
Document 1525E

Da Rocha's voyage—Accounts by Barros and others, analyzed by Lessa

Source: Extracts from an extensive study made by William Armand Lessa, an anthropology professor, entitled "The Portuguese Discovery of the Isles of Sequeira", and published by the University of Guam in Micronesica 11:1 (1975):35-70. Other, original sources, are given by this author (See comments and footnotes below).

Introduction

The first recorded interaction between natives of the Caroline Islands of Micronesia and Europeans took place in 1525 when a Portuguese galley came upon an island in the open sea northeast of the original Moluccas or Spice Islands, off the western coast of Halmahera. The small vessel was captained by one Diogo da Rocha, who had arrived in the Indies by way of Africa. With Gomes de Sequeira as his pilot, he had reached Celebes on a trading expedition for gold, having been sent there from the Portuguese stronghold in Ternate by Antonio de Brito, captain of the Moluccas. Leaving Celebes in August or September of 1525, after having been menaced by the wary inhabitants, he wandered from island to island in the Molucca Passage, and then was driven 200 to 300 leagues to the northeast by a storm. On October 1 he encountered a large island in the western Carolines where he and his exhausted men remained with the friendly inhabitants for four months to recuperate and await favorable winds. The island—actually a group of islands—was located at nine or ten degrees north latitude and was given the name Ilha de Gomes de Sequeira. Rocha left the place on January 20, 1526, and soon reached Ternate... My purpose is to identify the Isles and to ascertain the facts concerning their discovery.

Historical Sources

Apparently the one who has left us the earliest disclosure of the Portuguese incident was the Spaniard Andrés de Urdaneta, a survivor of the second crossing of the Pacific after Magellan. Stranded in the Moluccas in 1526 after the flagship of García Jofre de

Loaysa was destroyed, he returned to Spain in 1535 in Portuguese ships via the Cape of Good Hope and gave us a report there to the emperor concerning Portuguese maritime holdings in the East Indies. In it he said: "To the northeast of the Moluccas in an archipelago of islands which are very close together, which a *fusta* of the Portuguese discovered 200 leagues from the Moluccas, and they are from 3 to 9 degrees north."¹

...

The next account, in point of time, is much fuller and has been left to us by the Portuguese historian, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, in his *Historia do descobrimento & conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*²... Castanheda's account is an excellent one and is rivalled only by the next version, which is the most used.

This notice is that of João de Barros (1496-1570), another sixteenth-century historian, who published it nine years after that of Castanheda, which it greatly resembles. The narrative appears in Barros' well known *Terceira década da Ásia* (1563: 259v-260v):

...
"With the change of seasons, because the waters between that large number of islands in the [Moluccan] passage that they were trying to traverse are a vortex with the winds and ocean currents, the fusta was snatched up and carried into a very wide sea without their knowing where they were, running always towards the rising of the sun.³ Finally, after having lost any notion as to their whereabouts, and running at God's mercy with a tempest at the stern that was swallowing them—for it was a sea unsheltered by islands and they did not dare nor were they able to take another course—it seemed to them that they had run about three hundred leagues. Going along, relying more on the mercy of God than any confidence in their navigation, one night in the midst of all this to their greater disorder the pin of the rudder jumped out of its gudgeon. As it was night they could not repair it and they waited until morning came, at which time they were consoled because they found themselves near a large island that appeared to them very beautiful with a wooded freshness. Having adjusted the rudder, whose disrepair was the reason why they had not got lost by running past the island, and by having had to wait until morning, they landed.

The people came to receive them, showing by many signs the great pleasure and surprise they had on seeing them. And in truth, as evidenced by the assured manner in which they went near [the Portuguese], it appeared that they were a people who had never received any harsh treatment or harm whatsoever, because they approached our men with simplicity. Because of their simplicity and assurance one of our men was sent

1 Ed. note: Obviously, if the islands lie close together, they cannot be spread over 6 degrees of latitude. Either "3" is a typographical error for "8", or else Urdaneta meant that the ship crossed 6 degrees of latitude during the voyage. The original Spanish paragraph is as follows: "Al Nordeste de Maluco está un archipiélago de islas que están muy juntas, que descubrió una fusta de portugueses docientas leguas de Maluco, y están dende tres grados hasta nueve de la parte del Norte." ("Colección de documentos inéditos ... Indias", Series I, 40 vols., Madrid, 1864-1884; specifically vol. 5, page 63).

