



## The Maragtas Legend

How do historians know about events that occurred in the Philippines before the time of the Spaniards? How do they know the names of the people who lived then and the things they did if there are almost no authentic written documents from that era?

Much of what we know about the prehispanic era came to us through legends. These are stories that were not written but were spoken by each generation to its following generation. Many legends are usually nothing more than stories about the creation of the world, the first man and woman and such. It is easy to see that these are not meant to be regarded as fact. There are some legends that may have been based on actual events but they are not reliable records of the past because legends can change with each telling. Often a teller's memory can be weak or mistaken or the teller may even add or remove parts of the story just to spice it up.

This article is about one legend called Maragtas but not the Maragtas that was once taught to Filipino school children. This article is about a modern myth that surrounds a book entitled *Maragtas*. And, just like the legends of old, this one has been "spiced up" too. In this case, however, the legends have become confused with history. And, as we shall see, when history and legend are mixed, the stories often sound better but the truth always suffers.

### The Legends of *Maragtas*

The stories known as the Maragtas are legends that may or may not be based on actual events in the remote past. They are about the ten datos or chiefs who escaped the tyranny of Datu Makatunaw of Borneo and immigrated to the island of Panay. Once there, they supposedly bought the lowland plains of the island from Marikudo, the leader of the indigenous Aytas, for the price of a solid gold *salakot* (hat). According to the legend, these ten chiefs and their families are the very ancestors of the entire Visayan population. This is the legend that has been celebrated yearly in the *Ati-atihan* festival since the late 1950s when it became a part of the annual feast of the *Santo Niño* in Kalibo, Aklan.

### Pedro Monteclaro's *Maragtas*

Even though these legends might have been known for generations, the word *maragtas* itself was unknown until it was used as the title of a book by Pedro Alcantara Monteclaro in 1907. <sup>M1</sup> He wrote *Maragtas* in the Hiligaynon and Kinaray-á languages of Panay and the word *maragtas*

was merely intended to mean "history". To this day the word *maragtas* is known only in connection to his book.

Monteclaro regarded legends as an important part of Visayan heritage so he collected the various stories of the elderly of Panay and published them in his *Maragtas*. Some people have claimed that Monteclaro actually translated *Maragtas* from an ancient prehispanic manuscript but in the preface of the book he clearly stated that he himself was its author. And although he did refer to two old written documents, he said that he did not publish them due to their poor condition and he did not imply that they were transcribed in his book.

**Read Monteclaro's entire preface to *Maragtas* in  
[Foreword to the Readers](#).**

Monteclaro did not assign any specific dates to these supposedly ancient documents. One, he said, belonged to his grandfather and the other belonged to the grandfather of an 82 year old man whom he had met in his hometown of Miag-ao. Monteclaro said that he managed to copy these documents in 1901 even though they were almost completely illegible.

The fact that these documents were said to have been written on paper and that, at best, these sources date back only to two generations before 1901 (Monteclaro claimed one to be five generations old) places them firmly within the period of the Spanish occupation. Also, in the epilogue, Monteclaro stated that he had consulted with all the old men of every town because, he wrote:

*...my documents did not give me clear and complete data on the things of the past.*

The publisher of *Maragtas*, Salvador Laguda, even noted that:

*According to the author, this *Maragtas* should not be considered as containing facts all of which are accurate and true, because many of his data do not tally with what we hear from old men.*

A large part of *Maragtas* appears to be based on a work written in 1858 by Fr. Tomás Santarén, and published in 1902 under the title *Historia de los primeros datos*. It was a translation of one document of the mid 1800's and another older document. Santarén did not mention from what language these documents were translated and he described the older document simply as old but not ancient. Another note by the publisher of *Maragtas* may reveal its connection to this work by Santarén as well as the source of Santarén's information.

*The scattered sources from which this work is written came from the friars who tried to keep a record of what they had done and seen in this island.*

## **Once Legend, Now History**

Despite such clear disclaimers, later historians still came to regard *Maragtas* as an actual ancient document. This is probably due to the many misleading translations of Monteclaro's book.

