
Document 1522F

Letter from Captain Elcano to Emperor Charles V, dated 7 September 1522

Sources: Translated by Mairin Mitchell, *Elcano, the First Circumnavigator*, Herder, London, 1958, from *Abhandlung der I. Kl. der Bayerischen Akademie den Wissenschaften*, Bd. IV, Vol. I, p. 103. Also in *Raccolta... Colombiana*, Rome, 1894, Part III. Also in Medina's *Descubrimiento del océano Pacífico*, iv, pp. 289-294. This letter has also been translated by Morison (*Southern Voyages*, pp. 471-473). The original of Elcano's letter has been lost, but one copy translated into Latin, and two in Italian exist; one of the latter is in the Archives of Ragusa, Sicily (See Eugen Gelcich's *Zwei Briefe über die Maghellanische Weltumseglung*, Vienna, 1889).

Letter from Captain Elcano to the Emperor Charles, dated Sanlúcar de Barrameda 6 September 1522

Dated September 6th, 1522, San Lúcar.¹

To His Most Exalted Majesty:

Your Most Exalted Majesty should know that we, now only 18 men, have arrived, with one of the five ships which Your Majesty sent out to find the Spice Islands under Captain Hernando de Magallanes, of glorious memory.

In order that you should be informed as to the weighty events of our journey, I write in brief to you as follows:

¹ Ed. note: This date was based on ship time; the true date was 7 September.



Cinnamon and pepper being harvested in the Moluccas. These drawings are not very accurate. (From Thevet's "Cosmographie universelle", 1537)

We reached 54° beyond the Line where day and night are the same, at which point we found a channel which led into the sea between the territory of Your Majesty and India. This channel was 100 leagues in length.

Entering into this sea, although favored by winds we voyaged for three months and twenty days without sighting land¹, except for two small uninhabited islands.² Then we came into an archipelago of many islands rich in gold. Here our captain, Hernando Magallanes died, with many others. Owing to loss of men, we could not navigate farther; we destroyed one ship, and with the remaining two we went from island to is-

1 Elcano is evidently alluding to the arrival of the vessels at Humunu, in the Philippines. They had previously made a landfall at Guam in the Marianas, after a voyage of 99 days.

2 Ed. note: Since Elcano wrote this when he was sick and weak, he can be forgiven for forgetting about the Marianas. However, this first news of his journey made the round of the Emperor's court, and is responsible for the same omission made by some early writers, such as Transylvanus and Martyr.

land, until, with God's help, we found the Moluccas, which occurred 8 months after the death of our captain.¹ We thereupon loaded the two ships with cloves.

Your Majesty should know that, sailing to those islands of the Moluccas, we found camphor, cinnamon and pearls.

When we wished to leave these islands to return to Spain, we noticed a big leak in one of the two ships, which could not be repaired except by unloading. By reason of this, much time passed before we were in readiness for sailing homeward via Java and Malacca.²

We were pledged either to die or to worthily serve Your Majesty in pursuing the voyage farther, so that we could bring you information concerning the aforementioned discovery, God's grace permitting.³

On this course, we discovered many very rich islands, among them Banda, where nutmeg grows and the mace blooms, also Java⁴ where pepper grows, and Timor where sandal-wood is abundant; on all these islands there is also much ginger. We are bringing with us specimens of all these spices, taken from the islands mentioned, to show to Your Majesty. At the same time we are bringing back treaties of friendship with all the kings and rulers of the said islands, signed by their own hands, wherein they pledge themselves to belong to Your Majesty.⁵

When we had left the last island behind, we subsisted for 5 months on nothing but corn⁶, rice and water, not going near to any land, for fear of the King of Portugal, who had left orders in all his territories for the capture of our fleet, so that Your Majesty should never again hear anything of it.

1 Ed. note: Actually it was less than 7 months after the death of Magellan that the **Trinidad** and the **Victoria** reached the Moluccas.

2 Ed. note: They did not approach either of those places. In fact, there is a transcription error here. Medina (and Morison) wrote them as "Zabba and Melua". Zabba is Java, but Melua is Malua, i.e. Alor, north of Timor (See Doc. 1522E).

3 Ed. note: A piece of text is missing, resulting in some confusion. According to Medina (and Morison), the full paragraph should read as follows: "*Wishing to leave the said Isles of Maluco to return to Spain, there was found a very big leak in one of the ships, so that it could not be repaired without unloading; and the season having passed for ships to sail to Zabba and Melua, we resolved either to die, or honorably to serve Your Majesty by informing him of the said discovery, to depart with one ship only, and she [being] in such a [bad] state because of the teredos that only God knows.*"

4 Their route did not take them to either Banda or Java. They did, however, obtain a good deal of information about both places during their anchorage at Buru.

5 Ed. note: An abstract of these treaties, by Elcano himself, has been found in AGI: *Indiferente general, Legajo 1525*.

6 Ed. note: Corn in the English sense. Morison thinks this could be wheat, which was supposedly grown in Timor at that time.

On this course 22 men died from hunger; the lack of means of subsistence compelled us to stop at the Cape Verde [Islands]. The Governor of the island [of Santiago] took from us our skiff with 13 men¹, and wanted to send me, with the entire cargo, to Portugal, in a ship which had come laden with spices from Calicut; he declared that no-one except the Portuguese should venture thither to explore the spiceries. With the object of overpowering us, he armed 4 ships. With my company I determined to die rather than fall into the hands of the Portuguese. It so fell to us, overstrained at the pumps, working at them day and night, and more exhausted than men have ever been before, that with the help of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, we continued under sail, and after voyaging for three years, ran into the harbor of San Lúcar.