2 Volume VI, pp. 188-189.

3 Ed. note: This does not necessarily mean that they were carried due east, but eastward.

in their company to see their chief. Since some slaves that [the Portuguese] were carrying from the nearby islands of Maluco did not understand their language, they found through gestures that the natives had been there many hundreds of years. They were more white than black; both men and women were quite pleasant in appearance, with happy faces, quite friendly, neither too thin nor fat, without a sign of physical ailments. The men had long beards like ours, and straight hair. Their dress consisted of woven mats, which were very soft and flexible, and which served them as our shirts do us. Above them they wore other mats more coarsely woven without any shape whatsoever, like merely a loose piece of cloth that covered them from the waist down.

When the chief saw our man he expressed great happiness, and because of the easiness and mildness [of the natives] everyone thought that the people of that island were of simple rationality, without any malice, fear, or cautiousness, such as our men had seen in the isles of the Orient; whereof, it seemed to them that they were amidst the simplicity of the First Age. Their food consisted of some roots like yams, legumes, coconuts, and figs like those of India.

During the four months that our men stayed there waiting for the monsoon in order to return to Maluco, they showed them samples of iron, copper, tin, and gold. Only of the latter did they show any knowledge, and by gesturing with their hands they informed us that this metal was found in a high mountain to the west of the island.¹ They had large proas, but since our men did not see them use iron they asked them how they made them. They showed them fish spines² which they used for cutting and which were such that our men were able to use them just like iron.

Finally, as the time for sailing came, the island's position was marked down and placed on a navigational chart by Gomes de Sequeira, who was the pilot, and after whom it was named. They left on the twentieth of January [1526], having informed those simple people that they would return, all of them showing that they regretted their departure. Making their voyage they reached Maluco eight months after they had left, and found that their property had been sold and placed in custody, as they do with the deceased.”

In a seldom-noted passage appearing laconically in his posthumous *Quarta decada da Asia*, Barros has a puzzling passage saying that in 1527 [sic] Jorge de Menezes “sent Gomez de Sequeira to seek provisions in the isles of Mindanao, who being led astray by a storm discovered many islands close together, in ix or x degrees north, which were given the name Isles of Gomez de Sequeira.” (Barros, 1615:55). Here Barros is specific about latitude, whereas in the long account above appearing in the *Terceira decada* he writes only of a distance of 300 leagues in an easterly direction...

-
- 1 Ed. note: Since we now know that neither Yap nor Palau contains any gold, and we also know that drift voyages from the western Carolines to the Philippines had taken place since time immemorial, the natives could only have meant that gold existed in the Philippines.
 - 2 Ed. note: I agree with the author when he says, later, that only shell tools could have been meant by this bad expression.

Geographic clues

Any effort to identify the Isles of Sequeira must rely heavily although not exclusively on the geographic clues provided by the historians' statements. Most obvious of these is the latitude of nine to ten degrees north at which, according to Barros, Galvão, and Couto¹, the islands were said to be located. We can place some confidence in the ability of the Portuguese to be fairly accurate in determining latitude, for at that time the cross-staff and the astrolabe had been in use for some time. Longitude, on the other hand, was another matter, the chronometer not having been devised as yet, and the Portuguese do not even provide a crude estimate of it.

Castanheda, Barros, Maffei², and Sousa³ do say, however, that the *fusta* was blown about 300 leagues from what must have been the Molucca Passage. Urdaneta says 200. The old Portuguese league was just under four land or statute miles⁴, so the distance involved was approximately 1200 [statute] miles maximum and 800 minimum. Given the crude methods for determining the distance traversed in an hour or a day, and the conditions of enormous stress to which the men and their vessel were subjected, these distances can only be very approximate.

