A PASSAGE TO THE WORLD
The Strait of Magellan during the Age of its Discovery

Mauricio ONETTO PAVEZ
2020 will be the 500th anniversary of the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan that traversed the sea passage that now carries his name. It was an adventure that became part of the first circumnavigation of the world.

Ever since, the way we think about and see the world – and even the universe – has changed. The Straits of Magellan were the final piece in a puzzle that was yet to be completed, and whose resolution enabled a series of global processes to evolve, such as the movement of people, the establishment of commercial routes, and the modernization of science, among other things. This book offers a new perspective for the anniversary by means of an updated review of the key event, based on original scientific research into some of the consequences of negotiating the Straits for the first time. The focus is to concentrate on the geopolitical impact, taking into consideration the diverse scales involved: namely the global scale of the world, the continental scale of the Americas, and the local context of Chile. The text is aimed at a general reading public so that both young and old can be inspired to take an interest in a small building block in the construction of our modern world, of the America and of Chile, with this attractive book whose text is illustrated with images especially chosen for it.
A PASSAGE TO THE WORLD
The Strait of Magellan during the Age of its Discovery

Mauricio ONETTO PAVEZ
translated by Natascha SCOTT-STOKES

Illustrator/Electronic Image Restoration: Nicolas Sykas
Summary

Introduction .................................................................................................................................11
1 - The voyage of Ferdinand Magellan and Sebastien Elcano (1518-1522) ........................13
2 - The news that changed the world.....................................................................................23
3 - A new awareness of the world ans its history after the discovery of the Straits of Magellan .............................................................. 29
4 - The Magellan Straits : a territorial conduit ................................................................. 37
5 - The Straits and «the secrets of the Earth» ......................................................................45
6 - The conquest of Chile : an excuse to claim the Straits of Magellan...............................51
7 - The earliest knowledge of the Straits of Magellan : shipwrecks and exploratory voyages ......................................................................................................................... 59
8 - The Straits as a solution for the Chilean War ................................................................. 67
9 - A geopolitical problem : pirates ans english, french and dutch corsairs .................. 75
10 - The Straits as a defining factor in the perception of Chile............................................ 83
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 90
Bibliography ...............................................................................................................................92

This book is dedicated to four travellers starting their journey, Almendra, Sue, Santino and Constantin.
Introduction

Founded on my academic research, this book seeks to offer a new perspective on the many possible historical interpretations of the geopolitical importance of the Straits of Magellan throughout the 16th century, and will place their relevance within a global and continental American context, as well as highlight their role in the establishment of Chile's national territory.

In light of the imminent commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the official discovery of the Straits of Magellan – at least as far as the rest of the world was concerned in that era – the intention here is to provide a foundation on which to re-consider this ‘world-passage’ from a historical point of view. The significance of the discovery of the Straits of Magellan in 1520, and the subsequent development of this geographical sea passage during the 16th century, need to be better understood and valued in the teaching of history, not least because they were fundamental to the earliest pioneer settlements and the emergence of globalization, which developed after that date and endures to the present.

An understanding of how this world-passage was viewed, coveted and represented will enable students of history to consider new questions in their learning process and will help to expand the way we think about history beyond wars, key events and personalities, to include other perspectives worth analysing that project the creation of real and imagined spaces, inspire movement around the world, and impact on the human imagination.

By the same token, thinking about connecting spaces, such as the Straits, helps us understand that, from the beginning, national histories such as
Chile’s were always connected to global considerations, which provides us with a richer and more complex understanding of the past, replacing a simplistic localised view as the only possible horizon, with a broader vision of the past that obliges us to see it within the context of the constant tension between other people, places and agendas, just as in our present reality today.

In other words, this work intends to show how the history of a specific place like the Magellan Straits is linked to global history, with connections to distinct continents and people, and is not only relevant to the local national history of Chile or the regional history of the towns and people of the southern tip of South America.

This book will therefore demonstrate the ways in which the specific history of Chile from the 16th century onwards was tied to dynamics that went well beyond the country’s borders – which were not the same in that era, and evolved according to a variety of events – and directly impacted on its social, political and territorial evolution. The central focus is primarily on geopolitics, specifically on its four constituent dimensions: namely the political, commercial, geographic and imaginary spheres.

Given the above, this text will not concern itself with the socio-cultural consequences of the European discovery of the Straits of Magellan, nor give significant attention to anthropological themes. I am very well aware of the great number of indigenous peoples that already populated the region when the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan traversed the sea passage that now bears his name, as well as of the grave consequences they suffered as a result of all the changes we are about to examine. However, the specific objective of this book is to focus on the geopolitical perspective.

The interpretations offered here are supported and confirmed by a series of cartographic representations. Likewise, historic manuscripts from the era and a current bibliography are presented for those who are inspired to delve further into these topics by exploring the specialist publications available.

A number of individuals and institutions enabled this project to come to fruition, supplying information and enthusiasm, as well as participating in the academic activities tied to the scientific research project on which this text is based.

I acknowledge with thanks assistance provided by the Instituto Français Chile, the Centro Cultural de España, the regional museum in Punta Arenas and LiquenLab.

My deep gratitude goes to Louise Bénat-Tachot, Serge Gruzinski, Andrea Doré, Andrés Vélez, Luz Angela Martínez, Flavia Morello, Paola Grendi, Sandra Ulloa, Ingrid Chaneo, Joaquin Zuleta, Nataniel Álvarez, Marcelo Mayorga and Kassandra Hernández.

By the same token, I would like to thank the Autonomous University of Chile, which has facilitated the publication of this work with funding via its Department of Research and Post-graduate Studies. This publication would not have been possible without it. Grateful acknowledgement is also offered for the role of CONICYT, the institution that provided financing through its Fondecyt start-up project Nr. 11150474, and to GEOPAM for its sponsorship programme for the creation of international networks for academics at the initial stage of research projects.

