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BARTHOLOMEW DIAS AND THE VOYAGE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS*

The congresses devoted to the history of Portuguese geographical discoveries provide a good forum for putting problems and widening the horizons, in the words of Professor Magalhães Godinho. All the more so, that many events in the history of discoveries are insufficiently described or inadequately presented. Suffice it to say that even the biography of Bartholomew Dias, the discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope, has substantial gaps. And yet the importance of this sailor is of primary character : it was he who opened the way for his fellow countrymen through the South Atlantic¹; it was he who found the South-East Passage leading—through the Indian Ocean—to the lands considered in his time as the richest in the world. In the sphere of learning his discoveries contradicted some hypotheses of Ptolemy whose *Geography* was so popular in the 15th century Europe that in the period from 1475 to 1490 this eight-volume long work had seen seven editions.

What is of special interest is the fact that the only contemporary information on that voyage is due to Christopher Columbus. It is commonly held that Columbus's interest was natural since he himself was planning to reach India. However, the fact itself that the sea route to India had already been discovered—or rather faultlessly charted—this fact, I repeat, had not exerted any influence on Columbus's plans. Why? A hypothesis seems to offer itself of some possible cooperation between the two sailors. Something in the nature of division

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¹ The hypothesis of the first discovery of Brasil by Bartholomew Dias has originated with respectable Portuguese authors such as Cago Coutinho and Jaime Cortesão. May we remind that Coutinho—a geographer, sailor, and historian—was also the first (together with Sacadura Cabral) to have flown over the South Atlantic, taking off from Lisbon and landing in Rio de Janeiro, in 1922. Cortesão, for his part, was an author of many works devoted to Portuguese discoveries, and became one of the most outstanding experts in this field.

of labour. When one reads the famous *Historia de las Indias* by bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas, one finds the sort of information which is not given by the historians of the geographical discoveries. For instance, Las Casas says of the Columbus's brothers :

Many times, or at least a few times, did they navigate in the company of the Portuguese, participating in their discoveries, and it was Bartolome Colón in particular who took part in the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope; perhaps even Cristobal Colón did take part in it.²

This information is repeated by Las Casas on the same page, "Bartolome Colón had taken part in this discovery and said that the Cape is situated on 45 degrees latitude (nowadays it is said that the Cape is situated at 35 degrees latitude)."³ On another page does he quote the notes of Columbus, "I have been to the castle S. Jorge de Mina and can testify that it is located in a habitable place, contrary to what some are saying."⁴ And further on Las Casas says of Columbus that, "many times did he navigate from Lisbon to the Gulf of Guinea." Likewise in the diary of the voyage of Columbus do there recur hints at his frequent sojourns in the Gulf of Guinea, which was pointed to by Antonio Rumeu de Armas in his interesting book *El "Portugues" Cristobal Colón en Castilla* published in 1982. The voyages of Columbus to the West Coast of Africa must have taken place in the 1480s, since he mentions the castle S. Jorge de Mina, this castle having been built in 1482 under the supervision of Diogo de Azambuja, accompanied by Bartholomew Dias. The above mentioned voyages of Columbus are of interest, since the navigation over the so called *mares de Guiné* was restricted only to the Portuguese ever since the treaties with Castile in Alcáçovas (1479) and Toledo (1480). The foreigners, when apprehended, were punished with death, their ships being sunk, in accordance with the ordinance of the Portuguese King.⁵ And yet the Columbus brothers did navigate together with the Portuguese the waters which were off limits for foreigners ; and yet they did visit the Portuguese fortified castle S. Jorge de Mina (the centre of the gold trade) ; and yet they did circumnavigate the Cape of Good Hope together with Bartholomew Dias. Christopher Columbus was granted the royal assent to be present at the court of King John II in 1488 when Bartholomew Dias—having returned from his voyage of discovery—submitted his report to the King. Would that all have been possible if the Columbus brothers had been but Genoese ? The already quoted Spanish historian, Rumeu de Armas, gives a straightforward answer (which, besides, does not cover Bartholomew Columbus), "Cristobal Colón had managed to join the Portuguese commercial enterprise in the Atlantic, and he managed to do something extraordinary at that time : he navigated the off-limits

² B. de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, Caracas : Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1986, p. 147.

³ On page 145 of Las Casas we read, "In these voyages and discoveries, or in some of them, Bartolome Colón did take part."

