

Crime and Punishment on a Galleon: The Shackles of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*

By Corey Malcom

Reprinted from *The Navigator: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society*, Vol.22 No.1, January/February 2006



Two Pairs of Shackles recovered from the wreck of the 1622 galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*. The set at the top was recently donated to the MFMHS Permanent Collection by Mr. Bill Barman of Scottsville, Kentucky.

As would be expected of any organized and civilized community, the people aboard the galleons had ways of dealing with those who broke rules and laws. Many punishments could have been employed for this purpose, but two sets of shackles have been recovered at the site of the *Atocha* to offer direct physical evidence that this was indeed done.

The shackles are of a particular type in which two U-shaped pieces with looped ends were fitted over a straight rod of iron. The rod had a flared end and a pierced slot in the opposite to receive a

wedge-shaped forelock pin. They are both made of wrought iron and are similar in construction and size. Shackles of this style are known as *grilletes* in Spanish, and *bilboes* in archaic English. The latter is attributed to their supposedly having been manufactured in the northern Spanish port of Bilbao, and come to England via the 1588 Spanish Armada to hold prisoners.¹

¹1896 Earle, Alice Morse, *Curious Punishments of Bygone Days*. Reprinted 1969 by Singing Tree Press, Detroit.

Evidence that predates the Armada suggests that both the device and name were known well beyond either Spain or England well before that time. Writing in 1557 from above the Arctic Circle, the Englishman Steven Burroughs traveling to Russian Lapland, encounters Dutch traders there, and notes about them:

*“I was also conueyed to their lodgings, which gathered tribute for the king of Denmarke, where I sawe a pair of bilbowes: and I asked whether they were for the Lappians (if neede were,) and they said no, but onely for their owne company if they should chance to be vnruely.”*²

Other contemporary written and illustrated examples of these instruments give clear evidence to how, why and when shackles were used. From these, it is clear they were used as restraint devices and used over a long period. Captain John Smith wrote in *A Sea Grammar* of 1627:

“The Marshall is to punish offenders, and to see justice executed according to directions; as ducking at the yards arme, haling under the keele, bound to the capsterne, or maine mast with a basket of shot about his necke,

*setting in the bilbowes, and to pay the Cobtie or the Morioune...”*³

Guaman Poma’s illustrated history of Peru and the Incas, written in 1616-1617, features a number of drawings of shackles being used to hold prisoners. These drawings make clear how they were used; they held one person, with the bar under the Achilles tendon, and the loops going over the lowest part of the shin above the ankle. An iron wedge was driven into the slot in the bar to lock the loops.



An illustration from Guaman Poma’s *Buen Cronica*, 1616-1617, shows a Spanish prisoner with his legs bound by both shackles and the stocks.

² *The voyage of the foresaid M. Stephen Burrough, An.1557. from Colmogro to Wardhouse, which was sent to seeke the Bona Esperanza, the Bona Confidentia, and the Philip and Mary, which were not heard of the yeere before.* In *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* compiled by Richard Hakluyt. On the World Wide Web at: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/chapter68.html>

³ It is interesting that “the bilbowes” - shackles - are the only punishment listed here that would require a specific, durable physical device, and the only one traceable in the archaeological record.

The holding power of this design was not limited to restraining people. Colonial-era rigging called for shackles, and those that have been found utilize the exact same forelock technology, but have a shorter bolt and a single loop. These would have been used to temporarily attach chain or other rigging elements to shipboard fixtures. They have been recovered from the 1588 Armada vessel *Girona*⁴, as well as the *Atocha*.



A single-looped, rigging shackle recovered from the 1622 wrecks. The bar is 8 inches long, and the loop is 6 inches tall.

The 1622 shackles are solidly built, and it would have been very difficult to escape them once they were fixed. They are similar in size, with one pair mounted on a rod of 17½ inches and the other measuring 17¾ inches. Both rods are of one-inch diameter round stock. The loops are somewhat different though. One pair is round in cross-section, and quite a bit larger - 3 ¼ x 4 ¾ inches on the inside face. The other set is made of flat iron bar, and held an area of approximately 3 ¾ x 3 ¾ inches.