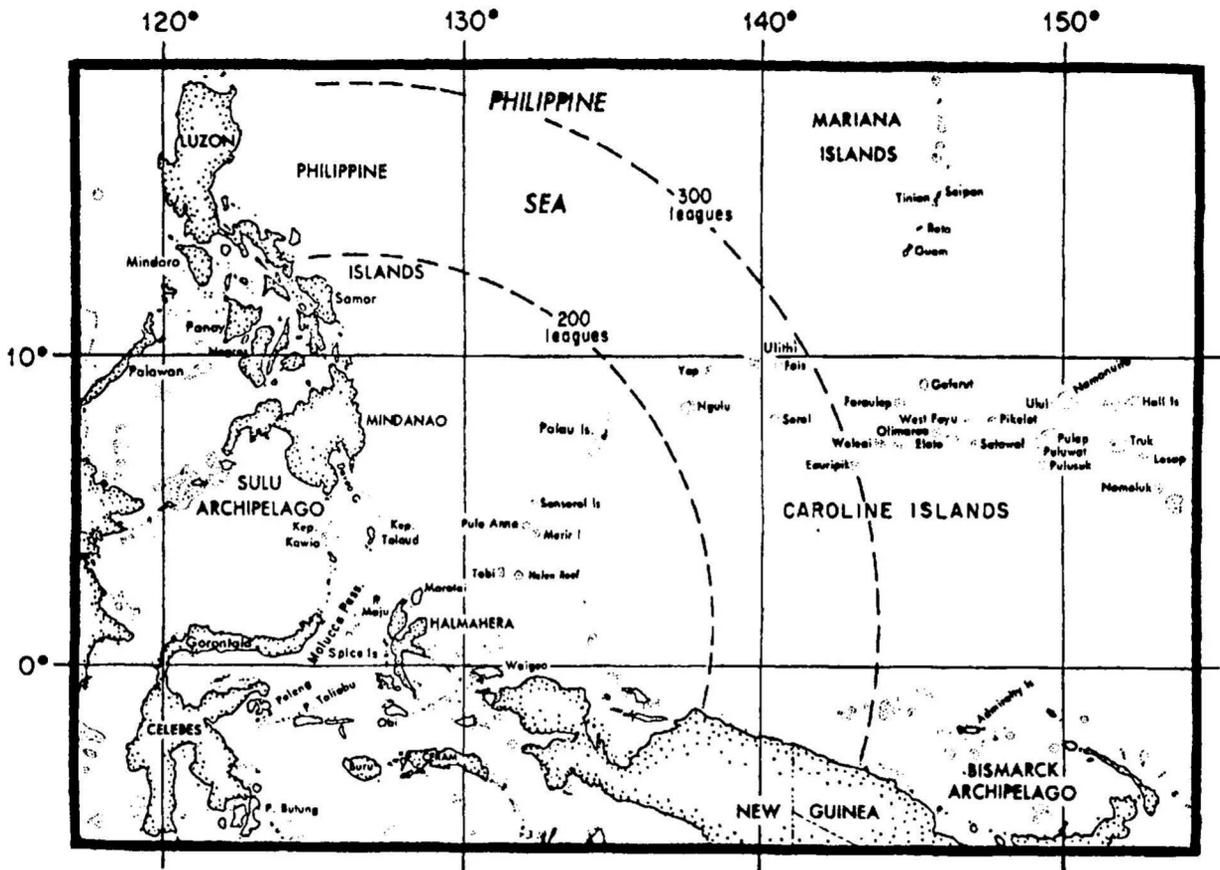
It is important to note that the accounts say that the *fusta* was carried to an open sea, in what Urdaneta says was a northeast direction. True, Barros and Sousa imply the direction was eastward, but they use the more literary terms *nascimento do sol* and *contra o nascente*, respectively, to indicate this direction. In this instance, northeast is more credible than due east, as the latter would take one into empty space until one reached distant Kapingamarangi Atoll or the Gilberts. Moreover, the winds in August and September, when the Portuguese were attempting to return to Ternate from Celebes, come predominantly from the south and southwest in the Molucca Passage, and southeast and east, with a slight increase in southerly winds, in the ocean area as far as far as 10° N of the Passage. Because of the southerly element of the wind during the two months in question, a northeast rather than a direct east direction is all the more plausible as being the path into which the *fusta* was forced...

1 Diogo do Couto, "Terceira quarta da Asia", Lisbon, Crasbeek, 1602; page 67.

2 Giovanni Pietro Maffei, "Historiarum Indicarum", Florence, Iunctam, 1588; page 168.

3 Fr. Luis de Sousa, O.P., "Annaes de el rei Dom João Terceiro", Lisbon, Sociedade propagadores dos Conhecimentos Uteis, 1844; pages 263-64.