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵ The royal document bears the date of April 6, 1480.

sea route to the Gulf of Guinea.”⁶ Such an explanation seems unacceptable to us. The only reasonable accounting for the fact is that the Columbus brothers navigated the off-limits sea routes because they had been Portuguese themselves. There are many other facts to substantiate this thesis which has been put forward by many Portuguese authors ever since the beginning of the 20th century.

Let us return, however, to Bartholomew Dias and his contacts with the Columbus brothers ; we have already suggested that they must have consisted in cooperation that was (which is easy to check) durable. Suffice it to say that in 1493 it was B. Dias to have, as the first, welcomed Columbus after the latter's famous voyage of discovery when he had reached the port of Lisbon.

It is worth while to find out when these contacts had begun. Perhaps in Italy ? We read in Luis de Fonseca in his short information on Dias:

On January 3, 1475 the captain of this name was granted by the commune of Genoa a safe-conduct. The reason for the issuance of this safe-conduct is unknown since Captain Dias next appears in the documents only as late as 1478 ; it is in this year that the ship *Chacharone* under his command enters the port of Pisano with the freight of sugar [...] for some Florentine company.⁷

Thus Dias was in contact with Genoa in the years 1475—1478, as well as with the merchants of Florence. If it is true that Columbus came to Portugal about 1476, which is held by some historians, then we may venture a hypothesis that he had met Dias in Genoa and then came to Portugal together with him. The story about Columbus swimming ashore from a sinking ship to the South coast of Portugal is, according to serious historians, an invention, Antonio Rumeu de Armas calling it even a “scandalous fake.” It seems to have been added by the counterfeiter-translator to *Historia del Almirante* penned by Fernando Colón, when the book had its first edition in Venice in 1571.

Returning to our conviction that Colubus was a Portuguese, we wish to stress that for a well-informed, objective, and impartial observer the “official” history of Columbus—contrived as it was by the Italians, and supported by certain Spaniards—is improbable and does not stand the test of logic. Let us have a look at it : Columbus, a son of a weaver, of an inn-keeper, or—according to the most recent *vie romancée* by Gianni Granzotto published in 1984—of the “guardian of one of the gates of the city of Genoa ;” this selfsame Columbus, born somewhere in the vicinity of Genoa, lived in this city for some time, helping his father Domenico in the daily chores. Then he started to navigate (as a hand, obviously) on the ships of Italian merchants on the Mediterranean Sea. About 1476 he found himself in Lisbon where, for reasons unknown and for equally unknown length of time, his brother Bartholomew had been dwelling and making his living as a cartographer. Supposedly the brothers were to work together, Christopher making frequent voyages to the North of Europe and to Africa, as we already

⁶ A. Rumeu de Armas, *El “Portugues” Cristobal Colón en Castilla*, Madrid : Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1982, p. 72.

⁷ L. Adão de Fonseca, *O Essencial sobre Bartolomeu Dias*, Lisbon : Imprensa Nacional—Casa de Moeda, 1987, pp. 32—33.

know. Presumably at his leisure he managed to amass the knowledge—according to Las Casas—of geometry, geography, cosmography, astrology, and navigation,⁸ not to mention theology. At any rate, it is known that he had a perfect knowledge of the books of the prophets, and that he himself wrote a book entitled *Profecias*.... Besides, he managed to master the following languages : Portuguese, Latin, Castilian, Greek, and Hebrew. Would that all have been possible ? Who, by the way, could have received such an education in the 15th century ? Such knowledge could not have been amassed by a self-taught man coming from a poor family, which means a man obliged to earn his living. Let us mention, as well, the marriage of Columbus contracted—as by some sort of a miracle—about 1479 with a girl “from a very good family having influences at the royal court,” in the words of a Spanish historian A. Ballesteros Berreta.⁹ It is hard to imagine that the family of Philippa Moniz Perestrelo would agree to give their daughter in marriage to some Genoese unknown to anybody. And it was this marriage—in accordance with what had been written—that enabled Columbus, thanks to the influence wielded by his wife’s family, to reach the court of King John II, to submit his proposition for reaching the longed-for India by the Western route. This was supposed to have taken place in the 1480s. Columbus presented the King with certain conditions which we will recount briefly : he demanded a nobleman’s title of Dom, a title of vice-roy and of the governor for life of all the lands that he would discover—for himself and for his progeny ; moreover, he demanded a tenth of all the revenue brought by these lands. Would that have been possible that in the 15th century—or, indeed, in any other century—some seaman-cartographer of no importance, without any standing or prestige, coming from a poor foreign family, would have dared to present to the sovereign the conditions so exceptional? If Fernão Teles, a Portuguese grandee, a donatory of the isles of Flores and Corvo (Azores), who had made himself useful to the King on many occasions and who made himself ready to navigate farther on into the Atlantic in search of new lands—if even such a man asked merely for the right to hold the ultimately discovered lands as a lease, then whence such exceptional demands on Columbus part ? According to all manuals of Portuguese history, the King rejected Columbus’s offer, some of the authors blaming the sovereign for that ; Columbus, for his part, went in 1485 to Andalusia where he turned to, among others, count Medinaceli and to duke Medina Sidonia to acquaint them with his plan. Those he turned to were even ready to help him, but when they notified the Catholic Queen Isabel she bade him come to Alcalá de Henares where the court resided at that time. The first audience took place on January 20, 1486 ; the mariner presented his intention, as well as his excessive demands. After almost seven years, the Queen consented to his conditions and to his undertaking of the voyage. Of interest to us is the fact

