

Simón de Torres' Shipment of Five Silver Ingots aboard the 1622 Galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*

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Reprinted from:

The Navigator: The Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society

Vol 23, No. 1, January/February 2007

In 1545, the discovery of vast silver deposits at Potosí high in the Andes Mountains in the viceroyalty of Peru (and now in modern-day Bolivia) was to change the course of Spain's empire and the economy of the world. Nearly all the wealth that had been imagined by Christopher Columbus and the succeeding conquistadors was contained in this one geologic anomaly. This remarkable find was further transformed some twenty years later with the introduction of the mercury amalgamation refinement process. At nearly the same time, the establishment of the *mita*, or requirement of forced labor by native Andean peoples, only increased the effectiveness of this system. By having a large number of poorly paid laborers mine, and then mix the silver ore with mercury, nearly pure metallic silver could be extracted very efficiently, and at great profit. In the late 16th century, silver began to flow in a steady stream from the Andes to Spain. Over 15 million *pesos*¹ of silver were mined and registered in Spanish Peru in 1622, and the *Atocha* alone carried nearly one million.

The primary function of the *Tierra Firme* galleons was to carry silver across the Atlantic Ocean, and provide Spain's economy with an annual infusion of South American treasure. The *Atocha* was certainly serving this purpose well, carrying over 30 tons of silver in the form of coins, plate and, most of all, 1,038 ingots. This large amount of bullion was being shipped to satisfy many objectives, both private and governmental. Among those were 133 ingots of Potosí silver as part of the *quinto*, a 20% tax on mined silver; a chest of ingots to pay the royal head tax on 1,400 African slaves sent to Cartagena; and, shipping his own personal fortune of sixty ingots, was Lorenzo de Arriola, a wealthy citizen of Potosí.

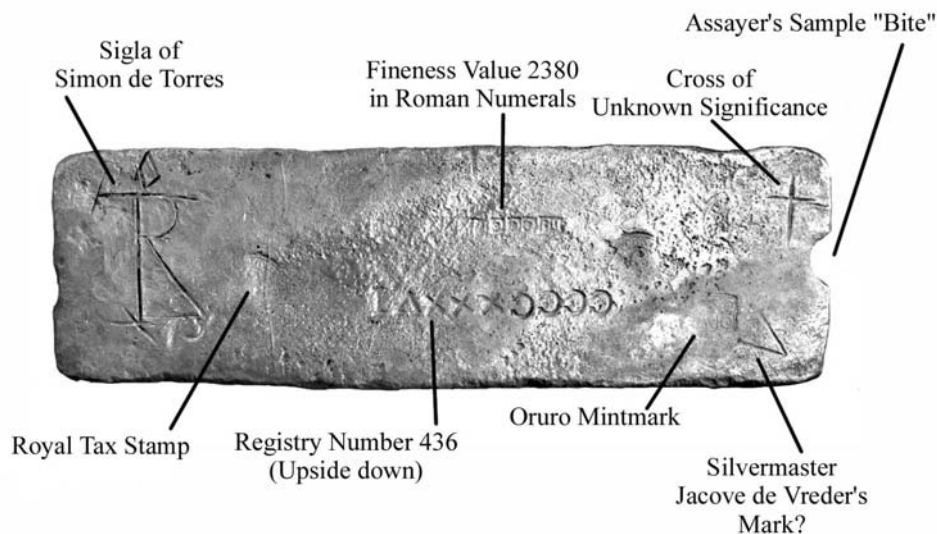
The silver was put aboard the *Atocha* at the Caribbean ports of Puerto Belo, Cartagena, and Havana. To keep track of the wealth that went into the galleon's hold, and to keep a strict check on any smuggling, the *Atocha's* silver master Jacove de Vreder, maintained a *registro*, or detailed manifest. This document, composed of a series of logs recorded at each port, describes each item of treasure put onboard. In the case of silver ingots, the serial number, the fineness of the silver, and the weight of each piece were all recorded. The shipper's mark, or *sigla*, a unique and indelible mark similar in function to a cattle brand, was noted in the margin (see Figure 3). This document was recorded in triplicate, with one copy going aboard the vessel carrying the cargo; one on another ship, and the third remaining on shore.