⁴ *Armada 1588-1988. The Official Catalogue to the International Exhibition to Commemorate the Spanish Armada*. Penguin Books, 1988.

Specific examples of similar restraints in use onboard ships are found both archaeologically and historically. From the 16th century is a pair of these devices from the wreck of what is possibly a Spanish slaver wrecked off the Turks and Caicos Islands.⁵ The slave ship *Henrietta Marie* was carrying at least 82 sets of shackles to restrain cargoes of Africans, as was made evident by its excavation.⁶ Numerous historical documents detail how shackles were used to hold slave cargoes two-by-two, with one person's ankle going into each of the loops. This system kept the captives from rebelling or leaping overboard.

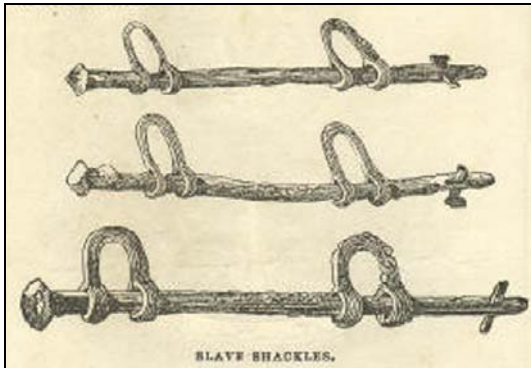
In 1845, during the salvage of the burned and sunk USS *Missouri* off Gibraltar, British divers recovered at least three sets of shackles. The ship was on a diplomatic mission, steaming to Egypt when it burned and sank. With relations between the US and England being relatively poor, some in the British press were willing to declare this evidence of US participation in the slave trade, considered illegal and piratical by that time⁷. Though it is clear that these were the same sort device as used in the slave trade, to have just a few on a naval vessel of a country that had outlawed and was actively combating such trade, makes it unlikely this was the case. They would more logically have been there

⁵ Donald H. Keith, "Shipwrecks of the Explorers" in *Ships and Shipwrecks of the Americas*, George F. Bass, ed., Thames and Hudson, New York, 1988.

⁶ Corey Malcom, "The Iron Bilboes of the Henrietta Marie" In *The Navigator: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society*, October, 1998.

⁷ *The Illustrated London News*, September 27, 1845.

much as Steven Burroughs learned from the Dutchmen, to discipline unruly crew.



Shackles recovered from *USS Missouri*, 1845.

The wreck of the Civil War ironclad ship *CSS Georgia*, sunk in 1862, contained a set of similarly designed shackles.⁸

Within the Spanish maritime system shackles were used as punishment for common and petty offenses. Crimes deemed punishable by this method were numerous, and included insubordination, blasphemy, fighting, petty theft, and the hurling of insults. Corporal punishment was employed as well, with floggings administered with a heavy cord known as a *rebenque*, but this treatment was generally reserved for the younger ships' boys or apprentices. If there was some dispute about the nature of a more serious charge, shackles could be used to hold a suspect until the ship reached a port that housed a court. Serious crimes, especially mutiny, were treated much more harshly, and were remedied by more drastic measures such as keelhauling, abandonment or death.⁹

The discovery of iron shackles on the wreck of the *Atocha* should not be a surprise. Crime had to be dealt with in some fashion on a ship away from home and at sea for months at a time with nearly three hundred people aboard. These holding devices provided an effective way of punishing people, and in design and manufacture were especially compact and durable; qualities that were essential in a crowded marine environment. It was these same qualities that made this same device popular with slave traders, and their discovery in large numbers on slaver shipwreck sites has made them emblematic of that nefarious business. As indicated by these two examples from 1622, exactly the same sorts of shackles, though in much smaller numbers, were a common component of ships' gear outside of the slave trade, and were part of a maritime tradition that spanned at least three hundred years.

⁸ Ervan G. Garrison and Richard J. Anuskewicz, "An Historical and Archaeological Evaluation of the *CSS Georgia*." *Historical Archaeology*, Vol.21 No.2, pp. 74-100.

⁹ *Spain's Men of the Sea*. Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaína. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998.