- Some writers deliberately mistranslated the parts of his foreword that referred to the two documents mentioned earlier. See: [Foreword to the Readers](#).

- Most deliberately excluded the sections that reveal the work to be modern, (i.e. the chapters which deal with the Spanish era and the original publisher's notes).
- And all the translators seemed to have turned a collective blind eye to Monteclaro's free use of Spanish words such as *dios*, *junta*, *negrito*, and *volcán* in a document they claimed to be prehispanic.

Nor did they draw attention to the fact that much of the book was written in a subjective style and in the third person, past-tense. That is to say, the parts which dealt with what, according to them, should have been contemporary information (languages, commerce, law, social customs etc.) were presented in the style of a modern history book rather than an account written by someone who had lived at that time. For example, here is the description of an offence punishable by slavery:

*The most serious and most severely punished offence was laziness.*

It is unbelievable that any legal code would present its laws in this manner. Also, this particular statement is inaccurate because there were other offences mentioned in *Maragtas* that were punished by mutilation and death. Incredibly, later writers would compile these descriptions, call them "The Code of Maragtas" and then claim that they were written in the year 1212!

The misconceptions surrounding *Maragtas* were further reinforced when even the highly respected historian, Dr. Henry Otley Beyer called it a prehispanic document. In *Philippine Saga* which he wrote with Jaime C. de Veyra in 1947, he mentioned a manuscript from Panay known as *Maragtas* and "the ancient writing in which it was originally inscribed". Then in his Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology of 1949 he wrote the following:

*A remarkable ancient document known as the "Maragtas," dating probably from about 1225, was preserved in Panay and transliterated into romanized Visayan in the early Spanish days.*

Unfortunately, lesser historians have accepted these statements without question and many teachers still repeat them confidently today.

In 1957 anthropologist Tom Harrison wrote a preface to a translation of *Maragtas* by Manuel Carreon wherein he referred to Monteclaro not as the author of *Maragtas* but merely the transcriber of an ancient Philippine legend.

## **The Confederation of Madya-as**

In *Maragtas*, Monteclaro also told the story of the creation of the *Confederation of Madya-as* in Panay under the rule of Datu Sumakwel and he gave the details of its constitution. In spite of the importance that should be placed on such an early constitution and his detailed description of it, Monteclaro gave no source for his information. Also, it appears that the *Confederation of Madya-as* is unique to Monteclaro's book. It has never been documented anywhere else nor is it among the legends of the unhispanized tribes of Panay.

## **The Code of Maragtas**

Even though Monteclaro did describe the customs and rules of Sumakwel's community, he never made reference to any *Code of Sumakwel* or *Code of Maragtas*. Indeed *Maragtas* was

simply the title of his own book and a word which was supposed to mean "history". Thus any *Code of Maragtas* that predated his book would be highly suspect from the start.

In fact, the *Maragtas Code* only first appeared in an article entitled *El Código de Maragtás* written by Guillermo Santiago-Cuino in 1938. These were a set of laws which were said to have been enacted in the year 1212. This code was allegedly translated by Santiago-Cuino from "ancient Filipino writing". He claimed that he had found these documents in the mountains of Madya-as and that he was accompanied by a Bishop Gabriel Reyes at the time. However, when Reyes was asked about the incident by a relative, Jaime de Veyra of the *National Language Institute*, he said that he did not know Santiago-Cuino nor had he ever been to the Madya-as mountains. Guillermo Santiago-Cuino never produced his original document for the public or any believable proof for his essay.

Santiago-Cuino probably took the date of the *Code of Maragtas* from a work by Josué Soncuya, *Historia prehispana de Filipinas* (1917). The year 1212 is the date that Soncuya gave for the emigration of the ten datus. He based this on two unpublished documents from Mambusao, Capiz and Bugasong, Antique which were never recognized to be prehispanic by any historian. In fact, these said documents were not dated as such but were assigned this date by local school teachers who had prepared chronicles for their towns to submit to the *National Library* in 1911. Aside from this, Soncuya's calculations are generally quite unreliable. For example, by his estimation, the year 1212 is 16 generations after the year 1160. Obviously, 16 human generations could not fit into a span of only 52 years.