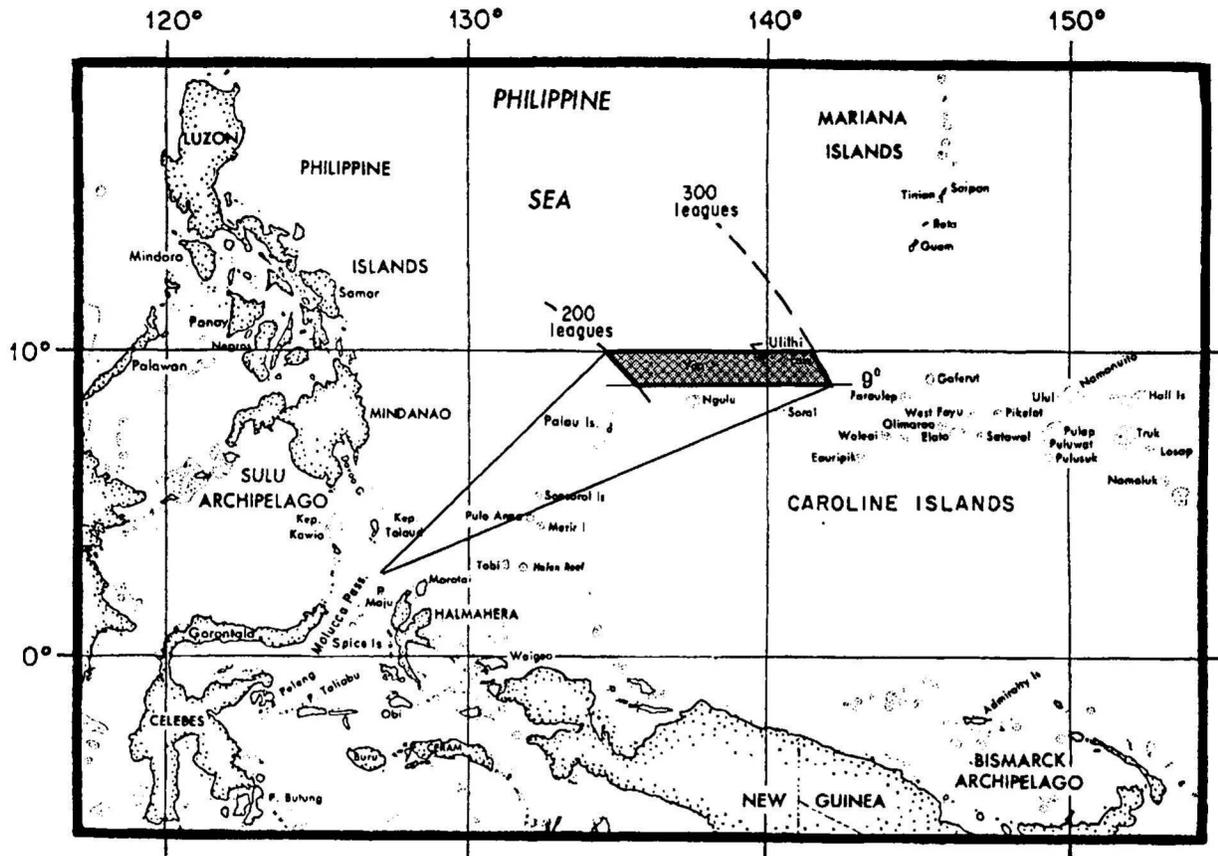
4 Andrew Sharp, "The Discovery of the Pacific Islands", London, OUP, 1960; page 3. Ed. note: The Spanish and the Portuguese league is more generally reckoned to be exactly 4 land miles, i.e. 3.2 nautical miles, or 5,920 meters.



Map given by Lessa to illustrate the discovery of the Sequeira Islands.

Two remaining geographical clues are at our disposal, the first being that the island group was large and the second that the *fusta* sailed between the islands. The latter, especially, has more significance than might appear at first glance, as we shall see later.

