

MAXIMILIANUS TRANSYLVANUS'S LETTER ABOUT MAGELLAN

By Andrew Sharp

Among the Alexander Turnbull Library's rare books is a copy of the printed publication in Latin in Rome in November 1523 of a letter from Maximilianus Transylvanus to the Cardinal of Salzburg giving an account of Magellan's expedition. One of the ships of the expedition, the *Victoria*, completed the first circumnavigation of the world, in what was perhaps the greatest voyage in history. Maximilian was secretary to the Emperor Charles V (Charles I of Spain) who sent out the expedition. The survivors who returned with the *Victoria* were summoned by Charles to his Court, at Valladolid in Spain, and Maximilian says in his letter: 'I have taken care to have everything related to me most exactly by the captain and by the individual sailors who have returned with him.' Maximilian's account, when compared with first-hand accounts by members of the expedition, proves to be far from exact, being garbled in a way which one might expect from a person relying on oral discussions who did not know the geography of the areas traversed or the precise course and events of the expedition. That defect, however, is inseparable from the charm of Maximilian's account, which throws light on Maximilian as a child of his age, in which enlightenment competed with fancy.

What may be described as the classical English translation of Maximilian's letter is that by Mr James Baynes of the British Museum in the Hakluyt Society's volume *The First Voyage Round the World, by Magellan*, edited by Lord Stanley and published in London in 1874.

It is not the purpose of this article to summarise Maximilian's account, but rather to quote and comment on some of its high lights.

Maximilian starts off with a graceful summation of the purpose of the expedition, to find the Spice Islands which were known to the Portuguese but only indirectly to the Spanish: 'One of those five ships has lately returned which Caesar [the Emperor] sent in former years, when he was living at Saragossa, to a strange, and for so many ages, an unknown world, in order to search for the islands where spices grow. For though the Portuguese bring a great quantity of them from the Golden Chersonesus, which we now suppose to be Malacca, yet their own Indies produce nothing but pepper. Other spices, such as cinnamon, cloves, and the nutmeg, which we call muscat, and its covering (mace), which we call muscat flower, are brought to their own Indies from distant islands till now only known by name, and in ships which are fastened together not by iron but by palm leaves. The sails of these ships are round and woven,