



5th Marianas History Conference

ONE Archipelago, Many Stories: Navigating 500 Years of Cross-Cultural Contact

Day 1 – Day 3

Friday, February 19 – Sunday, February 21

Book 2 of 4





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5th Marianas History Conference

Day 2: Saturday, February 20

Pacific Ocean: A 500 Year-Old Word

By Dr. Rafael Rodríguez-Ponga¹

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Abstract: *The word Pacific (“Pacific Sea”) was used for the first time in the 16th century. We can read it in the chronicle written by the Italian Antonio Pigafetta, member of the Magellan & Elcano expedition, and in the last will of Elcano himself. The geographical names Pacific sea and Pacific Ocean have been used together with South Sea and South Seas.*

The word Pacific was adapted by languages all over the world, even in the Pacific Ocean, such as Chamorro, Hawaiian, Samoan or Tagalog. It became not only the name of the sea or the ocean, but also the general name for the region: Pacific islands, Pacific languages, Asia-Pacific...

Pacific means ‘peaceful’, and comes from Latin pacificus, from pax, pacis ‘peace’.

In the Magellan & Elcano expedition, some other geographical names were created, such as Strait of Magellan and Ladrone Islands. This last name was referred to the Mariana Islands, but their inhabitants were called Chamorros with the meaning of ‘friends’, in the 16th century.

Keywords: First Round-the-World Tour. Magellan. Elcano. Pacific Ocean. Latin. Spanish language.

The word *Pacific*, in the sense we use it for the Pacific Ocean, was created in the 16th century, five centuries ago.

This paper has the purpose of giving answers to questions such as what the word *Pacific* means. Where does it come from? How was coined as the name of the ocean?

First of all, I would like to stress that the 2021 Marianas History Conference was held in order to commemorate the fifth centennial of the First Round-the-World Tour (1519-1522).

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It is important to take into consideration that the First Round-the-World Tour took place in the Renaissance, a time that combined the recovery of Roman culture and Latin – a classical language – with the appearance of the first grammar of a modern language, Spanish². Throughout Europe, Latin was the language of academia, science, universities, international relations and the Church, but vernacular languages were also used in literature, administration and trade (Gómez-Lauger & Escudero, 2020).

The crew of the expedition – led by Ferdinand Magellan and Juan Sebastián de Elcano – was composed of seamen that came from several countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Great Britain, Ireland, India, Malaysia... Altogether, they were able to speak more than thirty languages, as we can deduct from the records we have about their geographical origin and families (Rodríguez-Ponga, 2017). With such a linguistic diversity, Latin, along with Spanish, served as the vehicular languages of the expedition (Rodríguez-Ponga, 2021). We will see how Latin could have had an influence in the name of the ocean.

It is very important to explain that the members of the expedition gave names to different landforms all over the world, wherever they were not able to know the name already given by their inhabitants. Thus, when the names were unknown, they decided to create new toponyms.

Pacific was the name given to this ocean during this voyage, the First Round-the-World Tour. Indeed, in November 1520, the ships led by Magellan entered this huge ocean. After sailing through the Atlantic Ocean, they passed through what they called *Strait of Magellan*, in South America, and decided to sail the new ocean, from East to West, in an area totally unknown for Europeans.

An Italian member of the crew, Antonio Pigafetta, wrote the best-known chronicle of the expedition. He described the new ocean as follows:

Wednesday, the twenty-eighth of November, 1520, we came forth out of the said strait, and entered into the Pacific sea. [...] During those three months and twenty days we went in an open sea, we ran fully four thousand leagues in the Pacific sea. This was well named *Pacific*, for during this same time we met with no storm (Lord of Aldekley, 1874, págs. 64-65).

² The first grammar of a modern language was published in 1492 in Spain. It was written, by Antonio de Nebrija, with the title *Gramática de la lengua castellana* “Grammar of the Castilian Language”.

The English translation I am using is very clear: the name of the sea or the ocean, given in 1520, was *Pacific* (Lord of Aldekley, 1874).

South Sea or Pacific

It must be remembered that, some years before, another Spanish explorer, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, reached the beaches of the sea he was looking for. It happened in the American coast of the ocean, coming from the Caribbean Sea. He had supposed that an ocean existed in the other side of the American continent and decided to go and look for it. He gave it the name of *South Sea*, because he arrived at the southern coast of Panama, a country in Central America, in 1513. Since then, the name *South Sea* (or, in plural, the *South Seas*) has lasted for centuries.

