

Last Will and Testament of Juan Nuñez de Nodal aboard *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, May 18th, 1622

By Corey Malcom

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One of the great historical resources in the world is Spain's system of archives. The documents held in its repositories cover many of the aspects of the administration of the nation and its far-flung territories, whether on land or at sea. They are especially rich when looking at the activities in the New World colonies. In a remarkable exercise in bureaucracy and governmental organization, countless events from the trivial to the sublime were all documented and then stored for future reference. Nowadays, these old pieces of paper offer an exceptionally detailed understanding of the people, functions and logic of the Spanish empire.

Luckily for researchers today, many of these documents have been digitized and are available online at the website of the Spanish national archive system - <http://pares.mcu.es/>. Using a document found there¹, it is possible to steal a look at one of the events that occurred onboard the *Tierra Firme* galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* as it sailed through the Caribbean in the spring of 1622. This is important because with the modern understanding of the ship having been revealed largely through objects, it is rare to find specific anecdotes relating to events as it sailed. But in the words of a young soldier, recorded as he lay dying, surrounded by friends and colleagues, we see a poignant moment shared between some of the many people onboard.

On May 18, 1622, while the *Atocha* sailed near the eastern coast of Panama, a failing but still lucid young soldier named Juan Nuñez de Nodal dictated his last will and testament. Nodal was serving as ensign; the junior officer and standard bearer for the company of soldiers stationed onboard the galleon. A group of eight of his comrades stood nearby, witnessing the veracity of his words. Nuñez had made arrangements with his uncle, Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal, who was also onboard, to act as executor of his estate. He wanted to be laid to rest near a church but understood he was likely to be buried at sea. And though the details of his assets are not stated, everything he owned was to be divided equally amongst his wife and children in Spain.

Nuñez de Nodal's trusted uncle, Bartolomé García de Nodal, was the Captain of the troops, and he was a highly respected person within Spain's maritime community. Just three years before the *Atocha* sailed, he, along with his brother (and presumably Juan's father) Gonzalo de Nodal, reconnoitered the southern tip of South America; the last unexplored piece of Spain's American territories. They sailed through the Magellan Straits, Tierra del Fuego, and past Cape Horn.² They also discovered the Diego Ramirez Islands, named in honor of their chief pilot. Then, and for the next 156 years, the islands became the southernmost known landforms. The largest of these them was named "Isla Bartolomé" in García de Nodal's honor. The expedition confirmed for Spain that there was indeed terminus to South America, and that there was a navigable route around it.

¹*Testamento de Juan Nuñez de Nodal. Archivo General de Indias, CONTRATACIÓN, 348B, N.1, R.26*

² Markham, Clements Sir, ed. (1911). *Narrative of the Voyage of the Nodals in Early Spanish Voyages to the Strait of Magellan*. The Hakluyt Society, London.

The *Atocha* arrived in Portobelo on May 24, 1622 and stayed there until July 22, after it had been loaded with Peruvian silver.³ While there, Nuñez de Nodal's will must have been taken to shore and put onboard another ship, which then carried it safely to Spain where it could be processed. There is no indication as to whether or not his things were left onboard the galleon, and nothing has been recovered in its wreckage that can be traced to him.



The original, handwritten text of the *Testamento de Juan Nuñez de Nodal*.
 Archivo General de Indias, CONTRATACIÓN, 348B, N.1, R.26

The will is relatively brief, getting its points across in two and a half pages. The person who wrote it used no punctuation and cut words or strung them together seemingly without reason. Misspellings are frequent. The (roughly) translated text of the will is as follows:

Juan Nuñez de Nodal said In the name of God, amen, all know as much as this letter of power to make a will to see that I Juan Nuñez de Nodal, ensign of the company of captain Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal, my uncle, [and] who to the present am in the galleon named Nuestra Señora de Atocha, flagship of the fleet, and a native resident of the town of Pontevedra del Reyno of Galicia, being ill of the body and healthy of the spirit, and in my entire and free judgment, just as God was served, giving me belief, as you believe, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and I enter that which is created and possessed [by] the sainted mother Catholic Church of Rome. I say that inasmuch by the gravity of my infirmity I can no longer make nor forge [write] my testament, and so that everything I [am saying] to you to make this will, I have arranged and communicated with the said captain Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal, my uncle, person of whom I have entire and complete satisfaction, therefore I grant and I know that I give all my power as is enough, required, and is necessary to the said captain Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal, so

³ Lyon, Eugene (1989). *The Search for the Motherlode of the Atocha*. Florida Classics Library, Port Salerno.

