

Ships at St Helena, 1502-1613

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While researching my book *Fernão Lopes – a South Atlantic Robinson Crusoe* at the British Library, I stumbled on to details of ships and captains at St Helena in the 16th century, which I had not previously come across in the St Helena literature.

My principal source is Falcão [5]. Luis de Figuerido Falcão was the Secretary of the Portuguese Government during the time of King Philip II of Portugal (III of Spain) [5, 9]. He was also an employee at the Casa da India (India House), where he had access to original records – of both the Casa da India and King Manuel I, many no longer in existence, as well as records held in Madrid. Falcão's comprehensive manuscript, a year by year account of the progress and maritime movements of the Portuguese in respect to India, took three years to complete. It was first dated, in Madrid, on 20 October 1607, during the period when the Spanish king was also the king of Portugal (1580-1640), a time when Portuguese literary works inevitably found their way into Spain. The manuscript was updated to 1614, when the last ship of the final 1612 listed outward fleet returned to Portugal. Housed in the Biblioteca Régia, it escaped the fires following the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in which numerous other original records were lost [9]. By order of the Portuguese Government, it was eventually published in 1859 [5]. The only two copies I traced in the UK – a book and a microfilm – were at the British Library. And, the book was listed missing.

A most useful source, it contains a mass of information of the highest interest, with particulars of all the India fleets outward from Portugal, from that of Vasco da Gama in 1497 to the final listed fleet in 1612, under Jeronimo de Almeida. Included are the names of ships and captains, viceroys and governors in India, and details of return voyages, departure and return dates, also of wrecks, losses and clashes with enemies. In addition, there are exhaustive financial records, including ships' provisioning and stowage, cargoes, and also fortifications. Falcão also quotes Barros [2] and other historians. Inevitably,

there are differences between Falcão's [5] sources, and he draws attention to these.

Let me first deal with what Falcão [5] has on João da Nova. This was the third India fleet, comprising four ships, that sailed from Lisbon (Belem) on 25 March 1501. João da Nova, of Galicia, the Capitão Mór or chief captain, was a former 'alcaide' (deputy governor) in Lisbon. While making no mention of Ascension Island, Falcão [5] specifically names João da Nova as the discoverer of St Helena, on the return voyage, but does not give a date. His exact words are 'Este João da Nova descobrio a Ilha de S. Elena vindo da India'. Although Falcão [5] sadly does not give the names of João da Nova's vessels, which I have not managed to trace anywhere, he lists João da Nova's three other captains as Diogo Barbosa, Francisco de Novães and Fernão Vimet. Vimet was a Florentine. All four vessels, fully laden, returned to Lisbon on 11 September 1502 [3, 5], and this destroys any suggestion that one of them was wrecked at St Helena [8; this misconception is addressed in 13, 14].

João da Nova is supported as discoverer of St Helena by historians such as João de Barros [2], Gaspar Correa [4], Jerónimo Osório de Fonseca [11], Damião de Góis [7] and Damião Peres [12].

Judging from an illustration in the *Livro das Armadas da India* (plate, Estampa CX, opposite page 433 in Peres [12]; for two details, see opposite), three of João da Nova's ships were carracks, largely square-rigged, while the fourth (Vimet's ship) was a caravel, largely lateen-rigged. Peres gives 'Vimet' as 'Vinet'.

Next comes Falcão's [5] account of Estevão da Gama in 1502-03. Again, I was unable to trace the ships' names. While three ships of this squadron were present at St Helena on 30 July 1503 [15], five captains' names are given, Estevão's others being Thomás de Carmona, Lopo Mendes de Vasconcelos, Lopo Dias and João de Bueno Gracia. Gracia was an Italian. This suggests that two vessels were separated from the squadron sometime before arrival at St Helena, and I could not determine which two captains were not at the island. Another account of this visit, with reference to Cantino's map and the discovery of St Helena, is given by Peres [12].

According to Falcão [5], Estevão da Gama's squadron was the third in the fleet of his cousin, Vasco da Gama (total 20 ships), that departed Lisbon on 10 February and 1 April 1502. Of the overall fleet, only 9 ships are given as returning to Lisbon, on 1 September

Saturday of Easter), when they encountered very heavy rain. All three ships, which had left Lisbon separately in a 'fleet' of five between 1 March and 16 May the previous year, arrived back in Lisbon on 23 July, 1527, the *Santa Maria do Espinheiro* having caught up at the Azores.

