

# The discovery of St Helena: the search continues

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by Alexander Hugo Schulenburg

St Helena's discovery came about as a direct result of European attempts to find a sea route to the East Indies by way of the Southern shore of Africa, which was eventually rounded by Bartolomeu Dias in 1488. That year marked the beginning of the establishment of a Portuguese trading empire in the East.<sup>1</sup> St Helena is commonly said to have been discovered by João da Nova, a Portuguese captain, who in 1501 had been placed in command of a squadron of four ships, which were to constitute Portugal's annual India fleet for that year. On the outward voyage the fleet apparently discovered Ascension Island, and on its return voyage, in 1502, the island of St Helena.<sup>2</sup> The first chronicler to claim this discovery for da Nova was the Portuguese historian João de Barros. According to Barros, da Nova

was fortunate, because God revealed to him a small island, which he named St Helena and where he took in water, although he had already done so twice since departing India, first at Melinde, then at Mozambique. God appears to have created this island in that very location, in order to nourish all those who come from India, as everyone endeavours to call there since its discovery, for it offers the best water on the whole journey or at least the most necessary, which one requires on the return voyage from India.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, reasons for doubting this version of events. These have convincingly been discussed by Duarte Leite in his monumental study on the Portuguese discoveries, *História dos Descobrimentos*, published in 1960. Dismissing Barros' claim for accrediting da Nova, Leite suggests that St Helena had only been discovered in July 1503, albeit by a Portuguese fleet.<sup>4</sup> The main basis of Leite's claim (aside from the fact that the dates suggested for the discovery do not square with what is known about da Nova's voyage) is an account by a Thomé Lopez, which was first published in 1507 in

Francanzano de Montalbodo's *Paesi Nuovamente Retovati & Nuovo Mondo da Alberico Vesputio Fiorentino Intitulato*, thus pre-dating Barros' account by forty five years.<sup>5</sup> The advantage of accepting Leite's claim is that in place of the mere fact of St Helena's discovery, it provides an actual account.

Thomé Lopez served as a writer in the squadron of Estavão da Gama, which formed part of a Portuguese fleet under Admiral Vasco da Gama, whose second voyage to India this was. The first two squadrons of the fleet had left Lisbon in February 1502 and were followed by Estavão da Gama's squadron in April of that year. The two fleets met up at Moçambique in July and reached Calicut in October. After several rather eventful months in India, Vasco da Gama's fleet left Calicut for Moçambique in February 1503.<sup>6</sup>

The island now known as St Helena makes its appearance in the last few paragraphs of Lopez' narrative, which is here translated from Italian into English for the very first time.

On the 30th [of July 1503], we sighted an undiscovered island towards which we made our way. On the north-west side of the aforesaid island we cast our anchor. We did not find any fish, nor did we see any kind of trees, but it was completely green, and we judged that there should be some water. As our anchor dragged, the other ships sent our their shallops and told us what they found in it. So we got under sail, and on that day, and for most part of the following one, we were waiting for them. As they showed no signs of coming, we understood that the two aforesaid ships were still riding at anchor at the aforesaid island. This island faces the Cape of Good Hope north-west to south-west, taking a rhumb of east to west; from it to that cape the distance is 600 leagues. It faces the island of San Thome north-east to south-west, and the distance between them is 380 leagues. It faces the Cape of Palms north to south, taking a rhumb of north-west to south-east, and the distance between these is 360 leagues. It faces the Ascension islands north-west to south-east, and the distance from one to the other is 200 leagues. It faces the island of May north-west to south-east, taking a rhumb of north to south, and the distance between those is 680 leagues.<sup>7</sup>



It is at this point that Lopez' narrative breaks off abruptly, leaving many an interesting question unanswered, including what it was that Lopez had been told about the island. Nevertheless, there is no particular reason to doubt the authenticity of Lopez' narrative.

