

The story of the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines is closely connected to the historic Magellan–Elcano expedition, the Spanish voyage that took place from 1519 to 1522 and ultimately became the first expedition to circumnavigate the Earth. The most important historical evidence about this event comes from the chronicle written by Antonio Pigafetta, an Italian nobleman, scholar, and navigator who joined Ferdinand Magellan's expedition and carefully documented the journey in his manuscript commonly known as *First Voyage Around the World*. Because Pigafetta personally witnessed the events he described, historians consider his work a primary source. His account survives today through several preserved manuscripts kept in European archives, including copies in the Ambrosian Library in Milan and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and these manuscripts were later translated and compiled in scholarly works such as Blair and Robertson's *The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898*, one of the most widely used academic collections of early Philippine historical documents. According to Pigafetta's narrative, Magellan's fleet first sighted land in the Philippine archipelago on March 16, 1521, near the island of Homonhon, where the sailors anchored to rest and recover after their long crossing of the Pacific Ocean. Soon after arriving, the expedition encountered two local rulers, Rajah Kulambu and Rajah Siagu, who governed nearby communities and established friendly diplomatic relations with the Spaniards through ceremonial exchanges and hospitality. These interactions reveal that pre-colonial Philippine societies already had organized political leadership, trade networks, and diplomatic customs long before Spanish colonization. Pigafetta recorded that these local leaders later guided Magellan's expedition to an island he called Mazaua, where an important religious event took place on March 31, 1521, which was Easter Sunday. On that day, the expedition priest Pedro de Valderrama celebrated a Catholic Mass on the shore, attended by both the Spaniards and the local inhabitants, including Rajah Kulambu and Rajah Siagu, who respectfully observed the ceremony. After the Mass, Pigafetta described that a large wooden cross was erected on the highest hill of the island as a symbol of Christianity and Spanish presence. This event is widely considered the earliest recorded Catholic Mass in the Philippine islands and marks the symbolic beginning of Christianity in the country. However, historians later debated the exact location of the island referred to by Pigafetta as Mazaua. For many centuries, some scholars believed the event occurred in Masao, Butuan, largely due to interpretations made by later Spanish historians such as the seventeenth-century writer Francisco Colín, who associated Pigafetta's description with the historically important trading settlement of Butuan in northern Mindanao. In contrast, many modern historians argue that the island described by Pigafetta corresponds to Limasawa Island in Southern Leyte, and this conclusion is supported by several pieces of evidence. Pigafetta recorded the latitude of Mazaua as approximately nine and two-thirds degrees north, which closely matches the geographic coordinates of Limasawa but not those of Butuan. He also described the island as relatively small and surrounded by other islands, whereas Butuan is located on the mainland along a river delta rather than on an isolated island. In addition, Pigafetta mentioned that after leaving Mazaua, the expedition sailed westward to reach Cebu, a navigational route that aligns geographically with Limasawa's position but does not match the route from Butuan. Another important primary source that supports this conclusion is the navigation logbook of Francisco Albo, the pilot of Magellan's flagship, whose recorded latitude measurements also place the expedition near the region corresponding to Limasawa. Because Pigafetta's eyewitness account, Albo's navigation data, and the geographic description of the

