Navajas of the Galleons

by Corey Malcom
Reprinted from The Navigator: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society
Volume 21, No. 4, 2005.

Figure 1. A navaja recovered from the 1622 galleon Nuestra Señora de Atocha. The blade is an epoxy replica cast from the marine concretion, and the sheath has broken at one end.

Spain has a deep-rooted knife-making tradition and the cutlery produced there has long been world-renowned. Cities such as Toledo and Albacete are often first identified by their blade-manufacturing industries. This fact is reflected in the collection of objects recovered from the 1622 galleons. Dozens of swords, daggers and their various accoutrements have been found. These were complemented by other fixed-blade, kitchen knives, along with pairs of scissors. Knives and their kin clearly played a strong role in the operation of the galleons, and in the lives of those sailing onboard.

Over the course of the excavations of the 1622 galleons Nuestra Señora de Atocha and the Santa Margarita, a significant number of folding-knife sheaths have been found. These slightly curved, wooden sheaths, many with decorative bronze ends, have generally been regarded as the remains of razors. In line with such thinking, these items would have been useful not only for shaving but also as medical scalpels. Medical knowledge of the day was developing rapidly but on ships it commonly fell under the domain of the traditional “barber-surgeon,” who was both a hygienist and doctor of sorts. A navaja-type scalpel could serve to open

and probe wounds or abscesses (see Figure 2). Properly sharpened, such a blade could perform both functions admirably. But, in light of the many other needs aboard a ship at sea, and only a limited number of resources to cover them, did these knives really serve such specific purposes on the ships? Or were they much more versatile? The word navaja itself is certainly suggestive of this. The term is interchangeable for both folding knives and razors[1].

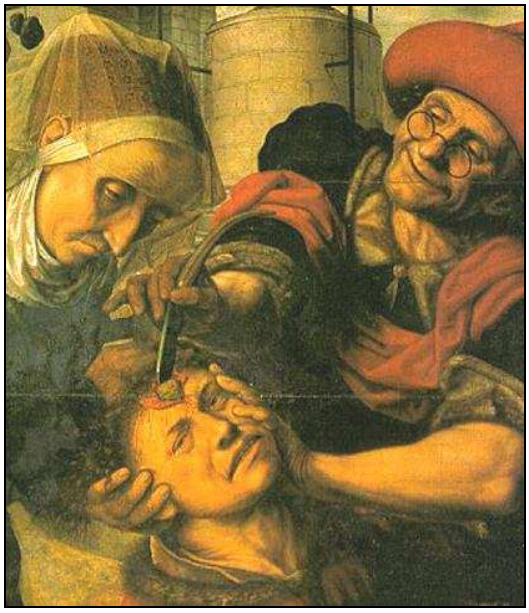

Figure 2. Detail from The Surgeon showing a navaja-type knife being used to perform surgery. Painting by Jan Sanders van Hemessen, ca. 1555. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

Sixteen folding-knife sheaths have been recovered from the 1622 wrecks, and six are in the collection of the MFMHS. In only one case has any evidence of the blade survived. The sheaths themselves are made of wood, 14 being of ebony (genus Diospyros) and the other two of unidentified types.

The one blade, which was recovered as an epoxy cast from the marine concretion that formed around the original, is 13.2cm long, and 2.9cm at the widest point. The cutting edge has a slightly convex belly, and an examination of the sides shows a hollow grind (meaning the angle from the spine to the middle of the blade is greater than from the middle to the cutting edge, making it concave). Though the point is not blunt, it is not particularly sharp. All of these characteristics suggest this knife was designed more for cutting than stabbing or piercing. Two circular depressions are punched into the blade near the spine that may be the remains of the manufacturer's marks. The sheath is undecorated, and made of an as yet unidentified wood. Holes for the hinge pin are barely 2mm in diameter. The sheath was either broken or rotted over time, and is not quite complete (see Figure 1). There is no evidence for a locking mechanism to hold the blade in place when it was opened.