Finally, I would like to express my friendship and sincere professional admiration for Nicolas Sykas and Sebastián Suter, with whom this handsome publication was created. Without their commitment, rigorous attention to detail and creativity this book would never have been possible.
Chapter 1

The voyage of Ferdinand Magellan and Sebastien Elcano (1518-1522)
Motivated by commercial ambition and territorial rivalry, the ‘discovery’ of the Straits of Magellan in 1520 was the decisive moment of the 16th century, in terms of the colonial expansion initiated by European powers; and although it is true to say the four quarters of the world had already begun to interact, thanks to the ‘appearance’ of America, as the historian Serge Gruzinski has said, it was only once the Straits were discovered that expansion and connectivity reached their apogee and began to operate at every level of the global sphere, and at modern speeds, such as we know today.

Without doubt, those events rearranged the world’s general geopolitical order and the great beneficiaries of the discovery of the Straits of Magellan were the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Spain, to the detriment of Portugal.

The Spanish Court saw itself obliged to back up its new overseas territories with a series of regulatory measures, military pacts and royal provisions, which all caused offence to the Portuguese. After all, they had been the expansionist pioneers and, furthermore, Ferdinand Magellan, who was in part responsible for the ‘discovery,’ was one of their nationals.

As Carmen Bernard and Xavier de Castro have indicated, regarding the knowledge of navigation in the second half of the 15th and the early 16th century, it was the Portuguese who held the advantage over any other European court, due to their technical expertise in ship building and their nautical science.

From the discovery of the Straits onwards, Portugal and Spain, the great colonial powers of the era, were embroiled in diplomatic disputes regarding the terms contained in the 1493 Treaty of Tordesillas, which generated unresolved disagreements that were resolved within a few decades, by the 1529 Treaty of Zaragoza.
The importance of spices and commerce

In relation to expansionist ambitions, the desire to reach the Orient was inspired by the commercialization of spices. However, contrary to what has been taught for decades, their importance was not for preserving food, but rather to provide a combination of sensations, aromas, health benefits, prestige, and elements of fashionable culinary practices with which they were associated.

As Paul Freedman has stated, spices ‘were marvellous and mysterious manifestations of the world’s secrets and miracles,’ and he added that ‘the search for the lands where spices were found was at once an economic endeavour, and part of the medieval desire to discover the earth’s secrets.’

Both Magellan and his associate Christopher de Haro understood the significance of searching out new lands, and to that end petitioned the King of Spain in early 1518 for the necessary permits to travel to the Orient via a new route they had received notice of. The Royal Contract was signed on 22nd March of that same year.
The best-known description of the first circumnavigation of the world was written by Antonio Pigafetta, who once served the Knights of Rhodes. Originally published in Italian, it was quickly translated into many other languages.

His report was completed in 1524 and published in book form by 1536, under the title of Relazioni in torno al primo viaggio di circumnavigazione. Notizia del Mondo Novo con le figure dei paesi scoperti.

His text describes some of his first impressions of the Straits, including the following entry: “We call this stretch the ‘Patagonian Strait,’ in which one finds excellent safe ports, perfect waters, wood – though only of cedar – fish, sardines, shell fish and celery, as well as sweet herbs, and some bitter ones. The vegetation grows in gullies and was all we could find to eat, on many days. I don’t believe a better nor more beautiful sea passage exists anywhere in the world.”

According to the personal secretary to King Charles V, Maximilianus Transylvanus, both navigators proposed to the king that he should send his vessels and navy to ‘that part of the seas in the Orient by descending the other hemisphere,’ an idea the king and his advisors at first thought a ‘most difficult and vain’ prospect. Nevertheless, the expedition was finally authorized. Furthermore, once the Spanish king recognized the tremendous potential of the enterprise, should it succeed, he decided to finance the greater part of it. The remaining expenses were covered by the contacts both petitioners had in Germany and other parts of Europe.

In spite of the resources they were given, it was not easy to put together the expedition because of Magellan’s Portuguese nationality, and it is even believed the King of Portugal himself was involved in boycotting him, despite the fact that he denied this when the voyagers petitioned him for support.

Originally the expedition was composed of 237 individuals from all over Europe, who were installed in five ships: the Victoria, the Concepción, the San Antonio, the Trinidad, and the Santiago. However, the return to Seville on 8th September 1522 was completed by just one ship, the Victoria, carrying 18 surviving crew and Fernando Magellan was not among them. For he had died during a dispute with the natives of the Philippine Island of Cebu, in April 1521.

It was Juan Sebastian Elcano who arrived in charge of the surviving vessel and who was responsible for the commercial profits that resulted. This is why the figure of the navigator became the most important symbol of the feat achieved, and why we see so many illustrations of the vessel Victoria, which became an icon of its time.
Chapter 2

The news that changed the world
In 1522, the personal secretary to King Charles V, Maximilianus Transylvanus, wrote a letter to Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Salzburg in Austria. In the letter, he announced that thanks to the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan, Spain had gained dominion over new lands: the fabled and now real Spice Islands. This was vital news indeed, but even more important was the second piece of information contained in the letter: namely that the expedition had discovered a sea passage to the Orient, unheard of until then, and which we now know as the Straits of Magellan.

Today we know the sea passage through the Straits of Magellan was crucial to navigation and the future of the modern world, not least because its discovery by the Spanish implied a revolutionary change on a global scale. For the first time, all points of the planet could be connected. Maximilianus was well aware of the significance of this, and considered the best strategy for developing the new opportunities it implied for the Spanish Crown was to share the information in the form of political propaganda.
Following this line, he inaugurated global economic and territorial expansionary projects for King Charles V, making sure his propaganda reached all the courts of Europe to make them aware of the great discovery that was going to benefit his king. Of course it was also intended to reach the ears of the Spanish Crown’s various creditors and associates, such as bankers, merchants, mariners, scientists and universities, to motivate them to invest in what might lie beyond the known world.

