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The Wreck of the 'Apostle' *San Bartolomé* (1597)

On 18 October 1597, an armada under the command of the *Adelantado de Castilla*, Martín de Padilla, set sail from the port of La Coruña (figure 1, A). Its objective was to seize Falmouth and to destroy the English fleet on its return from the Azores.¹ However, a storm dispersed the fleet when it was only 27 leagues

(171 kilometres) from its destination.² The majority of the vessels returned to the ports of La Coruña and Ferrol in Spain during the following days and only a few ships were lost.³

1 Fernández Duro, *Armada española v. III*, 166; Graham, *Spanish Armadas*, 235–36; Tenace, 'Strategy of Reaction', 875.

2 The nautical league used by the Spanish in the sixteenth century was the league of 17.5 per latitudinal degree that was equal to 7,558.57 Spanish *varas* (6,349.2 metres). Serrano Mangas, *Tres credos*, 109–11. Archivo General de Simancas (hereafter AGS) Guerra y Marina (hereafter GYM) Legajo (hereafter Leg.) 491 Documento (hereafter doc.) 73

3 Fernández Duro, *Armada española v. III*, 167.

One of those ships was the *San Bartolomé*, a 900-ton galleon built in Deusto, on the Ría de Bilbao (Biscay, Spain), by Agustín de Ojeda between 1589 and 1591.⁴ This ship belonged to a series of newly designed galleons, known as the ‘Twelve Apostles’, built after the failure of the 1588 expedition. In 1596 the *San Bartolomé*, along with three other ‘apostles’, took part in the armada sent to seize Brest,⁵ but a storm scattered the fleet near Cape Finisterre and sank 25 ships, including the ‘apostle’ *Santiago*.⁶ The following year another armada was prepared to invade England and the *San Bartolomé* was chosen to transport 50,000 ducats provided by the king because it was one of the strongest ships of the fleet.⁷

The loss of the *San Bartolomé* has been associated with three different locations. The presence of Spanish type lead ingots on the wreck of a sixteenth-century armed vessel found in the Bartholomew Ledges in St Mary’s Sound in the Isles of Scilly was tentatively identified as the *San Bartolomé*.⁸ However, the archaeological evidence indicates that ‘the vessel is most likely a late sixteenth-century Spanish or Spanish Netherlands armed cargo

vessel.’ In Spain a letter written by Philip II, in which he regretted the loss of the galleon in the inlet of Viveiro in Galicia, was used to locate the wreck there.⁹ Monson’s also mentions Biscay as the shipwreck’s possible location.¹⁰ This discrepancy about the location of the shipwreck has now been decisively solved through the examination of a series of unpublished documents held in the General Archive of Simancas.

These documents describe how the galleon missed the entrance to the port of Ferrol on its return from Falmouth because it had all its masts broken due to the storm, and therefore, was unable to tack when it was only 5–6 leagues (32–38 kilometres) from La Coruña (figure 1.B).¹¹ The *San Bartolomé* continued leeward until the weather improved near the Sisargas Islands (figure 1.C), and the currents drove the galleon back to the north-east (figure 1.D). Then, the western wind began to blow and, as it strengthened, forced the galleon into the inlet of Viveiro where it arrived in the first week of November badly damaged (figure 1.E).¹² Its arrival was a relief for the *Adelantado* who immediately ordered the king’s money to be unloaded and transported to La Coruña, and sent sailors and pilots to bring back the galleon.¹³ An official arrived at Viveiro on 10 November to unload the money, but Pedro de Guevara

4 AGS GYM Leg. 253 doc. 39.

5 AGS GYM Leg. 459 doc. 73. The ‘apostles’ which took part in the 1596 Armada were the *San Pablo* (1,200 tons), *San Pedro* (1,200 tons), *San Bartolomé* (900 tons), and *Santiago* (900 tons); García, ‘Forgotten Armada’, 56; Kamen, *Philip of Spain*, 308; Tenace, ‘Strategy of Reaction’, 866.

6 AGS GYM Leg. 481 doc. 3.

7 AGS GYM Leg. 490 doc. 431; AGS GYM Leg. 491 doc. 138. The *San Bartolomé* and the Ragusan *Santiago de Galicia* were chosen to transport 120,000 ducats.

