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# April 27, 1521: Was Magellan Worth Defending?

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**Overview:** Ferdinand Magellan was a Portuguese master of sea navigation and exploration. He was also a complicated man, greatly admired by some, feared and even hated by others. Magellan's life ended during a fight with local villagers on a beach in the Philippines in 1521. Many of his own men were slow to come to his rescue. This Mini-Q reflects on events leading up to Magellan's death and asks if you would have tried to help save his life.

## The Documents:

- Document A: Magellan's Voyage (map)
- Document B: The Easter Mutiny
- Document C: The Strait of Magellan (map)
- Document D: Sailing the Pacific
- Document E: The Battle of Mactan

## April 27, 1521: Was Magellan Worth Defending?

During the late Middle Ages, Europeans developed a craving for spices – especially nutmeg, pepper, and cloves – that came from the mysterious Spice Islands in distant Asia. But overland trade through Arab lands was difficult. Two countries in particular, Portugal and Spain, wondered if there wasn't an easier way. The Portuguese found one route by sailing south around Africa and then east to India and the Spice Islands beyond. Christopher Columbus, sailing from Spain, sought to reach Asia by traveling west across the Atlantic. It was a good idea, but the Americas happened to be in the way. The challenge now was to find a river or **strait** that cut through the Americas and led to the Spice Islands on the other side.

One person who hoped to make this discovery was Ferdinand Magellan. Born in 1480, Magellan was the son of Portuguese nobility and a student of **cartography** and astronomy. From 1505 to 1512, Magellan sailed on expeditions for his native country of Portugal. But he wanted more – his own fleet – which the king of Portugal refused to give. In 1517, he arrived in Spain, determined to get support from that throne just as Columbus had in 1492. His plan was simple in design – sail south and then west across the Atlantic, find a strait that led him to Asia, fill his ships with fragrant spices, then continue on around the world and back to Spain. A single shipload of cloves would pay for the voyage and make investors happy. For Magellan, there would be fame and glory. For Spain there would be the huge wealth gained by opening up a new trade route.

The Spanish king agreed to give Magellan an **armada** of five ships. Magellan hired a crew – young men in their teens and twenties – and

prepared to set sail. At 40, he was probably the oldest man in the armada.

At sea, a captain's word was law, so Magellan had complete power over the roughly 270 men under his command. This was a problem for many of Magellan's officers, who were Spanish and resented sailing for a Portuguese captain. If Magellan wanted to stay in command, he would have to be tough. He was.

For his crew, life was already hard. Typically, there were no beds or hammocks on a trade ship, just the boards of the deck. Men had to keep

watch throughout the night, so sleep was a luxury. Food rations were often cut back to **hardtack**, water, and wine. And bathroom facilities were non-existent. Magellan's hard personality didn't help. Eventually, the crew of one of his boats staged a **mutiny**.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that after three long years at sea, only one of the five ships in Magellan's

armada completed the voyage around the world. When the lone surviving ship, the *Victoria*, arrived back in Seville, Spain, on September 10, 1522, it had a crew of just 18. Magellan was not among them.

As you will discover in the last document, Magellan was killed in hand-to-hand combat with local villagers of a Philippine island on April 27, 1521. Many of his own men could have come to his rescue. Most did not. What would you have done? Read the documents that follow and answer the question: *Was Magellan worth defending?*



