

The Site of the First Mass in the Philippines: Butuan or Limasawa?

There is a controversy regarding the site of the first Mass ever celebrated on Philippine soil. Pigafetta tells us that it was held on Easter Sunday, the 31st of March 1521, on an island called "Mazaua". Two native chieftains were in attendance: the rajah of Mazaua and the rajah of Butuan. After the Mass the crowd went up a little hill and planted a wooden cross upon its summit. The subject of controversy is the identity of this place which Pigafetta calls "Mazaua," There are two conflicting claims as to its identity: one school of thought points to the little island south of Leyte which in the maps is called Limasawa; the other school rejects that claim and points instead to the beach called Masao at the mouth of the Agusan River in northern Mindanao, near what was then the village (now the city) of Butuan. But in summary, I believe that Limasawa is the location of the first mass in the Philippines. It is because there are lots of evidences that support so.

The Butuan Tradition

The Butuan claim rests upon a tradition that was almost unanimous and unbroken for three centuries, namely the 17th, the 18th and the 19th. On the strength of that tradition and embodying it, a monument was erected in 1872 near the mouth of the Agusan River at a spot that was then within the municipal boundaries of Butuan, but which today belongs to the separate municipality of Magallanes, named after Ferdinand Magellan. The monument was a brick pillar on which was a marble slab that contained an inscription which might be translated as follows:

To the Immortal Magellan: the People of Butuan with their Parish Priest and the Spaniards resident therein, to commemorate his arrival and the celebration of the First Mass on this site on the 8th of April 1521. Erected in 1872, under the District Governor Jose Ma. Carvallo.

The monument was erected apparently at the instigation of the parish priest of Butuan, who at the time was a Spanish friar of the Order of Augustinian Recollects. The date given for the first Mass (8 April 1521) may be an obvious error, or it may be a clumsy and anachronistic attempt to translate the original date in terms of the Gregorian calendar. In any case, that monument is a testimonial to the tradition that remained

vigorous until the end of the 19th century, namely, that Magellan and his expedition landed at Butuan and celebrated there the first Mass ever offered on Philippine soil.

The Evidence for Limasawa

1. The evidence of Albo's Log-Book
2. The evidence of Pigafetta
 - (a) Pigafetta's testimony regarding the route;
 - (b) The evidence of Pigafetta's map;
 - (c) The two native kings;
 - (d) The seven days at "Mazaua";
 - (e) An argument from omission.
3. Summary of the evidence of Albo and Pigafetta.
4. Confirmatory evidence from the Legazpi expedition.

1. The Evidence of Albo's Log-Book

Francisco Albo joined the Magellan expedition as a pilot ("*contra•maestre*") in Magellan's flagship "Trinidad". He was one of the eighteen survivors who returned with Sebastian Elcano on the "Victoria" after having circumnavigated the world. Albo began keeping his own diary - merely only a log-book - on the voyage out, while they were sailing southward in the Atlantic along the coast of South America, off Brazil. His account of their entry into Philippine waters (or, as it was then called, the archipelago of San Lazaro) ... may be reduced to the following points:

1. On the 16th of March (1521) as they sailed in a westerly course from the Ladrones, they saw land towards the northwest; but owing to many shallow places they did not approach it. They found later that its name was Yunagan.
2. They went instead that same day southwards to another small island named Suluan, and there they anchored. There they saw some canoes but these fled at the Spaniards's approach. This island was at 9 and two-thirds degrees North latitude.
3. Departing from those two islands, they sailed westward to an uninhabited island of "Gada" where they took in a supply of wood and water. The sea around that island was free from shallows. (Albo does not give the latitude of this island, but from Pigafetta's testimony, this seems to be the "Acquada" or Homonhon, at 10 degrees North latitude.)
4. From that island they sailed westwards towards a large island named Seilani which was inhabited and was known to have gold.
(Seilani - or, as Pigafetta calls it, "Ceylon" - was the island of Leyte. See below, on Pigafetta's map.)
5. Sailing southwards along the coast of that large island of Seilani, they turned southwest to a small island called "Mazava". That island is also at a latitude of 9 and two-thirds degrees North.

6. The people of that island of Mazava were very good. There the Spaniards planted a cross upon a mountain-top, and from there they were shown three islands to the west and southwest, where they were told there was much gold. "They showed us how the gold was gathered, which came in small pieces like peas and lentils."

7. From Mazava they sailed northwards again towards Seilani. They followed the coast of Seilani in a northwesterly direction, ascending up to 10 degrees of latitude where they saw three small islands.

8. From there they sailed westwards some ten leagues, and there they saw three islets, where they dropped anchor for the night. In the morning they sailed southwest some 12 leagues, down to a latitude of 10 and one-third degree. There they entered a channel between two islands, one of which was called "Matan" and the other "Subu".