8 Bartholomew Ledges (NHLE) <http://list.historicengland.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1000066> (accessed 13 Sep. 2015). Other finds included Iberian-type anchors and Spanish wrought-iron breechloading swivel guns similar to those found in sixteenth-century Spanish shipwrecks in the New World. Six silver coins were also found: one half-reale of Emperor Charles (1521–5), four two reale coins of Ferdinand and Isabella (1474–1504), and a thaler of 1555. Larn, *Shipwreck Index*, vol. 1, section 3.

9 Frías, ‘Algunas noticias’, 89–90; San Claudio, ‘Carta arqueológica’, 37; Abilleira, ‘El San Bartolomé’, 62. This letter is mentioned by the XVIII Duque de Frías in an article published in 1970.

10 Monson, *Naval Tracts*, 73; According to Monson, the *San Bartolomé* sank off the coast of Biscay in 1597 when returning from Falmouth with the *Adelantado* although he does not provide the exact location of the wreck.

11 AGS GYM Leg. 491 doc. 138; AGS GYM Leg. 492 doc. 79.

12 AGS GYM Leg. 492 doc. 79. The captain of infantry Pedro de Guevara, who was on board the *San Bartolomé*, describes the journey of the galleon since it missed the port of Ferrol until its arrival to the inlet of Viveiro, where he disembarked with 80 soldiers, 60 of whom were sick.

13 AGS GYM Leg. 491 doc. 136.

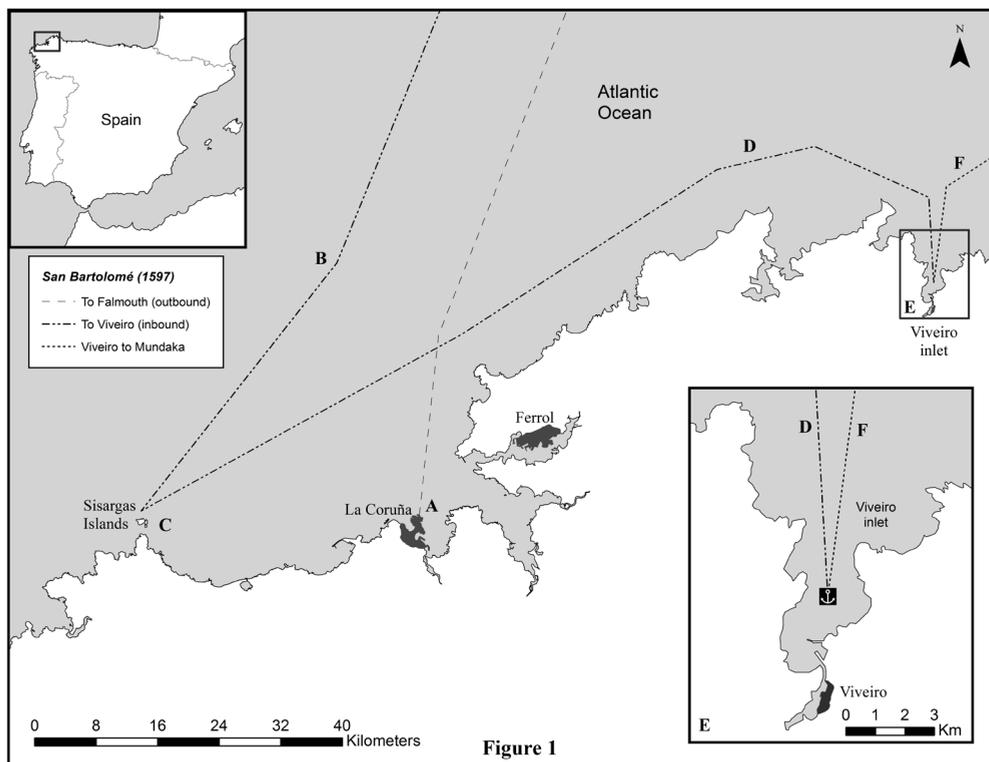


Figure 1 *San Bartolomé's journey from La Coruña to Viveiro*

recommended him to wait until the next morning because the galleon lay at anchor half a league (3 kilometres) from the town and it was impossible to complete the task that day (figure 1.E). The galleon was riding on four anchors in the safest area of the inlet and the weather was so pleasant that nobody could imagine what would happen that night. At eight o'clock in the evening the wind began to blow from the south and by midnight its increasing strength broke the cables of the four anchors, pushing the galleon out of the inlet into the ocean (figure 1.F).¹⁴