## Background Essay Questions

1. Why did the Portuguese and Spanish want to find a water route to Asia?
2. Why did Magellan approach the king of Spain?
3. How much authority did Magellan have over the fleet?
4. What hardships were faced by crewmembers on Magellan's ships?
5. How many men left with Magellan and how many came back?
6. Define these terms:

strait

cartography

armada

hardtack

mutiny

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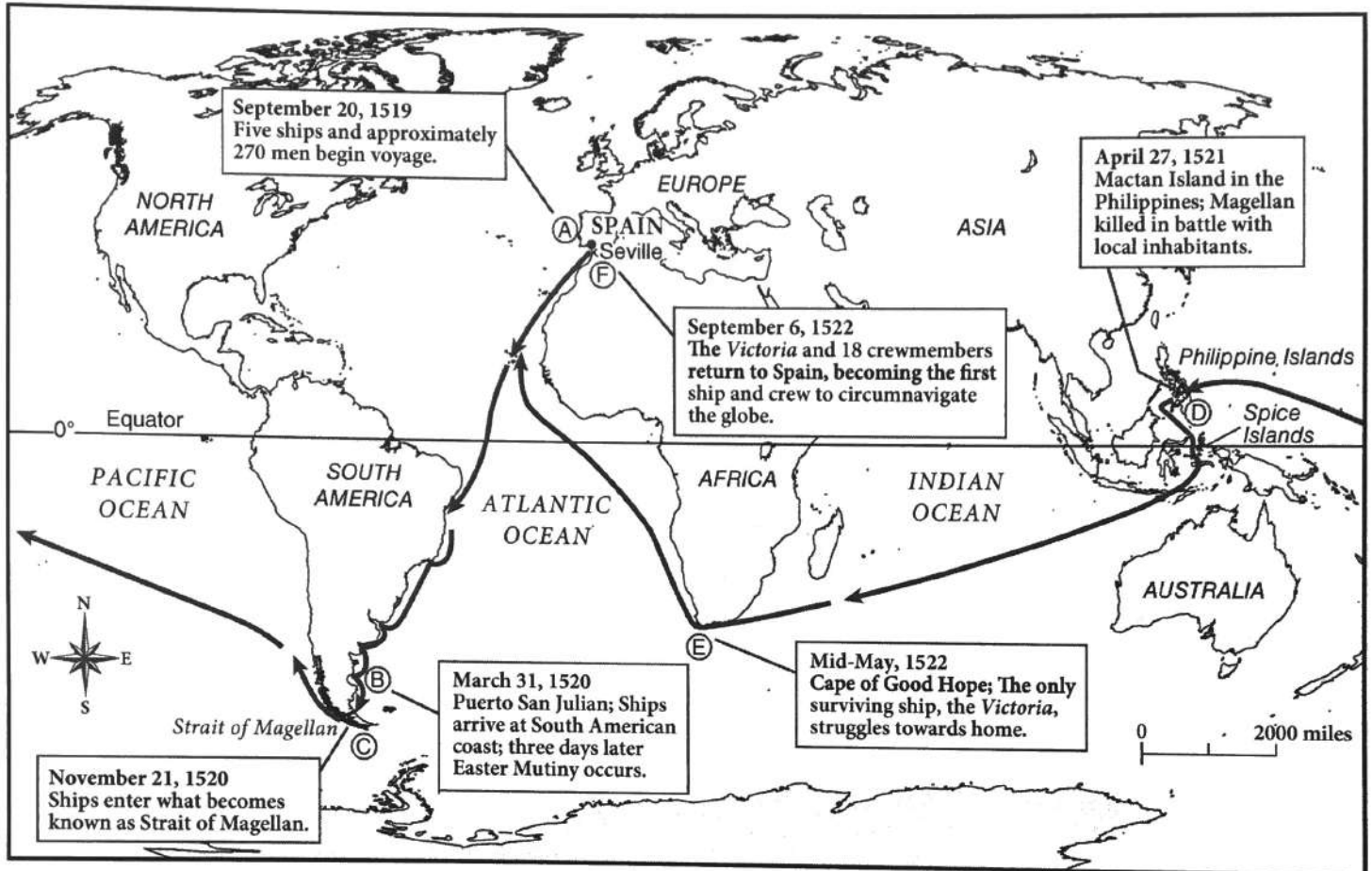
### Timeline