The ship of Diogo Botelho Pereira [6] that called at St Helena at the end of April 1551 was the *São Bento* [5]. She was the flagship of the annual fleet (5 ships) that departed Lisbon in 1549 (23 March), and Pereira was the Capitão Mór. The *São Bento* arrived back in Lisbon on 9 August 1551.

The next record is Bermudes, the Patriarch of Abyssinia. Falcão [5] names the carrack of Dom João de Meneses that brought him to St Helena in April 1557 [6, 8] as the *Nossa Senhora da Graça*. She was the flagship of the 1556 fleet (5 ships) that departed Lisbon on 30 and 31 March of that year, and of which Meneses was the Capitão Mór. This vessel arrived back in Lisbon on 6 September 1557. Bermudes' ship home in 1558, the *São Paulo*, was in the same fleet out from Portugal under Meneses, though running a year late. Her captain, Rui de Melo [6, 8], would have taken command in India, as the captain on her outward voyage was Antonio Fernandes [5]. The *São Paulo* arrived back in Lisbon on 16 August 1558.

We now come to the Portuguese chapel. Three ships that arrived in Lisbon from India on 4 September 1571 [5] may well have been at St Helena together to participate in the building of the chapel that year in what is now 'James Valley' [6, 8]. Two were the flagship *Sancta Catharina*, under Jorge de Mendonça, the Capitão Mór, and the *Anunciada*, whose captain was Dom João de Castelobranco, that left Lisbon with two others for India on 9 March 1570. The third vessel, the *São Francisco* under Francisco Ferreira, had departed Lisbon for India with three others on 25 March 1569.

Then, there are the three Japanese ambassadors to the Pope who landed at St Helena sometime in 1583 [6, 8]. The Portuguese ship they were on may well have been the *São Pedro*, under Lionel de Lima. Departing Portugal with four India-bound vessels on 8 April 1581, the *São Pedro* went to Malacca, which had sea links with China, and arrived back in Lisbon on 26 April 1583 [5]. This would have allowed the time to bring the ambassadors from Malacca into Goa, and the call at St Helena would then have been in around January that year. As for the ambassadors departing Portugal for India on the *San Felipe* in 1586

[8], on their return home, Falcão [5] gives the departure date of the *São Phellippe*, under João Trigueiros, with five other ships, as 11 April. Falcão also lists this vessel as the first to be lost in enemy action, and this would match with the *San Felipe* being taken on her homeward voyage by Sir Francis Drake [8].

The ship of the astute Dutch pilot, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who was at St Helena in May 1589 [16] was the India-built Portuguese carrack *Santa Crus*. Her captain was João Alvares Soares [5].

As for enemy action at St Helena, the first, on 16 March 1602, involved the galleon *São Tiago Maior*, under Antonio de Melo de Castro [5]. In another part of his book, Falcão [5] also gives the date as 16 December. She was taken by two Dutch vessels, the *Zeelandia* and the *Langebercke*, and escorted as a prize into Zeeland. A third Dutch ship present, the *Witten Arent*, did not take part in the capture. The *São Tiago Maior* had left Lisbon for India on either 7 or 22 April, 1601 (annual 'fleet' of 9 ships), and was homeward bound when captured [5].

Probably the best known such battle, won by the Portuguese despite their waning sea power, was on 3 June 1613 off Chapel Valley when the Dutch vessel *Witte Leeuw* (White Lion) exploded and sank when her powder store was hit [6].

The two Portuguese vessels involved, both large carracks, were the *Nossa Senhora da Nazaré*, under Dom Jeronimo de Almeida, and the *Nossa Senhora do Monte do Carmo*, under Christovão de Ciqueira de Alvarenga. They were, in fact, two of only three ships in the final India fleet listed by Falcão [5], that had sailed from Lisbon on 30 March 1612. On the way to India the *Nossa Senhora da Nazaré* had also had action with two English East Indiamen off the South African (Natal) coast.

The two carracks arrived together back in Lisbon on 23 September 1613 [5]. The third in the fleet, the carrack *Nossa Senhora do Cabo* under Dom Luis da Gama, arrived back a year later, on 15 September 1614. She too had survived a sea battle, with two Dutch East Indiamen, off the Cape of Good Hope. ☞

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