that for me and in my name, he takes [acts] the same as me, and Representing my own person can I make the saying of my testament and complete and by primary will [desire] doing everything equally those controls and legacies that seem [best] to him, and by good your brief that from now [until] then I ratify them and I prove and want that they leave as if I myself am taking it and would be wanted because here it is my will [desire], although it is of Little or much quantity. And if God is served and if I die on land, I ask that my body be buried in any parochial church in the place where I will die, and my executor alike, and if it [my life] passes away at sea, do with me as is accustomed. And I leave and name for my executor, the said captain Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal, as the equal. I give him complete power and enough so that he can receive and collect and gather all equally to decide the rights and actions that to me are owed, and of my goods in Spain as in the Indies by any cause and reason that is here and [which] pertains to me and matters to me, [and] to say the masses that with the said captain I have communicated. And I leave and I name for my all my heirs all the Surplus of my goods, which I give that to my children that may be, and who I have, with Isabel de Magallanes my wife with whom I am presently married, any [of] those today. And it is my will that the young inherit all my goods by equal parts with the blessing of God, and to me and by this power strong and wide and two[?] by no means all and any testaments to give and codicils [additions] that I have reason to make anytime there is [illegible] and granted in writing of word to note any manner as I want, that they are worthless if it will not be the said Bartolomé Garcia de Nodal in my name, and if there are that are worthy, it is sufficiently affirmed and valid by my complete, and by [my] own, will. Made at sea in the jurisdiction of Puerto Belo the eighteenth of May of [1]622 years, being witnesses the squad commander Alonso de Guzman; and Pedro de Nodal, Soldier; and the lieutenant Francisco Correa Meneses, soldier; and Jacome Ruiz, soldier; and Amaro Nuñez de Nodal; and Juan Ramos, squad commander; and Gregorio Sanjurjo, squad commander; and Juan Lopez de Aran, soldier; and Juan of Viso, squad commander, sign that it = and gives affirmation to the said Juan Nuñez not being able, by the gravity of his malady and request, yet witness who signed it

Fran^{co} Correa Meneses

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Alonso deguzman

Juan lopez desbe Ranos

Juan ramos

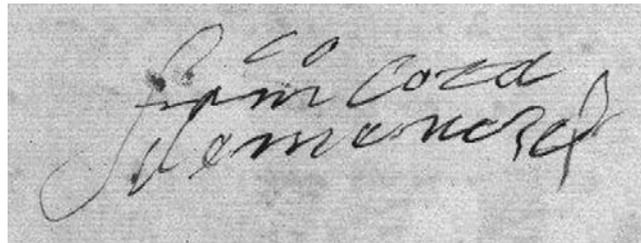
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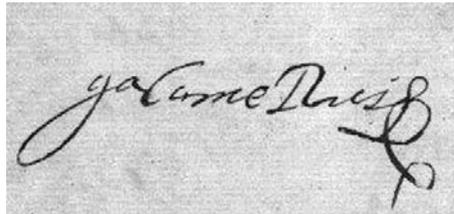
Of the nine men who witnessed Nuñez de Nodal's testament, seven of them appear on the lists of those who perished at the Florida Keys. It is not clear what became of the two who don't, Gregorio Sanjurjo and Juan Lopez de Aran. Perhaps they too died before the *Atocha* sank; maybe they transferred to another ship (but, according to the documents, not the *Santa Margarita*); or they stayed behind in one of the ports that the galleon visited.

To see the signatures of people who were onboard during the terrible disaster of 1622, adds a significant human touch to the story. It is one thing to see objects they might once have owned, but to see these most personal and distinguishing marks really reaches back to them. Combining them with other bits of information about each man, we can start to see the outlines of people who have been long-lost to the shadows of time.

The following are the names of the men, in their own writing, who are known to have perished onboard the *Atocha* in the hurricane of September 5, 1622. The brief descriptions that follow each are compiled from two lists of those who sailed onboard the galleon.⁴

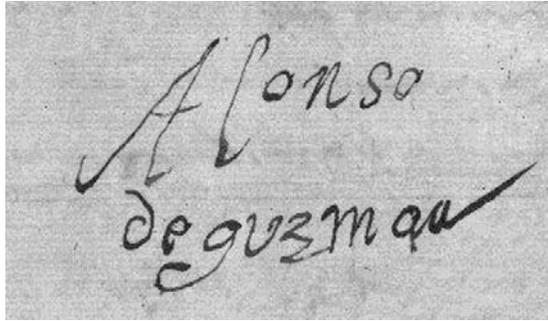
A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Francisco Correa de Moneses". The first name "Francisco" is written in a larger, more prominent script, while "Correa de Moneses" follows in a similar but slightly smaller cursive hand.

Francisco Correa de Moneses was the son of Antonio and a native of the Mediterranean port of Malaga. He had a distinctive mole on his face.