### **The Verdict on *Maragtas***

*Maragtas* was finally placed in its proper perspective as a book of legends rather than historical fact in 1968 by William Henry Scott. For his doctoral dissertation at the *University of Santo Tomas*, Scott made a painstaking investigation into all the sources of information about the Philippines before the coming of the Spaniards.

Rather than merely plagiarizing past historians, Scott examined the original documents and searched archives and museums the world over for supporting documents and artefacts. He questioned the top historians of the day about their sources of information and consulted with many experts in other fields such as language, geology, archaeology and anthropology. He scoured the vast collection of prehispanic material amassed by his personal friend, Dr. H. Otley Beyer. He interviewed the friends, colleagues and relatives of the figures behind the stories such as Pedro Monteclaro and Jose E. Marco and he examined their correspondence.

William Henry Scott proved in his dissertation that *Maragtas* and the *Confederation of Madya-as* were not actual ancient documents from long ago but only legends that were collected and in some cases possibly concocted by Pedro Monteclaro and published in 1907 in his book entitled *Maragtas*. As for the *Maragtas Code*, Scott found that it was merely an invention of Guillermo Santiago-Cuino's mind which was probably based on Monteclaro's book and published in 1938.

Scott successfully defended his dissertation before a panel of eminent Filipino historians, some of whom had formerly endorsed and promoted the erroneous facts of Philippine history. The panel included Teodoro Agoncillo, Horacio de la Costa, Marcelino Forondo, Mercedes Grau Santamaria, Nicholas Zafra and Gregorio Zaide. Scott's meticulous research was published in 1968 in his book *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History* and since then no historian has contested his conclusions.

## The Result of Scott's Discoveries

By the 1960s the better scholars already had some doubts regarding *Maragtas* and they avoided mentioning it in their works. Scott's thesis confirmed their suspicions. However, it was many years before the writers of school textbooks noticed Scott's findings. Most continued to reprint their old texts while others wrote new books that still contained the old mistakes. Take for example this quote from *Ang Pagsulong ng Pamayanan* (1981):

*Maragtas' Code is the premier example of written law and it has been considered the oldest because it was in effect from 1250.*

Not only is this statement wrong but its authors seem to believe that *Maragtas* was a person and not a book.

Jose Villa Panganiban used *Maragtas* to trace the origin of the Tagalog language in the preface of the very popular *English-Tagalog Dictionary* by Fr. Leo James English in 1965. To this day it remains unrevised in spite of many reprintings.

Even one member of Scott's dissertation panel did not appear to be eager to set the record straight. Gregorio Zaide continued to include information from *Maragtas* in works such as *Pageant of Philippine History* in 1979, *History of the Republic of the Philippines* in 1983 and *Philippine History* 1984 which he co-authored with his daughter, Sonia Zaide.

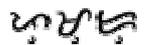
While making an effort to correct the errors of the past, some historians mistook *Maragtas* to be one of the many hoaxes of Philippine history rather than a mere legend. When Sonia Zaide revised *History of the Republic of the Philippines* in 1987, she mistakenly described *Maragtas* as a fraudulent document:

*The legends surrounding the settling of the Philippines by Malay migrants are notably celebrated in the ati-atihan festival and perpetrated by hoaxers in the fraudulent documents containing the Maragtas chronicle and the Code of Kalantiaw.*

Zaide clarified her opinion on the following page:

*Although previously accepted by some historians, including the present authors, it has become obvious that the Maragtas is only the imaginary creation of Pedro A. Monteclaro, a Visayan public official and poet, in Iloilo in 1907. He based it on folk customs and legends, largely transmitted by oral tradition.*

It would be unfair to brand Pedro Monteclaro a hoaxer or his book a fraudulent document because he never claimed that *Maragtas* was anything more than a collection of legends. Any frauds involving his book were perpetrated by other later writers who misrepresented it as an authentic ancient document.



