

A Visual Documentation on Fil-Hispanic Churches

Part III: Tumauni, Isabela

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TUMAUINI, ISABELA

The town of Tumauni developed as a stop-over post between Cabagan (now San Pablo) and Ilagan along the winding Cagayan River. Dominican missionaries from Cabagan established a chapel in honor of St. Matthias the Apostle in 1707 but the settlement did not prosper until much later. For one thing, a colony of wasps nested on the chapel's façade soon after its blessing, scaring away the local Gaddangs and Irrayas. Another community grew in Lapogan, further south on the way to Ilagan, but this was eventually incorporated into Tumauni after the latter was definitely established as a town on May 7, 1751. Settlement was encouraged by three years exemption from tribute for those who would wish to stay, especially those from Cabagan and Tuguegarao further north. The town was moved to its present site a year later, and on May 12, 1753, a few days before the patron's fiesta, Tumauni was erected as a parish.

Construction of the present church of solid materials did not begin until thirty years later, when a request for exemption from *polo* or compulsory labor and the payment of taxes for four years was finally granted by the provincial government. Such exemption was granted to allow the townspeople to work on special projects especially the construction of more permanent edifices like a town hall, church, and school. In the case of Tumauni, the residents filed a request in 1759 but this was denied. Finally, after a number of tries, the Dominican Provincial himself petitioned the government in Manila in 1781. Although official approval came only on September 5, 1783, the impatient townspeople had already begun almost three months earlier when they lowered a vase of coins under the first stone on June 10, 1783.

At the forefront of the church construction was the parish priest, Fr. Domingo Fortó (also spelled Portó). Born in Gerona, the northeasternmost province of Spain, he was the son of a Catalan engineer. His special upbringing undoubtedly prepared him for undertaking this masterpiece in brick. Fr. Fortó was greatly aided by a master mason named Castillejos from Lalloc, Cagayan; he was also assisted by his fellow Dominicans in Cagayan Fr. Antonio Feixas (a Catalan like Fortó) and Fr. Joaquin Sancho who it seems also had some construction expertise. In 1790, after 12 years, Fr. Fortó had to leave his beloved Tumauni for a new assignment in Aparri. He commissioned a bell, the largest in the town, as his legacy.

The kilns for firing the bricks could still be seen in 1895, but they now rest under the West Central School. Special moulds were carved for the terra cotta insets shaped as flowers, leaves, cornucopiae, shells, suns, hearts, angels, saints, and various other insignia. Assembly of complex capitals and scrolls was facilitated by inscribing numbers and initials on the parts before firing. Bricks with the years “1783”, “1784” and “1785” mark the construction of sections of the church; formerly, the years “1786” and “1788” could also be seen, but these have sadly disappeared. Certain insets carry undecipherable signatures—those of the artists and builders perhaps?

Moulded, numbered, dated, and signed bricks distinguish a certain technology that runs throughout the churches built in the late 18th century by Dominicans in the Cagayan Valley. A charcoal-black 1783 brick on the façade appears overcooked, witness perhaps to experimentation in firing temperatures. By such practical experience, Dominican-fired brick walls in Cagayan exhibit much less wear-and-tear even without a protective lime plaster, as opposed to the brick walls of the Ilocos which turn to powder when exposed to the elements.

The belltower reached the height of the church in 1805 and must have been concluded soon after. It is unique for at least three reasons. Its round plan is not seen elsewhere except in Itbayat (Batanes), Borongan (Eastern Samar), and San Francisco, Naga City (Camarines Sur). The brick artistic elements are left exposed, to contrast with the rest of the walls covered with lime plaster. The decorative scheme is a delight by itself, with swags, festoons, hearts, pineapples, and the so-called egg-and-dart motif with the “darts” left out.

The brick convento was greatly damaged by the earthquake of 1863. Parts were demolished by Fr. Juan de Dios Rico (1867-1872) who had to bring in prisoners from Ilagan because of strong opposition from the residents. What was rebuilt by Fr. Alejandro Sarralde (1872-1878) was destroyed by a typhoon in 1884. Fr. José Brugues (1883-1889) continued the rebuilding and replaced the tile roof with galvanized iron. Despite its present ruined condition, there are amazing survivals. Over what must have been the dining area is a curved masonry ceiling, technically

called a barrel vault. Such solid vaults are rare in the Philippines, and the majority is found in the Cagayan Valley. In Tumauni alone, there are three: the largest, over the dining area (the refectory), another over the hallway linking the convento to the church, and a small one over a portion of the sacristy. What's more, impressions on the *palitada* or lime plaster of the vault show that the wet plaster was held up by mats of *sawali*, woven strips of skived bamboo. At the end of the dining area is the kitchen, surmounted by an impressive quadrangular brick chimney.

