

In trying to answer the hypothetical question posed at the beginning of these notes, it may be seen from the Table that two earthquakes actually occurred within a year of each other (items 5 and 6) but on the other hand it appears that after 1864 no further earthquakes occurred for another 120 years, i.e. not within living memory. This therefore poses a problem for the hypothetical pill taker since he (or she!) could be ultra-cautious and take one every year and yet go their whole lives without there being an earthquake to counteract. Since there is evidently nothing to fear on St Helena from earthquakes it hardly matters however – even for the most gullible hypochondriac!

One further thought, it will be seen from Addison's writings that although many people may not realise it, earthquakes do occur in the U.K. In fact they probably occur about as frequently there as they do on St Helena, which may be regarded by some as yet further evidence that St Helena is a lost county of England!

---

# *João Da Nova*

*and*

## **THE LOST CARRACK**

*by*

**Alexander Hugo Schulenburg**

**University of Sussex and**

**The St Helena Institute**

---

Although João da Nova is widely considered to have been St Helena's discoverer, there are at least two intriguing questions surrounding the man and his discovery. One of these harks back to the early 1800s, the other to Philip Gosse's classic history, *St Helena 1502 - 1938*, published in London in 1938.

Gosse narrates how

three ships were sent ( ... ) under the Admiral, João da Nova Castella, to reinforce Cabral, the Portuguese commander in India. In due time da Nova arrived at his destination, met, attacked and defeated a fleet belonging to Zamorin, and was appointed commodore of the returning ships to Europe. When at last he rounded the tempestuous

Cape of Good Hope, da Nova ran his ships before the steady south-east trade wind, and it was on 21st May 1502, the anniversary of Saint Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, that the sailor at the mast-head cried out, "Land ho!" and on the horizon could be seen a lofty island. In honour of the saint, da Nova at once christened the unknown island and new possession of the King of Portugal, Saint Helena.

Da Nova anchored opposite a deep valley on the leeward and sheltered side of the island, where Jamestown, the little capital, now stands.

He found a stream of fresh water and set out to explore the island. No inhabitants were seen, but sea-birds, sea-lions, seals and turtle abounded. No other animals are said to have been found. The interior of the island was covered by dense forest, and even some of the precipices overhanging the sea, now bare rock, were covered with gum-wood trees. The only land bird was the wire bird – *Augialitis sanctæ-helenæ* – which by some strange fluke of fortune, is still existing and to be found in considerable numbers.

According to several early legends a large carrack, one of the fleet, was either wrecked or else became so unseaworthy that the Portuguese broke her up and "drew on shore her weather-beaten sides and all the armory and tackling, building with the timber a chappell in this valley, from thence is called Chappell Valley".<sup>1</sup> Although this chapel and a stone one built afterwards by the Portuguese have long since disappeared, the valley in which Jamestown stands still goes locally by the name of Chapel Valley.

(*Gosse's original reference: 1 Osorio, Narrative of the Voyage of João Da Nova in 1502. Translated by J. Gibbs, 1752.*)<sup>1</sup>

I have quoted this passage at length, because it contains both issues with which I am here concerned. Firstly, what authority is there for the addition of 'Castella' to João da Nova's name and, secondly, what authority is there for the claim that one of da Nova's carracks was wrecked at St Helena?

The issue of the correct rendering of da Nova's surname is fairly straightforward. Although Philip Gosse writes of João da Nova Castilla, this rendering of da Nova's name is most certainly false, as none of the Portuguese literature knows the addition of 'Castella' to da Nova's name. The spelling of 'da Nova' appears to be consistent in Portuguese accounts and history, and the family of his birth is given as Noboa or Nóvoa in the *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira*.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the translation of 'João da Nova Castella' into John of Newcastle', which is based on the erroneous assumption



that 'Nova' is derived from the Portuguese for 'new' (novo), cannot be substantiated. Likewise, the 'Castella Award', which is awarded by the St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha Philatelic Society, is consequently left somewhat stranded.

Unfortunately, entries on St Helena in English language encyclopaedias tends to base themselves on the erroneous rendering of 'da Nova Castella'. This addition first occurs in the St Helena literature in 1817, when 'Juan de Nova Castella' makes his first appearance in John Barns' *Tour through the Island of St Helena*.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, this invention of Barns was soon taken up by others. Although Thomas Brooke, undoubtedly one of St Helena's ablest historians, had written of 'John de Nova' in his 1808 *History of the Island of St Helena*, it is to his great discredit that in the book's second edition of 1824 he had amended it to read 'John de Nova, or Juan de Nova Castella'.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of the loss of one of da-Nova's carracks is a more difficult one to solve. I shall begin my answer with a closer look at Philip Gosse's assertion, which is based on a source which he refers as: 'Osorio, *Narrative of the Voyage of João Da Nova in 1502*. Translated by J. Gibbs. 1752.' No such translation or narrative exists. Instead, Gosse must have been referring to Jerome Osorio's *The History of the Portuguese during the Reign of Emmanuel*, which was indeed translated by James Gibbs, and published in London in 1752. The mistake seems to have arisen from Gosse's use of Brooke's 1824 *History of the Island of St Helena*, where Brooke begins to quote as follows:

"This island," says Osorio in his account of De Nova's voyage,  
"standing by itself ( ... )."<sup>5</sup>

This would explain the otherwise mysterious origin of Osorio's *Narrative of the Voyage of João Da Nova in 1502*.

