

In Magellan's Wake

An Interview with Romain Bertrand

by Ivan Jablonka

Fernand de Magellan's "circumnavigation of the globe" in 1519-1522 conceals a whole fascinating and little-known universe: crews, kings, peoples, plants, peaceful or bloody encounters, hopes and fears. But, come to think of it: did Magellan really circumnavigate the globe?

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Books and Ideas: You have just published *Qui a fait le tour de quoi ? L'affaire Magellan* ("*Who Went Around What? The Magellan Affair*") (Verdier, 2020). Many people learn in school that Magellan "circumnavigated the globe" in the early 16th century; there is even a strait that bears his name to the south of America. In reality, things seem to be more complicated than this...

Romain Bertrand: Magellan is a name that resounds in our imagination. It appears again and again in the story and saga of the Great Discoveries, by which I

mean the century that starts with Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas, and which will take Europeans to many a far-flung society with which they had previously only had very distant or, at least, very indirect relations. The name of Magellan remains connected to the idea that he is the first to have circumnavigated the globe by sea.

But things are actually more complicated than this. Firstly, we know very well from sources from this time, from the chronicles of the "great journey", that Magellan did not strictly speaking circumnavigate the globe, since he died two thirds of the way into his expedition, on an islet in the Philippines, in April 1521. It is true that the adventure continued without him, and that a handful of survivors managed, onboard the *Victoria* (the last of the expedition's five vessels), to return to Spain in 1522, followed by a few survivors of the *Trinidad* who had been kept captive for a while by the Portuguese. Magellan can therefore still be rightly considered as one of the architects of this "circumnavigation of the globe".

But we should add that Magellan most probably did not have the intention and, at any rate, certainly did not have a mandate from Charles V, the king of Spain, to circumnavigate the globe. At the time, the world was divided between Spain and Portugal, and Magellan had no right to enter Portuguese territory, their "demarcation" [in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas, which was ratified in 1494].

All of this leads us to a final consideration: the prodigious gap between this name, which billows in the wind like a kind of standard of the European romance, and the reality of a man about whom we in fact know very little.

***Books and Ideas:* At the time, people did not know how to measure longitude. This was a huge issue, both for practical reasons (navigation) and political ones (the Treaty of Tordesillas). How did Magellan imagine this huge ocean separating Chile from the Philippines? Was it really as "pacific" as all that?**

Romain Bertrand: In September 1519, the flotilla of five ships was armed and left the outer harbour of Sevilla, Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The real question was the one that all of the crew members and the other captains were asking themselves: their itinerary. Where were they going? What did Magellan think he was going to find - not "discover", but find, since he clearly has something specific in mind? It's a thorny issue, and one that is constantly being debated: finding out what cartographic or

cosmographic elements Magellan had access to prior to the departure of his expedition.

One thing is more or less certain, and that is that he was convinced there was a passage between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. He was persuaded that this passage was not a strait, but rather a kind of channel that cut through the American subcontinent from one side to the other. This was why he spent weeks exploring the enormous mouth of the Rio de la Plata, thinking this was the entry point to this channel that would take him over to the next ocean. Ultimately, when he did not find this channel, he decided to continue to go down along the coast of Argentina until he found the strait that now bears his name.

This, based on the knowledge people had at the time, is what Magellan thought. What people knew was that there was indeed another ocean, a “Southern Sea”, on the other side of the South American subcontinent. They knew this because a conquistador, Balboa, had caught a glimpse of it from the Isthmus of Panama in 1513. When, having discovered the strait, the expedition entered this ocean, Magellan would rename it the “Pacific”, but it was a pacifism that spelt misfortune for sea-faring vessels. Indeed, it was *too* pacific! It was difficult to catch a favourable wind, and ships sometimes had to tack for days and days before really being able to move forwards.

Books and Ideas: Hearing you speak, there’s not much left of the great man’s adventure. What was Magellan’s great feat, in the end?

Romain Bertrand: The great maritime feat accomplished by Magellan’s expedition was crossing the Pacific. Firstly because people absolutely did not know if it was possible to cross it or sail on it. And then because this crossing took months, which should have decimated the crews due to scurvy; but this was not the case because they had built up provisions of jars of a kind of wild celery, which they had collected before embarking on the crossing, and that was rich in vitamin C.

This journey took them to Asia, but first to the Mariana Islands, to the Island of Guam. This first piece of inhabited land was also the stage for the first great moment of cruelty following the crossing: Magellan decided to have several dozens of islanders, the Chamorros, massacred to punish them for a theft.

Books and Ideas: In his diary, the Italian Antonio Pigafetta refers to the Maluku Islands, “where cloves are born”, as well as nutmeg, the palm tree bark

women use as clothing, and the famous giants of Patagonia (who in reality were Tehuelche warriors). How are we to define this log book, which has elements of both literature and ethnography?

Romain Bertrand: Antonio Pigafetta's chronicle is the main document allowing us to understand the 1519-1522 expedition down to its smallest details, or nearly so. It is a text that would remain in its manuscript form until the very beginning of the 19th century.

We know very little about Pigafetta. However, he is the one who has taught us almost everything we know about Magellan during this expedition. All we know is that Pigafetta was a young noble from Vicenza, on the Venetian mainland, part of the entourage of an apostolic nuncio who had been sent to Spain, that he met Magellan at court and that he immediately viewed him as a master and mentor. Pigafetta would be one of Magellan's most faithful attendants, right through to the great man's death. He wrote his chronicle in 1522-1523 to save Magellan's honour, to perpetuate the memory of his greatness.

