When Miguel López de Legazpi dispatched a galleon across the Pacific from Manila to Acapulco in 1571, he began one of the world’s most ambitious commercial ventures, and heralded a centuries’-long trade in Asian commodities. Spanish galleons sailed annually, with few exceptions, across the Pacific until 1814, transporting Spanish American silver and Asian luxuries. The voyages created, for the first time, the sense of the Pacific as a unity, as the vast ocean—the world’s largest geographical feature—was regularly and methodically traversed. The story of the galleon has intrigued sailors, Filipinos, cultural aficionados and historians, but has rarely formed the nucleus of an important study, such as this edition.

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Model of a Manila ship of about 1575.

*Model by Bill Brown based on new plans by Raymond Aker, from the San Diego Maritime Museum exhibit “Treasures of the Manila Galleons,” photo by John Wright*
With the popularizing of the concepts of the global economy and the Pacific Rim, the history of the Manila galleon reminds us that important far-flung commercial efforts are not new to the Pacific. Though the discovery of America has garnered the lion’s share of attention, commerce between Spain and the Far East fulfilled the primary goal of Europe’s Age of Expansion. Spanish voyages of exploration had been prompted by the lure of Asian goods, and, with the precious metals they extracted from America, Spain alone among European nation-states had direct access to the means to pay for both ships and Asia’s luxuries. The Portuguese had been the first to establish trade with China, but the Spaniards arrived in Asia possessing the preferred means of exchange, silver. The galleon trade realized the dreams of centuries.

From the time of their establishment on the American mainland, the Spaniards wasted no time in pursuing maritime activity in the Pacific. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa claimed the entire ocean for the Kingdom of Castile in 1513; Ferdinand Magellan’s expedition crossed the Pacific and reached the Archipiélago de San Lázaro (Philippines) in 1521; Cortés established a shipyard on Mexico’s Pacific coast and dispatched an expedition in 1523. Their interest in America was scant initially; their interest in continuing on to the East was immediate and abiding.

The biggest problem with establishing an outpost in the Far East was the fact that a reliable return route across the Pacific proved elusive. Prevailing winds and currents prevented the return of three expeditions in the 1520s and 1540s. Finally, in 1564, López de Legazpi was given the order to found a permanent beachhead in the archipelago, and did so at Cebú. He renamed the Philippines in honor of Prince Philip, and dispatched Basque pilot Andrés de Urdaneta to Mexico the following year. Urdaneta sailed far into the North Pacific and was able to sail back to America successfully, calling at Acapulco and establishing that port as the terminus of the trade route.

With his first colony at Cebú faltering, López de Legazpi captured the trading entrepôt of Manila in 1571 and made it the seat of government and commerce in the region. He first sent local products to America—cinnamon, wax and other Philippine commodities—but the trans-oceanic trade soon came to rely primarily upon Chinese goods. These were obtained either from the Portuguese, who had been permitted to establish an outpost at Macau, or from the Chinese themselves, who had been visiting the archipelago for centuries, and who lived in and around Manila in significant numbers. Isolationism had been official Chinese policy since the Ming Dynasty’s prohibition of foreign trade in the 1430s, but merchants from southern Chinese coastal communities continued to live and trade around the South China Sea and other parts of Southeast Asia.
The luxurious commodities that loaded down the galleons caused much of the wonder associated with the enterprise. These treasures included fine silks and linens, precious stones and spices, and manufactured items such as jewelry, porcelain and lacquerware. Spanish Philppine oidor Antonio Morga breathlessly described a cache of such items in 1609:

"Raw silk in bundles...quantities of velvets...woven stuffs and brocades...quantities of gold and silver thread...damasks, satins, taffetas...musk, benzoin and ivory; also pearls and rubies, sapphires and crystal...precious stones of all colors; pepper and other spices; and rarities, which, did I refer to them all, I would never finish..."

