

LA CIUDAD de NUEVA CACERES

The Rise of a Sixteenth Century Spanish City



DANILO MADRID GERONA

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by **DANILO M. GERONA**

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The City With Many Facets

Neither was Naga far, nor was it Nueva Caceres, but its history is beyond forgetting. The men of the region lived a golden era at the time of the arrival of the first batch of *conquistadores*, *encomenderos*, and Franciscan missionaries. In few years time, thanks to gold and its strategic location, a villa was founded which since then became the city of Nueva Caceres, one of the first four cities founded by the Spaniards in Southeast Asia. With it as the base for colonization in the region, with its bureaucratic apparatus serving to spread the ideas which began initially in Castille, modified in Latin America and then adopted to the Filipino in turn.. From religion and their Iberian vision of the world, to the multiple forms of organizations, they set in motion in Asia, the system of resettlement and governance where the church and the secular realm worked in unity..

In due time, the wealth of the period of the encounter such as gold which initially attracted the Spaniards had disappeared while the resources for the settlement of Nueva Caceres was redirected to the war efforts in the Low Countries. The wealth is gone but the city remained crucial for the archipelago and a reference point for the region. Despite the natural calamities and the decades of economic difficulties, as well as the chronic outbreak of controversies, the city did not only preserve its cathedral and the episcopal palace for centuries, but also created new structures, among these was the Royal Hospital. The period also witnessed a gradual geographic expansion of the city landscape, as it opened new terrain for new communities such as the barrio for the Chinese, the Parian, or the increase of an increasingly stratified (*imbricada*) Spanish community..

In due time new crops were cultivated, and wealth flowed in once again. The cultivation of rice and above all, abaca, restored the wealth to the city and the region and toward the end of the Spanish regime, the city became a mirror of modernity for the rest of the archipelago. This money propelled a major diversification, producing more and more commodities, from hats to a perfume which became a famous export item to Europe, the *ilang-ilang*. The increase in the production followed the increase in population and the expansion of the bureaucracy. From doctors to architects, professionals who were urgently needed for the urban development which was underway. Aside from catapulting the local markets in a global context, it also

improved on the city's basic infra-structure such as the opening of a public market, the construction of a new municipal building with a plaza principal. The new legislation at the end of the 19th century favored the autonomy of the municipal government and this excellent book demonstrates, among others, how they moulded new ideas, professionalized the system of public administration in a particular body which enabled them not only to respond to the chronic piratical attacks but also to maintain the low level of crime rate..

Nueva Caceres, as such, could achieve a qualitative transformation. On one hand, it attained an efficient system of rapid communication, from a weekly postal service to a telegraph system. On the other, its technological advancement propelled the city to a sophisticated lifestyle such as in the system of public lighting, which had been installed in the first half of the century. The same progress intruded into the educational realm giving rise to a normal school. But aside from these numerous institutions which complete the work, from charity school to others which assisted in improving education such as a printing press, a library, a theater where *zarzuelas* were staged or a newspaper "defender of the interest of the southern part of Luzon, as a weekly *El Eco del Sur*. Indeed, Nueva Caceres became one of the most prosperous cities in the archipelago at the end of the 19th century and remained such decades after. This prosperity persisted way beyond the Spanish regime until its name was changed to Naga.

Danilo M. Gerona provides an account of the evolution of the city of Nueva Caceres with numerous twists and turns but with a continuity pervading the longer stretch of its history, from a period of prosperity until its most critical episode. For one, it remained a bastion of Hispanic culture in the Philippines for the larger period of the colonial regime, with the least signs of violent resistance against Spanish power. Above all, it protected Spanish Catholicism during and after the departure of the Spaniards in 1898, one of its most distinct identity in the archipelago, The city welcomed the Franciscans, the *Paules* and the Sisters of Charity, and has lived through the many controversial disputes between the Franciscans and other religious orders, between the regular and the seculars, and between the civil authorities and those of the ecclesiastical. Above all, Professor Gerona recalled to us the initial foundation of the city under the administration of the first Spaniards, the institutions which were created through the years, which explain its survival in the difficult centuries until the present.

It is an excellent book as it recounts the great trends which influenced the destiny of the city and the region of Camarines, but also the personal initiatives which shaped it. From the desires of Governor Sande, because his native city does not have the records, he has provided a narrative of it, and over and above, gathered documentation in numerous archives expanding a lengthy duration of various years, on the bishops Andres Gonzales or Antonio de Luna to limit the abuses of the Spaniards, or the mestizo Florencio Lerma to put up a *zarzuela* theater. Danilo Gerona is not only the most appropriate person to do this contribution but has carried out the work through a meticulous research. It is not strange to me, because from the time I knew him, he left me a profound impression of his capacity to undertake historical research focused in an area so difficult as this.

The history of the Philippine and also that of Spain ought to be pursued along similar lines, as an alternative to the Manila centric view in order to understand history's various shades of colors which is also indispensable for the deeper understanding of the history of Naga, of Ambos Camarines and the Bicol region. But this holds true in the case of the Philippines and Spain where in it is necessary to know its relation with the country and the Filipinos themselves. As a Spaniard, above all as a historian, as well as an academic, I thank you, Nilo, for allowing us to know better the history of Nueva Caceres, the mutual friendship, and above all for this new manifestation of your having done well as a historian.

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