Indeed, Magellan died on 27 April 1521, following an incident that many have described, in line with Stefan Zweig, as a "stupid brawl" on an islet of the Philippines. Having formed an alliance with the *rajah* Humabon, the ruler of the Island of Cebu, Magellan, at this king's request, went to punish a rebel war lord, Lapu-Lapu, on a neighbouring islet, the minuscule islet of Mactan. Thinking he would be facing a gang of "savages" who would be incapable of fighting properly, he in fact found himself confronted with a very professional band of warriors. He collapsed into a lagoon, pierced with arrows and javelins. Antonio Pigafetta was standing by his side, in the huddle of last combatants. It was he who, following Magellan's death, continued to write the chronicle of the expedition.

His text is probably one of the most beautiful European travel accounts of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is written with near ethnographic precision, both as regards the Tupinambas in Brazil and the Tehuelche Indians of Patagonia and as regards the Sultanates of Borneo or of the Maluku Islands. At the same time, it is a text that is suffused with all of the Christian and political anthropology of the time. It often views these peoples, whose habits and customs it describes, with a mix of disdain and superiority.

Books and Ideas: Your previous books are set in Java, in Malaysia, in Manilla or Madrid. One might think that this circumterrestrial journey would decentre you in terms of your field of research. In fact, Magellan leaves Sevilla to go and die in the Philippines, on an islet located 3,000 km away from Malacca. What is this “Orient” you like to explore?

Romain Bertrand: The world I am interested in is this part of South-East Asia and its island region: Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei (in Borneo), i.e. this “insulindian” world which, as early as the 15th century, was a densely interconnected world, powerfully connected to the rest of Eurasia, in particular to the Indian Ocean and to Imperial China.

It was a Malaysian and Muslim world that was relatively unified culturally. Malaysian was the lingua franca for trade, for commercial exchanges: it was understood from one end of this world to the other, from Sumatra to the Philippines. This was what allowed Magellan, thanks to his Malaysian slave Enrique, to glean information from the inhabitants of the Philippines. It was also a world that was profoundly defined by the spread of Islam from the 14th century onwards. It is often referred to as “another Mediterranean”, to use Denys Lombard’s terms, but it is a South-East Asian, profoundly Muslim Mediterranean.

I got interested in Magellan’s expedition because, through working on the Philippines and examining the oriental part of the Indonesian archipelago and the key role played by the Maluku Islands in the 16th century, I came across Pigafetta’s chronicle a long time ago. It describes for the first time, in a very precise manner, several key locations of this world.

Books and Ideas: You co-edited *L’Exploration du monde. Une autre histoire des Grandes Découvertes* (Seuil, 2019). What does a history of the great discoveries “in equal parts” look like?

Romain Bertrand: It is not necessarily a more “balanced” history, in the sense where the aim would be to deposit on one of the trays of an imaginary set of scales an excess of extra-European documentation to rebalance the narrative. But it is a more equitable history, which pays the same level of attention, takes the same degree of interest, and grants the same amount of credit to the history of societies other than those of Europe. In terms of the tale of the Great Discoveries, this means several things.

Firstly, in the shadow of the names of the great discoverers - Columbus, Cortès, Pizarro, Magellan - hides an entire little society, a whole set of people that made these journeys of exploration possible in practice: not just the cabin boys, caulkers, and gunners of crews that were in fact very cosmopolitan, but also and above all those that were long referred to as the "indigenous middlemen": sherpas, translators, reservists. These latter individuals were members of the societies the Europeans landed in. We are now realising that they played a far more decisive role than what was long believed. By charting their stories, by taking as much of an interest in them as in the great European, Christian, white-skinned discoverers, we venture onto the paths of other histories.

A history "in equal parts" of the Great Discoveries is thus not necessarily another history of the Great Discoveries, as if the point were to replace one great narrative with another. However, it is a door cracked open onto a whole world of other histories.

Books and Ideas: In your book, you write that the great voyages of the 16th century never end: "They drag behind them, like a sad bride, [...] a huge veil of consequences." What is this veil?

Romain Bertrand: Indeed, the great voyages such as Magellan and Elcano's expedition never end. This is why we are still talking about them today. At the actual time of their accomplishment and conclusion, this huge range of consequences encompassed all those who had survived them just as much as those who died because of them, since for years, and even decades, their families, their relatives, their more or less mournful widows, and more or less legitimate heirs, would take legal action, and bombard the King and his councillors with letters of supplication in order to collect what remained of their wages, and would thus keep alive, humming around these great names, all of these tiny lives that have been deleted by death or oblivion.

The other train of consequences is even more important. It is the trickle of ink which starts with the event and which gradually, through successive amendments, through deletions and distortions, creates a legend. Because when we look at Magellan and Elcano's expedition, we are inevitably confronted with something other than the technical, social, political and economic history of these men and their maritime exploits: we are confronted with a centrepiece of the great tale of the Discoveries, meaning with nothing less than the entire romance of European modernity, with the tale that Europe has often lulled itself with.

And we have to make do with this. But not just with the weapons of historical erudition. This is the moment where we must, using literature as a support but turning the powers of literature against it, deploy a different kind of writing. And this is not just in order to “clean the cruddy gilt off our haloes”, as Éric Vuillard used to put it, but also to have a relationship with our past, meaning with the overly complacent idea that we have long had of ourselves, that is more serene, more mature, that makes more habitable a present in which the traces of this past are constantly emerging.

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