The Earth becomes one world

In his letter, the royal secretary presents the voyage begun under the leadership of Magellan as the most important in history, not only for being a navigational feat, but also because it established a new delineation of the planet. This was the first expedition that had succeeded in circumnavigating the world, an achievement that went far beyond what had been done by the celebrated mythological seafarers of Antiquity, such as Jason and the Argonauts – a nautical reference since time immemorial - but whose exploits were limited to the Mediterranean.

Transylvanus speculated that the new sea passage would consolidate a new way of perceiving and travelling the world, which was now fully known, both in its geographical dimensions and in terms of its cosmography. The outlines of the globe were now definitively established by means of a new way to traverse it.

Old measurements and uncertain borders

Having said that, Maximilianus’ letter also relates that while Ferdinand Magellan and the merchant Christopher de Haro intuitively understood that existing measurements for the planet were not as definite as believed; they also suspected there may be territories that should be included in the dominions belonging to Spain and not to Portugal. In fact, this was one of the arguments presented to the king, when the navigators petitioned him to sponsor their enterprise. And although their hypothesis, based on knowledge gathered from multiple sources and on their professional experience, failed to entirely convince the court, they did, nevertheless, gain the required permission and financing to initiate their business venture.

Indeed, upon their return from circling the globe, the suppositions of the navigators were confirmed, and previous calculations of the earth’s geography were found to be erroneous and in need of correction.

This meant a break with the cartographic model established by Ptolemy, which had been the defining reference for centuries up to that date, as well as the lodestar for all seafarers.

Claudius Ptolemy

Claudius Ptolemy was born in Egypt and was active during the 2nd Century AD. He was renowned for his work in astronomy, mathematics, chemistry and geography. Furthermore, he was Antiquity’s greatest promoter of the science of astronomy and also composed a treatise on geography that dominated scientific thought for centuries. Among his many works, which included a planetary hypothesis, writings on optics, an astrological treatise called Almagest and work on astronomic phases, his treatise known as Geographia was famous and provided the foundation of geographical thinking up until the 15th century and the day when Christopher Columbus accidentally reached America by following the erroneous maps in his book.

Despite his geographical calibrations needing correction, many of the concepts he introduced in his book are accepted to this day, such as, for example, his coordinates for latitude and longitude.
Chapter 3

A new awareness of the world and its history after the discovery of the Straits of Magellan
The Straits of Magellan not only served as a passage to unite the world, but also as a point of departure for thinking about the globe in its entirety and, by the same token, re-envisioning the world and its commercial potential. A new global consciousness can be detected after the discovery of the Straits.

A new era and history

Both a spatial and a temporal revision resulted from the break with accepted knowledge handed down since Antiquity, which was recalibrated as a result of the expeditions carried out by the likes of Columbus and Vespucci, who paved the way for reaching the new sea passage.

In the process of joining the gaps of the mappa mundi a change also occurred in perceptions of time and our relationship to it, something that was determined by the newly discovered spaces.

Thus, concepts of our past, present and future acquired new definitions, which
The discovery of the Straits of Magellan also impacted on anthropology. The very idea of humanity was transformed. Representations of indigenous populations encountered in various locations were modified, while new ones also arose, such as the case for the Patagonians.

After the mid-16th century, up until the end of the 17th century, cartographic illustrations presented them as people according to their specific characteristics of height and strength, just as they had been described in the first narratives of the expedition led by Magellan.

In this way, it was the key experience of the age that revealed our true reality, which would pave the way to a new earthly paradise. Furthermore, it was in the ‘far away,’ the unknown, that true history would be found.

**New globe, new monsters**

The spatial revision demanded a modification and redefinition of how the images of the world had been interpreted, up to that time. Within this series of paradigmatic changes, came the emergence of the Modern Age, which was characterized by a temporal and spatial aperture towards the new, as opposed to the old. This meant, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has defined it, that the conquest of the world was inspired by the visionary. In this context, for example, there emerged a need during that era to revise how the image of the unknown or other was presented. Transylvanus dealt with this aspect by inverting the paradigm that had prevailed prior to Magellan’s expedition, characterizing the expeditionary enterprises of the Conquest as ‘monstrous’ for being willing to risk their lives, sometimes needlessly, in the name of securing profits, rather than characterizing the unknown cultures as monstrous, as was the custom until then.

This profound change in the idea of...
who the real monsters were and in the concept of ‘monstrosity’ itself was linked to the vast aspect of the objectives of the companies sponsoring the Conquest, and to the impact they had, which was directly related to the new awareness of the world. On the one hand, this idea was expressed in a variety of forms that were neither always aesthetic nor coherent, but which sought to express observations and experiences of the New World; and, on the other hand, it was related to the idea of unlimited synergetic movement at a global level, which was the keynote of an era in which objects and people became linked by personal and collective ambition.

Celestial Globes Gores
Johann Schöner, Strasbourg, 1517

The modern concept of monster is based on a synthesis of ideas of different kinds of monsters, the awareness of interactions between new elements, people and places, and the search to meld all these into a planetary context. Thus we can see that whereby illustrations of monsters in historic cartography were based on the idea that they were created by God for punitive reasons and had unnatural characteristics; modern representations, from the 16th century onwards, display evidence of a profound encounter with the new thinking inspired by the discovery of the Straits of Magellan: a global awareness, travel, profits, investment and risk, and catastrophe.
Chapter 4

The Magellan Straits: a territorial conduit
From the time the Straits of Magellan were first officially traversed in 1520, they established themselves as a global reference point that served to create and reconfigure a variety of territorial notions, including the oceanic and terrestrial. This implied that, once their transit had been experienced, there was a need to not only re-envision the world inserted into an existing geopolitical framework - which was reflected in specific maps - but also to rethink the sea, because this was the first time the Pacific Ocean was recognised in its entirety. It also inspired a new version of the astronomic map.