In consequence, Magellan, Elcano and the crew had already a name for the sea they were sailing, South Sea since 1513, but they decided to give it a new name: *Pacific*, in 1520.

Pacific is the translation into English. However, what language did it appear in, for the first time? Maybe Spanish?

Although Spain organized and financed the expedition, it had members from very different countries and languages, as I have said before. What was the common language used by an Italian like Pigafetta, a Portuguese like Magellan and a Spaniard like Elcano, and some other coming from different countries? It was really an international expedition!

For those who had studied and had some formal education in European institutions, the common language used to be Latin. Most probably, the ocean was first named *Pacificus* ‘peaceful’, in Latin language. Of course, the crew, mainly Spanish seamen, would have said, immediately, *Pacífico*.

In 1522, with Elcano as Captain General, they arrived back to Seville, in southern Spain³. They knew they were the first men able to achieve the First Round-the-World Tour. Pigafetta was one of the 18 men who managed to return to Spain.

The Pigafetta’s chronicle had several versions after 1522: one copy was given to the King of Spain, in Spanish we suppose (but unfortunately, it was lost); another copy was sent to the

³ Magellan died in the Philippines in 1521. He failed to go around the world. The Captain General of the First Round-the-World Tour was Elcano.

King of France, in French; and another copy was written in Italian. Nowadays, we have very good editions (Pigafetta, 1985) (Pigafetta, 2019) (Pigafetta, 2020).

So, the word *Pacific* was soon used in several languages, traveling in different countries of Europe, in the 16th century.

On the other hand, in the last will of Elcano, in 1526, we can read⁴:

En la nao Victoria en el mar Pacífico, a un grado de la línea equinoccial, a veintiséis días del mes de julio, año del Señor mil y quinientos y veintiséis, en presencia de mí, Íñigo Ortes de Perea, contador de la dicha nao [...]

‘In the ship Victoria in the Pacific Sea, to a degree of the equinoctial line, to twenty-six days of the month of July, year of the Lord one thousand and five hundred and twenty-six, in the presence of me, Íñigo Ortes de Perea, accountant of the mentioned ship [...]’.

As we can see, Elcano and Pigafetta, in the same years, were using the word. I think they loved it, because they were together with Magellan the creators of the word. The three of them, with other Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians and so on, each one with their own origin, vernacular language and cultural level.

Etymology

The Latin adjective *pacificus* comes from the Latin noun *pax*, *pacis* with the meaning of ‘peace’, and the suffix *-ficus*, from *facio*, *facere* ‘to do, to make’. Therefore, *pacificus* (feminine *pacifica*, neuter *pacificum*) means ‘peaceful, calm, tranquil, conciliatory’.

The word was used not only in Latin, but also in several European vernacular languages. Already in the 13th century, it was used in Castilian Spanish, as we can read in the poems by Gonzalo de Berceo, who wrote *pacífico*:

*Omne era pacífico, non amava contienda*⁵ ‘the man was peaceful, he did not love strife [fight]’.

Therefore, it was a well-known word in the European Middle Ages.

⁴ I have read the manuscript in “[Documentos sobre Juan Sebastián Elcano: testamento y otros instrumentos relativos a su familia](#),” p. 17.. Archivo General de Indias (Sevilla), PATRONATO, 38, R.1.

⁵ [Diccionario Histórico de la Lengua Española \(1960-1996\)](#), s.v. *pacífico*: c1255 BERCEO Mil. (Clás. Cast. XLIV) v. 705d.

The sea was called *Pacific* because it was a ‘calm sea’ during the expedition. The historian José Luis Comellas studied the meteorological conditions they had in 1520 and 1521, and concluded that they had an extraordinary situation of good weather while sailing the ocean, so they did not have to face specific phenomena that would have put them in serious difficulty (Comellas, 2019).

Maps

The word for the ocean was created in 1520, but it took more than forty years to appear reflected on printed maps. In the second half of the 16th century, books and maps printed in different places of Europe included the new name of the ocean, mainly in Latin.

