

Drake in the Marianas?

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Abstract

Neither the ethnological nor the geographical evidence contained in the documentary sources pertaining to Francis Drake's first landfall after leaving the California coast in 1577 on his way around the globe indicates that this place was in the Marianas. Two island groups in the Carolines—Palau and Yap—are far better candidates; but the decision as to which of these two is the right one lies outside the scope of the present discussion.

There is a persistent but disputed belief that Francis Drake stopped at the Marianas in the course of his circumnavigation of the globe four centuries ago. The uncertainty of this identification stems principally from the inability of navigators, until the development of the chronometer by John Harrison in 1761, to ascertain longitude, as well as from the loss of the diary or log of the circumnavigation presented by Drake to Queen Elizabeth, who probably destroyed it for reasons of state.

We know from the chief documentary source available to us, the *World Encompassed* (1628) compiled by Sir Francis Drake, nephew of the captain-general, that towards the end of July, 1579, Drake left the California coast and after sixty-eight days made his first landfall at a place to which the angered English gave the name "Island of Theeves." Drake remained at this island or islands—it is sometimes referred to in the plural—until October 3, a period of three days, killing twenty natives in retaliation for purported aggressions. Continuing on towards the Moluccas, the English privateer then sighted some unidentified islands on October 16 at a latitude given as 7°5'N.

There is no evidence that Drake ever indeed stopped in the Marianas, whether at Guam, Rota, or any other place in the archipelago. According to the *World Encompassed*, the latitude of the spot where he had his unpleasant experience was about 8° north of the equatorial line. This is in sharp disagreement with the known latitude of Guam, which is about 13°25' N., and of Rota, which is about 14°10' N.

It cannot be argued that there may have been an error in either the documentary sources or the ascertainment of latitude. The latitude given in the *World Encompassed* is corroborated by the "Famous Voyage" (Hakluyt, 1589), which is an earlier and shorter account of the voyage based essentially

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on the same source—an unpublished but incompletely preserved copy of a manuscript by Francis Fletcher, who was the chaplain on the *Pelican-Golden Hind*. There are two other documentary sources pertaining to the Pacific crossing, both of them resulting from the examinations by the Inquisition of John Drake, a youth who accompanied his illustrious cousin as a page on the trip around the world and was later captured by the Spaniards in South America during an ill-fated expedition organized by Edward Fenton. In a deposition given in 1584 at Santa Fé (in what is now Argentina), young John places the latitude of the Island of Thieves at 9°, and in a second deposition given three years later at Lima, Peru, reaffirms this latitude (Fuller-Elliott-Drake, 1911; also, Nuttall, 1914). John relied entirely on memory.

As to the determination of latitude, thanks to the advances of the Portuguese and the Spaniards, parallels could be measured with some precision by the use of either the cross-staff or the astrolabe. Drake had each of these instruments as well as the skill to use them with good accuracy. He could not use the cross-staff at latitudes within 20° of the equator because of its unreliability in making solar sights at such levels; but he could use the astrolabe, with which he was thoroughly familiar. It is true that when the actual latitudes of places that he is known to have visited throughout the world are checked against those in the documents, there are some discrepancies—in one extreme instance as much as two degrees, thirty-eight minutes, and four seconds. But this is a far lesser discrepancy than the five and a half degrees that would obtain if the Island of Thieves were Guam, or the even greater discrepancy if it were Rota or Saipan northward of it.

All four of the documentary sources on which our knowledge of the Pacific crossing is derived provide several ethnological clues in addition to some demographic ones. Unfortunately for proponents of the Marianas claim, none of the ethnological traits in question are peculiar to the Marianas; all are applicable to some extent to some of or even the entire six locales in the Carolines that have also been asserted by various writers to be the Island of Thieves. They are: nudity, deeply blackened teeth, betel nut chewing, stone throwing, darts, and a *modus operandi* in aggression against foreigners.

If the nakedness of the thievish islanders could be established as having been total, it would favor the Marianas over all the Carolinian islands except Palau, where the prevalence of complete nudity has also been ascertained. But the word "nude" was almost always used by early Spanish, Dutch, and English visitors throughout the Pacific in a loose sense, so that we may think of it as truly complete only when reports specifically say so, as do those of Pigafetta, Urdaneta, Martinez, van Noort, and van Spilbergen for the Marianas, and Somera, Henry Wilson, Holden, and William Wilson for the Palaus. Regarding purposely blackened teeth and the chewing of the areca nut, these are found not only in the Marianas but Palau and Yap as well. The throwing of stones at the English by the islanders presents a problem, for

we do not know that they were hurled with the aid of a sling; but if they were, all locales including of course the Marianas would qualify except probably Palau. As for darts, all Micronesians used them for warfare. This leaves one last trait—the feigning of sincerity and honesty in order to lure foreigners and their ships into situations where they would be vulnerable to attack; but this turns out to be so widespread and vague as to be without diagnostic value.

Two other ethnological traits that are mentioned in the Fletcher-based documents are the great lengthening of the earlobes and the growing of long fingernails. However, these are weak clues, not only being apparently absent in the Marianas in former times but dubiously reported even for the Carolines. They may be ignored for our purposes.

