The Spanish fleets (review)

*Nueva España* (from Seville to Veracruz)
*Tierra Firme* (from Seville to Cartagena)
Manila (from Manila to Acapulco)
Lima (from Lima to Panama)

Leaving Seville around April or May, these fleets sailed south to the Canary Islands (1 week), and then west to the Antilles, between 17° and 15° latitude south (1 month). Ships would bring almost everything to the New World. There were restrictions to the production of many goods in the West Indies. Once arrived in the Caribbean the fleet divided into two fleets:

*Nueva España*: to Puerto Rico and San Juan de Ulúa to load gold, silver, copper, cochineal, and tobacco from Mexico, and Chinese porcelain, gold, and stones from Manila via Acapulco. *Tierra Firme*: to Cartagena de Indias to load gold, silver, and emeralds from Peru, and pearls from Venezuela. On their way back to Spain both the *Nueva España* and *Tierra Firme* fleets would sail to Havana (2-3 weeks) where they would assemble to sail back to Spain. From Havana the ships would sail north and east to the latitude of about 40°, and then east, to the Azores (1 month). From the Azores they sailed east to the coast of Portugal, and then south, around the Cape St. Vincent, to Sanlúcar again (20-30 days).

These ships carried back large quantities of copper and silver in ingots, coins, or artifacts of many types. Gold, emeralds, and pearls were also an important part of the cargo, which was completed with the agricultural production of the settlers’ farms: cow hides (generally raw), tobacco, cocoa beans, cochineal, indigo, precious hardwoods, coconuts (introduced by the Spanish), and many other small productions, such as gourds to make exotic drinking vessels.

From Lima (Callao) to Panama. Every year a fleet loaded with silver would sail from Lima’s port of Callao, into Panama City, from where they carried in the back of mules to Portobello and shipped to Spain via Havana. The voyage to Panama lasted around 3 weeks. The trip back, however, would take as much as 5 months, due to contrary winds.
After the discovery of the Potosí mines, in 1545, the quantities of silver shipped from Peru increased dramatically. From Manila to Acapulco (1565-1815). One round voyage was done once every year, lasting 6 months or more. Ships brought silk, gold, precious stones, and porcelain from Asia. On the way back the ships carried silver and gold. They would sometimes stop at Guam to load water and fresh food.

The Cayo Nuevo Wreck.

Found by two sport divers from Louisiana off the coast of Mexico, at Campeche Bay, in 1979, this shipwreck has been dated to the mid 16th century. The site was surveyed by a joint team of the TAMU based Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) and the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). A bronze gun bearing a date 15?2, two iron guns, and an anchor wedged in the coral reef were found along with numerous ballast stones, ship’s fittings, and fragments of lead hull sheathing. Test trenches were excavated, and revealed three additional cast iron guns, another anchor, and shards of Spanish olive jars. Globules of mercury found attached to brass pins suggest an inbound ship with cargo from Europe.

The 1554 fleet

On November 4, 1552, a fleet of 54 vessels left Spain to the New World. It consisted of 24 vessels for Tierra Firme, of which 6 were warships, 16 vessels for Nueva España, 10 ships for Santo Domingo, 4 ships with other destinations. As it happened every year, the majority of the ships was meant to stay in the New World. Only 5 of the 16 ships of the Nueva España fleet and 7 of the 24 ships of the Tierra Firme fleet were actually scheduled to make the round trip.

The 5 ships of the Nueva España fleet were the San Pedro, San Andres, San Esteban, Espiritu Santo, and Santa Maria de Yciar. After a voyage cursed by foul weather, pirates, and disaster, in which 8 ships were lost, the 24 vessels of the Nueva España arrived finally at San Juan de Ulúa in late February and early March, 1553. Since Veracruz had been devastated by a hurricane soon before their arrival, unloading, repairing, and reloading took longer than usual, and only the San Pedro left to Havana and Cadiz in time, accompanied by four other vessels available at the time.