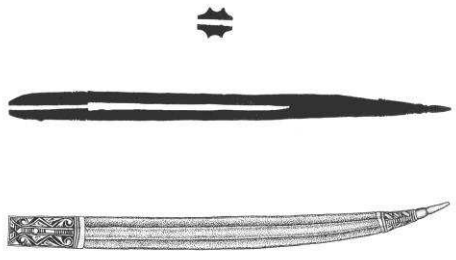

Figure 3. Folding Knife Sheath made of ebony wood with bronze end-caps.
Drawing by Katherine Amundson/MFMHS

[1] The New World Spanish-English, English-Spanish Dictionary. New American Library, New York, 1968.

The more common ebony sheaths are decorated with fluted grooves running the length of the sheath. Bronze caps at each end are intricately engraved with repetitive geometric designs that suggest a Moorish artistic tradition (see Figure 4). Altogether, these sheaths average 19cm long, with grooves cut for a blade running nearly the entire length.

Figure 4. Detail of decorative bronze end-cap. These engraved pieces of sheet metal were folded over the end of the wooden sheath. At the center is the hole for the blade to attach to and pivot open from.

Judging from the evidence presented by the sheaths, these knives would not have been particularly strong. The wood is thin for the length, and many of the examples in the MFMHS collection are cracked or broken. The pin holding the blade was also small, and coupled with the slight sheath, would not have provided much resistance against twisting or torque.

A folding blade does so for two reasons: to protect the user from being cut while carrying it, or to protect the blade from being damaged (or, of course, both). One suggests portability or concealment, and the other, fragility to the edge that comes with extreme sharpness. The sheath was designed to not only cover the sharp edge, but the curvature served to enclose the tip as well.

Figure 5. Detail of a mark cut into interior fold of bronze end cap. The meaning of this "Z," or "2" is not known.

Just as today, sailors then would have found themselves relying heavily on an easily accessed, portable, personal "pocket" knife. Such a tool would serve any number of mundane uses throughout a typical day, such as cutting lines, peeling fruit, and cleaning fingernails. In the 16th century, navajas were carried regularly in the waistband[2].

In moments of anger, this handy tool could also become an easily accessed

[2] Pablo Pérez-Mallaína. *Spain's Men of the Sea*, p.221. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998.

weapon. Sailing the Indies route on a galleon was a trying experience that frayed nerves. The atmosphere, alternating between boredom and intensive labor, along with crowded conditions allowing no personal space, along with a myriad of social tensions, assured that tempers were frequently on a hair-trigger.

A look at the physical descriptions of those who served on the Atocha shows nearly half of the men with "scars" or "wound scars" on their faces, hands or wrists. Others were listed as "clean shaven" or "partially shaved."[3] The shaving was most likely done with navajas, and quite conceivably some of the scars could have resulted from fights with the same. Interestingly, stylized knife fighting with navajas became a tradition of sorts that reached a peak in the Seville area in the 19th century. This "baratero" style of fighting is the basis for a still-practiced martial art[4]. Perhaps this brutal custom developed from centuries-earlier shipboard disputes between sailors going to and from Andalusia aboard the treasure ships.

The large number of navajas recovered from the 1622 galleons makes clear they were a common part of early 17th century shipboard life and because of this fact, as well as their versatility, were found well beyond just the surgeon's tool kit. Historical and archaeological evidence suggest that seamen and soldiers commonly carried these knives as part of their personal possessions to use as razors, as well as all the simple, day-to-day purposes for which pocketknives are employed on ships today.

---

[3] Byrna O. West. "The Face of Seventeenth Century Spain" in Astrolabe - Journal of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society, Volume 7, Number 1, Summer 1992.

[4] James Loriega. Sevillian Steel: The Traditional Knife-Fighting Arts of Spain. Paladin Press, Boulder, 1999.