In 1562, the Spanish cartographer Diego Gutiérrez wrote *Mare Pacificum* on his map *Americae Sive Quartae orbis Partis Nova*⁶. It is very interesting to note that he used the name *Mar del Sur* (Spanish for ‘South Sea’), for the Northern area of the ocean, but *Mare Magellanicum sive Pacificum* (Latin for ‘Magellanic Sea or Pacific’), for the Southern area. According to the geographer José María Moreno, “it could be the first time that the name appears, in Latin, in the 16th century”⁷.

On the other hand, the main atlas was *Teatrum Orbis Terrarum*, edited by the Belgian cartographer and geographer Abraham Ortelius. It had several editions, in several languages, with maps prepared by different cartographers.

It included the map *Maris Pacifici (quod vulgo Mar del Zur)* (Latin for ‘Pacific Sea, for the people South Sea’), in 1589. It is considered “the first dedicated map of the Pacific to be printed”⁸, although the name was already used.

The same Diego Gutiérrez designed one of the maps of America for Ortelius. There, we can see *Mar del Zur Hispanis Mare Pacificum* (Latin for ‘South Sea for the Spanish, Pacific Sea’). Both toponyms are synonyms and refer to the sea between the American continent and New Guinea (Martín Merás, 1993, págs. 127-128). In the same atlas, there is a map of South America (*America Meridionalis*), prepared by the cartographer Jerónimo de Chaves, where we

⁶ [*Americae Sive Quartae Orbis Partis Nova Et Exactissima Descriptio*](#). July 24, 2021

⁷ Personal email by José María Moreno, from Museo Naval, Madrid. March 26, 2021.

⁸ [*Maris Pacifici*](#). July 24, 2021.

can read *Mar del Zur quod et Mare Pacificum* (Martín Merás, 1993, págs. 129-130). Again, they wrote the Spanish name (Mar del Sur) and the Latin one (Pacificum).

At the end of the century, in 1597, in another atlas, we see *Pacificum Mare* together with *Mare Australis* (Latin for ‘South Sea’) in the map (planisphere) drawn by João Batista Lavanha and Luis Teixeira (S.A. de Promoción y Ediciones, 1990, pág. 72).

Diffusion of the Word

From Latin, the word *pacificus* evolved into several languages.

In Spanish, as we have seen before, the word *pacífico* exists since at least the 13th century, with the sense of ‘peaceful person’. In the 16th century, it added the new meaning referred to the Pacific Ocean. Since the 18th century, *Océano Pacífico* is the most common name for our ocean, although *Mar del Sur* or *Mares del Sur* have not disappeared.

In French, the word *pacifique* existed since the 14th and 15th centuries with the meaning of ‘peaceful person’. Around 1550 it was first used for *mer Pacifique* ‘Pacific Sea’ and it appears as *océan Pacifique* ‘Pacific Ocean’ in 1765 (Dauzat, Dubois, & Mitterand, 1971, pág. 522). In the 18th century, the names were *Mers du Sud* ‘South Seas’, *Mer Pacifique* ‘Pacific Sea’ and *Gran Océan* ‘Big Ocean’. Grégoire-Louis Domeny de Rienzi invented the name *Océanie* (*Oceania*) in 1836, for the islands of the Pacific as a whole (Mohamed-Gaillard, 2015, pág. 33).

From French, the word came into English as *pacific*, with the original meaning of ‘making or tending to peace’, in the 16th century. Afterwards, it has been used for *Pacific Ocean* since the 17th century, after the Magellan expedition. The name of the ocean may have come into English from French *pacifique* or from Latin *Mare Pacificum* (Onions (ed.), Friedrichsen (ed.), & Burchfield (ed.), 1966, pág. 639). Anyway, the reason is very clear in the dictionaries, without any doubt:

Adj. Calm, tranquil. Applied to the ocean between Asia and America, because found peaceful by its discoverer, Magellan, after weathering Cape Horn. Noun, *Pacific Ocean*. (MacDonald (ed.), 1964, pág. 444)

Therefore, the word *pacific* has now two meanings: 1. Peaceful, calm. 2. Related to the ocean between Asia and the Americas.