One entry details five silver ingots shipped aboard the *Atocha* by a Simón de Torres. All of these bars were recovered in 1985 from the site of the wreck's cargo hold. This

¹ One *peso* was equivalent to 45 grams or 1.587 ounces of pure silver.

discovery allows a “face” to be put to an individual shipment, and helps to define exactly what it was that people were shipping in this historically important system. According to the manifest, this particular shipment was a fairly straightforward one, showing Torres intended to pick up the bars at the House of Trade himself. He had also arranged for a series of consignees if he was unable to do so. Torres, like everybody shipping treasure on the ships, paid a 6% fee -“eight *reales* for each hundred *pesos* of assayed silver”- for “freight and transportation.” Unfortunately, the intentions Torres had for this silver are not stated in the document. In an interesting side note, the aforementioned wealthy Potosino Lorenzo de Arriola, served as a witness to the loading of this parcel, yet another indication of his prominent role in the *Atocha*’s mission and the Peruvian silver trade.

Interestingly, and somewhat unusually for the *Atocha*, the ingots in this shipment all originated from the mining town of Oruro, and not the larger and more productive mines at Potosí. Oruro was positioned roughly 150 miles northwest of Potosí, along the route that linked both of the mining towns with the port city of Arica. It was founded in 1606, and was the second largest producer of Andean silver. Of the 964 silver ingots recovered from the wreck in 1985, at least 208 appear to have come from this smaller, but obviously significant mine. Ingots originating from Oruro are distinctive not only from mintmarks, but because the assayer’s sample “bite” was taken from the end of the bar, and not the top.² At least one of Torres’ bars, number 346, was produced there in 1621.³ Each was assayed at 2380 on a scale of 2400, meaning that the silver was over 99% pure – a clear reflection of the efficiency of the mercury amalgamation process. The total weight of the shipment was 407 lb 10 oz troy, or 335 lb 9 oz avoirdupois.



The marks on *Atocha* silver bar 436 and their significance

² See Craig and Richards’ *Spanish Treasure Bars from New World Shipwrecks*, En Rada Publications, 2003 for a more complete review of Oruro ingots.

³ The date is stamped below the mintmark. The others may be from the same year because of their relatively close registry numbers.

The bars themselves are all well preserved, and do not show significant corrosion from their long undersea immersion. The marks have remained clear. All the ingots bear Torres' distinctive "TR" *sigla*, along with mintmarks, tax stamps, fineness values, registry numbers, and assayer's bites. Each bar in this shipment also bears marks whose purposes are not recorded or understood. Chief among these, a large "V" is believed to be the mark of the *Atocha's* silvermaster Jacove de Vreder, who would have stamped this after registering the ingot. (An alternate theory suggests that it might be a Roman numeral five, symbolic of the *quinto*, a tax of one-fifth the value of the bar.) Most of the *Atocha* silver ingots bear this particular mark. Also, a cross, which is found on these particular bars in association with the "V" stamp, suggesting it had some sort of official function. Two other stamped marks are a small, well-defined Omega near the assayer's bite on bar number 346, and an unusual "X" near the bite of bar number 342. It is assumed these two also served an official function because of their purposeful placement so near the assayer's sample. Unfortunately, the written manifest gives no evidence for the reason of any of these.