An ambiguous geographical feature is whether the locale of the Portuguese's sojourn was a single island or a group. Even though it is referred to as "a large island" by Castanheda, Maffei, Andrade, and Sousa, this would appear to be a loose use of the word. The terms "archipelago of islands" (Urdaneta), "some islands" (Galvão), and "many islands" (Couto) seem to be a correct description and will be here accepted as indicat-

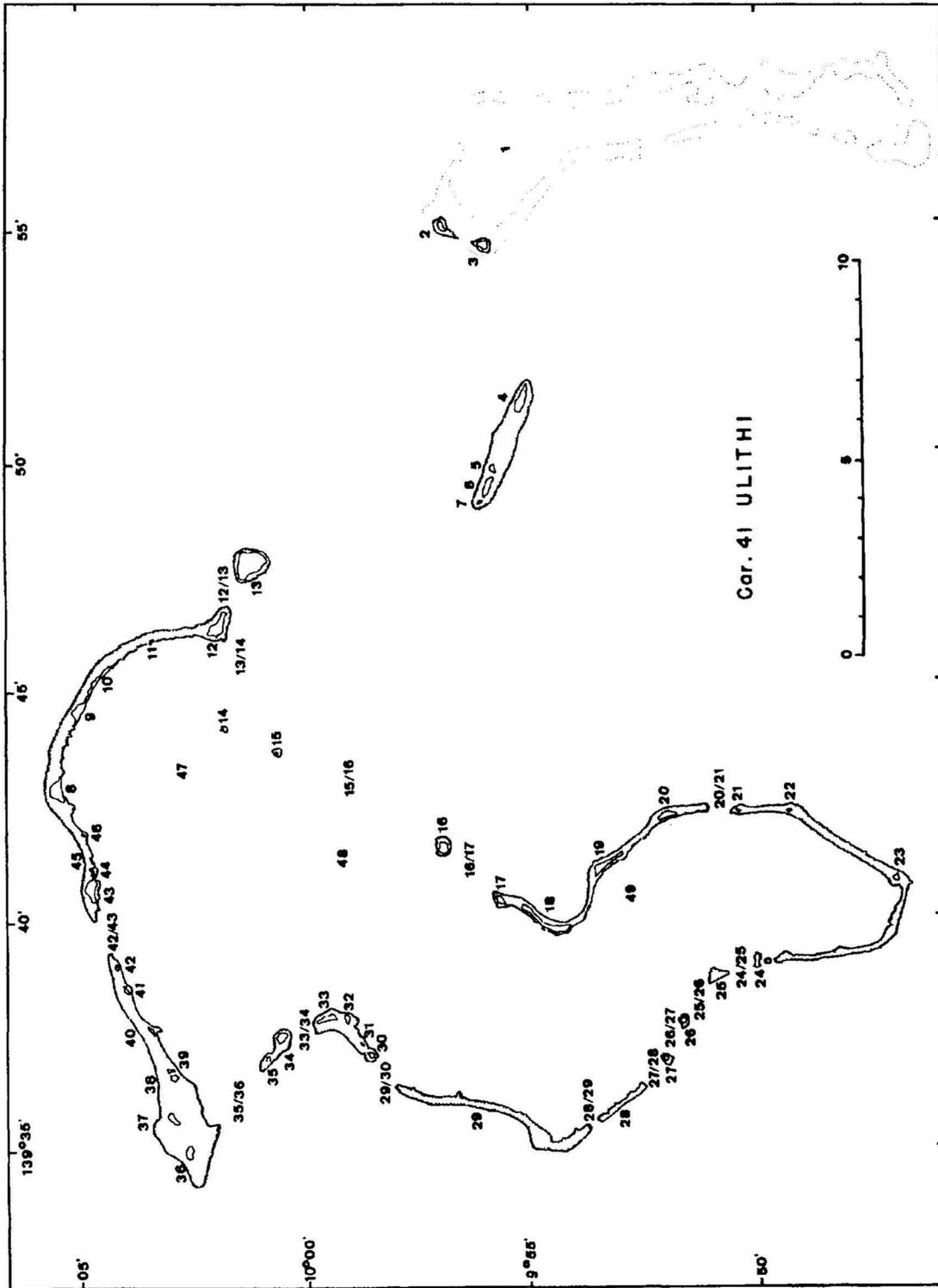


The same map with the search area defined by distances and latitudes. It lies between NE and ENE of the Molucca Passage.

ing what the historians had in mind, particularly in view of their use of such terms as “close together”, “went between”, and so on.