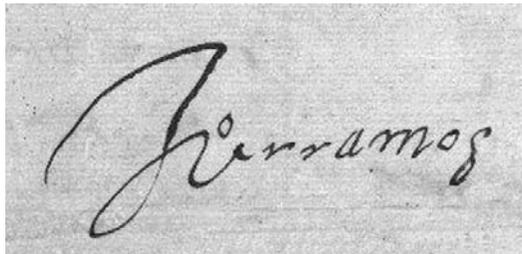
A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Jacome Ruiz". The first name "Jacome" is written in a larger, more prominent script, while "Ruiz" follows in a similar but slightly smaller cursive hand.

Jacome Ruiz was a soldier from the Atlantic port of Santa Maria near Cadiz. His father had the same name.

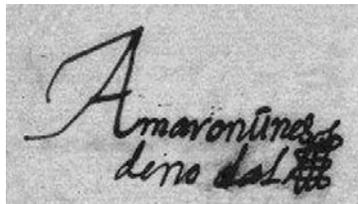
⁴ *Relación de los oficiales y soldados de la compañía del Capitan Batolomé García de Nodal que y en embarcadera en el galeón nombrada Nra Señora de Atocha. Archivo General de Indias, Contratación 2987, Libro de Armadas.* This document was translated by MFMHS intern Byrna O. West and published in 1992 as "The Face of Seventeenth Century Spain" in *Astrolabe: Journal of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society*, 7:1, pp. 12-18. The detailed *Relación De Lo Sucedido en los Galeones y Flota de Tierra firme* was also used. A facsimile copy of this 1622 Spanish news account is in the MFMHS library.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alonso de Guzman". The name is written in two lines, with "Alonso" on the top line and "de Guzman" on the bottom line.

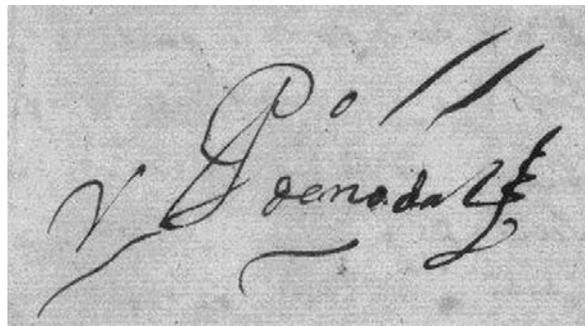
Alonso de Guzman was a native of the Andalusian town of Manchuela de Jaen. He was of average build with brown hair. He served as corporal to Captain Don Alonso de Piedrola. His father was named Diego.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Juan Ramos". The name is written in a single line.

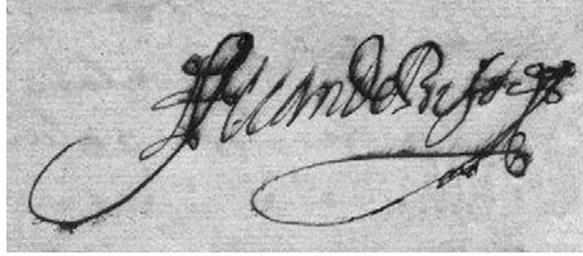
Juan Ramos was a corporal. He was the son of Diego and a native of Talavera, a small town near Madrid in central Spain. He had a slender build.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Amaro Nuñez de Nodal". The name is written in two lines, with "Amaro Nuñez" on the top line and "de Nodal" on the bottom line.

Amaro Nuñez de Nodal was the son of Alonso San Vicente and, like Juan Nuñez de Nodal, was a native of the Atlantic port city of Pontevedra in Galicia. He was of average height and had a stocky build. It seems probable that all of the men onboard named “de Nodal” from Pontevedra were related.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Pedro de Nodal". The name is written in two lines, with "Pedro" on the top line and "de Nodal" on the bottom line.

Pedro de Nodal was the 20 year old son of Amaro and also a native of Pontevedra. He had a black beard, which helped to cover his many pockmarks.



Juan de Viso was a freckle-faced corporal. He was from Bayona in north central Spain, and his father was named Bartolomé.

The image of these men gathered round their friend, listening as he lay dying, is a touching moment made all the more affecting by the fact that, because the galleon would be destroyed in a hurricane just four months later, they were all doomed. For the most part, our knowledge and understanding of the wreck of the *Atocha* has been shaped by the diverse multitude of objects from that have been able to survive nearly four centuries under the sea. Words written from the ship have not been a typical part of our conception of the subject, especially those about the “common” men onboard. To see a young man’s life slipping away as his friends and colleagues witnessed his dying wishes only makes it clearer that these were real people with lives and families and concerns, perhaps not unlike ours today. It is easy to become fixated on all of the remarkable artifacts that have been found, but really, as this centuries-old document testifies, the story is even more about those who were living on the ship, what they were doing, and why.