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Magellan not first to sail around the world

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THE recent reports on the ancient anchor found on Sabah Island make interesting reading (NST, April 10/12).

The fact that this bit of ironmongery is venerated for "supernatural powers" is reminiscent of the "floating" cannon that used to lie in the sand near the Butterworth ferry pier that was believed to have potent fertility powers.

However, there are some misleading statements. It is wrong to say that Ferdinand Magellan was "the first navigator to sail around the world" although the Vittoria was the first ship to do so.

Magellan himself was killed during a tribal skirmish at Macatan in the Philippines in March 1521.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out a few years ago Magellan's personal slave Enrique or Black Henry was from the Moluccas and became the first man to sail around the world.

Sebastian Del Cano and other survivors on the Vittoria, of course, were the first to do so on the same ship.

Magellan, however, was the first ever known navigator to cross the Pacific Ocean with three of his ships.

Magellan set sail from Spain in September 1519 with a fleet of five ships.

Three years later, only one ship the Vittoria (85 tons) completed the circumnavigation.

Of the 237 men who sailed with Magellan, only a handful returned home, although the accounts vary.

The Vittoria reached Spain with only 18 or so sailors, while the Portuguese later released 13 of her crew captured in the Atlantic and somewhat later, from those who had tried to return to Panama, another four or five.

After the death of Magellan, because of a shortage of men, one of the ships the Concepcion (90 tons) was abandoned and burnt.

Eight months later, the Vittoria, and the Trinidad (110 tons), reached the Spice Islands of the Moluccas, Magellan's original destination at the end of a known trade route to Europe.

Exactly where the ships had been to in the interim is subject to some scholarly debate, and the anchor may provide a piece in the jigsaw.

It is known that after fleeing from the Philippines the two surviving ships sailed across the Sulu Sea through the Balabac Strait to Brunei, where its Kampung Ayer became to the visitors, the Venice of the east.

Magellan, a Portuguese working for the Spanish king, left his name to the straits at the tip of South America but in Spain the glory went to Del Cano.

He was granted a family coat of arms depicting a globe with the motto *Primus circumdedisti me* - rendered as "First didst thou sail around me".

Magellan's family got nothing, not even his back pay.

He is best remembered in the Philippines where a tall column stands at the spot he died.

A mile or so away, there is a new bronze statue to the man who killed him - a local hero "Lapulapu" whose name in recent times was given to the presidential yacht.

Whether or not the anchor came from one of Magellan's ships requires a more detailed examination.

Robert F. Marx's opinion that the anchor dates from the early 16th century is intriguing, but anchors with wooden stocks were still in use up till the 19th century.

The great anchors on Nelson's Victory preserved at Portsmouth show the buoyant oak stocks provided to the Royal Navy.

The strong point is that the replica does not have any flukes or blades to dig into the seabed; it is interesting that early Spanish anchors did not have any.

An examination of the original anchor might eliminate the possibility that these may have snapped off during use in coral.

Marx's etymological attempt to connect Pulau Mengalum to Magellan is not convincing.

On a previous occasion Marx connected Pulau Aur off the coast of Pahang with the Golden Chersonese of the ancient geographers.

This was because of a supposed connection between the gold of the Aurea Chersonesus with the bamboo of Aur.

The Kamus Dewan (dictionary) has an entry for Mengalum - menjadi layu, merana - in the sense of fading or wasting away.

I would hazard a guess that the island is either tidal, or that sandy beaches would wash away, possibly during the north-east monsoon, but that is just a guess.

Marx is not a qualified marine archaeologist, however skilful he might be as a diver and scavenger of wrecks.

It would be to Marx's credit if his probable theory is upheld by the academics.