- 1488** – Bartolomeu Diaz of Portugal reaches the Indian Ocean by rounding the tip of Africa.
- 1492** – Christopher Columbus arrives in the Bahamas, but thinks he has reached Asia.
- 1498** – Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama reaches India.
- 1513** – Vasco Nunez de Balboa of Spain crosses Panama and becomes the first European to see the Pacific Ocean west of the Americas.
- 1519** – Ferdinand Magellan's expedition leaves Spain to find a route to the Spice Islands.
- 1521** – Hernán Cortés of Spain conquers the Aztec Empire in Mexico.
- 1533** – Francisco Pizarro of Spain conquers the Inca Empire in Peru.
- 1542** – Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto becomes the first European to see the Mississippi River.

## Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

## Voyage of Magellan



## Document Analysis

1. How long did it take to complete the entire voyage?
2. What could explain the eight-month gap between the mutiny at San Julian and the navigation of the Strait of Magellan?
3. What was the course of the voyage after Magellan's death?
4. The map states that *Victoria* was the first ship to circumnavigate the globe. What does that mean?
5. How might you use this document to argue that Magellan was worth defending?
6. How might you use this document to argue that Magellan was not worth defending?

## Document B

**Source:** From the journal of a crewman known only as “The Genoese Pilot,” 1520.

**Note:** After crossing the Atlantic, Magellan sailed down the coast of modern-day Brazil and Argentina, searching for a waterway that would lead to the Pacific Ocean. It was the start of autumn in the Southern Hemisphere, and the weather soon turned harsh. Magellan stopped in a harbor which he named St. Julian. Fearing that his fleet’s supplies would not last the winter, Magellan put the crew on reduced rations. Many of the men—resentful of this cut and fearing that Magellan might lead them to their death—began to demand that the fleet return to Spain. Magellan refused, and the growing discontent eventually led to the mutiny described below.

Thence they navigated along the [Argentine] coast, and arrived on the last day of March of the year 1520 at the Port of St. Julian. . . . In this port three of the ships rose up against the Captain-Major [Magellan], their captains saying that they intended to take him to Castile [Spain] in arrest, as he was taking them all to destruction. Here, through the exertions of the said Captain-Major, and the assistance and favour of the foreigners whom he carried with him, the Captain-Major went to the said three ships. . . and there the captain of one of them was killed, who was treasurer of the whole fleet, and named Luis Mendoza; he was killed in his own ship by stabs with a dagger by the chief constable of the fleet, who was sent to do this by [Magellan] in a boat with certain men. The said three ships having thus been recovered, five days later [Magellan] ordered Gaspar de Quesada to be decapitated and quartered; he was captain of one of the ships, and was one of those who had mutinied.

**Note:** The three mutinous captains, Luis Mendoza, Gaspar de Quesada, and Juan de Cartagena were closely associated with a powerful Spanish royal official. All three men looked down on Magellan and had mutinied unsuccessfully earlier in the voyage. On that occasion, Magellan showed leniency. This time, he did not. In addition to the killing of Mendoza and Quesada, Magellan abandoned Cartagena and a priest who conspired with him on an island.

### Document Analysis

1. Why did the captains of three ships rebel against Magellan?
2. Why do you think Magellan responded to the mutiny the way he did?
3. What is the definition of “decapitation”? What is the definition of “quartering”?
4. How might you use this document to argue that Magellan was worth defending?
5. How might you use this document to argue that Magellan was not worth defending?

## Document C

**Sources:** Laurence Bergreen, *Over the Edge of the World*, Harper Collins, 2003. Map created from various sources.

**Note:** Several months after leaving the Port San Julian, Magellan found a strait linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The trip through the strait took 38 days, during which time one of the ships, the *San Antonio*, deserted the fleet and returned to Spain.