Notwithstanding mention of plentiful fresh water on the Isles of Sequeira by Castanheda and even “rivers of water” by Andrade, we cannot include this as one of the clues because we do not really know what these two historians had in mind. “Rivers of water” is probably a figure of speech denoting an abundance of water...¹

1 Ed. note: Lessa goes on to discuss anthropological and biological clues, which cannot be discriminating enough because they are present throughout the western Carolines. However, the reference to the presence of goats is probably fanciful. As far as possible identification of the Sequeira Islands by previous authors, I agree with Lessa that their analysis was either incomplete or not very scientific. Some of those who speculated were as follows: Palau is supported by Captain Burney and Cortesão; Ngulu by Meinicke; Yap by Sharp. Yap or Ulithi was chosen by Coello. A more extensive study by Agustin Krämer, the leader of the Hamburg South Sea Expedition of 1907-1910, supports Ulithi over all others, even other atolls farther east.



Map of Ulithi, identified as the Sequeira Islands of 1525.
(From E. H. Bryan, Jr. "Guide to Place Names", Honolulu, Bishop Museum, 1971)

Ulithi Atoll

The easternmost and last place remaining to be considered as the Isles of Sequeira is Ulithi, the most spacious atoll in the western Carolines. Its northernmost latitude is 10°05'N. It is about 22 miles long from north to south and 14 miles wide at its northern extremity, being composed of about 30 islets, all reef fringed and arranged in something of the shape of a mushroom whose cap has been partly detached from its stem. Not included in the atoll proper are a long bank, submerged except for two islets, that is located about 15 miles eastward of Ulithi, and a detached reef with several small islets on it that lies between Ulithi and the bank. Not only is Ulithi oriented in a north-east direction from the Molucca Passage, it is at the right latitude and distance, being about 270 leagues or 1080 miles away. Thus, the atoll has vital geographic features conforming to those mentioned by the Portuguese historians.

...

The anthropomorphic features meet the requirements. My observations on 59 males taken in 1947 show that skin color, as seen on the inner side of the upper arm, is predominantly light brown in terms of the von Luschan chart (color nos. 15, 17, 18), with 50.9 percent of the subjects falling in this category. Reddish brown skins (nos. 12, 13, 14, 16) are found in 28.8 percent of the subjects. Medium brown skin colors (nos. 21, 22, 23, 24, 25) occur in the remainder of the cases, or 20.3 percent. None of the subjects showed dark brown or black skin color, although cheek colors are noticeably darker than arm colors, and in many cases display a yellow brown range (nos. 6, 19, 20) not found on the arm.¹

...

Were it not for the "high mountain to the west of the island" most writers would readily qualify Ulithi as the Sequeiras. At 10° the atoll is at the right latitude. It is at the right distance from the Molucca Passage. With its numerous islets it can be thought of as an "archipelago", having none of the extreme compactness of Yap. Certainly its islets invite "passing between" them... Ulithians knew Yap well and they would not have said that there was gold there, because it would have been so obviously untrue.² If we accept Ulithi as the Isles of Sequeira, it would not offend credibility for us to say that the mountain to the west was in the Philippines, where we know from the historical records that Ulithians have been stranded time and again by the elements, often to return to their homeland after a long stay there.

...