It is not known what markers, if any, of their discovery the Portuguese may have left behind at St Helena. There is no evidence to suggest that Portuguese vessels continued to carry *padrões* after 1488, that is, stone columns to be erected at prominent points on newly discovered lands.<sup>8</sup> According to some historians, the Portuguese built a chapel upon discovering the island,<sup>9</sup> but there is no evidence to support this. Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that they formally claimed the island as a possession of the Portuguese crown. Notably, the Portuguese never fortified the island, nor did they establish a permanent settlement there. Finally, it is not known why the island was named St Helena. That it was discovered on one of the two feast days of St Helena, and hence named after the said saint, is mere supposition. St Helena Bay in South Africa, for instance, was discovered and thus named by Vasco da Gama on 7 November 1497, coinciding with neither of the two feast days.

While it is frequently claimed that the Portuguese kept their discovery of St Helena a secret, I can find no convincing evidence to support this claim. Instead, there is a fair range of documentary evidence to provide at least some idea of the context in which the existence and location of St Helena became more widely known. Particularly with the introduction of printing, information was inevitably disseminated fairly quickly and, as it happens, one of the earliest surviving records of St Helena's discovery does not come from a Portuguese source at all. Instead, both the location of the island and its name appeared in print in a Dutch book published at Antwerp as early as 1508, which contained an account of a Portuguese voyage to India in the year 1505, and was published by Jan van Doesborch. The account's author, Albericus, has been identified as Albericus Vespuccius, but this is far from certain. This Albericus relates that on the return voyage, "[o]n the twenty-first day of July we saw land, and it was an island lyng six hundred and fifty miles from the Cape, and called Saint Helena, howbeit we could not land there. [...] And after we left the island of Saint Helena, we saw another island two hundred miles from there, which is called Ascension."<sup>10</sup>

To whichever fleet St Helena's discovery is rightfully assigned, it is

worth noting that the 'existence' of Southern islands had already been projected onto Atlantic maps well before their eventual discovery.<sup>11</sup> Both St Helena and, in particular, Ascension Island had in effect been conceived of before they had been discovered. A world map by Henricus Martellus, dated to about 1490, shows a cluster of four islands south of the Cape of Palmes, roughly in the location of present day Ascension Island. This cluster certainly does not represent the islands of St Thomas, Annobon and Princes Island, which are shown separately.<sup>12</sup> A similar cluster of islands is also shown on a chart known as the Columbus map, which is dated to ca. 1500.<sup>13</sup> This cluster even survives in the so-called Cantino map, which is the work of an unknown Portuguese cartographer and which was smuggled to Italy by Alberto Cantino, an agent of the Duke of Ferrara,<sup>14</sup> where it is known to have been received by the Duke in November 1502.<sup>15</sup> In the exact location of present day Ascension Island, a group of seven small islands is depicted, the largest of which is coloured differently from the others and is labelled *illa adadajzachamaba ase, cussam*. The island group as a whole, as on an earlier chart by La Cosa, is labelled *illas tebas*. As the map was completed after da Nova's return to Portugal, it undoubtedly incorporated his fleet's discovery of that island. By not erasing the cluster in favour of the solitary island found by da Nova, the maker of Cantino's map seems to underline the aspect of 'confirmation' involved in the island's 'discovery'.<sup>16</sup>

St Helena, more significantly, had likewise been conceived before it had actually been discovered. A map of the world by Juan de la Cosa,<sup>17</sup> which is commonly dated to 1500, shows two clusters of islands, one in the approximate location of Ascension Island, the other in the location of St Helena.<sup>18</sup> The first of these clusters is labelled in two different way, *yslas tibras etiopicas yn mare oceanon austral*, as well as *tlubeas*. The second cluster is labelled in three different ways, *Islas tansens montises etiopiens oceanas*, as well as *y tausens* and *tauses*. According to George Nunn, who has examined the map's dating in great detail, the second of these clusters, the one corresponding to St Helena, is a representation of the Tristan da Cunha group, which was discovered in 1506.<sup>19</sup> This, and a number of other features relating to discoveries in the West Indies, lead Nunn to consider 1508 as the most likely date of la Cosa's chart. Not all scholars agree with this.<sup>20</sup> One reason is that la Cosa's designation of the Ascension cluster as *yslas tibras*, is retained by Cantino in 1502 as *illas tebas*, despite