## Postscript

To this day ignorance and misunderstanding of the true nature of *Maragtas* is still prevalent throughout Philippine society even among its highest institutions and organizations. Evidence of this can be seen in the following list of web sites:

- **Supreme Court of the Philippines**  
*A Brief History*. Management Information Systems Office of the Philippine Supreme Court. Copyright © 1998 SUPREME COURT. Author not identified.
- **Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines**  
*Looking Back; Important Dates in Philippines History*. Education News. Vol. 7, No.4. April 2001. Author not identified.
- **Governor's Office, Province of Antique**  
*Antique Provincial Profile*, League of Provinces of the Philippines. Copyright 2001 Author not identified.
- **Mayor's Office, City of Iloilo**  
*The Exciting Blend of East and West*. Author not identified.
- **Madya-as Heritage Foundation Inc.**  
*Save Madya-as, Save Panay*. Author not identified
- **Akaenon.Com**  
*Confederation of Madyaas*. Author not identified.

**For more information about the true history of Aklan and the Visayas, visit [AklanWeb](#).**

## Bibliography

The main source of information for this article, including some of the quotations from earlier works, is W.H. Scott's *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History*, revised edition, 1984. Specific citations may be accessed by clicking on the M# links.

The drawing at the top of this article is from *Ang Pagsulong ng Pamayanan*, first edition, 1981, p.174 by F.T. Leogardo, R.R. de Leon & P. Jacob. The artist was not credited.

Other sources:

- **AklanWeb**, <http://aklanweb.tripod.com/ati.htm>
- Alip, Eufronio M. *Political and Cultural History of the Philippines*, revised edition, 1954.
- English, Leo James. *English-Tagalog Dictionary*, 1965.
- Leogardo, Felicitas T., Rosalina R. de Leon & Purification Jacob. *Ang Pagsulong ng Pamayanan*, first edition, 1981.
- Scott, William Henry. *Looking for the Prehispanic Filipino*, 1992.
- Zaide, Gregorio F. *The Pageant of Philippine History* vol. 1, 1979.
- Zaide, Gregorio F. & Sonia M. Zaide. *Philippine History*, corrected edition, 1987.
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## Pedro A. Monteclaro's "Foreword to the Readers" of

### Maragtás

*Maragtás* was written by Pedro Alcantara Monteclaro in 1907 as a collection of the legends of the island of Panay in the Philippines. He wrote it in a mixture of Hiligaynon and Kinaray-a, the languages of his birthplace, Miag-ao in the south of Panay. However, many translators of the book have selectively mistranslated or omitted parts in order to make it appear that the book was an ancient manuscript written at the time of the events described in it.

The full title of the book is:

*Maragtás kon (historia) sg pulò nga Panay kutub sg iya una nga pamuluyö, tubtub sg pag-abut sg mga taga Borneo nga amó ang ginhalinan sg mga bisayâ, kag sg pag-abut sg mga Katsilâ.*  
(Note: *sg* should be written with a tilde (~) above the word. It is short for *sang*.)

"Maragtás or (history) of Panay Island from the first inhabitants, until the arrival of the Borneans from which the Bisayans are descended, to the arrival of the Spaniards".

### The Original Preface to *Maragtás*

Here is Pedro Monteclaro's own foreword to *Maragtás*. It is a corrected translation taken from William Henry Scott's *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History* (Revised Edition, 1984). The underlining and bold typeface are added by the present author.

#### Foreword to the Readers

I wrote this *Maragtás*, a history of the first inhabitants of the island of Panay, with great reluctance for fear I might be considered too presumptuous. I would therefore have refrained from writing it but for my burning desire to reveal to the public the many data which I gathered from records about the first inhabitants of the island of Panay, the arrival of the Datus from Borneo, their possession and settlement of our land, their spread to different parts of the Island, and their customs and habits until the Spaniards came and ruled the Philippines.