⁸ Las Casas, *op. cit.*, pp. 29—30.

⁹ A. Ballesteros Berreta, *Cristóbal Colón y el Descubrimiento de América*, vol. 2, Chapter IV, Barcelona : Salvat, 1945, p. 278.

presented by A. Rumeu de Armas in the aforementioned book: in the Castilian court Columbus introduced himself as a Portuguese, and was considered as such (p. 35). Still, “officially he was identified as a foreigner” (p. 51). The quoted author further on explains:

It was convenient to Christopher Columbus to have introduced himself as a Portuguese discoverer because of the immense prestige and great fame enjoyed by the Portuguese pilots in all of Castile since the memorable times of Henry the Navigator.¹⁰

He adds further, “Portuguese was the first language used by Columbus in speech and writing” (p. 43), and that till the end of his days did he speak Castilian with the Portuguese accent and inserting Portuguese words. A. Rumeu de Armas found among the manuscripts in Instituto de Valencia de D. Juan in Madrid an interesting document filed away in a fascicle entitled *Libro de los maravedis que recibio Pedro de Toledo...*. This document constitutes a receipt for the stipend paid by Pedro to Columbus on the order of Queen Isabel. It runs as follows:

I gave to [a gap], Portuguese on this very day thirty Castilian doubloons which Her Majesty bade me hand in to him, in the presence of Doctor de Talavera; I was given them by Alonso de Quintanilla ; the Portuguese is the one who has sojourned in Real Malaga....¹¹

Actually, Columbus found himself in 1487 in Malaga to continue his negotiations with Their Catholic Majesties. Why does the document fail to mention his name ? A. Rumeu de Armas says, “...the almoner Pedro de Toledo did not know the name of the man who had been received in Malaga with such respect [...]. Yet he described him with such detail as to leave no doubt of the man’s identity ” (p. 27). We are of a different opinion: we think that Pedro de Toledo must have known the name of the sailor—the name which was Colón (in Portugal Colom)¹²—and that he is sure to have written it down on the document ; however, someone must have deleted the name later, not wishing that the Portuguese origin of Columbus be known among the people. In all the documents in Spain—with this one notable exception—the “immortal seafarer,” as he is called by the Spaniards, is always referred to as a “foreigner,” which means that his real nationality remains hidden. It is worthwhile to add that this is an exceptional case as concerns the sailors in service of the kings of Spain. The other similar case concerns Columbus’s brother Diogo: the document of

¹⁰ A. Rumeu de Armas, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29. We have no doubts as to that Isabel de Castile knew who Columbus was : in “Provision,” that is in the writ bestowing a coat of arms on Columbus, of May 20, 1493, there is a sentence “and your coat-of-arms which you were wont to have.” We are of the opinion that the Queen thought that Columbus had fled Portugal because he had been involved in a conspiracy against John II in 1483 or 1484, whose chief initiators were punished with death, and others either fled Portugal or had been put into dungeons.

¹² The first time that the name Colom/Colón appears in print as Colombo is in *Libretto di tutte le Navigazioni de Re de Spagna*, 1504—a compilation put together by Angelo Trevisano in Venice.