island all point to the same location, many historians concluded that the site of the First Mass was Limasawa rather than Butuan. This interpretation was eventually reviewed and formally adopted by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, which conducted historical investigations and reaffirmed Limasawa as the official site of the First Mass, commemorating the event with historical markers and monuments such as the Limasawa Shrine originally installed by the Philippine Historical Committee in 1950. After the Mass in Mazaua, Magellan's expedition continued its journey to Cebu, where the Spaniards formed an alliance with the local ruler Rajah Humabon and conducted baptisms among members of the community, expanding Spanish religious and political influence. However, Magellan later intervened in a local conflict and confronted the ruler of Mactan Island, the chieftain Lapu-Lapu, which led to the Battle of Mactan on April 27, 1521. In this battle, Magellan was killed by the warriors of Lapu-Lapu, an event that is often remembered in Philippine history as one of the earliest recorded acts of resistance against foreign intervention. Despite Magellan's death, the expedition continued under the leadership of Juan Sebastián Elcano, and in 1522 the surviving crew returned to Spain aboard the ship *Victoria*, completing the first circumnavigation of the Earth. The study of the First Mass in the Philippines therefore illustrates how historians reconstruct the past by analyzing primary sources such as Pigafetta's chronicle and Albo's logbook, comparing them with geographic evidence and later scholarly analysis, and evaluating competing interpretations through the process of historiography, which ultimately allows historical institutions and scholars to arrive at evidence-based conclusions about significant events in the past.

The historical reconstruction of the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines cannot be understood without examining the broader context of the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese navigator sailing under the Spanish crown who commanded the fleet that eventually completed the first circumnavigation of the globe. The expedition departed Spain in 1519 with the goal of discovering a western route to the lucrative Spice Islands in Southeast Asia. After navigating the Atlantic Ocean and passing through the narrow waterway later called the Strait of Magellan, the fleet crossed the vast Pacific Ocean and eventually reached the Philippine archipelago in 1521. The most detailed narrative of this voyage was written by Antonio Pigafetta, whose chronicle provides a day-by-day description of the expedition's travels, encounters, and ceremonies. Pigafetta's journal is particularly valuable because it includes geographic coordinates, sailing directions, and ethnographic descriptions of the people the expedition encountered, making it both a historical narrative and an important geographical document. Scholars consider Pigafetta's account to be the most comprehensive eyewitness source about the voyage, and it has been preserved through several manuscript copies kept in European libraries. These manuscripts were later translated and compiled in scholarly publications such as the multi-volume historical collection *The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898* edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, which gathered primary documents from Spanish archives and made them accessible to historians studying the early history of the Philippines.

Pigafetta's chronicle records that the expedition first sighted land in the Philippine archipelago on March 16, 1521, when the fleet arrived near the island of Homonhon in Eastern Visayas. After months at sea, the sailors anchored there to rest, repair their ships, and obtain food and water. During this period the expedition encountered local inhabitants who demonstrated hospitality and trade relations with the foreigners. Soon afterward, Magellan and his men established contact with two local rulers, Rajah Kulambu and Rajah Siagu, leaders of nearby communities who governed territories connected through regional trade networks. Pigafetta described how these leaders welcomed the Spaniards and engaged in ceremonial exchanges of gifts, including food, textiles, and other valuable goods. The interactions between the Spaniards and these rulers illustrate that pre-colonial Philippine societies were politically organized and capable of diplomacy, contradicting earlier colonial narratives that portrayed the archipelago as politically undeveloped before Spanish arrival. Historians such as William Henry Scott emphasize that pre-colonial communities were organized into autonomous political units known as barangays, each led by a datu who exercised authority over local affairs, including warfare, dispute resolution, and trade relations with neighboring communities.

According to Pigafetta, Rajah Kulambu later guided Magellan's fleet to an island he called Mazaua, where an important religious ceremony took place on March 31, 1521, which happened to be Easter Sunday that year. On that day the expedition's priest, Pedro de Valderrama, celebrated a Catholic Mass on the shore of the island. Pigafetta described the ceremony in detail, noting that the Spaniards constructed a temporary altar and that the local rulers attended the event respectfully even though they were not Christians. He recorded that Rajah Kulambu and Rajah Siagu knelt during the Mass alongside the Spaniards, demonstrating a form of diplomatic respect rather than religious conversion. After the ceremony, Pigafetta wrote that a large wooden cross was erected on the highest hill of the island overlooking the sea. This act had both symbolic and political significance: it represented the introduction of Christianity to the islands and served as a marker of Spanish presence in the newly encountered territory. Because Pigafetta's narrative is the earliest surviving eyewitness description of a Catholic ceremony conducted in the archipelago, historians generally recognize this event as the first recorded Catholic Mass in what is now the Philippines.

