of Magellan's strait

1. *Cabo de las Once Mil Virgenes*
Cape of the Eleven Thousand Virgins
2. *Bahía Lomas*
Lomas Bay
3. *Primera Angostura*
First Narrow
4. *Segunda Angostura*
Second Narrow
5. *Islas Isabel, Magdalena, Marta*
Isabel (visible), Magdalene, Martha Islands
6. *Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego*
Tierra del Fuego
7. *Isla Dawson*
Dawson Island
8. *Cabo Froward*
Cape Froward—southernmost point on the continent
9. *Cabo Deseado*
Cape Desire—entrance to the Great South Sea