Thus we can see that from this time onwards, the Straits functioned as a connecting conduit between the natural, geographic and astral world, as understood by mankind.

Revealing of the unknown

During the decades following the discovery of the Straits of Magellan, they became a gateway, in cartographic terms, to delineating the Americas, the Pacific, the realm of Chile, and also imaginary sites, such as Terra Australis. An example illustrating the latter can be seen in the Cosmografia Universal (1555) by the Frenchman Guillaume Le Testu, in which the sea passage is shown as both a gateway and a bridge that could allow for the existence of that unknown land, wild yet fertile, and promising potential wealth.

Le Testu’s work is also revealing because the sequences he presents dispense with scales and transform Terra Australis into a projection of the Americas, both in terms of their territory and in relation to the imaginary. This exemplifies a common practice in the cartography of the day, when such documents mixed knowledge from a range of disciplines, including aesthetic information about territories, which was sometimes based on actual experience, and sometimes just based on the imagination. After all, France then had no right to enter the territory, much less to draw maps of a zone that belonged to the Spanish Crown.

In this sense, one has to remember that representations of certain regions – especially of those one did not own – were based on the speculated image current at the time.
The scholar Jean-Marc Besse defines the cosmography of the 16th century as “a vision of the earth and the sky as one whole, an intellectual concept that sought to represent planet Earth from the sky down, whereby the surface of the earth reflected the categories and components of astronomy.” He also suggests that cosmography “is the space created for an encounter between the descriptive knowledge of geography and the analytical instruments of rhetoric.”

A New World through the Straits

Clearly, the discovery of the Straits was as important as that of the Americas in creating the foundation on which to construct territorial notions of the New World, not only from a geopolitical point of view – in relation to the connectivity of its territories with the rest of the world – but also in terms of the symbolic importance of its spaces.

Foremost, one can say that the Americas represented the awaited confirmation of the belief that a sea passage properly capable of connecting the ‘four parts of the world’ really existed. In fact, a number of people, such as cartographers, mariners, mathematicians and politicians – among them Magellan himself – were already convinced of the existence of the Straits prior to their discovery. We can see this in a variety of maps of the age, in which the southern region of the American continent facing the Pacific Ocean has already been drawn, which supports the hypothesis. This is even clearer after the maps produced by Vespucci, in global maps produced by the likes of Waldseemüller in 1507, or by the Shöninger globe of 1515. Nevertheless, all those images and beliefs could only gain legitimacy after they were demonstrably confirmed by nautical experience.

Symbolically, the Straits of Magellan extended the riches and paradisiacal landscapes imagined in the New World to reach as far as the extreme south of the American Continent. The terra incognita one hoped to encounter beyond the Straits magnified the initial ambitions of the European courts, and allowed them to fill in the territorial gaps of places they knew existed, but had yet to explore.
The map of the Pacific Ocean’s ports commissioned by King Charles V and produced by the Genoan cartographer Battista Agnese in Venice, in 1544, shows the Straits as the main entrance port to the Pacific and, furthermore, as one of the key geographical points of most strategic relevance to the Americas, at the expense of other territories, such as Chile, which is not even outlined on the map.

Taking the above into account, we can see the Straits constituted a fundamental point for projecting images of the American continent and also territories, such as Chile. Likewise, we can infer the geopolitical priorities that are reflected in the significant gaps and silences in this cartographic representation.
Chapter 5

The Straits and “the secrets of the Earth”
The desire to possess the Straits of Magellan was not only inspired by the idea of venturing into the unknown, but also associated with the idea of a secret world, which was presented in all kinds of ways. In fact, as has already been mentioned, Magellan’s expedition itself was the source of ‘secret whispers’ of the existence of a sea passage via the southern tip of the Americas, which could provide a route to the Orient. This can serve as an example of the probable existence of a series of navigational secrets that might have circulated in that era; and it also allows us to see how fomenting a secret was a way of manipulating and inspiring investors to sponsor commercial expansion and the Conquest of the Americas.

Thanks to the discovery of the Straits of Magellan, the European powers were able to develop a geopolitical policy that delineated the terrain of secrets. That is to say, they could formulate state policy on how to manage destinations associated with secrets of the world, its riches and desirable contents which, in turn, defined ideas of the unknown or new dimensions to be conquered and possessed, and where anything might still be possible.

Looked at in this way, the discovery of certain places not only held obvious economic importance – not least for the spice trade – but also impacted on the ambition already born in the medieval era, to discover the secrets of the earth.

The territoriality of the secret was an almost immediate response to the definitive circumnavigation of the world, made possible by the confirmation of the existence of the supposed sea passage. It also extended the imaginary boundary of the unknown world and acted as an aperture, which could have led anywhere, but which, in time, was principally focused on the idea of terra australis. Furthermore, the territoriality of the secret served to acknowledge that the discovery of the world had been completed and that intangible dreams could inspire infinite ways to traverse it, confirming the value of the enterprise, and also the extremely rapid growth in concrete knowledge of how to circumnavigate the globe.

Thus, the territoriality of the secret was both a legitimate hypothetical and cartographic justification by which to speculate about spaces with a view to justifying commercial enterprises and the Conquest. In the words of Jean-Marc Besse, at that juncture, ‘the unknown and the known acquired ontological and epistemological value in equal measure.’
Geopolitical ambition based on speculation

The search to discover the world’s secrets was a geopolitical policy, not least for those territories that were yet to be claimed, where tales of riches had not yet been disproved, and where speculation was unlimited. In the case of the Straits of Magellan, they served as the aperture to the unknown world and also as the gates to the territorial repository of secrets. This image endured throughout the 16th century, in part due to the propagation of myths and fantasies of cities of gold – such as the City of the Caesars – or the transference of the legendary El Dorado to the southern tip of the American continent; and also by political decisions taken by the leaders of the Conquest, as was the case with Pedro de Valdivia.