I ask Your Majesty now to ensure the freedom of the 13 men who have for so long served Your Majesty, to claim them as required.² They will count it as their gain to know that we have given practical proof that the earth is a sphere; having sailed round it, coming from the West, we have come back through the East.

I ask Your Majesty, in recognition of the hard work, hunger and thirst, cold and heat, which our men have borne in the service of Your Majesty, to graciously ensure their release, and to award them the freight we have carried home.³

I close herewith, kissing Your Majesty's hand and feet.

Written aboard the ship **Victoria**, in San Lúcar, a.m., 6 September, 1522.

Captain Juan Sebastian Delcano.

1 Ed. note: Twelve Europeans and one Indian from Tidore whom they had named Manuel (See Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 176).

2 Ed. note: They were released 5 months after their arrest.

3 Ed. note: To release them from the obligation of paying duties on their personal bags of spices.

Chronology of events affecting Elcano, from September 1522 when he arrived in the Victoria, until July 1525, when he left with the Loaysa Expedition. (Adapted from Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-173)

8 Sept. 1522: Casts anchor at Seville.

9 Sept.: Elcano leads the 18 [European] survivors [and at least 3 natives of Tidore] to fulfil vows of thanksgiving in the church of Santa Maria de la Vitoria in Triana [facing Seville], and Santa Maria de Antigua, Seville Cathedral.

13 Sept.: Charles V replies to Elcano's letter.¹

End of September: Elcano, with Alvo and Bustamante, arrive at Court, Valladolid.

18 Oct.: A Commission of Enquiry into the San Julian Mutiny and the death of Magellan takes the depositions of the 3 men.²

31 Oct.: The Emperor writes to his aunt, Margaret of Austria.³

23 Jan. 1523: The Emperor announces the reward of an annual **pension** [of 500 ducats] to Elcano.⁴

13 Feb.: The Emperor pardons Elcano for his sale of a ship many years earlier to some foreigners [to pay the crew].

20 May: The Emperor announces that Elcano has the right to use a **coat-of-arms**.

20 May 1524: The Emperor grants a special licence to Elcano to have two armed men as a personal bodyguard.⁵

1 Ed. note: The Emperor expressed "infinite thanks" to Elcano for bringing his ship safely home. He was ordered to appear at Court, there to give a verbal account of the voyage, and was to bring with him "two of the most reliable and best-informed men". Realizing that neither they nor the captain would have suitable apparel after such a voyage, His Majesty ordered the India House of Trade to provide them with what was necessary. Elcano chose Alvo the pilot, and Bustamante the barber, as his two companions, leaving the gentleman Antonio Pigafetta to make the journey on his own.

2 Ed. note: Original in AGI: *Patronato Simancas*, 1- 1-1/1 n° 19. See Mitchell, pp. 178-182. In accordance with Elcano's verbal report, the Royal Geographer, Nuño García, made a map of the world on vellum, richly colored in gold. Unfortunately, only part of this map is extant; it is kept in the Royal Library at Turin, the city where García was from.

3 Extract from this letter: "*The armada which left 3 years ago for the Spice Islands has now returned after visiting those islands, where neither the Portuguese nor any other people have ever been [a little white lie!]. In proof of this, one of our ships has returned loaded with cloves and with specimens of all the other spices, such as pepper, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and also sandalwood. Further, I have received tokens of submission from the rulers of four of these islands... My captains have confirmed that they have sailed all around the world. And in order to take advantage of this achievement, and in furtherance of the Christian faith, I plan to arrange for a second expedition to be sent to the Moluccas.*" (From the Staatsarchiv, Vienna: A.3 (2.a) 1519-1522, Correspondenz Karls V mit Margarethe von Parma).

4 Ed. note: Alvo the pilot, and Miguel de Rodas, Master, were to receive annual pensions of 500,000 Maravedis. All 18 survivors were to receive the "fourth part of the twentieth" of the Crown's share of the spice cargo.]

5 Ed. note: In response to a petition by Elcano, as certain people had threatened him with physical harm.

11 April to 1 June: Elcano appears at the Conference of Badajoz as a witness for the Commission of Enquiry concerning the ownership of the Moluccas.¹

23 May: Interrogation of 16 of the survivors of the Magellan Expedition.²

1 June: Elcano presents a summary and a **chart** showing the Spanish claims to the Moluccas.

15 Apr 1525: The Emperor orders that the promised payment of the annual pension to Elcano be made only after his return from a second voyage to the Moluccas.³

April: In Portugalete, near Bilbao, Elcano supervises the preparation of 4 ships for the Loaysa Expedition to the Moluccas.

7 May: The Emperor directs that officers may contribute to the equipment of the fleet. Elcano contributes 400 ducats.

13 May: The Emperor gives written directions that Elcano is to succeed Loaysa in the event of the death of the latter.

July: Elcano brings his 4 ships to La Coruña.

24 July: Elcano sails from La Coruña as Pilot Major of the fleet and captain of the **Sancti Spiritus**.⁴

1 Ed. note: See Doc. 1524B.

2 Ed. note: 11 of them had arrived aboard the **Victoria**, 5 were former Cape Verde prisoners.

3 Ed. note: The pension was never paid to his heirs either, regardless of their many claims.

4 Ed. note: See Doc. 1526A for the follow-up story.