9. They sailed down that channel and then turned westward and anchored at the town (*la villa*) of Subu where they stayed many days and obtained provisions and entered into a peace-pact with the local king.

10. The town of Subu was on an east-west direction with the islands of Suluan and Mazava. But between Mazava and Subu, there were so many shallows that the boats could not go westward directly but had to go (as they did) in a round-about way.²³

Such is Albo's testimony. The island that he calls Gada seems to be the *acquada* of Pigafetta, namely the island of Homonhon where they took in supplies of water and wood. The large island of Seilani which they coasted is the island of Leyte. Coasting southwards along the eastern coast of that island, then turning southwest they came upon a small island named, Mazava, which lies at a latitude of 9 and two-thirds degrees North.

That fits the location of the small island of Limasawa, south of Leyte. The island's southern tip is at 9° 54' N.

It is to be noted that Albo does not mention the first Mass, but only the planting of the cross upon a mountain-top from which could be seen three islands to the west and southwest. This also fits the southern end of Limasawa. It does not fit the coast of Butuan from which no islands could be seen to the south or the southwest, but only towards the north.

2. *The Evidence from Pigafetta*

The most complete account of the Magellan expedition is that by Antonio Pigafetta entitled *Primo viaggio intomo al mondo* (First Voyage Around the World). Like Albo, he was a member of the expedition and was therefore an eyewitness of the principal events which he describes, including the first Mass in what is now known as the Philippine Archipelago, but which Magellan called the Islands of Saint Lazarus. Of Pigafetta's work there are two excellent English translations, one by Robertson (from the Italian) and another by Skelton (from the French). Pigafetta was among the eighteen survivors who returned to Spain with

Eicano aboard the "Victoria". Pigafetta tried to interest Charles V of Spain in his account of the voyage. When no interest was shown, he returned to Italy and there wrote a fuller account from his day-to-day notes, which he entitled *Primo viaggio intomo al mondo*. His plans for publication failed. But a French translation (in summary form) appeared in Paris in 1525, and in Italian (retranslated from the French) in

1536. Ramusio included Pigafetta's account in his *Delle navigationi et viaggio* which first appeared in Venice in 1550 and was reprinted many times thereafter. Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d' Anghiera) included Pigafetta's account in his own collection, which was translated into English and published in London in 1555. Several manuscripts of Pigafetta's work exist, of which the one considered most authentic is the Ambrosian codex in Milan. That manuscript was published in its Italian text in 1894. What James Alexander Robertson did, however, was remarkable. Instead of merely translating from the printed text of 1894, Robertson went back to the original manuscript and reprinted the Ambrosian codex, together with his translation. Robertson's work appeared in a limited edition in three volumes at Cleveland in 1906.

The pertinent section in Pigafetta's account is that part in which he narrates the events from the 16th of March 1521 when they first sighted the islands of the Philippine Group, up to the 7th of April when the expedition landed at Cebu. That was a period of approximately three weeks. (We have reproduced this entire section in Appendix B, below, from Robertson's translation. It corresponds to chapters 16 to 20 in the Skelton translation.)

In examining the evidence from Pigafetta, we shall consider five points: (a) Pigafetta's testimony as regards the route taken by the expedition from the Pacific Ocean to Cebu; (b) The evidence of Pigafetta's map; (c) The presence of two native kings; (d) The events of the seven days at the island of "Mazaua"; (e) An argument from omission.

(a) Pigafetta's Testimony Regarding the Route

The route taken by the Magellan expedition may be reconstructed if we follow Pigafetta's account day by day. Here is a summary of his account.

1. *Saturday, 16 March 1521.* - Magellan's expedition sighted a "high land" named "Zamal" which was some 300 leagues westward of the Ladrones (now the Marianas) Islands.

2. *Sunday, March 17.* - "The following day" after sighting Zamal Island, they landed on "another island which was uninhabited" and which lay "to the right" of the above-mentioned island of "Zamal," (To the "right" here would mean on their starboard going south or southwest.) There they set up two tents for the sick members of the crew and had a sow killed for them. The name of this island was "Humunu" (Homonhon). This island was located at 10 degrees North latitude.

3. On that same day (*Sunday, 17 March*) Magellan named the entire archipelago the "Islands of Saint Lazarus", the reason being that it was the Sunday in the Lenten season when

the Gospel assigned for the Mass and the liturgical Office was the eleventh chapter of St. John, which tells of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

4. *Monday, 18 March.* - In the afternoon of their second day on that island, they saw a boat coming towards them with nine men in it. An exchange of gifts was effected. Magellan asked for food supplies, and the men went away, promising to bring rice and other supplies in "four days."

5. There were two springs of water on that island of Homonhon. Also they saw there some indications that there was gold in these islands. Consequently Magellan renamed the island and called it the "Watering Place of Good Omen" (*Acquada la di bouni segniali*).