It was not only the Spanish Crown that promoted ideas of the ‘secrets of the earth’ either. The English, Dutch and French also sent expeditions to South America from 1530 onwards. In a number of cases, they illustrated their ambition by means of cartographic maps, with which they tried to justify their own right to aspire to territories located in zones commonly known. It is therefore no surprise that the work of the cosmographer Guillaume Le Testu sought to establish a ‘French Antarctica,’ for the purpose of securing the riches presumed to be in those lands. His drawings were intended to legitimize the supposed knowledge of a region his country had a right to conquer.

The English politician and intellectual Thomas More published his best-known work Utopia, in the Belgian town of Leuven, in 1516. It describes the ideal development of a society in which work, life, society, religion and morality function in perfect harmony.

Given that More knew of the letters written by Vespucci reporting on the New World, and the similarities of the journey to the lands south of Ecuador and certain geographical features of the island of Utopia and the Island of Tierra del Fuego described in his text, we have evidence of a direct relationship between his fiction and that region. By the same token, we can see that Utopia suggested a prior imaginative narrative for the voyage to the Straits of Magellan by planting the idea of the need to travel to a ‘non-place’ which, in turn, subsequently provided concrete spatial backing for More’s work, by revealing a territory in the ‘further beyond,’ that was unknown to Europeans until that time.
Chapter 6

The conquest of Chile: an excuse to claim the Straits of Magellan
During the 16th century, to conquer and rule required constant movement, and King Charles V embodied this practice from the time he was named Holy Roman Emperor in 1519. He never had a fixed seat from which to govern, which is why his rule was actually referred to as being ‘a moving court.’ One can therefore say he himself exemplified his personal motto, which was to always go ‘further beyond,’ including further beyond what was considered the heart of his realm.

In those days, travelling around the world was not just a matter for emperors. Rather, expeditions were also an enterprise made up of private groups of interested parties, associated with the business of money-making and promised future advantages. The conquerors of the Americas fall into this group – individuals, such as Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, and Diego de Almagro, among others.

Given that all those enterprises came from Europe, it was important to the European rulers to obtain territories that could serve as points of departure and rest, from which to mount new expeditions and acquire more wealth. In Europe, given that these expeditions were under the command of Iberians, who were the main protagonists in circulating the globe – at least during the first half of the 16th century – regions like Andalusia, Italian and Flemish ports, as well as cities like Seville, stood out and functioned as staging posts for reaching the far flung corners of the world.

Pedro de Valdivia, Governor of Chile
Juan Bautista Verdussen
Antwerp, 1728

Extending the extrem limits of the world

One of the men who was well aware of the geopolitical agenda of the time and made the motto to go ‘further beyond’ his own, was the soldier, first Lieutenant Governor, and then Governor of Chile, Pedro de Valdivia. To the day of his death, he never wavered from his goal to take control of the Magellan Straits, given that he understood their importance and the advantage it would give him over the other conquistadors. In fact, contrary to what one might imagine, his real objective was never the occupation and colonization of what we know today as the country of Chile, but rather that territory was simply a component in his itinerary that was designed to reach the ‘world passage’ already mentioned. The soldier of fortune said so himself in one of his many letters to the emperor, in which he affirmed that Santiago of the far south was just the first stage of a campaign that would allow him to populate the lands as far as the “North Sea” and the Straits of Magellan.

For this conquistador, therefore, the territory that was known as Chile was itself seen just as a long throughway to reach the great passage. In this way, the cities of Chile proposed as part of an expeditionary plan presented prior to reaching the territory need to be understood as staging posts or rest stops forming part of a larger trajectory. To paraphrase the historian Pierre Chaunu: in those days, Chile as a colony only made sense as a factor in the desire to...
A letter addressed to Prince Philip II in 1552, written by the founding father of Chile, Pedro de Valdivia, proposed three reasons for the need to control the Straits:

«The Straits of Magellan Straits should be an established route for three reasons: First and foremost, because all that territory and Southern Ocean pertains to Your Highness and no enemy should take advantage of what is not theirs to use; second, it will ensure control of the spice trade; and third, because it will be possible to explore and settle the region beyond the Straits, which I am informed is very good land.»

Later on he made it clear that he wished to extend the earth and thereby make this extremity known and useful for the rest of the world: even though it was still only an imagined or projected place, it was nevertheless likely to exist.

To control what lay beyond

Taking another perspective, one can confirm that Pedro de Valdivia understood the political trends and interests that were being developed in that era, for the distinct regions of the globe. His arrival in the Americas in 1535, which was later compared to that of other, more well-known conquistadors, helps to explain his true motivation. He knew how to judge when the time was right to launch one of the most ambitious enterprises of his age: to conquer and control the Straits of Magellan, a place that would function as the new frontier of the world and from which he hoped to develop a new centre of power that would wield control over the route to the ‘further beyond,’ which was originally believed to be the Orient, but which was later thought of as probably being terra incognita.
Chapter 7

The earliest knowledge of the Straits of Magellan: shipwrecks and exploratory voyages
From the time of the Victoria’s return to Seville in September 1522, the desire to take control of the Straits of Magellan and create a stable settlement there became the dream of many merchants, mariners, soldiers and some European monarchs. For his part, King Charles V, the owner of that territory, could not focus his attention or his resources on expansionary enterprises at that time, given that in parallel to the aforementioned discovery, he also faced a series of political, social and economic conflicts taking place in Europe. For example, he was committed to battles against the communities of Castile, the German states, and against the Turks. This explains why he always entrusted the definitive attempt to take control of the New World and areas like the Straits to private enterprises.

The length of the voyage and the complexities of navigating in the South Atlantic seas of the Americas meant the majority of authorized expeditions encountered problems, which were very often fatal. Not many were ready to face the adventure, due to the huge investment required to mount expeditions, and also because of pressure from fellow conquistadors in North America, who were not well pleased by the idea that it could be possible to reach the Indies by routes other than the current one, by crossing the Isthmus of Panama.