However, the exact geographic identity of the island Pigafetta called Mazaua became a major subject of historiographical debate among scholars. For several centuries many historians believed that the First Mass occurred in Masao, a location in Butuan in northern Mindanao. This interpretation originated largely from the writings of the seventeenth-century Spanish historian Francisco Colín, who associated Pigafetta's description with the historically prosperous trading port of Butuan. Because Butuan was known to be an important commercial center in the early colonial period, Colín assumed that it must have been the location referred to in Pigafetta's narrative. Over time this interpretation was repeated by other historians and eventually became widely accepted in textbooks during the early twentieth century. However, modern historical analysis began to question this interpretation by re-examining the original primary sources and comparing them with geographic data.

Several pieces of evidence led historians to reconsider the location of Mazaua. First, Pigafetta recorded the latitude of the island as approximately nine and two-thirds degrees north, which

corresponds closely to the geographic coordinates of Limasawa Island in Southern Leyte rather than to Butuan, whose latitude is significantly different. Second, Pigafetta described Mazaua as a relatively small island surrounded by other islands and accessible by sea routes leading directly toward Cebu. This description matches the geographic configuration of Limasawa but does not correspond to Butuan, which is located on the mainland of Mindanao along the Agusan River delta. Third, the navigation log of the expedition's pilot, Francisco Albo, independently recorded the fleet's sailing coordinates and route, placing the expedition near the same latitude as Limasawa. The agreement between Pigafetta's narrative and Albo's navigational data provided strong corroborating evidence that the island referred to as Mazaua was indeed Limasawa.

Because of these findings, modern historians increasingly accepted the Limasawa interpretation. The Philippine government eventually addressed the issue through formal historical review panels organized by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines. After evaluating the available evidence, including Pigafetta's eyewitness account, Albo's logbook, geographic measurements, and historical scholarship, the commission officially recognized Limasawa Island as the site of the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines. Historical markers were installed on the island to commemorate the event, including the monument at the Limasawa Shrine that identifies the location as the place where the Mass was celebrated in 1521. This official recognition reflects the consensus of many historians that the Limasawa interpretation satisfies the strongest evidentiary standards because it relies on primary documentation supported by geographic verification.

Following the events at Mazaua, Magellan's expedition sailed westward toward the island of Cebu, where the Spaniards established diplomatic relations with the local ruler Rajah Humabon. Pigafetta recorded that several members of Humabon's community were baptized into Christianity during the Spaniards' stay in Cebu, marking the first recorded conversions in the archipelago. However, Magellan later became involved in a political conflict between local rulers and agreed to assist Humabon in confronting the leader of Mactan Island, the chieftain Lapu-Lapu. This decision led to the Battle of Mactan on April 27, 1521, during which Magellan was killed by the warriors of Lapu-Lapu. The battle has since become a powerful symbol in Philippine history because it represents one of the earliest recorded acts of resistance against foreign intervention. Despite the loss of their commander, the surviving members of the expedition continued their journey under the leadership of Juan Sebastián Elcano, who eventually guided the remaining ship, the *Victoria*, back to Spain in 1522, completing the first circumnavigation of the Earth.

The study of the First Mass and the Magellan expedition illustrates the methodology historians use to reconstruct the past. Scholars evaluate different types of evidence, distinguish between primary and secondary sources, and analyze geographic and documentary data to determine which interpretations are most credible. In this case, the convergence of Pigafetta's eyewitness narrative, Albo's navigational records, and modern geographic analysis provides a strong historical foundation for identifying Limasawa as the site of the First Mass. The debate itself also demonstrates how historical understanding evolves over time as researchers revisit original documents, apply new analytical techniques, and reassess earlier interpretations. Through this

process historians are able to refine their knowledge of the past and build a more accurate account of events that shaped the cultural and religious development of the Philippines.