February 8, 1504, which grants him the Castilian citizenship, fails to mention—obviously on purpose—his nationality. Why? Why had they not been identified as the Genoese? A. Rumeu de Armas, even in the face of all that evidence, does not agree with the thesis of the Portuguese origin of Columbus. He is especially vexed with the version which holds that Christopher Columbus was a son of the Infant D. Fernando, duke de Beja, and of the daughter of João Gonçalves Zarco, first donatory of Madera, who came from a Jewish family. Rumeu de Armas holds that this is preposterous. Perhaps reading of the recently published book by Augusto de Mascarenhas Barreto *O Português Cristóvão Colombo, Agente secreto do Rei Dom João II [A Portuguese Christopher Columbus, Secret Agent of the King of Portugal, John II]* will make him change his mind. We have been convinced for years that the thesis presenting Columbus as a son of the Infant D. Fernando (the nephew of Henry the Navigator, and his adopted son) is true. It will suffice to scrutinize the facts conscientiously, and to perceive Columbus in the perspective of his times. Here is what Las Casas has to say about him in the first half of the 16th century:

His origins, as they say, are very noble and of long lineage, since he stems from that Colón of whom Tacitus speaks at the beginning of Book Twelve, that had brought captured Mithridates to Rome, the feat for which he had been granted the rank of a consul as well as other privileges by the people of Rome, in recognition of the services rendered.¹³

Las Casas understood that the famous seaman could not have been a weaver's or an inn-keeper's son; consequently, he made an effort to find for him somewhat nobler antecedents, reaching far back into the past. In his description of Columbus's personality he refers to a famous Portuguese chronicler João de Barros :

He was jolly and witty, eloquent and victorious in his undertakings. He was earnest in due measure, courteous with strangers, gentle and jocular with the members of his own family, sometimes severe in due measure, yet cautious with words [...]. Finally, both in his comportment, as well as in his demeanour, did he make an impression of a revered learned man of great authority and deserving of greatest respect (p. 27).

He kept "many times the company of learned people"—both lay and clerical—from the circles of Roman, Greek, Hebrew, Moslem, and other cultures (p. 30). Las Casas denies any credibility to the *Psalter* by Agostino Giustiniano, in which its author wrote that Columbus was an artisan. Las Casas adds that the Signoria of Genoa proscribed reading of this author, and ordered the confiscation of his work and of its translations (p. 32). It seems that in the later period the Italians—who appear never to have read Las Casas—returned to Giustiniano's information which made a commoner of Columbus. In the aforementioned story of Columbus, published in 1984, its author, the Italian Gianni

¹³ Las Casas, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Granzotto, holds that the thesis of the Genoese origin of Columbus stands to scrutiny. This could be countered, though, that it rests on forged documents, the opinion being shared by such famous historians as Ricardo Beltrán y Rózpide, Armando Cortesão, Luis Ulloa, Antonio Rumeu de Armas who speaks expressly that the so called Asereto Document—the foundation of the thesis—bearing the date of August 25, 1479, “is most clearly forged.”¹⁴ This opinion could be further confirmed by the letter of Giovanni dei Borromei written in 1494, in which its author states that Pedro Martir de Anghiera (coming from Milan, living in Saragossa, and then in Seville, himself one of the chroniclers of voyages to West Indies in his *Decadae*) had confided to him that Columbus had not been a Genoese, the Christopher Columbus—son of Domenico and Susana Fontanarossa—unearthed in Genoa having nothing in common with the discoverer of the alleged Indies. This letter is known to all specialists. It is likewise quoted by Simon Wiesenthal in his book *The Secret Mission of Christopher Columbus*, published in English, then in French (1972) and in Portuguese (1974). The author holds that the Spaniards consider this document as yet another forgery. Today, however, the authenticity of the document can be established beyond any doubt ; why is it, then, that the specialists do not undertake to examine all the sources previously put in question? Wiesenthal adds that he turned to Rome for permission to study the archives of Columbus held there (that is, the documents gathered in connection with the twice undertaken attempts at the canonization of Columbus). He was replied that the archives are located in the Vatican and are inaccessible for study.¹⁵ Why ?

Simon Wiesenthal says many interesting things in his book, but, alas, he did not know the thesis of the Portuguese origin of Columbus. That is the reason why he failed to discover the real origin of the sailor. Nevertheless, he gives a convincing evidence for the connections of Columbus with many Jews and converts—both in Portugal and in Castile. He recalls the assistance given by the latter to the navigator, and especially the help of Luis de Santangel—the Rothschild of his time—the treasurer of the Queen of Castile and the steward of the King of Aragon. Without the loan which he had given to Isabel for outfitting the flotilla of Columbus, the whole voyage might not have taken place. May we remind that it is precisely to Luis de Santangel and to another convert occupying an elevated position in Castile, Gabriel Sanchez, that Columbus did send his first letters to tell of the success of his voyage. He sent them from Lisbon on March 13 or 14, 1493, prior to leaving the port. Thus they had received the news before Queen Isabel herself got them, and yet later than the King of Portugal John II whom Columbus had visited on March 9 in his residence in Vale de Paraiso close to Lisbon, and to whom he had given two reports : one in the court audience, and

¹⁴ A. Rumeu de Armas, “La epopeya colombina,” in: *Las Raíces de América*, ed. José M. Gomes Tabanera, Madrid 1968, p. 99.