In the two decades that followed the ‘discovery,’ we see the expeditions of Francisco García Jofré de Loayza (1525-1526), who had travelled with Juan Sebastián Elcano, of Simón de Alcazaba (1535), of León Pancaldo (1538), and of Francisco Camargo (1540), all of which can be considered failed ventures, if seen from the viewpoints of settlement, the loss of human life and the financial investment.
Chapter 7

Ownership of the Straits

It is important to note that up until 1552, the Straits were not part of Chile, but rather pertained to the province of Chincha. This meant the spoils they represented were somewhat more interesting, because an entire territorial jurisdiction was in play.

No doubt for this reason, the famous German Fugger family of merchant bankers were interested in the region and were entrusted with its administration, between 1530 and 1531. This fact can also be seen as a return of political and economic favours, given that Charles V was raised to Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, thanks to the financial backing he received from the Fugger family. This pact is underlined by the agreements proposed between both parties, which also reveal how each side sought to protect its interests. From the Spanish side, for example, it was hoped the German investors would take financial responsibility for sending three or four vessels laden with people, artillery, and the munitions and supplies necessary to explore and pacify all the islands and mainland from the Straits as far as Chincha, which could avoid offending the King of Portugal. In this way, the monarchy sought to push its influence north, in an area that included a future part of Chile. However, the Germans also had designs on what lay further south, as one can see in one of their manuscripts, which states: ‘Likewise, the Fuggers have committed themselves

The deplorable condition of the brigantine San Francisco de Paula on the 19th day of February 1769, at the southern latitude of 52 degrees and 35 minutes
Alexo Berlinguero, captain of the brigantine, and recorded from Puerto Deseado, in 1769

As the historian Mateo Martinic has pointed out, the maritime configuration of the Straits of Magellan is characterized by “channels and straits, by fords and bays.” Temperatures from one place to another can oscillate between 2 °C and 10 °C. The local climate is influenced by the continental mass, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and also by the south pole, which explains why this region is very rainy and windy. Furthermore, there are numerous ocean currents so that, to this day, navigating the channels is a challenge fit only for the brave, and many have been shipwrecked.
to discover and populate the lands and islands existing beyond the Straits of Magellan and lying before them.”

Later, once the Straits had been incorporated as part of Chile in 1552, and the entire area was defined as the Provinces of Chili and New Extremadura, as far as the Straits of Magellan (thanks to Pedro de Valdivia’s insistence), expeditions were mounted more as geopolitical explorations; both in the name of profit and protection of existing interests, which were likely to benefit the Realm of Chile and the Vice-Royalty of Peru. An example of this was Pedro de Valdivia’s instruction to Francisco de Ulloa and Francisco Cortés Ojeda in 1553, prior to his death that same year, to venture to that region. However, they were forced to return soon afterwards, due to the damage incurred by their vessels.

A more successful expedition resulting in the most new information was led by Juan de Ladrillero, who sailed from Valdivia in 1557, and reached the straits the following year. A detailed report of the course taken by that voyage survives, whose objective was to ‘explore the Straits of Magellan,’ according to the document.

Juan Ladrillero, captain and cosmographer of the Straits

Juan Ladrillero was an expert captain who influenced the conquest enterprises of Juan de Valdivia, Pascual de Andagoya, Sebastián de Belalcázar, Francisco Pizarro, Pedro de Valdivia and the Viceroy of Mendoza, Andrés Hurtado. With him, we can trace a long line of journeying that begins in Seville and reaches the Caribbean islands; and goes from Panama to the jungles of Columbia, and from Lake Titicaca to the Straits of Magellan.

The confluence of cosmographic and commercial practices, as well as awareness of the world, is personified in this captain, makes him a key individual for understanding how new cosmographic intelligence recalibrated the geopolitical importance of the Panamanian and Magellan Straits as hemispheric and global links that Spain needed to safeguard against the pretensions of rival monarchies.
Chapter 8

The Straits as a solution for the Chilean War
Chapter 8

FROM 1541 ONWARDS, THE SPANISH CONQUISTADORS had to face the resistance put up by a variety of indigenous peoples - principally that of the Mapuche and the Pehuenche - who had been progressively displaced to the south of the River Bio Bio. This resulted in the first break in the system of conquest implemented in Latin America which was unchanged up to that time, and initiated a complex militaristic process that was not concluded until the so-called 'pacification' of the Araucaria Region was completed in 1883, by which time the national Chilean state had been formed.

As a result of the impossibility of taking full charge of the territory during the early centuries of occupation, the 16th – 18th centuries, the Spanish were obliged to develop different strategies to maintain an effective hold on the region inhabited by the Araucarians, which was the generic term by which all indigenous people were known at that time.

Delineatio omnium orarum totius Australis partis Americae ... Afbeeldinge van alle Zee-custen des geheelen Zuyderschen deels van America

Jan Huygen van Linschoten
Amsterdam, 1596

Haece pars Peruvianae, regiones Chicam & Chile, complectitur, & Regionem Patagonum

Petrus Plancius
Amsterdam, 1592-1594
The Chilean War

The first generation of Spanish conquistadors used the only tactic possible to gain a foothold in the area where they were being resisted, and that was to advance slowly, while building small fortified settlements that allowed them to safeguard what they had won. In this manner, forts were constructed along the length of the Chilean central valley, right amongst the roughly one million native people who lived in that zone during the early decades of the Conquest.

Thus the Spanish advanced in waves, which enabled them to install successive forts and establish a protective network against the risk of attacks.

This way forward was the only definitive means by which they could make coherent progress, given the lack of manpower, financial resources, and materials. And so they began to build the earliest towns of the new Realm of Chile, which were Santiago in 1541; La Serena in 1544; Concepcion in 1550; and Valdivia in 1552, among others.

One of the effects that arose from this settlement policy in the territory was that it became characterized by its longitudinal space, and was internally fragmented and demarcated by ‘safe places’ and ‘areas of risk.’ The region therefore evolved from an ‘immeasurable wild space’ into a place of ‘secured routes’ and ‘areas at war.’

