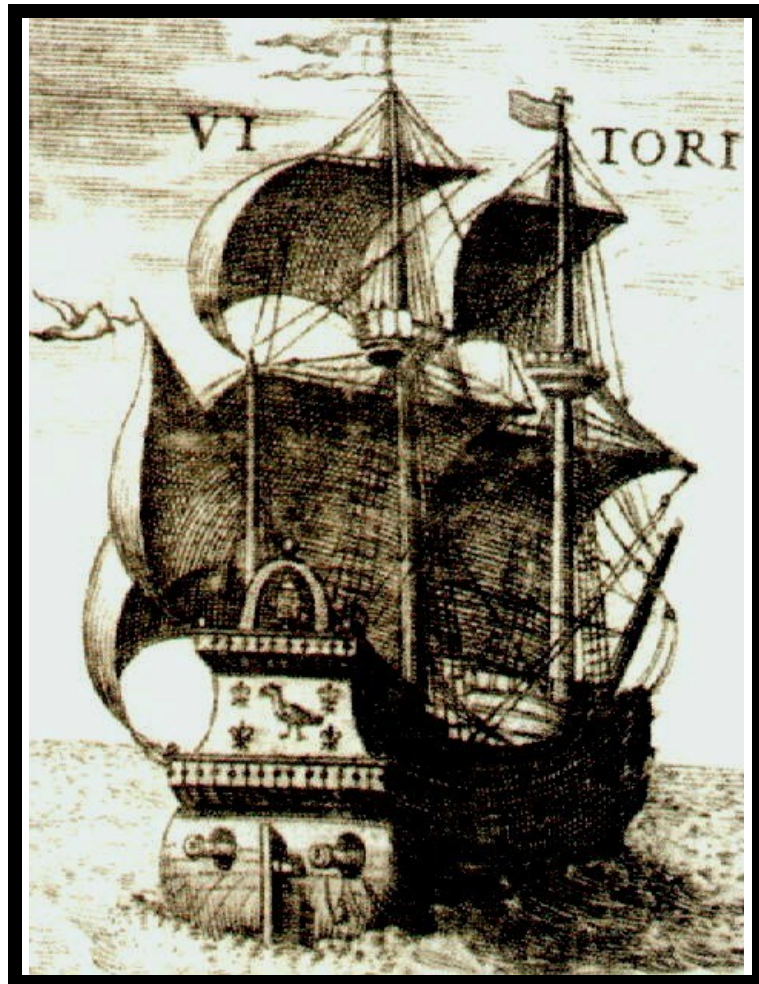


THE SPANISH GALLEONS IN KABIKOLAN

Dr. Danilo Madrid Gerona



A typical design of a Spanish galleon in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries

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I spent the wintry months of November and December last year in Amsterdam and Spain's naval archives, specially in the famed *Museo Naval* in Madrid, the most important repository of documents for imperial Spain's maritime history. My research was focused on one of the most spectacular subjects in Philippine history, the galleon trade but with emphasis on Kabikolan. The documents for this brief narrative are drawn mainly from the substantial materials I gathered from these archives.

Bicol was among the regions in the Philippines which played vital role in Spain's maritime enterprise, the Manila-Acapulco Trade or more popularly known as the galleon trade. The term galleon was derived from three or four-masted ship developed in the 15th and 16th centuries as a merchant vessel and warship. Owing to its size and armament capacity, it became the dominant warship of the late 16th century but eventually transformed into an armed merchant vessel for trade between Europe and the New World.

The galleons engaged in this trans-Pacific trade regularly left Manila in July, found exit to the Pacific via the Bicol region, sailing with the southwesterly wind along the south Luzon coast through the San Bernardino strait then across the Pacific to the California coast and finally southward to Acapulco. For its return voyage, the San Bernardino strait again became its entrance to Manila. Some of these galleons which passed through the region were never seen again.

The chronicles of the galleons and ships that were either sunk or wrecked in the area sounded like a litany. Among the most important galleons lost in this area was the *Espiritu Santo*. Loaded with enormous treasures and with about 100 Spanish passengers aboard, it met a violent storm and was wrecked on 25 April 1576 in Catanduanes while making its return trip to the Philippines from Acapulco. The *Santo Tomas* which floundered in the dangerous Catanduanes shoals in 1601 finally went to the bottom of this deadly water. The *San Geronimo* followed the same fate in almost the same area shortly after. In 1649, the *Encarnacion* from Acapulco crashed on the Sorsogon coast near Bulan. Another tragedy struck the colony in 1725 when the *Santo Cristo*, beached at night in Ticao, was mysteriously burned. The *San Cristobal*, hunted by the Dutch fleet for its enormous treasure, was wrecked in the Naranjos reefs between Ticao and Capul, went down the bottom in 1798.

Despite these various maritime disasters, the Spanish government acknowledged Kabikolan's indispensable share in this galleon trade. The strategic importance of the region for the trans-Pacific voyage and its abundant resources for the construction of sea-going vessels were reasons for the establishment of a number of shipyards in the region. One of the earliest of these was Bagatao which was opened in 1609. It was in this yard where the ships *San Felipe* and *Santiago* were built. Constructed in 1662, the *Nuestra Senora del Buen Socorro* was considered "the largest and the best galleon yet built." Placed under the able direction of Commander Diego de Arevalo, a man "most experienced in maritime matters," this galleon put off for the sea on 28 August 1667 after a little more than a year since its completion. The other ship which emanated from this shipyard was the *Santisimo Trinidad* built in

1762. Around 1718, a shipyard was also established in Masbate where the royal flagship *Salbador* was built.

The most important from among these shipyards in the region was located in Dalupaon, a village under the jurisdiction of Pasacao in Camarines Sur. Opened in 1618 this yard built the two famous ships *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe* and the *Angel de la Guardia*.

The twilight years of the trade came in the 19th century when its last galleon left Manila in 1811 for Acapulco and returned in 1815. The galleon trade was officially abolished by king Ferdinand VI by virtue of the Royal Decree on April 23, 1815. Despite the abolition of the galleon trade, the region continued to serve in the maritime industry of the colonial government.