In 1554 the remaining 4 vessels left to Spain independently, under the command of Antonio Corzo, a few weeks before the arrival of that year’s Nueva España fleet. But 20 days after they left Veracruz the fleet was caught by a hurricane and pushed towards the coast. Three of the four vessels sunk off Padre Island on April 29, 1554. Only the San Andres escaped, reaching Havana safely but so damaged that it had to be scrapped. Of the 300 people aboard the San Esteban, Espiritu Santo, and Santa Maria de Yciar, half may have died in the shipwrecks. The survivors sent a small party of sailors south, in one of the ships’ boats, to call for help, and then organized a march along the beach, back to
Mexico. They thought that they were much farther south, and that it would not take long before they saw people. However, they were very far from Mexico, and all except one died in the march.

A salvage expedition was sent as soon as the news of the disaster reached Veracruz, and recovered about half of the cargo from the 3 lost ships.

The site presumed to be the Santa Maria de Yciar was probably destroyed in the late 1940s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As they were opening the Mansfield Cut. Ship’s timbers, chains and anchors were caught up by the dredges…

The Espiritu Santo was found and salvaged by a group of treasure hunters in 1967, after a businessman from Indiana found coins along the beach and decided to search the sea.

The San Esteban was found by the Texas Antiquities Committee in 1973, and archaeologically excavated in the years that followed its discovery.

The artifact collection was treated at the University of Texas, as well as the collection recovered from the Espiritu Santo, won from the treasure hunters by the State of Texas following a lawsuit against the salvage company that had stripped the wreck site. It encompasses a large collection of weapons and rigging material.

The hull remains of the San Esteban were scarce. However, they have allowed a tentative reconstruction of the hull and stand as the first remains of a Spanish colonial wreck to have been studied by archaeologists.

The 1622 fleet

Also sunk by a hurricane were 8 ships of a fleet of 28 vessels that left Havana to Spain on September 4, 1622. Among the vessels lost was the Nuestra Señora de Atocha, the vice-flagship (almiranta), which has already been referred in class.

Built in Havana with 550 tons of capacity, it carried 20 bronze guns, a crew of 133 men, 82 soldiers, and 48 passengers. The Atocha’s holds were filled with copper and silver, and an enormous cargo of indigo, tobacco, cochineal, and rosewood. Precious artifacts, gold bars, and jewels were also stored in the passenger’s and crew’s personal boxes and arcs. Four astrolabes were found stored together, maybe in the pilot’s personal chest.

Since the Atocha was found and salvaged by treasure hunters not much is known about its hull nor the way its cargo was stored. Three other vessels believed to have been part of this fleet have been found:

the Santa Margarita,
the Dry Tortugas Wreck, and
the Nuestra Señora del Rosario.

Since the first two were found by treasure hunters not much is known about them.

The third wreck site was surveyed by a team of the Florida State University, but not much has been found so far.
The Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, 1641

The Concepción was a large galleon built in Spain in 1620. It sailed from Cadiz on April 21, 1640 with the New Spain and arrived safely at Veracruz two months later, on June 24. The only incident during the voyage was an attack by pirates that was promptly driven off by the ship’s 40 guns.

Already an old ship, the Concepción was much affected by a decision to keep it in the New World for an entire year. Before sailing to Havana and Spain the ship was repaired and careened, and then loaded with a large cargo of silver. The voyage to Havana was a difficult one that lasted 35 days due to contrary winds. Repaired once again, and loaded with new and fresh provisions, the Concepción left Havana with the remaining fleet, bound for Spain, on September 20, 1641. Nine days later the entire fleet was caught by a hurricane. The Concepción, greatly damaged, tried to sail to Puerto Rico. Lost in the ocean the ship struck an uncharted reef north of Hispaniola on October 31. The violent sea broke the hull. The crew built a number of rafts and many managed to sail to Hispaniola.

All the attempts to find the wreck and rescue the treasure failed, and the news of the lost galleon spread. It was only about 45 years later that the treasure of the Concepción would be salvaged.