Much of this legacy of intricate brick architecture perished when Allied forces bombed the towns along the Cagayan Valley in 1945. They were ostensibly mopping up Japanese troops, whereas by this time they had already vacated the area and were holed up in Ifugao. In Tumauni, the townspeople trustingly stored their pianos in the church. Legarda ruefully notes, "Musical life in Tumauni has not been the same since the bombing." Fr. Forto's 1790 bell resembles a giant sieve due to Allied strafing of the belltower.

Tumauni remained a magnificent ruin, like many other Cagayan Valley churches, for many years after 1945. Hollow blocks filled in the gaping holes on both sides of the nave; the rose window on the façade was reconstructed as best as the people could at that time. The old convento was not rebuilt, and a new one rose instead in a corner of the patio. Notwithstanding this series of misfortunes (which continue: in October 2010 Typhoon "Juan" unroofed a third of the church as it devastated the Cagayan Valley) the Parish Church of San Matías in Tumauni, Isabela, is the masterpiece of brick architecture in the Philippines. In the Cagayan Valley, where bricks were produced so well they outlasted those in other regions, Tumauni represents the height of brick technology in colonial Philippines, in terms of both durability and design. Added to this attainment are unique details such as the round bell tower; the sanctuary with its half-dome altar, oval windows, and curved corners; the kitchen chimney; the three barrel vaults; and the *sawali* impressions on the *palitada*. The uniqueness of Tumauni church and its hallowed grounds was finally recognized when it was declared a National Historical Landmark by the National Historical Institute in 1989 (but the two iron plaques were thoughtlessly applied over the brick insets of the façade). The National Museum in turn declared it a National Cultural Treasure on July 31, 2001.

Photo Credit Abbreviations:

REA Richard E. Ahlborn

RTJ Regalado Trota Jose

The church and tower as they appeared in an engraving published in *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, 1877.

Jaime Marcó Collection, Madrid

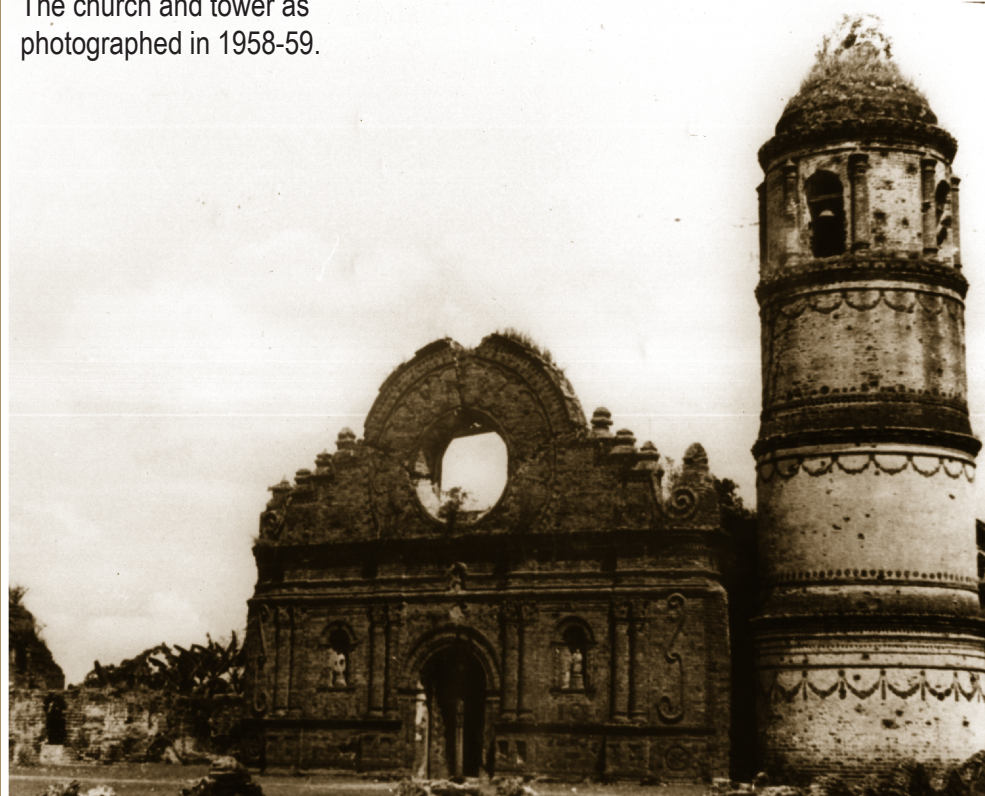


View of the church compound some time after the bombing of 1945. A portion of the convent adjoining the convento is still standing.

Sunday Times Magazine,
1961



The church and tower as photographed in 1958-59.