Not to be ignored, however, are some crucial canoe traits singled out in the Fletcher-based documents but absent in the Marianas. The most outstanding of these is the double-outriggered canoe, which is clearly described as such notwithstanding a perplexing effort by James Hornell to make it out to be a single outrigger (Haddon and Hornell, 1936). Micronesian canoes, whether Chamorran or Carolinian, have consistently been said by all visitors since Antonio Pigafetta (with the Magellanic fleet) to have been equipped with only a single outrigger apparatus. The double outrigger complex has never been reported for these water craft. The same is true of the bamboo floats mentioned in the documents; they occur nowhere in Micronesia. Another designated canoe feature absent in the Marianas and the rest of Micronesia is the high crescentic endpiece curving inward in a semicircle. "Oars" (paddles?) are mentioned but not sails, although it is hard to say if this is significant. Most Micronesian canoes are propelled by sails, and being singleoutriggered they are twin-ended so as to permit tacking by reversing the canoe in order to keep the outrigger apparatus always on the weather side. This would account for the statement in the *World Encompassed* that "a prow and sterne they had of one fashion."

Having said all this about the failure of the Marianas to measure up to these crucial canoe features, it may come as a surprise to be told that in all likelihood the discrepancies can be ignored, not only for the Marianas but the Carolines as well. Research carried on by the writer indicates that the "Famous Voyage" and more especially the *World Encompassed* are to some extent confused blends of different experiences and observations, and that the canoe type attributed to the "thieves" is basically Malaysian, with a few lesser traits shared with the Micronesian culture area. How it came about that Fletcher introduced such discordant traits can only be speculated upon. We know that Drake was in the East Indies for over two months after leaving the Island of Thieves and had ample opportunity to observe their double-outriggered apparatus as well as their near-ubiquitous bamboo floats, their high incurving endpieces, and their extensive use of wholly-oared craft.

Ignoring the anomalous canoe traits is not, however, enough to place the

Island of Thieves in the Marianas. If the Indonesian canoe features can be disregarded for the Marianas they can with equal justification be disregarded for all the Carolinian candidates, whose latitudes are much closer to those specified by Master Fletcher and young John. It is true that four of the suspected Carolinian locales —Ngulu, Ulithi, Sorol, and Woleai—are atolls and should be eliminated both on the grounds of demographic insufficiency and their inability to grow the areca palm tree necessary for supplying the nut used in the betel wad. Yet this still leaves Palau and Yap. Like the Marianas, these two island groups not only had the requisite trees and the population needed to furnish the hundred or so canoes that came out to meet the *Golden Hind*, but are better qualified in other respects to satisfy the necessary criteria. Thus, the Yapese and especially the Palauans suspended from their canoes “white and glistening shels for brauery [ornamentation]” as mentioned in the documents, whereas the Chamorros did not do so at all and the Malaysians did so only moderately in a few scattered places in the Indies. Moreover, the Palauans are the only ones who polished their canoes in a way to correspond to the Fletcher description of the thieves’ canoes as “being made so smooth both within and without, that they bore a glosse, as if it were a harnesse most finely burnished.”

Were it not for the confusion caused by the similarity in the names bestowed on Magellan’s and Drake’s landfalls, there most likely would never have been any sponsorship of the Marianas. Magellan, who had at first called his locale *Islas de las Velas Latinas*, or Islands of Lateen Sails, later renamed them *Islas de los Ladrones* because the islanders had cheated the Spaniards in barter and stolen a skiff from them. Drake selected a similar name for his landfall in order to emphasize the similarity of his experience, rather than to claim an identity in location. No documentary accounts of the circumnavigation even hint that Drake had raised the same islands as had Magellan. What may have added to the confusion is that when John Drake gave his two depositions before the Inquisition his accounts were translated from English into Spanish by an interpreter at the proceedings, and his reference to the Island of Thieves became, in Spanish, *Los Ladrones*. It is interesting that the “Famous Voyage” makes no mention of the name bestowed by Drake on his landfall. This might lead one to speculate that the epithet was coined well after the circumnavigation by Fletcher, who was altogether capable of such editorial accretions, except that John Drake’s first use of Island of Thieves came entirely from memory and, being made in 1584, antedated by at least a decade the tardy insertion of the Fletcher-based “Famous Voyage” into Hakluyt’s pioneering volume on English voyages and travels.

The belief that Drake stopped at Guam or some nearby isle is thus without foundation and should not be perpetuated. It is a far less worthy claimant than either Palau or Yap, or even Mindanao in the Philippines, for that matter. Virtually all historians and others who have placed the English privateer in the Marianas have done so without attempting to say why, except occasionally and

in a desultory manner. They have been content to follow the lead of such erring predecessors as William Dampier (1697) and Edward Cavendish Drake (1768). There have been, to be sure, unquestioning followers of other claims, but these claims have greater merit, despite weaknesses. How they are to be evaluated and which island emerges as the real Island of Thieves is a fascinating subject; but that is a different story, and it is not the purpose of the present article to identify it.

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