A lumber trader from Massachusetts named William Phips managed to get financial support from the king of England, James II, and in 1687 found the wreck with the help of a Spanish survivor. With two vessels, the James and Mary and the Henry, and a crew of native divers, he managed to salvage 68,511 pounds of silver and a small quantity of gold – of which 10% reverted to the king. Phips paid his backers and kept a large sum. Almost immediately Phips sailed back to salvage more treasure but upon arrival he realized that the site had been extensively salvaged by other parties and gave up after a few days. His partner in this venture, Sir John Narbourough, died on the site and was thrown overboard wrapped in an hammock and weighed with some cannon balls. Phips, now the rich and famous Sir William Phips, eventually became the governor of Massachusetts, and military leader of the colony. After failing both these commitments, he went back to treasure hunting in 1695 but never found anything else, and died soon afterwards of a fever, exactly 8 years after he found the first silver on the Concepción.

The site of the loss of the Concepción eventually became known as the Silver Bank, but the story of its treasure was soon forgotten. After World War II, however, the development of diving equipment brought new treasure hunters to the reef. In 1952 a man named Alexandre Korganoff failed to find the hull of the Concepción. The same fate waited the efforts of Edwin Link in 1955 and Jacques Cousteau in 1968.

Another attempt was made in 1978, this time backed by 30 investors who eventually gathered 2.5 million dollars, and the help of an historian who had found the log of the Henry, one of Phips’ ships. Burt Weber was successful, finding the remains of the Concepción deeply embedded in the coral reef. Weber found silver in bulk, in coins, and worked into several kinds of artifacts. He also found a few gold chains, and Ming porcelain from the Manila Galleons.
After Weber declared the site fully salvaged, another treasure hunter, Tracy Bowden, secured a permit and went on salvaging silver coins to this day.

The 1715 fleet

Yet another hurricane is responsible for the loss of almost an entire fleet in the summer of 1715. Of the 11 ships caught in the Straits of Florida only one made it safely to Europe. The other 10 vessels were lost, 5 from Nueva España fleet, under the command of Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla, and 5 from Tierra Firme fleet, under the command of Don Antonio de Echeverz y Zubiza.

All of Ubilla’s ships sunk off the Florida coast, south of Cape Kennedy: the capitana, the almiranta, two pataches, and the Urca de Lima. Three of Echeverz’ ships were also lost off Cape Kennedy: the almiranta, the Concepción, and the Holandesa. The other two were lost at sea: the Francesa, and the San Miguel. The first of these vessels were found by a small contractor named Kip Wagner. He formed a company called Real Eight Corporation, and secured the salvage rights of several shipwrecks, nicknamed by the salvors after the closest shore features or the type of cargo found:

- Cabin Wreck, in front of a beach cabin,
- Gold Wreck, from the amount of gold found in it,
- Wedge Wreck, from the shape of some silver ingots,
- Corrigan’s Wreck, and
- Sandy Point Wreck,

Another two wreck sites salvaged by the Real Eight Corporation proved to be part of other fleets:

- the Green Cabin Wreck, a 1618 vessel, probably the San Martin, the capitana of the Honduras Fleet, and
- the Rio Mar Wreck, presumed to be the Jesus Maria, a 1716 salvage vessel that rolled over during the rescue works.

In spite of the enormous interest of these finds, the provenience of the artifacts was not recorded, the treasure was stolen or sold, and very few remains of the 1715 fleet shipwrecks.

The Guadalupe and Tolosa, 1724

The Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe left Cadiz with another ship, the Conde de Tolosa, in July 1724, bound to Veracruz, in Mexico, via La Havana. This small fleet transported a cargo of 400 tons of mercury, which was enough for one year’s production of silver and gold in the Mexican mines. On August the 24th the two ships were struck by a hurricane off the northeast coast of Hispaniola, near Samaná Bay.
The *Guadalupe* was driven ashore and most of its crew and passengers survived; 550 people got alive to the beach soon after the wreck. However, very few would survive the march and sailing to Santo Domingo that followed. The Spanish attempts to salvage the 250 tons of mercury failed because the ship’s structure could not be broken down and allow the divers to reach the holds.