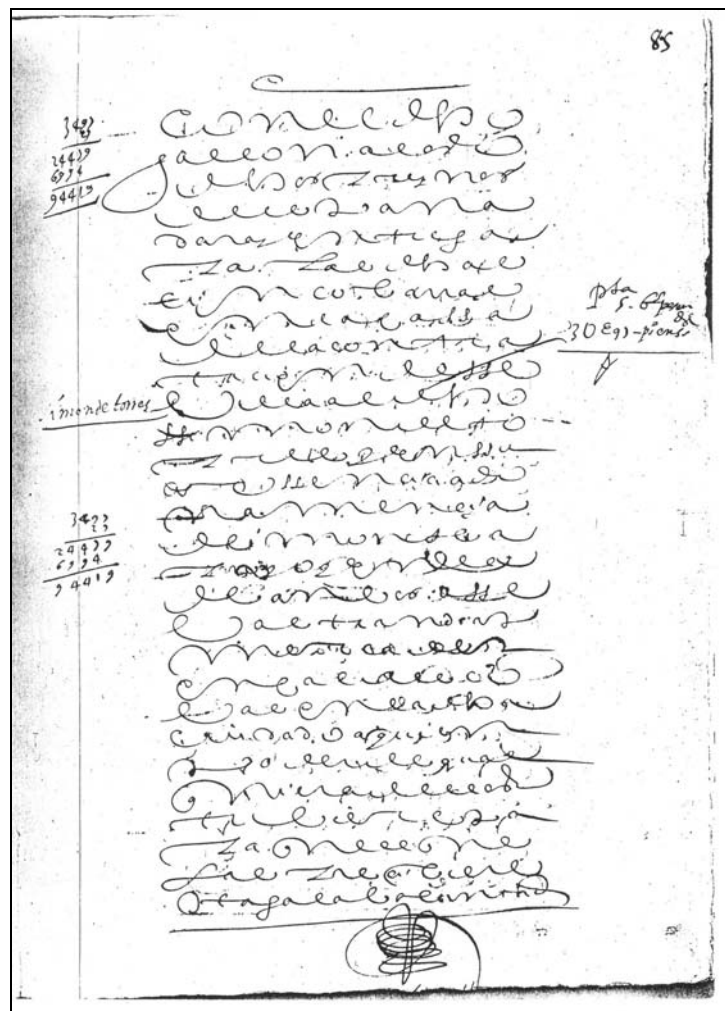


Figure 2. A Page from the Puerto Belo portion of the *Atocha registro* showing a portion of the entry for Simón de Torres' shipment of five silver ingots. His name can be seen in the left hand margin. The Arabic-style script strongly reflects a lingering Moorish influence.



Figure 3. The *Sigla* of Simón de Torres as Recorded in the margin of the *Atocha* Manifest

From the *registro* entries recorded at Puerto Belo, AGI *Contratación* 2211, and translated by Eugene and Homer Lyon⁴:

“In the town of San Felipe de Puerto Belo, on the eighth day of the month of July of one thousand six hundred and twenty two years; before me, the notary and witnesses above mentioned, there appeared the Captain Jacove de Vreder [silver]master of the galleon named Nuestra Señora de Atocha, one of those under the command of *Don* Lope de Almendaris, Marquis of Cadereita; which at present is anchored in this port and is to depart for the realms of Spain; and he acknowledged to have received, and to have below decks on the said galleon, from Simón de Torres, passenger, who is going to the said kingdoms, five bars of silver marked with the mark of the margin; with the numbers, fineness, and value as follows:



Figure 4. Bar #224

Bar number two hundred and twenty four; fineness two thousand three hundred and eighty; it weighs one hundred forty five marks, three *onzas*; that is worth seven hundred sixty eight *pesos*, six *tomines* of assayed silver.

⁴ The translation originally documented only ingot #224. The specific information for the other four bars comes from the summary notes recorded by Eugene Lyon for the entire manifest.

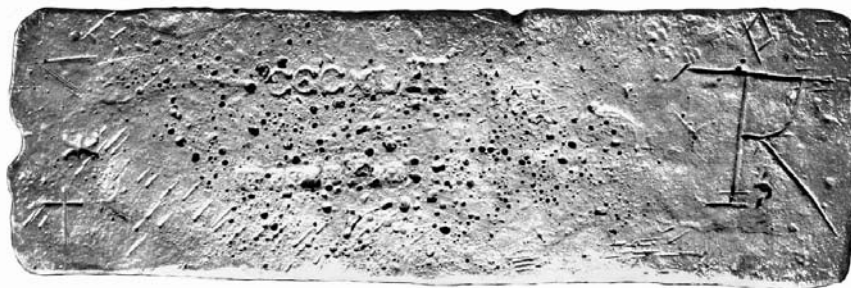


Figure 5. Bar #342

Another; bar number three hundred and forty two; fineness two thousand three hundred and eighty; it weighs one hundred forty three marks, five and one half *onzas*.