The *San Bartolomé* seemed to vanish until a few days later when the purveyor of Biscay, Baltasar de Lezama, informed the king about its sinking in Mundaka, a town 398 kilometres to the east of Viveiro (figure 2.A).¹⁵ In his letter to the king, Lezama included a vivid account of the wrecking written by the mayor of Bermeo, Martín de Vaquera, who first tried to help the

galleon and witnessed the tragedy. According to Vaquera, the galleon appeared off Cape Machichaco on 13 November at two o'clock in the afternoon, and began to fire its artillery for help (figure 2.B). He immediately left the port of Bermeo with five pinnaces to help the galleon, but the rough sea prevented any rescue attempt and had to return to port. The galleon continued sailing until it ran aground on the extremity of the sandbank of Mundaka, opposite the town's church (figure 2.C).

When Vaquera arrived at Mundaka by land with the sailors of the pinnaces, there was nothing to be done for the galleon apart from trying to rescue its crew. He urged the villagers and public servants to leave the port with some boats to rescue the galleon's crew but only one pinnace followed his orders and managed to pick up 40 people from the water. Vaquera believed that if two or three more pinnaces had obeyed him, more than 100 people could have been saved. For this reason, he recommended in his letter for Lezama to punish those villagers

14 AGS GYM Leg. 492 doc. 79.

15 AGS GYM Leg. 491 doc. 60.

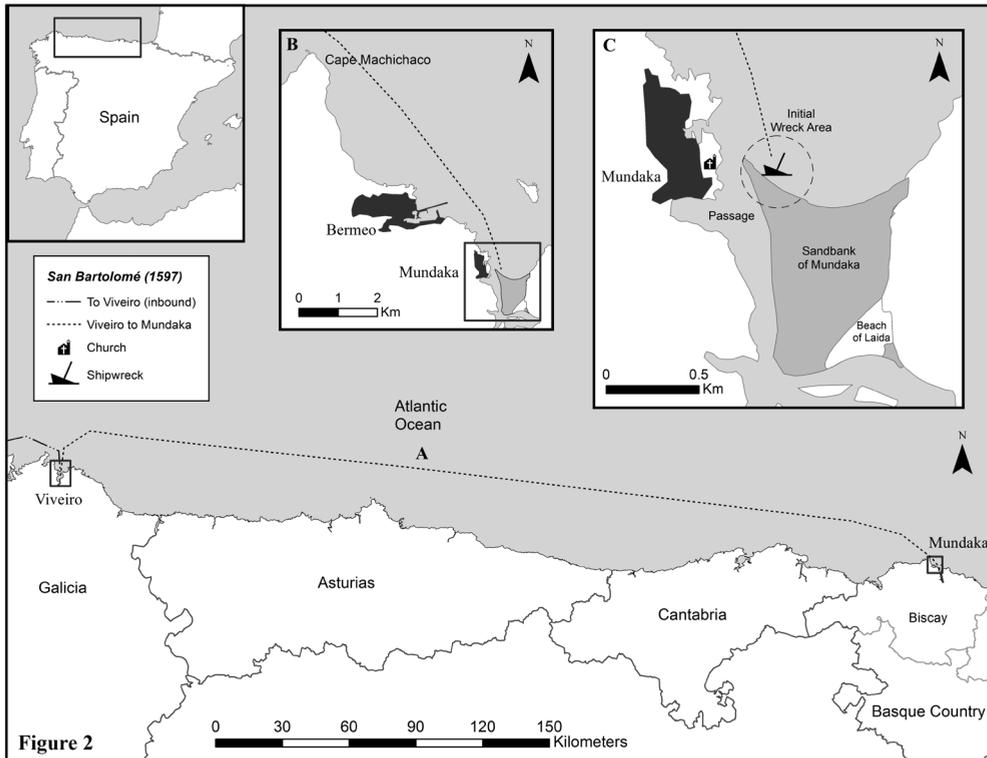


Figure 2 *San Bartolomé's journey from Viveiro to Mundaka*

who disobeyed him. The ship's master, one of the survivors, identified the vessel as the *San Bartolomé*, one of the galleons built on the Ría de Bilbao, which had lost all its anchors in Viveiro and carried on board 50,000 ducats and 27 pieces of artillery. That night, the huge swell broke the galleon's hull and a large part, including the lower deck, drifted towards Laida (figure 2.C), where Vaquera sent a dozen armed men to prevent any looting during the night in case the money was found.¹⁶

Lezama arrived at Mundaka on 15 November to organize the salvage of the shipwreck and to investigate what had been recovered from the galleon without the permission of the authorities. Many chests and boxes reached the shore and broke against the rocks or were opened by the villagers. Silverware, tablecloths, napkins and other small objects that probably belonged to a private individual were found in one of the boxes. However, before collecting the

valuables, Lezama buried over 280 bodies that washed ashore. Only 40 people were rescued out of the 400 that the ship's master declared to be on board. The chest with three locks that contained the king's money was found empty, missing the lid, and damaged on one side, probably due to the impact of a moving cannon during the wrecking. It was impossible to determine the exact amount of money on board the galleon because the officials in charge drowned.¹⁷