The *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* was found in 1976 by fisherman and the salvage of its cargo committed to the Dominican Republic Navy who contracted a treasure hunter by the name of Tracy Bowden. The salvage work was performed by a company called Caribe Salvage Company, S.A.. A “prop wash” was used and in a little over one year the salvage works were finished (and olive jars were for sale in the Santo Domingo flee market). A large amount of artifacts were recovered, including two bronze swivel guns, jewelry, coins, silver and pewter flatware, delftware, glassware, and daily life artifacts such as brass scissors handles, buttons, dice, religious medals, brass lanterns, an English watch mechanism, wine bottles, jugs, and olive jars.

The *Conde de Tolosa* had been bought in 1719 by the Spanish crown and baptized in honor of D. Luis de Borbón, an illegitimate son of Louis XIV. It left Cadiz in July 1724 bound to Veracruz, Mexico, via Havana, with a cargo of 150 tons of mercury. There is little information on the *Tolosa*’s size, but it has been said that it carried 70 guns and its crew and passengers were estimated in 600 persons. On August the 24th, sailing with the Guadalupe on the way to Havana, it was caught by a hurricane off the northeast coast of Hispaniola, near Samaná Bay. The *Conde de Tolosa* sunk after hitting a reef in the second day of storm, the 25th of August 1724. Only 40 people survived, of which six (seven according to another author) hung for 32 days on the top of its rigging before being rescued. Again, the Spanish attempts to salvage the mercury failed because the ship’s structure could not be broken down to allow the divers to reach the holds.

The *Tolosa* was found in June 1977 by the same treasure hunting company that had salvaged the *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in the previous year. The treasure hunters allegedly retrieved an impressive amount of artifacts, among which were a pewter chamber pot, glass and pottery objects, four pieces of gold jewelry with diamonds, about 1000 pearls, and a silver bracelet that had the name “Dª Antonia Franco” engraved.

Later, a team of archaeologists studied the ships and published two books.

**The 1733 fleet**

This fleet was composed of 4 warships and 18 merchantmen, and left Havana for Spain on July 13, 1733. On the second day of its voyage, sensing the approaching of a hurricane, Don Rodrigo de Torres ordered his fleet back to Havana. However, it was not possible to avoid the storm, and many sunk around the Florida Keys.

Extensively salvaged and burned by the Spanish in the years that followed, these wreck sites were heavily pillaged from the 1930s to the 1970s.

In 1977 some of these ships were located and surveyed by archaeologists from the State of Florida:
The *capitana*, *El Rubi Segundo*, was found and salvaged by Art McKee in the 1940s. The *Nuestra Señora de Balvaneda*, was purchased in Genoa in 1724. After the wreck Spanish divers rescued over 6,000,000 pesos and a large portion of its cargo. Salvaged uninterruptedly since 1955, not much was left to study by the time it was located by archaeologists.

The *San Francisco de Assis* was found in the 1960s and thought to be the *almiranta* of the fleet, *El Gallo Indiana*. Its location suggests that this was in fact the *San Francisco de Assis*, an English built 264 2/3 ton merchantmen. However, after having been salvaged for almost two decades, not much was left in order to make a strong case for its identification.

The *Nuestra Señora del Carmen, Santo Antonio de Padua y las Animas*, also known as the *Chaves*, after its owner, was also salvaged extensively although there was no treasure aboard when it sunk.

Another English-built merchantman known as the *Herrera* after its owner was found and salvaged by treasure hunters. It was known as the *Figurine Wreck* by its salvors, since hundreds of small Mexican statuettes of fish, animals, and humans were found in it.

Yet another wreck has been found and referred to as *El Lerri*, although it has never been identified.