¹⁵ S. Wiesenthal, *A missão secreta de Cristóvão Colombo—A Vela de Esperança*, Lisbon : Futura, 1974, p. 142.

another in private. Hence King John II was the first man in the whole Iberian Peninsula to have learned the details of the famous voyage, which by no means seems strange to those who read the letter which the King had sent to Columbus to Seville on March 20, 1488, in reply to the mariner's request that he may be granted the permission to come to Portugal. In this letter, kept in an extraordinarily well-disposed tone, King John II calls Columbus his "great friend."¹⁶ The second person to be informed by the sailor was Queen Leonor, King John's consort, since she had bidden the sailor to call on her at Villa Franca where she was staying with her entourage. These are the facts, but they can be explained only by the Portuguese.

We have been always interested in the fate of the archives left behind by Columbus or his family. We know that of these only a part had been preserved. When Diogo Colón died in 1526, the family letters passed to the hands of his wife Maria de Toledo and to her son Luis. According to Wiesenthal, in 1544 they both left the West Indies whose vice-roys they had been, taking the documents with them. Bishop de Las Casas, who was there at the time, wrote the biography of the discoverer after having examined the papers. Five years later, on the death of Maria de Toledo, the papers returned to Spain and were entrusted into the custody of the monks at the Las Cuevas convent. The litigations for their possession, which soon began, went on till the beginning of the 17th century. Following the court decision, Muño Colón received from Portugal only a part of them in legacy, the other part staying in the hands of the family of Duke de Alba.¹⁷ I do not know whether any one in Portugal can explain who did possess the other part of Columbus archives, or account for the court's verdict that they be handed over to Muño Colón. Still, it is worth while to add that the documents belonging to the family Alba became in 1790 the property of their kin, the family Colón Artegon y Avila, to be inherited subsequently by the 12th Duke de Verágua. They have not been published, and thus one should check for their whereabouts, since the duke had no male progeny.

A Spanish historian R. Beltrán y Rózpide denies in his work *Cristóbal Colón Genoves?* that the sailor came from Genoa. Moreover, according to a Portuguese scholar Armando Cortesão (an accomplished expert in cartography),¹⁸ the said Beltrán y Rózpide before his death divulged to Afonso Dornelas that in some private archive in Portugal, among the papers of the famous sailor João da Nova (the leader of the third voyage to the West Indies in 1501), there is a document testifying to the Portuguese origin of Columbus. The document has yet to be found.

¹⁶ The letter, oft-quoted by the Portuguese authors, can also be found in M. F. Navarrete, *Collección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los Espagnoles*, vol. 2, Madrid 1825, p. 5. It is addressed to *Cristovam Colóm nosso especial amigo en Sevilla*.

¹⁷ S. Wiesenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ A. Cortesão, *Cartografia e Cartógrafos Portugueses dos sécs. XVI^e-XVII^e*, vol. 1, Lisbon : Seara Nova, 1935, p. 231.

To conclude, let us remind that the historical criticism concerning the preserved documents connected with Columbus started to be plied ever since the publication in 1875 of *Historia de las Indias* by Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas. The spreading in the latter half of the 19th century of the democratic and republican ideas provided the fertile ground for the appearance in 1904 of the so called Aserreto Document (thus called from the name of its supposed finder) in which it is held that the discoverer of America was a commoner's son ; the document was favourably accepted by all positivistically-minded republicans. The problem lies in its lack of authenticity. All the same, we think that the aforementioned—and for many reasons commendable—book by A. de Mascarenhas Barreto, published in 1988, will be resisted since, alas, there are very few historians who would admit to having committed mistakes. And as far as Columbus is concerned, what has been for so long at stake was the sense of national prestige. It will be difficult to Italians, and to some Spaniards, to come to terms with the fact that (what the Spaniards say of Columbus) "next to Christ, the most famous man in history" was actually a Portuguese, a son of the Infant D. Fernando, Duke de Beja, and that there was Jewish blood in his veins, since the father of his mother Isabel, João Gonçalves Zarco, was of Jewish origin.