Cantino's addition of the name *ase, cussam*. This would presume an acquaintance by Cantino with la Cosa's map, or one very like it. If Cantino's map is earlier, than why did la Cosa's map not designate Ascension Island as such? Likewise, if la Cosa's map, or any addition to it, does indeed date from as late as 1508, why are Ascension Island and St Helena not represented more accurately?<sup>21</sup>

Given the cartographic evidence, despite some uncertainties, it appears reasonable to consider St Helena's (and Ascension Island's) discovery less as a chance event, than as the result of an earlier projection. This paradox of knowing the unknown has recently been addressed with particular reference to the voyages of Columbus.<sup>22</sup> In narratives of the island's discovery, however, the event is as frequently ascribed to providence as it is to chance. For Barros, for one, da Nova "was fortunate because God revealed to him a small island", whereas Lopez merely informs his readers that they "sighted an undiscovered island". But then again, Lopez was writing as an eye-witness, Barros with the hindsight of a historian.

In retrospect, discoveries tend to be imbued with the trappings appropriate to their significance, a significance not necessarily obvious in the context of the more mundane actualities of discovery. A narrative tendency to enhance is obvious in the St Helena literature itself, where the standard account of the island's discovery can be found in Philip Gosse's *St Helena 1502-1938*. Leaving aside the factual and bibliographical problems of Gosse's account,<sup>23</sup> a noteworthy feature of his text is the very narrative license that he takes in describing da Nova's discovery, for he writes that "the sailor at the mast-head cried out, 'Land ho!' and on the horizon could be seen a lofty island."<sup>24</sup> This seems to make the momentous moment of discovery that extra bit more memorable, a moment that has recently been commemorated on a St Helena postage stamp. The Rt. Rev. C.C. Watts, writing about St Helena in 1936, appears to have taken this narrative license the furthest.

Nearly four hundred and fifty years ago a Portuguese captain named John Baptista was creeping down the coast of Africa in his little ship no larger than a fishing smack. Blown out of his course, he found on St. Helena's Eve a little island irregular in shape and some forty-seven square miles in area. [...] Sailing round the rock-bound coast, Baptista's vessel eventually found

a creek down which a crystal stream flowed into the sea, a ravine or cleft in the rock, making a little valley of luxuriant fertility. [...] After a few days to refresh his crew, and a little exploring in the woods without finding any sign of human or of animal life, Baptista again set sail, marking the island on his rude map.<sup>25</sup>

St Helena historiography meets *The Boy's Own Paper*. This is not all that surprising, given that Watts admits to having written his book "at sea, and far from books of reference."<sup>26</sup>

No doubt, a comprehensive account of the history of St Helena's discovery is yet to be completed. ∞

## References:

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent introduction to the history of European expansion into and beyond the Indian Ocean, see Richard Hall, *Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and its Invaders* (London: Harper Collins, 1996). For a general introduction to the Dutch empire in Asia see C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969). Also see Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); K.G. Jayne, *Vasco da Gama and His Successors, 1460-1580* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970; orig. 1910).

<sup>2</sup> E. Feust (ed), *Die Asia des Joao de Barros* (Nürnberg: Theodor Cramer, 1844), 184. Also see Walter de Gray Birch (ed), *The Commentaries of the Great Alfonso Dalboquerque*, Vol. II (London: Hakluyt Society, 1877), xx. For biographical information on da Nova see the entry for 'NOVA (João da)' in *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira*, Vol. XVIII (Lisbon: Editorial Enciclopédia, 1945), 949.

<sup>3</sup> This English translation is based on a German translation of Barros' *Asia*, namely E. Feust (ed), *Die Asia des Joao de Barros* (Nürnberg: Theodor Cramer, 1844), 190-1, which I have compared with the original Portuguese edition, *Asia de João de Barros, dos Feitos que os Portugueses Fizerão no Descobrimento e Conquista dos Mares e Terras do Oriente, Decada I*, Book 5, Chapter X, folios 66-67 (Lisbon: 1552).