This strategy, which differentiated between protected and unprotected spheres, added up to a kind of immunity, in the words of Peter Sloterdijk, which, as a consequence, took the anxiety out of capturing an unexplored place. But it also established the earliest fragmentation of the space perceived of as Chilean, and of the sense of...
security on newly-won lands, and dampened fascination for what remained unclaimed. All this reveals that what happened in Chile was not only rooted in the conquest of territory, but also in issues that concern modern societies.

The jockeying for position between the Spanish and the indigenous inhabitants can be understood as a war whose successive episodes to the south of Santiago have collectively become known as the Arauco War.

To a limited extent, one can assert that the war was inspired by the impossibility of reaching the Straits of Magellan and that the fighting continued, in part, because of this conundrum.

Furthermore, it was due to the very importance of this world passage that efforts were made to resolve the conflict, especially in the 16th century, when the Spanish authorities sought to maintain their advantage in a region that was always coveted by the Spanish in Chile.

Multiple sources confirm the importance of the Straits as a means to solving wartime scenarios and, at the same time, providing a geopolitical defensive route for the Viceroyalty and for trade with the Orient. An example can be found in the reports by Lorenzo Bernal, who, in 1569, denounced the government of Bravo de Saravia, requesting the King’s support for continuing the war and urging him to “maintain a presence in the Straits, because the whole issue of land ownership will be decided here and it would entomb those Spanish.” In 1571, Melchor Bravo de Saravia also wrote to the King regarding the Araucan War and the King’s interests, and challenged him to send help, which “would most appropriately be sent via the Straits.”
Chapter 9

A geopolitical problem: pirates and English, French and Dutch corsairs
In the 16th century, the Realm of Chile, the southernmost territory in the Spanish dominions of the Americas, served both as a southern protective buttress for the Vice-Royalty of Peru, and as the administrative point for the maritime route giving access to the Pacific Ocean. It was therefore considered a strategic area by the administrative officials of Spain and the Indies, whose security was indispensable; even more so after the progressive increase in trade, and the amount of mineral wealth that was being shipped back to Spain, from the middle of the century onwards. All this drew the increasingly covetous attention of European powers hostile to Spain – England, Holland and France – who knew the vast maritime empire and the hegemony of the Spanish Crown on the old continent was crucially dependent on silver.

This situation resulted in the appearance of pirates and corsairs on the American coasts and was the root of justifications for expeditions and enterprises whose objectives were to fortify the Straits of Magellan, and in turn the city and port of Valdivia, among other coastal points that supported Chile’s strategic importance.

By 1573, the learned Viceroy of Toledo Joaquin Zuleta had already thought of certain lines of protection for the region and the continent: “he proposed the Spanish Crown build a complete system of coastal fortifications, including Arica, Callao, Guayaquil, Paita, Trujillo and Santa. The response was negative, which indicates the Crown was convinced that control of the Isthmus of Panama and of the Magellan Straits was sufficient guarantee for the natural defence of the Viceroyalty.” However, that natural defence was not sufficient and in September 1578, the English corsair Sir Francis Drake succeeded in reaching the Pacific Ocean by traversing the Straits. This incursion, sponsored by the English Queen, had a direct impact on a number of American ports governed by the Spanish, including Valparaiso and Coquimbo.

Drake’s ‘entrance’ was seen to have been facilitated mainly by the fact that the Spanish had already established a clear commercial route via Panama, and by the impossibility of reaching the Straits by land because of the conflicts with the natives, so there was no contingent Spanish force protecting the sea passage.
The fear of pirate incursions

The foothold achieved by the pirates caused consternation among the authorities, not least because it was not just a matter of attacks on their sovereignty, but also on the proper cultural and religious order. There was a fear the Lutheran cult might be imported to Chile and reach the native population. The fear of the foreigner was based on the potential alliances that could be formed between invading forces and the natives, which would have given them carte blanche and destabilized the imperial enterprise in the rest of the Americas. As the historian Gabriel Guarda has said, Latin America ran the risk of being split in two.

Given that the pirates and corsairs were sponsored politically by several European states and kingdoms, the Spanish Crown was forced to act quickly. To this aim, it established an armada and a system of protection for the Straits. Thus, in 1581, the most glorious imperial year of the Spanish monarchy, when it annexed Portugal after the Proclamation of Philip II as its king, the Spanish Crown sponsored a tremendous expedition to protect its most southerly domain. It was led by Diego Flores and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, and the enterprise set off from Cadiz with 23 vessels and around 3000 people. The objective of this armada was to halt enemy passage through the Straits and establish bases that would be in a position to not only protect South America, but also the trade with Asia. Furthermore, it was intended to reinforce the military status of the Spanish Crown and fortify sections of the Straits of Magellan, which would necessarily require military forces and up-to-date skills, which would not fail to be noticed by their adversaries. However, due to recurring problems between the leaders of the expedition, it was a disaster. Sarmiento did reach the southern region, but only with a contingent force fragmented by disputes and desertions which, added to a lack of resources, meant he was unable to establish a definitive settlement.
Chapter 10

The Straits as a defining factor in the perception of Chile
From the time the Straits of Magellan were discovered in 1520, the way this event was presented to the world was characterized by a tone that highlighted the difficulties associated with the exploit. From the first, therefore, the chronicles of the likes of Antonio Pigafetta, Sebastián Elcano and Ginés de Mafra, described the territory as inhospitable, cold, and difficult to traverse.

A narrow ‘island’

The truth of those narratives is confirmed by the difficulties encountered in establishing settlements or even reaching the area during the 16th century. In fact, the Straits were not passed again from Europe until 1578. Furthermore, neither King Charles V nor his associates sponsored major expeditions after some tentative projects had failed and significant sums had been lost in the process. The conquistadors posted in the northern territories of Latin America also put pressure on the monarchy to maintain Panama as the only passage to the Indies and therefore the southern sea passage and its adjacent lands were seen as a prospect for direct management by the Spanish Crown which, with the passing of time, meant that these lands quite literally became marginalised.

