
Document 1568G

Mendaña expedition—Narrative by Catoria the steward

Sources: BM London Add. ms. 9944, folios 197 (or 225) et seq.; translated in Amherst & Thomson's Discovery of the Solomon Islands, vol. 1, pp. 215-217, 434-442.

Account of the Voyage and Discovery which was made in the South Sea

In pursuance of an order made by the Most Illustrious Sir Lope García de Castro, a member of His Majesty's Council, Governor of Peru, and President of the Chancery of Los Reyes, under the command of Alvaro de Mendaña as General, drawn up by Gomez Hernández Catoira, Chief Purser of the said fleet, supercargo and accountant for H.M., addressed to the said Lord, the Licentiate Lope García de Castro.

...

In the flagship of this fleet, called **Los Reyes**, navigating in 4-1/2 degrees south of the equinoctial line, on Friday, the 27th of the month of August 1568, the ship named **Todos Santos**, *almiranta* of this fleet, navigating in the same position at a little distance from her, Hernando Gallego, the Chief Pilot, in the presence of the Illustrious Sir Alvaro de Mendaña, of myself, the Purser, and of many other persons, gentlemen and soldiers of both ships, said, consulting aloud with Pedro Rodriguez and Gregorio Gonzalez, pilots of the said *almiranta*, that they well knew and saw that, with the winds which prevailed and had prevailed since we left the [Solomon] Islands, we could not navigate and follow the course which the General had commanded us to follow, which was from E to SE and SSE, because the wind was very variable and was not fixed in any quarter which enabled us to navigate, except in the direction of NE and NNE...

[Discovery of Namu]

After reaching this region where these requests were made, we sailed to the NE till we reached 5° N latitude, and to the NW, as far as 6-1/2 degrees. And afterwards we sailed N and N by W and NE and NNW, for the winds shifted to the NE, and ENE. With these winds we reached 8-1/2 degrees N latitude, and at daybreak, before sunrise,

the Chief Pilot sighted land, and when it grew light we saw that it was some shoals, which surrounded some very small islands.

The Chief Pilot said that these were the shoals of San Bartolomé for which they had been on the lookout for some days; and he had told them the latitude in which they were. But before reaching these, being near the Line, we had seen signs of inhabited land, such as palm mats, leaves and burnt sticks. We inferred that there is much land below the Line.¹ We also met with heavy showers before reaching the said shoals. And the General ordered the pilot to approach them, to see whether we could anchor in the lee side of the island, and whether there was any water, and, if so, to provide ourselves with it; and he took it badly, saying that it was an uninhabited land, and that we should pass on. In the midst of these discussions we discovered two other islands to leeward of the reef. We kept at a distance from them, and from reefs which run parallel, almost [touching] each other.

We approached them and saw some huts from the ships. We launched the boat, and Don Hernando [Henriquez], with some soldiers and sailors, got in and went ashore, and the Master-of-Camp [Pedro de Ortega] went in the boat of the *almiranta*.

On reaching the land they all saw that there was no water, which was what we wanted most. They found no man nor woman, for they had all fled.² They found some of the natives' food, which was very different from that of the [Solomon] islands, and of a bad taste and smell. And they found fermenting under the ground, a kind of beverage like *chicha*, and the people also had coconuts and made oil of them. And, seeing that there was no water, nor anything which was of use to us, they returned to the ships, and brought a piece of iron lashed to a stick, the size of a small nail, which was a sign that Spaniards had been there. They also found a large shed, old and not well roofed. It was suspected that some ship of the Philippines had visited or been lost there.

We endeavored to anchor near the islands, but, when very near land, we found 20 fathoms and let go the anchor, and immediately it dragged and dropped in more than 100 fathoms. And such was the fury of the current that in a short space it carried us out of the lee of the islands and shoals, and it had such a force that, although there was no wind or sea, but only the current, the hook of the anchor was twisted, though it was a large one.

[Discovery of Wake]

Then, seeing that for lack of a harbor we could not stop, we put out to sea, and took in the boats, and sailed with the prow to the N and NNE and NNW, according as the winds served us; and so we went up to the latitude of 20° where we found a low and uninhabited island. We came near it on the eve of San Francisco, and so we gave it that name.

1 They had passed a few leagues west of the Giulbert Islands.

2 Ed. note: Probably to Majkin I. in canoes whose sails had been sighted by the Spaniards.

And when we came close we saw that it had a large lagoon within it which is filled by the tide; and we approached it against the will of the pilots, all judging that we were near the coast [of California]. The General told them that it would cause little inconvenience to lose a day and take water for our use; and we sailed all round it, but there appeared to be none. It lies from north to south¹, and with the shoals it may be about 7 leagues in circumference. Having sailed round this island we steered N, and NNW, one point more or less, as the wind served us; and although it was possible to sail to the SE the pilots would not do so, saying that the northerly course was better than a southeasterly one.²

And thus we went up to 32°, always declining at other times to the NW, because the *almiranta* could not lie closer to the wind, or rather, as it seemed to us all, because it was through negligence that she fell thus to leeward, though the pilots said they could do no more. And, as we sometimes saw her sailing to windward as we did, it was supposed that they made her fall to leeward on purpose, so much so that sometimes we bore down astern upon her. And the General asked them where they were steering to and whether they wished us to be lost, for the land was not so near as they thought. They always said that they were doing their best and could do no more. All that day she remained with us, although we kept ahead and nearer the wind; and the next day it was the same until 9 or 10 o'clock at night, when we saw her pass and fall to leeward astern of us, at which we were much astonished.

On Saturday, the 17th of October, she could not be seen...

1 Ed. note: As they sailed around it, the steward who was not a seaman lost his bearings; the island lies NW—SE.

2 Ed. note: If they had sailed SE now and then, they might have discovered the Hawaiian Islands.