

Magellan and the giants

Antonio Pigafetta's account of Magellan's voyage around the world in 1520

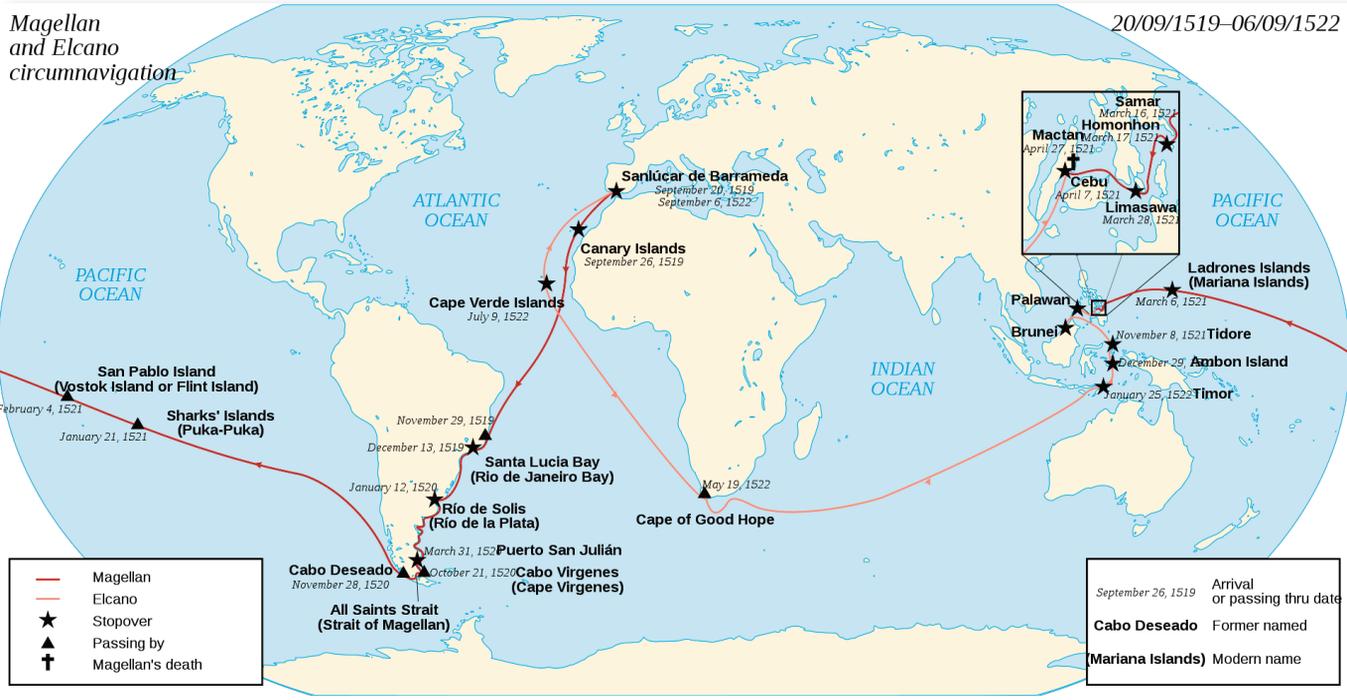
In 1519, the Portuguese naval officer and explorer Ferdinand Magellan led a Spanish expedition to find a western route to the East Indies and reach the Moluccas or Spice Islands (in present day Indonesia). The fleet of some 270 men in five ships left Spain on 20 September 1519, sailed across the Atlantic, and sighted the strait that now bears his name, allowing him to pass through the southern tip of South America into the Pacific Ocean (which he named). The fleet performed the first ever crossing of the Pacific, stopping in what is today called the Philippines, and eventually reached the Moluccas, accomplishing its goal. A much-depleted crew finally returned to Spain on 6 September 1522. Magellan died in battle in the Philippine islands on 27 April 1521.

The following is a series of extracts from the translated journals of Antonio Pigafetta. The extracts describe the many weeks of interactions between Magellan, the crew and 11–12-foot-tall giants.

We pick up after the fleet has successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and have arrived in Rio de Janeiro. – Ed

The said country of Verzin [Brazil] is very abundant in all good things, and is larger than France, Spain, and Italy together. It is one of the countries which the King of Portugal has acquired. Its inhabitants are not Christians, and adore nothing, but live according to the usage of nature, rather bestially than otherwise.

Some of these people live a hundred, or a hundred and



twenty, or a hundred and forty years, and more; they go naked, both men and women.

We remained thirteen days in this country of Verzin, and, departing from it and following our course, we went as far as thirty-four degrees and a third towards the Antarctic pole; there we found, near a river, men whom they call "cannibals," who eat human flesh, and one of these men, great as a giant, came to the captain's ship to ascertain and ask if the others might come.