The second meaning can be used as a noun, as a toponym (*the Pacific*) and as an adjective. It has many possibilities, referred not only to the sea itself, but also to everything that revolves

around it, like the countries and islands and their people, products and events. Then, we can say *Pacific countries, Pacific coast, Pacific states, Pacific islands, Asia-Pacific, Pacific time, Pacific Rim, Pacific people, Pacific languages, Pacific barracuda, Pacific cod, Pacific bonito, Pacific sardine, Pacific troops, Pacific fleet, Pacific Squadron, Pacific War...*

Suddenly, we have come up to a surprising and apparent contradiction: *Pacific War*. Etymologically, it should mean ‘peaceful war’! However, we understand very clearly in the new sense that *Pacific* is not any more ‘peaceful’ or ‘calm’, but the word related to the ocean.

In other European languages, we find the same word: in Portuguese *Oceano Pacífico* and in Italian *Oceano Pacifico*. In both languages, the name was introduced in the 16th century.

Maybe because of the influence from English, the word came into German *Pazifik, Pazifische Ozean*; Dutch *Pacifische Oceaan*; Polish *Pacyfik*; and so on.

It is important to realize that not only European languages accepted the name *Pacific*. Even the Pacific languages accepted it!

In Chamorro, we rediscover the original meaning of the word, as we can read in *The Official Chamorro-English Dictionary; Ufisiât Na Diksionârión Chamorro-Engles*: “*pasifiku*, n. or adj. Peace or peaceful. *Si Francisco pasifiku na taotao*, Francisco is a peaceful man” (Aguon (dir.), 2009, pág. 314). It comes from Spanish.

Personally, I registered both meanings (‘peaceful’ and ‘Pacific Ocean’) during my stay in the Marianas in 1985⁹ (Rodríguez-Ponga, 2002, pág. 517).

I have to admit that I do not know if there was a word for the Pacific Ocean in the old Chamorro language. Probably, the ancient inhabitants of the Mariana Islands did not have a proper name for it. They would have called it simply *i tasi* ‘the sea’.

In Ponapean language, we can read *Pacific*, and *Dekehrn Pacific* for ‘Pacific Islands’ (Rehg & Sohl, 1979, pág. 244), from English.

In Polynesian languages, we have *Pasefika* in Samoan (Allardice, 1985, pág. 166), *Pasifiki* in Tongan (Churchward, 1959, pág. 726), *Pākīpika* or *Fatifika* in Hawaiian, as in *Moana Pākīpika* ‘Pacific Ocean’ (Pukui & Elbert, 1986, pág. 306 & 495).

⁹With my wife Carmen-Paloma Albalá.

In Asia, we find in Malay *Pasifik*, as an adjective in *kepulauan Pasifik* ‘Pacific islands’, and as a noun in *Lautan Pasifik* ‘Pacific Ocean’ (Jones & Prentice (ed. y dir.), 1992, pág. 1101). It comes from English.

In Philippine languages, it is a loanword from Spanish, for example, in Tagalog *Pasípiók* (English, 1977, pág. 705), and in Cebuano, where we have again both meanings of the word: *pasífiko* ‘peaceful, conciliatory’ and *sa Pasípiko* ‘the Pacific’ (Cabonce, 1983, pág. 698).

If we look into Wikipedia, we will find the evolution of the word *Pacific* in many other languages all around the world, such as another Malayo-Polynesian language, Malagasy *Ôseana Pasifik*. Even in Africa, for example, in some Bantu languages such as Swahili *Pasifiki*, Lingala *Pasífiki*, and Yoruba *Pàsífíkì*.

Final Comments

The name given by Magellan, Pigafetta and Elcano, 500 years ago, has been an international success.

It is a very positive name: Pacific, peaceful. It does not matter if there are typhoons and other tropical storms; or terrible conflicts like the Second World War... The name of the ocean and the region is *Pacific*.

Another positive name created in the 16th century is *Chamorro*, now written *CHamoru* by many, mainly on Guam. The word *Chamorro* was adopted in Spanish in the year 1565, because the islanders of Guam shouted “*chamurre, chamurre*” when the Spanish ships arrived. *Chamurre* had the meaning of ‘friends’, as the chronicle and the vocabulary written that year said without any doubt (Rodríguez-Ponga, 2013). In addition, nobody is wrong when arriving to an island and looking to the islanders as enemies or friends. Even though Magellan gave the islands the name of *Islas de los Ladrones, Ladrone Islands*, their inhabitants were called *Chamorros*.

Therefore, since the 16th century we have names, in many languages, not only for the *Pacific* Ocean, but also for the islanders known as *Chamorros*, Friends.

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