Although the armada enjoyed reasonably good fortune, Magellan's extraordinary skill as a strategist proved to be the decisive factor in negotiating the entire length of the Dragon's Tail [the European name for Tierra del Fuego, the peninsula the strait runs through]. He ordered lookouts scrambling to the highest perch on the ships, where they could see the waterways and obstacles that lay ahead. In addition, he regularly sent small scouting parties in the long-boats. "They would go and come back with news of the findings, and then the rest of the armada would follow. This is the way the armada operated for the whole passage of the strait," Gines de Mafra recalled. The information they brought back helped Magellan plot his next move; they warned him against rocky shoals, bays that deceptively

resembled a continuation of the strait, and other dead ends that would have delayed the passage. Magellan even relied on the taste of seawater to guide the fleet. As the water became fresher, he knew he was traveling inland, and once it turned salty, he realized he was approaching the Pacific on the western side of the strait.



### Document Analysis

1. What two oceans are connected by the strait?
2. According to the map, about how many miles long is the strait?
3. What could explain why it took Magellan 38 days to navigate the strait?
4. How did Magellan use taste to find his way through the strait?
5. How might you use the document to argue for defending Magellan?
6. How might you use the document to argue against defending Magellan?

## Document D

**Source:** From the journal of Antonio Pigafetta, 1520.

**Note:** Antonio Pigafetta was an Italian scholar who was a passenger on Magellan's expedition. He kept a detailed journal that was the most complete account of the voyage. During the course of the journey, Pigafetta developed a great admiration for Magellan that never diminished. This excerpt describes the journey across the Pacific Ocean after the ships successfully made it through what became known as the Strait of Magellan.

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 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 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. . . . Besides the above-named evils, this misfortune I will mention was the worst, it was that the upper and lower gums of most of our men grew [swelled] so much that they could not eat, and in this way so many suffered, that nineteen died. . . . Besides those who died, twenty-five or thirty fell ill of [various] sicknesses, both in the arms and legs, and other places, in such manner that very few remained healthy.

**Note:** Magellan and his officers seemed immune to scurvy, a vitamin-C deficiency common among sailors which often led to death. As was the custom, the officers had a few delicacies they did not share with the crew. One of these was quince jelly, which contained enough vitamin C to prevent scurvy, something no one suspected at the time.

### Document Analysis

1. What did the sailors eat? Why did their food supplies run low?
2. According to Pigafetta, what was the worst misfortune about crossing the Pacific?
3. As a crew member, how might you feel about Magellan during this part of the voyage?
4. How can you use this document to argue that Magellan was worth defending?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Magellan was not worth defending?

## Document E

**Sources:** Text from the Journal of Antonio Pigafetta, 1520; illustration from Archive Photos/Getty.

**Note:** Magellan's main goal was to reach the Spice Islands. However, while crossing the Pacific, he stopped in the Philippines, where he decided that God had an additional purpose for him. On the island of Cebu, he converted about 2,200 people to Catholicism. Magellan began to threaten those who did not convert, and he burned a village on Mactan ruled by tribal chief named Lapu Lapu. In the battle that followed, Magellan was killed while many of his crew remained on their ships, despite knowing that their leader was in danger.

[Magellan] had his right leg pierced by a poisoned arrow, on which account he gave orders to retreat by degrees; but almost all our men took to precipitate flight, so that there remained hardly six or eight of us with him. . . . We fought for more than an hour, until an Indian succeeded in thrusting a cane lance into the captain's face.

[Magellan] then . . . pierced the Indian's breast with his lance, and left it in his body, and trying to draw his sword he was unable to draw it more than half way, on account of a javelin wound he received in the right arm. The enemies seeing this all rushed against him, and one of them with a great sword . . . brought the captain down on his face, then the Indians threw themselves upon him, and ran him through with lances and scimitars.



### Document Analysis

1. How does the artist portray Magellan at the time of his death? What appears to be the artist's purpose?
2. How had Magellan's goals changed by the time he reached the Philippines?
3. How long did the Battle of Mactan last? How did it end?
4. How can you use this document to argue that Magellan was worth defending?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Magellan was not worth defending?