This man had a voice like a bull, and whilst this man was at the ship his companions carried off all their goods which they had to a castle further off, from fear of us. Seeing that, we landed a hundred men from the ships, and went after them to try and catch some others; however they gained in running away.

This kind of people did more with one step than we could do at a bound. In this same river there were seven little islands, and in the largest of them precious stones are found.

This place was formerly called the Cape of St Mary, and it was thought that from thence there was a passage to the Sea of Sur; that is to say, the South Sea. And it is not found that any ship has ever discovered anything more, having passed beyond the said cape. And now it is no longer a cape, but it is a river which has a mouth seventeen leagues in width, by which it enters into the sea.

In past time, in this river, these great men named Canibali ate a Spanish captain, named John de Sola, and sixty men who had gone to discover land, as we were doing, and trusted too much to them.

Afterwards following the same course towards the

Antarctic pole, going along the land, we found two islands full of geese and goslings, and sea wolves, of which geese the large number could not be reckoned; for we loaded all the five ships with them in an hour.

In this place we endured a great storm, and thought we should have been lost, but the three holy bodies, that is to say, St Anselmo, St Nicolas, and Sta Clara, appeared to us, and immediately the storm ceased.

However, one day, without anyone expecting it, we saw a giant, who was on the shore of the sea, quite naked, and was dancing and leaping, and singing, and whilst singing he put the sand and dust on his head.

Departing thence as far as forty nine degrees and a half in the Antarctic heavens (as we were in the winter), we entered into a port to pass the winter, and remained there two whole months without ever seeing anybody.

However, one day, without anyone expecting it, we saw a giant, who was on the shore of the sea, quite naked, and was dancing and leaping, and singing, and whilst singing he put the sand and dust on his head.

Our captain sent one of his men towards him, whom he charged to sing and leap like the other to reassure him, and show him friendship. This he did, and immediately the sailor led this giant to a little island where the captain

was waiting for him; and when he was before us he began to be astonished, and to be afraid, and he raised one finger on high, thinking that we came from heaven.

He was so tall that the tallest of us only came up to his waist; however he was well built. He had a large face, painted red all round, and his eyes also were painted yellow around them, and he had two hearts painted on his cheeks; he had but little hair on his head, and it was painted white. When he was brought before the captain he was clothed with the skin of a certain beast, which skin was very skilfully sewed. This beast has its head and ears of the size of a mule, and the neck and body of the fashion of a camel, the legs of a deer, and the tail like that of a horse, and it neighs like a horse. There is a great quantity of these animals in this same place.

This giant had his feet covered with the skin of this animal in the form of shoes, and he carried in his hand a short and thick bow, with a thick cord made of the gut of the said beast, with a bundle of cane arrows, which were not very long, and were feathered like ours, but they had no iron at the end, though they had at the end some small white and black cut stones, and these arrows were like those which the Turks use.

The captain caused food and drink to be given to this giant, then they showed him some things, amongst others, a steel mirror. When the giant saw his likeness in it, he was greatly terrified, leaping backwards, and made three or four of our men fall down.

After that the captain gave him two bells, a mirror, a comb, and a chaplet of beads, and sent him back on shore, having him accompanied by four armed men. One of the companions of this giant, who would never come to the ship, on seeing the other coming back with our people, came forward and ran to where the other giants dwelled.

These came one after the other all naked, and began to leap and sing, raising one finger to heaven, and showing to our people a certain white powder made of the roots of herbs, which they kept in earthen pots, and they made signs that they lived on that, and that they had nothing else to eat than this powder.

Therefore our people made them signs to come to the ship and that they would help them to carry their bundles. Then these men came, who carried only their bows in their hands; but their wives came after them

laden like donkeys, and carried their goods. These women are not as tall as the men, but they are very sufficiently large.

When we saw them we were all amazed and astonished, for they had the breasts half an ell long, and had their faces painted, and were dressed like the men. But they wore a small skin before them to cover themselves.

They brought with them four of those little beasts of which they make their clothing, and they led them with a cord in the manner of dogs coupled together. When these people wish to catch these animals with which they clothe themselves, they fasten one of the young ones to a bush, and afterwards the large ones come to play with the little one, and the giants are hid behind some hedge, and by shooting their arrows they kill the large ones.

Our men brought eighteen of these giants, both men and women, whom they placed in two divisions, half on one side of the port, and the other half at the other, to hunt the said animals.

Six days after, our people on going to cut wood, saw another giant, with his face painted and clothed like the above-mentioned, he had in his hand a bow and arrows, and approaching our people he made some touches on his head and then on his body, and afterwards did the same to our people. And this being done he raised both his hands to heaven.