In effect, the natural isolation of all the islands of the world was simply magnified in the Magellan region, which was presented as the ‘furthest island of the world’ by the celebrated cartographer Alonso de Santa Cruz, whose life spanned most of the 16th century (1505-1567).
This insularity regarding the Straits of Magellan was underscored by its distance from the centres of commerce and power of the age; and because it was seen as a piece of land at the extreme ends of the earth, which underscored its reputation as antipodal (diametrically opposite) to the known world.

“European soldiers arriving at the Straits of Magellan”
Theodore De Bry, 1601

The printmaker and book editor Johann Theodorus de Bry, who was born in Liège, was one of the main promoters of images of the Americas in the 16th century. His works presented a range of American locations, such as Native Indian settlements from a variety of latitudes, in which he showed their dress, weapons, food etc; and also highlighted specific historic moments relating to the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, and their attempts to take possession of the land. One of those episodes illustrates the arrival in the Straits of Magellan as a battle, which was inspired by the tales emanating from the Spanish who lived in Chile at the time.
The Straits and the perception of Chile

With the passing of time, all those ideas and perceptions around antipodes, insularity, accident and narrow passage at the extremes of the earth inspired by the first expedition to traverse the sea passage, as well as by the subsequent impossibility of establishing a presence there, directly impacted on the discourse on the image of Chile as a whole; and also defined the experience of the Spanish who settled the territory. The ongoing attempts to encapsulate the Spanish experience were therefore couched in words and perceptions associated with these concepts.

The French philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry has defined this phenomenon of how an experience can become thematised, and how it can therefore colour the discourse, as certain words become attached to a series of experiences in accordance with the situation to be described.

The ongoing attempts to encapsulate the Spanish experience were therefore couched in words and perceptions associated with these concepts.

The Straits of Magellan were a historic and geographical reference point used to outline the challenges experienced by the Spanish in Chile, from their arrival onwards. This is not only seen in the letters sent to Spain from Chile, but also in some literary works, such as Alonso de Ercilla’s epic ‘La Araucana’, written between 1569 and 1589, which contains innumerable stanzas referring to the Straits. The historian Ricardo Padrón has undertaken important research on Ercilla’s text in this regard.
Conclusion

A clear relationship was established in the 16th century: the four corners of the world began to interact, to inspire each other, and to definitively inter-marry, a process that continues to this day. The Straits of Magellan are a key component in that history, given that it is thanks to its ‘appearance’ the world was completed, which allowed people, objects and ideas to be viewed in a global context, from then onwards. That is to say, the ‘discovery’ of this conduit to the world provoked the new spatial and temporal delimits that gave rise to these changes.

As soon as this ‘world-passage’ was revealed, reflections on what it meant to inhabit the world multiplied, on what humanity had constructed over time, and also on what this last concept really implied in that era. In many cases, the past had to be revised and the horizon of the present was expanded. The future indicated new reference points and places to speculate on. This shows how each concept around time and place had to be reconsidered which, in turn, necessitated a new way of looking at all those processes. For example, the concept of geopolitical and commercial influence evolved into an ideology that coloured even the way humanity itself was viewed.

Chile was never disconnected from this evolution, which grew from the Straits. On the contrary, Chilean territory was deeply intertwined in all these dynamics. More, they frequently inspired speculation on ideas relating to it as a pathway to terra australis, the secrets of the earth, or to the fabled City of the Caesars; and also reinforced ideas of possession in terms that were clearly geopolitical, such as pirate attacks and safe-guarding merchant shipping routes.

For all the ideas recorded above, it made sense to reflect briefly on the significance of the Straits as a ‘world-passage’ during the century of their discovery. The interpretation offered here is but one of the many ways in which this fascinating stretch can be thought about. The main intention is to highlight and show how important it is to incorporate a chapter in the history of the Straits of Magellan into the bigger picture we learn of in the history of Chile – not to encourage further the exceptionality sought in the geography that makes up Chilean territory, but rather to demonstrate that history is not a national exercise. It is universal and ought to seek a collective understanding of men and women down the ages, even while we look at specific points on the globe.
**Bibliography**


PASTOR BEATRIZ, Discourse Narrativo de la conquista de América, La Habana, Edición Casa de las Américas, 1983.


PIZARRO Y ORELLANA FERNANDO, Varones ilustres del Nuevo Mundo: descubridores, conquistadores, y pacificadores del opulento, dilatado, y poderoso. Imperio de las Indias occidentales: sus vidas, virtud, valor, hazañas y claros blasones, Madrid, Diego Díaz de la Carrera, 1639.


RAMÓN ARMANDO DE, Descubrimiento de Chile y compañeros de Almagro, Santiago, Ediciones de la Universidad Católica de Chile, 1953.


RUSSO ALESSANDRO, El Realismo Circular, Tierras, espacios y paisajes de la cartografía indígena novohispana, siglos XVI y XVII, México, UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2005.


URBINA MARÍA XIMENA, La frontera de arriba en chile colonial. Interacción hispano-indígena en el territorio entre Valdivia y Chiloé e imaginario de sus bordes geográficos, 1600–1800, Valparaíso, Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, 2009.


VEGA ALEJANDRA, Los Andes y el territorio de Chile en el siglo XVI. Descripción, reconocimiento e invención, Santiago, DIBAM, 2014.


---

**Archives and libraries consulted**

- Chilean National Archive
- Chilean National Library-Sala Medina
- Harvard Library
- Library of Congress, Washington
- The John Carter Brown Library
- Archive of the Indies
- Spanish National Library
- French National Library
- Library of the University of Paris-Sorbonne.
- The British Library.
- Cambridge University Library