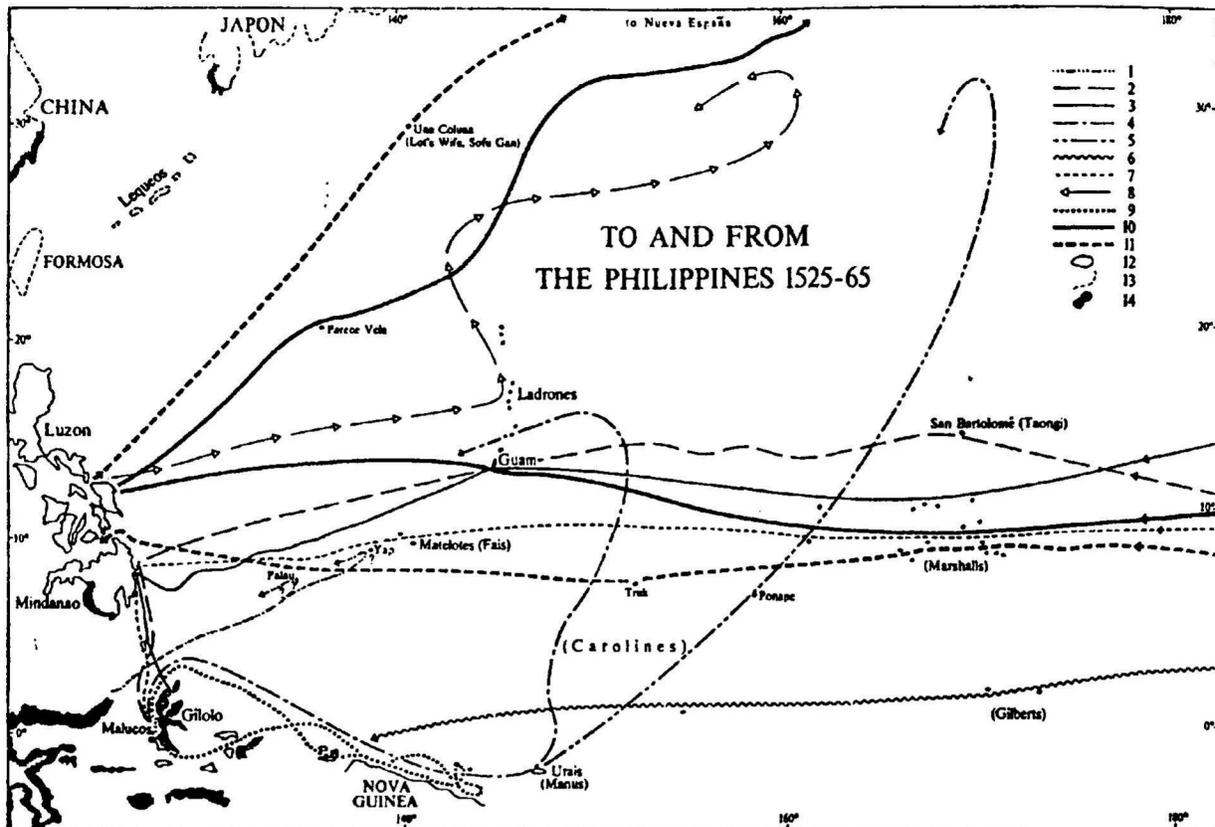
Fortunately, however, other kinds of evidence immensely favor Ulithi as being the islands marked down on his map by Gomes de Sequeira, at the same time insuring its selection by the elimination of each of all the other possible candidates sponsored by

1 Ed. note: All this is well and good, but the people living on Ulithi in 1947 were not the same as those living there three centuries before... The same comment would apply to other points he makes about beards, hair, modern clothing, etc.

2 Unless they were thinking of something else, such as yellow ocher. But whatever it was, the "mountain" did not have to be on one of their own islands.

interested historians, geographers, and anthropologists. The one thing that has served for so long as a deterrent—the mountain to the west of the island—proves to have been a needless obstacle that is easily removed when the records are examined from all possible facets.

This, then, is the solution to a vexing problem surrounding an obscure discovery by the Portuguese, who had entered the open Pacific from the west five years after Magellan had entered it from the east by way of the Strait. It has strong implications for the identification of other Carolinian islands whose locations have long been steeped in controversy.



Probable tracks of Ships Through Micronesia, 1525-1565. (From O. H. K. Spate, *The Spanish Lake*, 1979, p. 92)

Legend:

1. Da Rocha's voyage (Portuguese), 1525-26;
2. Loaysa's voyage (Spanish), 1526;
3. Saavedra's voyage (Spanish), 1527;
4. Saavedra's first return attempt, 1528;
5. Saavedra's second return attempt, 1529;
6. Grijalva's mutineers, 1536-37;
- De Castro's voyage (Portuguese, not shown), ca. 1538;
7. Villalobos' voyage (Spanish), 1542-43;
8. De la Torre's return attempt, 1543;
9. De Retes' return attempt, 1545;
10. Legazpi's voyage (Spanish), 1564, and Urdaneta's successful return, 1565;
11. Arellano's successful return, 1564-65;
12. Reasonably-known coasts, ca. 1550 (but ca. 1575 in the Philippines);
13. Vaguely-known coasts;
14. Portuguese contacts by ca. 1545.