6. *Friday, 22 March.* - At noon the natives returned. This time they were in two boats, and they brought food supplies.

7. Magellan's expedition stayed eight days at Homonhon: from Sunday, 17 March, to the Monday of the following week, 25 March.

8. *Monday, 25 March.* - In the afternoon, the expedition weighed anchor and left the island of Homonhon. In the ecclesiastical calendar, this day (25 March) was the feast-day of the Incarnation, also called the feast of the Annunciation and therefore "Our Lady's Day." On this day, as they were about to weigh anchor, an accident happened to Pigafetta: he fell into the water but was rescued. He attributed his narrow escape from death as a grace obtained through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary on her feast-day.

9. The route taken by the expedition after leaving Homonhon was "toward the west southwest, between four islands: namely, Cenalo, Hiunanghan, Ibusson and Albarien." Very probably "Cenalo" is a misspelling in the Italian manuscript for what Pigafetta in his map calls "Ceilon" and Albo calls "Seilani": namely the island of Leyte. "Hiunanghan" (a misspelling of Hinunangan) seemed to Pigafetta to be a separate island, but it is actually on the mainland of Leyte (i.e. "Ceylon"). On the other hand, Hibuson (Pigafetta's Ibusson) is an island east of Leyte's southern tip.

Thus, it is easy to see what Pigafetta meant by sailing "toward the west southwest" past those islands. They left Homonhon sailing westward towards Leyte, then followed the Leyte coast southward, passing between the island of Hibuson on their portside and Hiunangan Bay on their starboard, and then continued southward, then turning westward to "Mazaua".

10. *Thursday, 28 March.* - In the morning of Holy Thursday, 28 March, they anchored off an island where the previous night they had seen a light or a bonfire. That island "lies in a latitude of nine and two-thirds towards the Arctic Pole [i.e. North] and in a longitude of one hundred and sixty-two degrees from the line of demarcation.²⁶ It is twenty-five leagues from the Acquada, and is called Mazaua".

11. They remained seven days on Mazaua Island. What they did during those seven days, we shall discuss in a separate section below, entitled "Seven Days at Mazaua."

12. *Thursday, 4 April.* -They left Mazaua, bound for Cebu. They were guided thither by the king of Mazaua who sailed in his own boat. Their route took them past five "islands": namely: "Ceylon, Bohol, Canighan, Baibai, and Gatighan."

Pigafetta thought that Ceylon and Baibai were separate islands. Actually they were parts of the same island of Leyte. "Canighan" (Canigao in our maps) is an island off the southwest tip of Leyte. They sailed from Mazaua west by northwest into the Canigao Channel, with Bohol Island to port and Leyte and Canigao Islands to starboard. Then they sailed northwards along the Leyte coast, past Baibai to "Gatighan" The identity of Gatighan is not certain. But we are told that it was twenty leagues from Mazaua and fifteen leagues from "Subu" (Cebu).

13. At Gatighan, they sailed westward to the three islands of the Camotes Group, namely, Poro, Pasihan and Ponson. (Pigafetta calls them "Polo, Ticobon, and Pozon.") Here the Spanish ships stopped to allow the king of Mazaua to catch up with them, since the Spanish ships were much faster than the native *balanghai* - a thing that excited the admiration of the king of Mazaua.

14. From the Camotes Islands they sailed [southwestward] Towards "Zubu".

15. *Sunday, 7 April.* -At noon on Sunday, the 7th of April, they entered the harbor of "Zubu" (Cebu). It had taken them three days to negotiate the journey from Mazaua northwards to the Camotes Islands and then southwards to Cebu.

That is the route of the Magellan expedition as described by Pigafetta. It coincides substantially and in most details with the route as described in Alba's log. In that route, the southernmost point reached before getting to Cebu was Mazaua, situated at nine and two-thirds degrees North latitude.

The question may now be asked: Could this "Mazaua" have been Butuan? Or more precisely, could it have been the "Masao" beach in the Agusan River delta, near Butuan.

(c) *The Two Kings*

There is confirmatory evidence in the presence of two native "kings" or rajahs at Mazaua during the Magellan visit. One was the "king" of Mazaua - who later guided the Magellan expedition to Cebu. The other was a relative ("one of his brothers" as Pigafetta says), namely the king or rajah of Butuan.

Of this latter individual, Pigafetta says that he was "the finest looking man" that he had seen in those parts. (We shall have more to say about him later.) At the moment, the relevant fact is that he was a visitor to Mazaua. His territory was Butuan, which was in another island:

That island of his was called Butuan and Calagan. When those kings wished to see one another, they both went to hunt in that island where we were.

The "island where we were" was Mazaua, where they stayed seven days. Therefore Mazaua could not have been Butuan.