In order that readers of this *Maragtás* should not accuse me of having merely composed this book from imagination, **I wish to mention two manuscripts I found**. One of these was given to me by an 82 year old man, who had been the first teacher of the town and who said it had been given him by his father, who in turn got it from his father, the old man's grandfather. The long years through which the manuscript must have passed wore out the paper so much that it was almost impossible to handle. Worse yet, it was only written in a black dye and smeared with sap which had burned the paper and made it almost useless. The other manuscript I found in a bamboo tube where my grandfather used to keep his old papers. This manuscript, however, was hardly legible at all, and was so brittle I could hardly handle it without tearing it to pieces. Having located one manuscript, I concluded there would most likely be another copy somewhere, so I decided to inquire of different old men and women of the town. My search was not in vain for I then came across the aforementioned old man in the street, who even gave me the manuscripts dealing with what happened in the town of Miag-ao from the time of its foundation. I copied these records in a book on 12 June 1901, as a memoir for the town of Miag-ao, but did not publish them for the reasons stated. Besides, I was waiting for someone better qualified to write a history of the Island of Panay from the time of its first inhabitants.

I should like my readers to know that my purpose in writing this *Maragtas* is not to gain honor for myself but to transmit to others what I read in the records I collected.

This corrected translation was prepared after Scott consulted with the eminent Ilonggo anthropologist, Felipe Landa Jocano; Trinidad Molavin, granddaughter of Pedro Monteclaro; and Dr. Juan C. Orendain. It was based on the following English translations:

1. *H. Otley Beyer Collection: Visayan ethnography paper No. 25* by Encarnacion J. Gonzaga, Natividad Rosado, Ramón P. Locsin and Ismael Golez, 1916.
2. *A pre-Spanish history of the Island of Panay*, translated for the Research Commission from the vernacular version of Pedro Monteclaro, Philippine Executive Commission, Department of Education, Health and Public Welfare, Manila, typewritten, by Manuel Carreon, 1943.
3. *A pre-Spanish history of the Island of Panay*, *Philippines Review*, , vol. 2, No. 4 and No. 5 by Manuel Carreon, July and August 1944. Reprinted as *Maragtas: pre-Spanish history of the Island of Panay* in *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, by Zoilo M. Galang, 2nd edition, revised, Vol. 15, 1950 .
4. *Maragtas* by Eva M. Bayoneta in *Supplementary readings on A short history of the Filipino people* by Teodoro Agoncillo, 1960.

## Sins of Omission

None of the translations listed above included the last chapter or the epilogue of Monteclaro's book where he gave a list of Spanish officials from 1687 to 1808 and mentioned various dates from the 1700's in the town of Miag-ao. The 1916 translation made for Otley Beyer (#1) did not include Pedro Monteclaro's foreword either.

The second work on this list did include these chapters in its original typewritten form but the final chapters were suppressed when it was actually published in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, Vol. 8, 1957 under the misleading title, *Maragtas: the Datus from Borneo (the earliest known Visayan text)*. An introduction was added by the journal's editor, anthropologist Tom Harrison, where he referred to Monteclaro not as the author of *Maragtas* but merely the transcriber of an ancient Philippine legend.

## Deceptive Translations

Even when translators did include Monteclaro's preface, they often took great liberties with the text which only served to mislead readers. For instance, the phrase shown above in bold lettering, **...I wish to mention two manuscripts I found** – is a faithful translation of the original phrase:

*...akon diri igasambit nga duha ka talamdan ang akon naayap.*

However, in Manuel Carreon's article of 1957 this is translated as "the two manuscripts on which I based my work". And in *The Ten Datus of Madiaas* (1963) by Juan C. Orendain it reads, "I am here presenting two writings which I have been able to find." The truth is that Monteclaro wrote in the foreword that one manuscript was "almost useless" and the other was

"hardly legible at all". Thus he could not have "presented" or "based his work on" either of these documents.

Orendain went on to write in the preface of his 1963 book that, "He [Monteclaro] claimed he copied the Maragtas." However, when William Henry Scott interviewed Orendain in 1966 he admitted that Monteclaro's foreword did not actually make that claim.

Ref.: [http://www.mts.net/~pmorrow/marag\\_e.htm](http://www.mts.net/~pmorrow/marag_e.htm)