While Brooke quotes Osorio correctly, Osorio's account includes no reference whatsoever to a wrecked Portuguese carrack. That information, however, also appears to have been taken by Gosse from Brooke, who writes that the island's discovery

is stated by several writers to have been accompanied with the loss of one of the fleet, a large carrack, but whether from having accidentally run aground, or intentionally broken up as unseaworthy, seems uncertain.\*

(Brooke's original reference. \*Dr John Fryer's voyage.)<sup>6</sup>

Brooke, however, misreads Fryer, who claimed that the discovery itself was the result of a shipwreck.

The *Portuguals* first found it out, as is said, by an unhappy Accident; one of their great Carracks being cast away here, or not able to

proceed farther, they drew on shore her weather-beaten sides, and all the Armory and Tacklin, Building with the Timber a Chappel in this Valley, from thence called *Chappel-Valley* ( ... ).<sup>7</sup>

It is from this passage, finally, that Gosse took the quote about drawing on shore the carrack's 'armory and tackling', which he ascribed to a non-existent narrative by Osorio. Incidentally, Brooke's use of Fryer constitutes a revision of the first edition of his *History*, where he had referred his readers to Roggewein's voyage<sup>8</sup>, when writing that

The event was attended by the loss of one of the fleet\*, which a tradition (now nearly forgotten) states to have happened off Deep Valley.

(*Brooke's original reference: \*Roggewein's Voyage.*)<sup>9</sup>

This 'early legend', as Gosse calls it admittedly, does indeed stem from the wreck of a Portuguese carrack at St Helena, but not in 1502.

Instead, in 1626 the ship *Nossa Senhora da Conceição* had been abandoned at St Helena after it had become unseaworthy on its return voyage from Goa in 1625. The vessel managed to reach St Helena, where its crew, having fortified their camp on shore, survived a skirmish with a number of Dutch and English vessels. The ship was eventually abandoned in early 1626, when its cargo and crew were transferred to six vessels of the Spanish-Portuguese fleet sent from Brazil.<sup>10</sup> The *Nossa Senhora da Conceição* must thereafter have run aground. Evidence of this can be found in Peter Mundy's accounts of his visit to St Helena in 1634, eight years after the wreck of the *Conceição*.

( ... ) one of their Carracks (there being 3 in Company) proved Leakie and not able to proceed was heere hailed ashoare and her goods landed, where they remained till other shippes from Portugall came and brought all away, dwelling heere in the mean tyme and fortifieing themselves against English, Dutch or any other that should offer to molest them. Many of the Ribbs of the Carrick were yett to be seene and abundance of Iron worke all over the Strond.<sup>11</sup>

I believe that it was this account by Mundy which inadvertently created the legend of da Nova's lost carrack.

The moral of my examination is that St Helena's historians should be wary of being too inward looking, while those in other fields need to be more cautious with respect to the reliability of St Helena historiography. What is urgently needed is a critical engagement with the classics of St Helena history, even if it means abandoning one or other cherished narrative of the island's past.

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938*, London, 1938, p.2-3
- <sup>2</sup> For this and other biographical information on da Nova see *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira*, Vol XVIII, Lisboa, 1945, p. 949
- <sup>3</sup> John Barnes, *A Tour Through the Island of St Helena*, London: 1817, p.2.
- <sup>4</sup> T.H. Brooke, *History of the Island of St Helena*, (second edition), London, 1824, p. 46.
- <sup>5</sup> T.H. Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- <sup>6</sup> T.H. Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- <sup>7</sup> John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia being Nine Years' Travels 1672-1681*, London, 1915, p. 182.
- <sup>8</sup> Contained in Robert Kerr, *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Vol. XI, Edinburgh, 1814, p. 192.
- <sup>9</sup> T.H. Brooke, *A History of the Island of St Helena*, London, 1808, p. 35.
- <sup>10</sup> For details on the voyage and fate of the *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, see C.R. Boxer's *From Lisbon to Goa, 1500-1750*, London, 1984, p. 176-200.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Richard Carnac Temple (ed.), *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, Vol. II, London, 1914, p. 329

## *Book Review*

---

# **St Helena, Ascension and Tristan Da Cunha**

*by Alan Day*

Volume 197 of World Bibliographical Series published by Clio Press, Oxford – £49

*by* **TONY CROSS**

**F**or over sixty years now I have written a wide variety of magazine articles, stories, books, essays, poetry and even short plays. When at my best I have modestly accepted, with downcast eyes, the accolade “writer” – notably from friends and relatives but truthfully knowing that much as I enjoy the experience, I