REA



RTJ 1996

Façade of the church.

RTJ 1996



Upper right corner of the façade.

Details of decoration around the rose window.



RTJ 1996



RTJ 1996

Right side of the pediment.



RTJ 1996

Six-spoked wheel design on the lower right side of the façade.



RT-J 2000

Close-up of the inner coil design on the façade. To guide the assembly of the design, the individual parts were numbered and a line was incised on all the components.

Close-up of the numbers
incised on the brick
components.



RTJ 2003



RTJ 2000

Other components were marked "S" to
indicate which side was to point right;
the inverted "M" indicated the side to
face left.



Parts of the intricate capitals were similarly numbered from 1 to 8.

RTJ 2000



RTJ 1996

Brick inset on the south wall of the church, featuring the year "1783" when the construction was started.



RTJ 1996

Perhaps the secret of the resistance of the bricks to erosion from the elements without the *palitada* lime layer lies in the firing of the clay. This blackened brick seems to have been overcooked, however. The year “1783” may be barely read; perhaps this was one of the first experimental bricks.



RTJ 2000

A handful of brick insets on the façade and south wall feature the year “1784”. A hatchet symbolizes the martyrdom of St. Matthias, while the sun is one of the components of the Dominican emblem.



RTJ 1996

Another handful of brick insets on the south wall feature the year “1785”, perhaps when most of the church was finished.



RTJ 1996

Brick image of the
Apostle St. Peter on the
façade.



Brick image of the
Apostle St. Paul on the
façade.

RTJ 1996

Brick image of the Apostle
St. Andrew on the façade.



RTJ 1996



Brick image of the Apostle St. James the Great on the façade.

RTJ 1996



Brick image of the Apostle St. John on the façade. His tunic reminds us more of St. John the Baptist, while the eagle is rooster-sized.

RTJ 1996



Brick image of St. John Nepomuk on the façade.

RTJ 1996



Brick image of St. Catherine of Alexandria on the entrance to the sacristy. A bell dedicated to her was commissioned by the church's builder, Fr. Domingo Fortó, in 1790, after his last year of ministry in Tumauni.

RTJ 2000



RTJ 1996

Brick inset with the anagram of Christ, IHS, on the façade.



RTJ 2000

Brick image of an angel holding a crown and a book, one of a handful on the façade and the south wall.



RTJ 1996

Brick floral motif on the façade.



Brick floral motif on the façade. This one bears some signatures and a curious pierced circular motif. Could these have some reference to the church builders and sponsors?

RTJ 1996



Close-up of the
signatures and motif.

RTJ 2000



A pair of "initialed"
bricks on the
south wall.

RTJ 1996



Stone image of St. Dominic of Guzman on the façade.

RTJ 2000



Stone image of St. Vincent Ferrer on the façade.

RTJ 2000



Stone image of the patron saint, San Matias, in the niche over the main entrance.

RTJ 2000



RTJ 2000

Apse of the church, showing an arched “flying” buttress added onto the original buttress.



RTJ 1996

Exterior of the baptistry on the south side of the church.



RTJ 2000

Northeast end of the church, towards the apse, showing the sacristy extension on the right.