The *San Pedro* was a Dutch-built 287 ¼ tons ship that has yielded thousands of silver coins.

Silver coins have also been found at the site of the presumed *El Sueco de Arizón*.

The ninth vessel located is thought to have been the 212 3/8 tons *Nuestra Señora de Belén y San Juan Bautista*. The find of silver ingots has been reported, presumably contraband, since there was no treasure declared aboard.

In 1968 the *San José de las Animas* was found by a treasure hunter called Tom Gurr. It was a 326 ½ tons English-built ship and carried a large treasure. In spite of the enormous amount of artifacts, the well-preserved state of the hull, and the presence of archaeologists during the initial salvage operations, almost nothing is known about this vessel.

The last of the 1733 fleet vessels was known as *Nuestra Señora de las Angústias y San Rafael*. It was found by a treasure hunter in 1972 and salvaged under the supervision of archaeologists of the State of Florida. Again, not much is known about this vessel, except that there were almost no wooden remains.

**The San Diego, 1600**

In late December 1600 news that two Dutch vessels were near the Philippines lead the Spanish authorities in Manila to prepare for war.

The Dutch ships were the *Mauritius* and the *Eendracht*, which, under the command of Olivier van Noort, had left Holland in 1598 to explore the Asian seas in search of business routes, and ways to fight their Catholic enemies from Portugal and Spain.
One powerful Spanish judge, Antonio de Morga, prepared two ships for war in about 30 days, the San Diego and the San Bartolomé, and sailed from Manila in search of the intruders with a force of about 500 men, which included a few Japanese mercenaries.

After two years of explorations, Olivier van Noort had lost half of his crew and two of his vessels, and was hoping for anything except a naval battle.

The Spanish however engaged his small fleet for several hours and he had no other choice than to fight back, for his life and the lives of his men.

The San Diego rammed the Mauritius, grappled it with its hooks, and 30 Spanish soldiers boarded the Dutch vessel, stripped the main and mizzen masts of sails and rigging, and told the Dutch to surrender. The Dutch barricaded in the fore and stern castles, and tried to discuss the terms of surrender when word came around that the San Diego was sinking.

The San Bartolomé was told that the battle was won, and sent to catch the Eendracht which was running away with van Noort’s papers.

Antonio de Morga was a bureaucrat with no combat experience and soon it seemed that it had been a bad idea to let him command the attack. First it seemed that he had the San Diego loaded too heavy and was unable to fire its guns. Then he ordered his crew to hit the Mauritius at full speed, springing a leak while grappling. Finally he is said to have panicked, sitting behind the capstan, incapable of moving or talking, as soon as he discovered that the ship was taking water.

Without any leadership, the Spanish called off the attack and started to prepare to abandon both ships and make it to shore. Amidst the complete disorder that followed on the Spanish side, the Dutch managed to cut the grapnel cables and drift away, leaving the Spanish busy, trying to save their lives.

The San Diego sunk and maybe 350 soldiers drowned while trying to swim ashore. The San Bartolomé caught and took the Eendracht, but its captain was later blamed by Morga for the sinking of the San Diego.

A French treasure hunter found the San Diego in 1991 and salvaged its cargo during 3 months of underwater work, in 1992 and 1993. An impressive amount of artifacts was recovered from the wreck site. However, no scholarly publication has ever been published about this wreck.

Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, 1638

Sailing from Manila to Acapulco under the command of a young and inexperienced captain, the Concepción hit a reef off Saipan, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, in the Northern Mariana Islands, and sunk.

Forty-six years later the Spanish recovered 35 of its 36 guns together with 7 or 8 anchors and part of its cargo. Its treasure was salvaged by William Mathers in 1987 and 1988. Mathers was a treasure hunter that tried to apply the best archaeological standards to his work, and struggled to keep the artifact collection together, publish a detailed report, and prevent the sale of any artifacts. The artifact collection was purchased by a Japanese developer and will be donated to the government of Guam.

See: Additional texts in the Readings Volume.