Many of these items came from further afield than China. Cottons from Bengal and other distant regions eventually became available to the Spanish merchants; precious stones came from Indochina, pepper from Sumatra, lacquerware from Japan, and rare spices from the Moluccas. Typically the Spaniards acquired them at Manila from regional merchants eager to tap into the supply of Spanish silver. The lure of this silver, and centrality of location, made Manila the leading entrepôt of the East in its day.

Ever ambitious and monopolistic, Spanish officials soon adopted a system of purchasing Chinese trade goods en masse, the \textit{pancada}, whereby they attempted to procure the entire annual shipments of goods, and prevented the worst excesses of price gouging. In an ingenious and progressive bid to support merchants and other resident Spaniards, a system of entitlement emerged whereby each citizen (\textit{vecino}) of the colony was allotted lading space on the galleon, represented by a certain number of vouchers, or boletas. As the decades passed, speculators, or the voracious charitable institution the \textit{Casa da Misericordia}, came to control the greater part of the boletas. Widows, youthful heirs and unwary common sailors and soldiers parted with their boletas for ready cash, but were consequently cut out of the trade’s huge profits. Within a few decades, the bulk of the trade came under the control of a small coterie, but collectively or individually, the galleons’ cargoes became the sustenance for the colony.
Great wealth was obtained by many of the Manila merchants; beautiful homes were built and lavish lifestyles enjoyed. Fiestas upon the arrival of the galleon from Mexico were mirthful and decadent, and foreign travelers tell of the sloth of the wealthy Manileños. Some Spaniards stayed on in the colony, and many became large land-owners, or encomenderos. Others returned to Mexico or Spain with their earnings. Other merchants invested in the trade from New Spain (Mexico), though Manila regulations forbade it. Many, however, became victims of the vicissitudes of the far-flung enterprise, losing fortune or life to shipwreck or other hardships of the crossing. The proliferation of beggars, widows and orphans attested to the risks of the trade.

The long voyage across the Pacific inspired awe, and dread. Westbound, the journey was a bearable, even pleasant, three months along the prevailing trades. Galleons departed Acapulco in late winter, arriving at Manila in the spring, usually without incident. “They always run in a straight line in a smooth sea, before the wind,” exaggerated one passenger, “as if they were in a canal.” The eastbound return was a different matter altogether. The voyage took approximately six months, sometimes longer—an extraordinarily long time to be at sea—and was often beset by storms in the Philippine Sea and as far north as Japan. Galleon departures were often delayed due to bureaucratic or other reasons, increasing the risks of encountering monsoon rains or typhoons (baguios).

The length of the voyage caused much discomfort, illness and loss of life. Storms sent many ships and men to their graves, or forced returns (arribadas) to Manila. In the case either of shipwreck or arribada, the year’s profits were lost to the colony, for there was typically only one galleon annually. For Manileños, there was no other income until agriculture and ranching took hold in the eighteenth century. Tribute and largesse from the Mexican treasury (the socorro) supported the colony, but for most Spanish merchants and settlers, the fabled wealth and glamour often remained elusive.

Over the course of Imperial history, the Manila galleon was marginalized. As early as 1591, the trade was restricted to two galleons per year, cargo not to exceed 250,000 pesos’ value at Manila. This was designed to facilitate or obviate inspection, and to keep the alarming amount of silver escaping from the empire.
somewhat in hand. Merchants in Seville, in particular, lobbied for the curtailment of the trade. This was the great irony of the Manila trade—that Europeans spent centuries struggling to establish direct trade with China, and when it was finally achieved, the threat of its success caused its sponsors to attempt to limit or squelch it. Thus we find Philippine governors begging repeatedly for a higher trade allowance, begging for more soldiers and settlers, begging for additional financial assistance, begging for permission to trade overtly with Portuguese Macau, even occasionally suggesting abandoning the colony. Manila became a victim of its own potential.