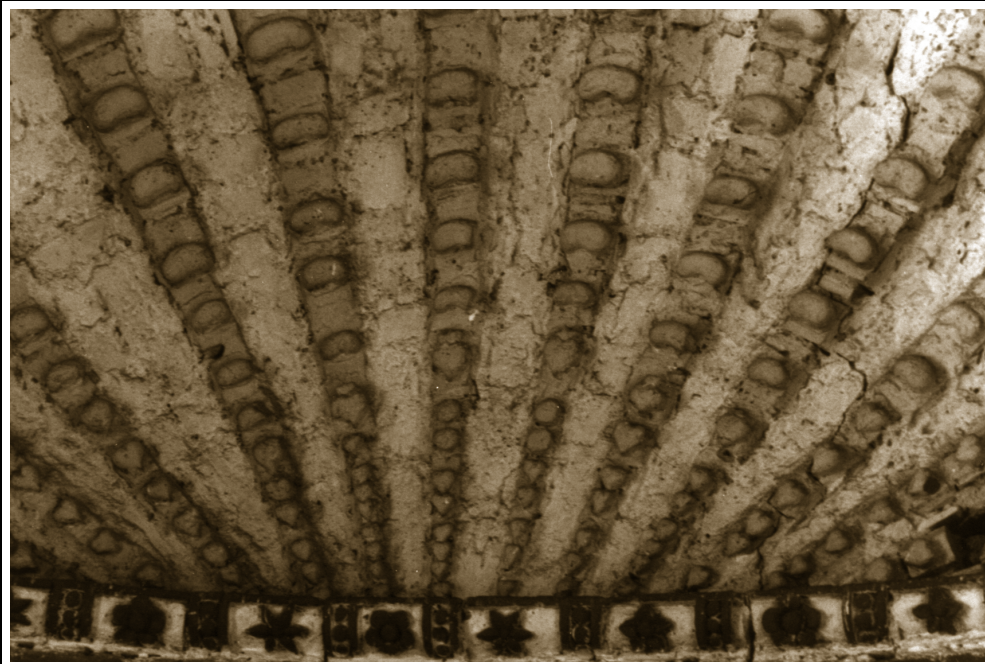
RTJ 2000

Interior of the church looking towards the main altar. There is a slight expansion of the nave as it approaches the sanctuary, like a "false" transept.



RTJ 1996

The sanctuary with its great scallop half-dome over the main altar.



RTJ 1996

Central portion of the scallop half-dome, showing how the “ribs” or rays grow out from tiny hearts.



RTJ 1996

A corner of the base of the scallop half-dome.



RTJ 1996

Decorations over the scallop half-dome.



RTJ 1996

Sun motif on the walls of the sanctuary.



RTJ 1996

Aspect of the unique curved corner of the sanctuary.



One of a pair of the unique oval windows in the sanctuary.

RTJ 1996

Detail of ornamentation over the sanctuary windows. This one on the north side features Jesus' anagram IHS, surmounted by a crown of thorns. The south side features the anagram of Mary, topped by an imperial crown.



RTJ 1996



Scallop motif, one of two on the spandrels flanking the half-dome over the main altar.



South wall of the nave, showing brick swags and floral decorations over the doorway to the baptistry.

RTJ 1996

RTJ 1996



RTJ 2000

Inner wall over the baptistry doorway. In a reverse of the method elsewhere, the brick insets here have been covered with *palitada*, while the unadorned brick walls have remained exposed.



RTJ 1996

Brick cornucopia over the windows of the sanctuary. Note the prevalent method of a thin *palitada* layer on the walls but not covering the decorations, providing contrast. The same method was used on the belltower.



RTJ 1996

Brick vase of flowers on the south wall, near the baptistry. The design is inspired by motifs in 17th and 18th century books.



RTJ 1996

View of the nave from the main altar. The nave narrows after the doorway leading to the sacristy on the right.



Anonymous picture source

View of the nave from the main altar before the bombing of 1945. Note the bright interior given by the *palitada* coating on the walls.



Interior of the sacristy, with its unusual "trinity" of windows. There is room at the back for storage.

RTJ 1996



The exposed brick insets provide a contrast to the whitewashed wall of the belltower. Prominent elements from the top are: egg-and-dart motifs (without the intervening "darts"), dentils, hearts, and swags.

RTJ 1996

RTJ 1996



The belltower is composed of an inner hollow core with a *caracol* or “snail” stairway winding around it, reminiscent of Islamic minarets or Mudéjar towers in Spain.

Top of the belltower stairway coiled around the inner hollow core of masonry.



RTJ 1996



Inner cupola of the belltower, still with its *palitada* intact.



Bullet holes on a bell witness to the shelling of the church in 1945, as Allied planes fired at Japanese defenses in the tower. This bell, the largest of the original six, was commissioned by Fr. Domingo Fortó, the builder of the church, a year after he left Tumauni in 1789. Fr. Fortó had served here for 12 years, and this gift was perhaps his way of being present in the town through his "voice."

A battered bell in the parish school. By its archaic shape, it is possibly the 1751 bell from the Lapogan mission that was joined to Tumauni by Bishop Miguel García between 1768 and 1780. If so, it is the oldest bell in the church.





RTJ 1996

Ruins of the front of the convento beside the church.



RTJ 1996

The refectory and kitchen form the foot of the “L” plan of the convento. This is the view from the patio between the church and convento. Right of center are the remains of a well that adjoined the building.



RTJ 2003

The rear of the kitchen of the convento as seen from the road. A low conical tile roof crowns the great chimney of the kitchen.

A portion of the ruined barrel vault over the refectory. Tumauni is unique for its number of barrel vaults: this one in the refectory, another in the convento hall perpendicular to the church, and a much smaller one over the sacristy. The curved ceiling over the refectory is remarkable for the well-preserved lime plaster impressions of woven bamboo or sawali. This matting was probably applied to keep the freshly troweled plaster in place as it dried.



RTJ 2000

Impressive inner view of the great chimney. On the lower left may be seen charred impressions of woven bamboo matting.



RTJ 2000



RTJ 1996

A section of the "sway-back" wall around the church plaza.



RTJ 1996

Detail of brick decorations on the base of the pedestal in the plaza.

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