When the captain-general knew all this, he sent to fetch him with his ship's boat, and

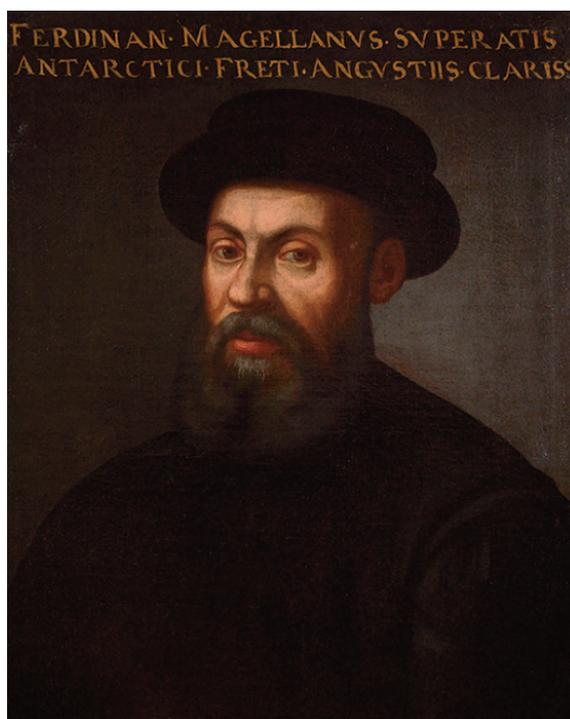
brought him to one of the little islands which are in the port, where the ships were.

In this island the captain had caused a house to be made for putting some of the ships' things in whilst he remained there.

This giant was of a still better disposition than the others, and was a gracious and amiable person, who liked to dance and leap. When he leapt he caused the earth to sink in a palm depth at the place where his feet touched.

He was a long time with us, and at the end we baptised him, and gave him the name of John.

This giant pronounced the name of Jesus, the Pater noster, Ave Maria, and his name as clearly as we did: but he had a terribly strong and loud voice. The captain gave him a shirt and a tunic of cloth, and seaman's breeches,





a cap, a comb, some bells, and other things, and sent him back to where he had come from.

He went away very joyous and satisfied. The next day this giant returned, and brought one of those large animals before mentioned, for which the captain gave him some other things, so that he should bring more. But afterwards he did not return, and it is to be presumed that the other giants killed him because he had come to us.

Fifteen days later we saw four other giants, who carried no arrows, for they had hid them in the bushes, as two of them showed us, for we took them all four, and each of them was painted in a different way.

The captain retained the two younger ones to take them to Spain on his return; but it was done by gentle and cunning means, for otherwise they would have done a hurt to some of our men. The manner in which he retained them was that he gave them many knives, forks, mirrors, bells, and glass, and they held all these things in their hands. Then the captain had some irons brought, such as are put on the feet of malefactors: these giants took pleasure in seeing the irons, but they did not know where to put them, and it grieved them that they could not take them with their hands, because they were hindered by the other things which they held in them.

The other two giants were there, and were desirous of helping the other two, but the captain would not let them, and made a sign to the two whom he wished to detain that they would put those irons on their feet, and then they would go away: at this they made a sign with their heads that they were content.

Immediately the captain had the irons put on the feet of both of them, and when they saw that they were striking with a hammer on the bolt which crosses the said opened, these giants were afraid, but the captain made them a sign not to doubt of anything.

Nevertheless when they saw the trick which had been played them, they began to be enraged, and to foam like bulls, crying out very loud "Setebos", that is to say, the great devil, that he should help them. The hands of the other two giants were bound, but it was with great difficulty; then the captain sent them back on shore, with nine of his men to conduct them, and to bring the wife of one of those who had remained in irons, because he regretted her greatly, as we saw by signs.

But in going away one of those two who were sent away, untied his hands and escaped, running with such lightness that our men lost sight of him, and he went away where his companions were staying; but he found

nobody of those that he had left with the women because they had gone to hunt. However he went to look for them, and found them, and related to them all that had been done to them.

The other giant whose hands were tied struggled as much as he could to unfasten himself, and to prevent his doing so, one of our men struck him, and hurt him on the head, at which he got very angry; however he led our people there where their wives were. Then John Cavagio, the pilot who was the chief conductor of these two giants, would not bring away the wife of one of the giants who had remained in irons on that evening, but was of opinion that they should sleep there, because it was almost night.

During this time the one of the giants who had untied his hands came back from where he had been, with another giant, and they seeing their companion wounded on the head, said nothing at that moment, but next morning they spoke in their language to the women, and immediately all ran away together, and the smallest ran faster than the biggest, and they left all their chattels.