(e) An Argument from Omission

If "Mazaua" were Butuan, or in the vicinity of Butuan, there is a curious omission in Pigafetta's account which would be difficult to explain. Butuan is a riverine settlement. It is situated on the Agusan River. The beach called Masao is in the delta of that river. If the Magellan expedition were at that delta, and if the Mass were celebrated there, why is there no mention of the river?

Later on, after Magellan's death and after the Cebu debacle, the survivors of his expedition went to Mindanao and it seems, actually went to Butuan. Pigafetta describes quite vividly a trip up river to see the queen. But that was *after* Magellan's death. Forty years later, members of Legaspi's expedition visited Butuan, and the river anchorage forms a very important part of their account.

The fact that there is no mention of the river is a significant fact in

Pigafetta's account of their seven-day stay at "Mazaua." We must therefore take him literally: Mazaua was an island surrounded by sea, not a river delta.

3. Summary of the Evidence of Albo and Pigafetta

Taking the evidence of Albo's log-book together with that from Pigafetta's account, we may take the following points as established:

1. Magellan's expedition entered Philippine waters south of the island of Samar and dropped anchor at Homonhon where they stayed a week. Then they sailed westward towards Leyte and then southwards parallel to the eastern coast of that island and that of the adjoining island of Panaon. Rounding the southern tip of the latter, they anchored off the eastern shore of a small island called Mazaua. There they stayed a week, during which on Easter Sunday they celebrated Mass and planted the cross on the summit of the highest hill.
2. The island of Mazaua lies at a latitude of nine and two-thirds degrees North. Its position (south of Leyte) and its latitude correspond to the position and latitude of the island of Limasawa, whose southern tip lies at 9 degrees and 54 minutes North.
3. From Mazaua the expedition sailed northwestwards through the Canigao channel between Bohol and Leyte, then northerwards parallel to the eastern coast of this latter island, then they sailed westward to the Camotes Group and from there southwestwards to Cebu.

4. At no point in that itinerary did the Magellan expedition go to Butuan or any other point on the Mindanao coast. The survivors of the expedition did go to Mindanao later, but after Magellan's death.

4. The Legazpi Expedition

There is confirmatory evidence from the documents of the Legazpi expedition, which sailed into Philippine waters in 1565, forty-four years after Magellan. One of the places that Legazpi and his pilots were anxious to visit was precisely Mazaua, and to this end they inquired about "Mazaua" from Camotuan and his companions, natives of the village of Cabalian at the southeastern end of the island of Leyte. Guided by these natives, the Legazpi ships rounded the island of "Panae" (Panaon), which was separated from Leyte by a narrow strait, and anchored off "Mazaua" - but they found the inhabitants to be hostile, apparently as a result of Portuguese depredations that had occurred in the four-decade interval between the Legazpi and the Magellan expeditions.

From Mazaua they went to Camiguing (which was "visible" from Mazaua), and from there they intended to go to Butuan on the island of "Vindanao" but were driven instead by contrary winds to Bohol. It was only later that a small contingent of Spaniards, in a small vessel, managed to go to Butuan.

The point seems clear: As pilots of the Legazpi expedition understood it, Mazaua was an island near Leyte and Panaon; Butuan was on the island of Mindanao. The two were entirely different places and in no wise identical.²⁸

IV. The Geography of "Mazaua"

The question may be asked: If "Mazaua" is the little island of Limasawa, why did Magellan go there? Why go to an insignificant little island; why not instead to the larger islands? The answer must be sought in geography. He was coasting southward down the eastern coast of Leyte (Alba's "Seilani"; Pigafetta's "Ceylon") with Hibuson Island on his left. This took him down to the southern tip of what looks like a part of Leyte but is really a separate island, the island of Panaon.

When his ships rounded the tip of Panaon, the wind was blowing westward from the Pacific. It was late March: in March and April in this part of the Philippines, the east wind is strong. It is what the people of Limasawa call the "Dumagsa", the east wind. Sailing with the wind, Magellan's vessels would find themselves going west or southwest, toward the island of Limasawa. Having seen a light on the island one night, they deduced the following day to anchor off it.

A visit to Limasawa will convince the traveller that here indeed is the place circumstantially described by Pigafetta. The island is shaped like a tadpole, running north to south. The northern portion is almost all hills, with the slopes dropping steeply to the sea,

leaving only a narrow coastal strip. But the southern portion of the island is almost all level land with a few hills. It has a good harbor, protected on the west by Panaon Island and on the east by Limasawa. The fields in this portion of the island are fertile. It is easy to understand why an expedition should wish to stay a week anchored off this fertile island where the natives were friendly and there was enough food, water and wood. Here the Mass could be said with solemnity. Here, on one of the hills, the cross could be planted which everyone could see from the plain. And from the top of that hill could be seen the islands to the south, to the west and to the east.

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