The restrictions helped to foster smuggling of legendary proportions aboard the already richly-laden ships. The legend was enhanced by four British captures of Manila galleons (1587, 1709, 1743 and 1762), from which word spread widely of the unimaginably vast sums of wealth being transported. A rare inspection at Acapulco in 1637 revealed that ten times the permitted amount of cargo was being shipped.3

Further, the priorities of Spanish policymaking rarely included the Philippines. From the moment of the colony’s founding, the Crown was preoccupied with challenges that precluded rapt attention to Manila. From the Inquisition to the peninsular expulsions to the administration of America to the constant European wars to Habsburg and Bourbon dynastic concerns, attention was constantly directed elsewhere. Even the British occupation of Manila during the 1760s failed to make the colony a priority. This is not to say that its existence and administration were ignored; on the contrary, they received attentive review. Instead, hampered by this multiplicity of concerns, the most far-flung empire yet to appear in the world was unable to expend the initiative or provide sufficient resources to realize its colony’s potential.

The viability of the trade, and the splendor of Manila, peaked between approximately 1610 and 1640. During this time, silver was plentiful, suppliers of luxuries active, construction in Manila and in the Cavite shipyards booming, and competitors few. A number of factors diminished the success of the trade and the colony thereafter. Dutch incursions proved damaging, the fall of the Ming in 1644 chaotic, and the opening of Canton to Western merchants in 1685 debilitating. The hostility of Japan to Catholics, too, proved disadvantageous, as did an earthquake that devastated Manila in 1645, and flooding of Mexico City between 1628 and 1633. The incursion of Northern Europeans into the Caribbean created new challenges and expenses during the 1630s, and decreasing silver production after 1620 was detrimental to the Imperial economy as a whole.6 In Europe, the Thirty Years’ War and rebellions in Cataluña and Portugal devoured resources, and the success of Sevillano merchants in restricting the trade all had their effects.

The galleon trade carried on, however, until 1814, continuing to link Madrid and its most distant colony. It still brought silks, porcelain, devotional items, and the tortoise-shell combs and embroidered silk shawls (mantones de Manila) that had become characteristic dress for women in Spain and her American colonies. The trade still supplied the enormously successful Philippine missions with wine, wafers and prelates. It survived the challenge of the short-lived Philippine Company of the 1780s, the Bourbon monarchy’s attempts at enlightened economic and Imperial reorganization, and arguments that the resource-draining colony be abandoned altogether, but ultimately the trade foundered on the rocks of Mexico’s War of Independence.

For almost 250 years, the galleons carried their treasures across the vast Pacific. They pioneered trans-Pacific trade, in the longest-enduring and
furthest-flung regular maritime trading voyage during the Age of Sail. At its peak, the Manila-Acapulco trade was one of the great commercial and logistical achievements in world history. It was also the theater for a great deal of heroism as well as hardship and oppression, and saw the creation of an extraordinarily ambitious and successful economic system. The rich subject of the galleon trade, as the articles on the following pages attest, is no longer being tarnished by neglect, nor by the subsequent torpor of the economy of the great port on Manila Bay.

NOTES

1 While his successful passage followed that of mutinous captain Alonso de Arellano by several weeks, Urdaneta is generally accorded the honor of having discovered the key to traversing the Pacific from the West.

2 Benzoin is a balsamlike tree resin used in medicines and perfumes. Quoted in William Lyle Schurz, The Manila Galleon (New York: Dutton, 1939), 74. Schurz’s book remains important; drawing upon decades of his research, it was the first to describe the galleon trade in significant depth and detail. With an eye for effective anecdotes and admirable thoroughness, his work has yet to be surpassed. In previous histories of Spain and its empire, the Manila galleon received scant attention as a curiosity, or a quaint but marginally significant adventure.


4 Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Carreri, A Voyage to the Philippines [1697] (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1963), 138. Such contemporary travelers’ accounts offer generally grim impressions of the voyages, and may not have been widely read. Antonio Morga’s Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas, quoted earlier, was written in 1609 but not published until the twentieth century. Dominican Father Francisco Domingo de Navarrete told of being shipwrecked off southern Luzon in 1655. J. S. Cummins, ed., The Travels and Controversies of Friar Domingo Navarrete, 1618-1686 (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1962).