Two of these giants being rather a long way off shot arrows at our men, and fighting thus, one of the giants pierced with an arrow the thigh of one of our men, of which he died immediately. Then seeing that he was dead, all ran away.

Our men had crossbows and guns, but they never could hit one of these giants, because they did not stand still in one place, but leaped hither and thither. After that, our men buried the man who had been killed, and set fire to the place where those giants had left their chattels. Certainly these giants run faster than a horse, and they are very jealous of their wives.

When these giants have a stomach ache, instead of taking medicine they put down their throats an arrow about two feet long, then they vomit a green bile mixed with blood and the reason why they throw up this green matter is because they sometimes eat thistles. When they have headaches they make a cut across the forehead, and also on the arms and legs, to draw blood from several parts of their bodies. One of the two we had taken, and who was in our ship, said that the blood did not choose to remain in the place and spot of the body where pain was felt. These people have their hair cut short and clipped in the manner of monks with a tonsure: they wear a cord of cotton round their head, to this they hang their arrows when they go a-hunting...

When one of them dies, ten or twelve devils appear and dance all round the dead man. It seems that these are painted, and one of these enemies is taller than the others, and makes a greater noise, and more mirth than the others: that is whence these people have taken the custom of painting their faces and bodies, as has been said.

The greatest of these devils is called in their language *Setebos*, and the others *Cheleule*. Besides the above-mentioned things, this one who was in the ship with us,

told us by signs that he had seen devils with two horns on their heads, and long hair down to their feet, and who threw out fire from their mouths and rumps.

The captain named this kind of people "Pataghom", who have no houses, but have huts made of the skins of the animals with which they clothe themselves, and go hither and thither with these huts of theirs, as the gypsies do; they live on raw meat, and eat a certain sweet root, which they call *capac*.

These two giants that we had in the ship ate a large basketful of biscuit, and rats without skinning them, and they drank half a bucket of water at each time.



These words were given me by that giant whom we had in the ship, because he asked me for *capac*, that is to say bread, since they thus name that root which they use for bread, and *oli*, that is to say water. When he saw me write these names after him, and ask for others he understood (what I was doing) with my pen in my hand. Another time I made a cross and kissed it in showing it to him; but suddenly he exclaimed "Setebos!" and made signs to me that if I again made the cross it would enter into my stomach and make me die. When this giant was unwell he asked for the cross, and embraced and kissed it much, and he wished to become a Christian before his death, and we named him Paul. When these people wish to light a fire they take a pointed stick and rub it with another

until they make a fire in the pith of a tree which is placed between these sticks.

Wednesday, the twenty-eighth of November, 1520, we came forth out of the said strait, and entered into the Pacific sea, where we remained three months and twenty days without taking in provisions or other refreshments, and we only ate old biscuit reduced to powder, and full of grubs, and stinking from the dirt which the rats had made on it when eating the good biscuit, and we drank water that was yellow and stinking. We also ate the ox hides which were under the main-yard, so that the yard should not break the rigging: they were very hard on account of the sun, rain, and wind, and we left them for four or five days in the sea, and then we put them a little on the embers, and so ate them; also the sawdust of wood, and rats which cost half-a-crown each, moreover enough of them were not to be got.

Besides the abovenamed evils, this misfortune which I will mention was the worst, it was that the upper and lower gums of most of our men grew so much that they could not eat, and in this way so many suffered, that nineteen died, and the other giant, and an Indian from the country of Verzin. Besides those who died, twenty-five or thirty fell ill of diverse sicknesses, both in the arms and legs, and other places, in such manner that very few remained healthy. However, thanks be to the Lord, I had

no sickness.

(Source: The First Voyage Round the World by Antonio Pigafetta, translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley, Published in London, UK, in 1874, WikiSource.org)

About the Author:

Antonio Pigafetta belonged to a rich family from the city of Vicenza in northeast Italy. In his youth he studied astronomy, geography and cartography. He then served on board the ships of the Knights of Rhodes at the beginning of the 16th century. Until 1519, he accompanied the papal nuncio, Monsignor Francesco Chiericati, of Spain. Pigafetta heard of Magellan's planned expedition and decided to join, accepting the title of supernumerary. During the voyage, Pigafetta collected extensive data concerning the geography, climate, flora, fauna and the native inhabitants of the places that the expedition visited. His meticulous notes proved invaluable to future explorers and cartographers, mainly due to his inclusion of nautical and linguistic data. Pigafetta was wounded on Mactan in the Philippines, where Magellan was killed in April 1521. He recovered and was among the 18 who accompanied Juan Sebastián Elcano on board the *Victoria* on the return voyage to Spain.