Figure 6. Bar #240

Another; bar number two hundred and forty; fineness two thousand three hundred and eighty; it weighs one hundred seventeen marks, seven *onzas*.



Figure 7. Bar #436

Another; bar number four hundred and thirty six; fineness two thousand three hundred and eighty; it weighs one hundred and twenty four marks, three *onzas*.



Figure 8. Bar #346

Another; bar number three hundred and forty six; fineness two thousand three hundred and eighty; it weighs one hundred thirty and one half marks.

Of which said bars, the said master acknowledged delivery; and because the delivery does not appear at present, he waived the laws of delivery, proof, and payment, exactly as is said in them; and he pledged himself that, God bringing him to safety, with the said galleon to the said kingdoms of Spain, he will turn over and deliver the said five bars at the House of Trade of Sevilla to the said Simón de Torres, and in his absence, to *Doña* Mencia de Montearroyo; and in that of both to Sebastian Dias, merchant in Caldescovas in the said city; or to whomever a power of attorney of whichever of them should have; so that he who should receive them fulfills the wishes of the said Simon de Torres, at whose risk they go, so that from he who they may be delivered to, [they go] to his executors, so that, if god should have brought him, they fulfill his testament; and in assurance of this, the said master pledged his person and his property, past, present, and future; and he gave a power of attorney to the justices of His Majesty, of whatever place that they may be, so that they may order him to fulfill it; and especially the justices of the house of trade of Sevilla, to whose laws and jurisdiction he submits; and he renounced his own and any other that he may gain; and there must be paid to him for the freight and transportation, for each hundred pesos of the said five bars, at the rate of eight reales for each hundred pesos of assayed silver; and he signed it with his name, the said executing party whom I, the present notary, certify that I know; being witnesses Juan de Licaran and Lorenzo de Arriola, and Juan de Ovillorete; Jacove de Vreder before me, Diego Ximenez, notary of His Majesty.”

With this manifest entry and small collection of ingots, the nature of early American silver shipping is a bit more understandable. What constituted a shipment of silver, and what distinguished one person’s from another’s is clearer. A complex system had evolved around the transportation of silver from the Americas to Spain. Along a tortuous route, from the mine to the refinery, the mint, then to the overland trails of Peru and shipment up the western coast of South America, and across the isthmus of Panama where it was finally put aboard the transatlantic galleons; silver, in its many forms, was registered and tracked by both its owners and the crown. This system was designed to keep theft, fraud and smuggling in check, and generate the maximum amount in taxes. It was also an effective way to avoid any confusion about ownership when the time came for the final

disbursement of the treasure. Torres' shipment reflects this system, and helps to reinforce the fact that the larger portion of the trade across the Atlantic during the Spanish colonial period was being conducted privately. As is evident from the *Atocha's* manifest, the crown earned the bulk of its revenue from the taxes and freight charges placed on the seemingly endless flow of treasure like this.

Sadly, not much can be said about Simón de Torres himself. He appears to have had a connection to the relatively new mining establishment at Oruro. Whether he was a mine owner or resident there is not known. Though Torres is listed in the *registro* entry as being a passenger aboard the galleon, his name does not appear in later documents as such.⁵ His fate is not clear. Only the treasure he lost survives in his stead.

⁵ A detailed account of the loss of the galleons entitled *Relacion de lo Sucedido en los Galeones y Flota de Tierra firme*, and published in Spain shortly after the news reached there, does not list Torres on either the *Atocha* or *Santa Margarita*.