The initial salvage recovered 250 hundred-weight of metal fastenings, planking and rigging that Lezama requested for the construction of new galleons in the shipyards of Bilbao. Lezama provided medical assistance for the survivors as the majority were sick and injured, and gave them old clothes recovered from the galleon and new shoes. The English artillery sergeant and Flemish gunners rescued from the galleon also received gold coins to pay for their own expenses. They were soon dispatched in

16 AGS GYM Leg. 491 doc. 329.

17 AGS GYM Leg. 492 doc. 41.

a *patache*,¹⁸ arriving from Blavet (Port-Louis, France) that was also supplied with rigging rescued from the galleon, and some food.¹⁹

The English sergeant declared that there were 20 bronze cannon onboard the galleon, but the location of the wreck in the middle of the sandbank, very exposed to the swell, prevented the recovery of large objects such as the ordnance.²⁰ The salvage continued with great difficulty until 24 December. Due to the poor weather conditions only three cannon were recovered. In fact Lezama thought that nothing valuable could be rescued until the next spring. He also had to ask the king for 500 ducats to pay for the salvage expenditures, the assistance provided to the survivors, and any other future expenses.²¹ The inventories of the material salvaged from the galleon and sent to the king included three cannons, several hundredweight of iron nails, wooden and metal sheaves, deadeyes with their metal straps, sails, bonnets, barrels, pipes, cordage, cables, masts fragments, chains, wax blocks and harquebuses. Personal belongings such as porcelain, silverware, cups and different types of cloth, including German tablecloths and napkins, also appeared in the inventories although there was no mention of the king's money.²²

The unusual circumstances surrounding *San Bartolomé's* loss, resulted in the misunderstanding over its final location. However, the fact that the galleon was one of the strongest ships of the armada and was therefore selected to transport part of the king's money, contributed indirectly to the production of an abundant collection of documents about its loss and salvage attempts. The examination of these documents allows for the reconstruction of events that led to the

loss of the galleon. The new data provided by the documents found in Simancas conclusively confirms that the *San Bartolomé* sank in the sandbank of Mundaka on 13 November 1597, and dismisses other hypotheses such as Viveiro or Bartholomew Ledges.

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18 O'Scanlan, *Diccionario Marítimo*, 407. *Patache* was a two-masted vessel specialized in dispatch carrying and communication within the fleet, exploring the coast, and guarding ports' entrances.

19 AGS GYM Leg. 492 doc. 41.

20 Ibid.

21 AGS GYM Leg. 511 doc. 112; AGS GYM Leg. 511 doc. 113.

22 AGS GYM Leg. 511 doc. 111; AGS GYM Leg. 511 doc. 113; AGS GYM Leg. 511 doc. 115.