<sup>4</sup> Duarte Leite, *História dos Descobrimentos*, Vol.II (Lisbon: Edições Cosmos, 1960), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Francanzano de Montalbodo, *Paesi Nuovamente Retovati & Nuovo Mondo da Alberico Vesputio Fiorentino Intitulato* (Venice: 1507). Lopez' account was later included in the first volume of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle Navigationi et Viaggi* (Venice: 1550), an early collection of travel narratives.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of this voyage, see Henry H. Hart, *Sea Road to the Indies* (London: William Hodge, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> G.B. Ramusio, *Delle Navigationi et Viaggi*, Vol.I (Venice: 1550), 156. Prof. Aldo Corcella, formerly of the University of St Andrews, very kindly translated this

passage at my request.

<sup>8</sup> J.H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration and Settlement 1450-1650* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), 175-7.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938* (London: Cassell & Co., 1938).

<sup>10</sup> C.H. Coote (ed), *The Voyage from Lisbon to India 1505-6* (London: B.F.Stevens, 1894), 18. In the original Dutch, the islands are spelt "sinte Helena" and "Ascecion".

<sup>11</sup> For a useful introduction to maps of this period, see Fred L. Hadsel, 'Early Maps of Africa: The Crucial Decades from 1490 to 1520', *The Portolan*, No.43 (Winter 1998-9).

<sup>12</sup> For a reproduction see Peter Whitfield, *The Image of the World: 20 Centuries of World Maps* (London: The British Library, 1994), 42-3.

<sup>13</sup> For reproductions see Kenneth Nebenzahl, *Atlas of Columbus and The Great Discoveries* (New York: Rand McNally, 1990), 22-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-7.

<sup>15</sup> G.R. Crone, *Maps and their Makers: An Introduction to the History of Cartography*, 5th edition (Dawson: Archon Books, 1978), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Note that St Helena is missing from this map, although Ascension Island is shown. As the information about the existence of Ascension Island could only have been imparted after da Nova's return to Portugal, why is St Helena not shown as well?

<sup>17</sup> For reproductions see Kenneth Nebenzahl, *Atlas of Columbus and The Great Discoveries* (New York: Rand McNally, 1990), 30-3.

<sup>18</sup> According to George E. Nunn these two clusters of islands are also featured in the Leonardo da Vinci gores and the Egerton No. 2803 Mappemonde, neither of which I have to date been able to inspect. See G.E. Nunn, *The Mappemonde of Juan de la Cosa: A Critical Investigation of its Date* (Jenkintown: George H. Bean Library, 1934), 47-8.

<sup>19</sup> Even this date is open to debate.

<sup>20</sup> G.R. Crone, *Maps and their Makers: An Introduction to the History of Cartography*, 5th edition (Dawson: Archon Books, 1978), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Much of the above problem relates to the process of dating early charts by the presence or absence of places whose date of discovery is known, which merely allows for a fairly accurate dating with the respect to the earliest possible date of a map's draughting. On the other hand, the discovery of places is frequently dated by reference to their presence or absence on maps whose date of draughting is thought to be known. Unfortunately, while this may seem a useful approach in principle, in practice it can often be shown to constitute little more than circular reasoning. For an introduction, see G.R. Crone, *Maps and their Makers: An Introduction to the History of Cartography*, 5th edition (Dawson: Archon Books, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Paine, 'Columbus and the Anthropology of the Unknown'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.1, No.1 (1995).

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion, see Alexander Schulenburg, 'Note. Philip Gosse and the Discovery of St Helena', *Notes and Queries*, Vol.45, No.4 (1998).

<sup>24</sup> Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938* (London: Cassell & Co., 1938), 2.

<sup>25</sup> C.C. Watts, *In Mid Atlantic: The Islands of St. Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha* (London: S.P.G., 1936), 13-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, v.