

POPULAR FALLACIES ABOUT THE DIAS VOYAGE 1487—1488

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During the quincentenary commemorations of the voyage of Bartolomeu Dias 1487—1488 it emerged that some fallacies about the voyage persist. The basic reason for this is the complete absence of any contemporary account. Although some information can be gleaned from early maps and rutters and an account of the voyage of Vasco da Gama, the only details appear in a chronicle written by Barros and published in 1552, long after the events described, and errors were not unnatural. Theal's translation into English of extracts relevant to South Africa in Barros's work made his account readily available (in *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, VI, Cape Town, pp. 149—153). A number of modern writers — and teachers — have ignored research and have perpetuated Barros's errors.

Barros's first mistake was in the date of the voyage. According to him King Joao II sent Dias out in August 1486, and he returned in December 1487. Christopher Columbus was present at an interview of Joao II with Dias, and Christopher's brother Bartolomeu recorded quite definitely that Dias returned to Portugal in December 1488.

Barros stated that Dias had aboard his caravels four negroes from the Guinea coast, who were to be landed at various newly-discovered places with samples of spices, gold and silver, with instructions to enquire whether there were such products in those lands — and to enquire the way to Prester John. The first of these was landed at Angra dos Ilheus, later known as the Angra das Voltas, the Luderitz Bay of today. For years the Luderitz Museum displayed the skeleton of a person popularly believed to be that of the first negress to be marooned by Dias. But it is now appreciated that Dias could not have entered Luderitz on his outward voyage: time simply did not permit. On 23 December 1497 Dias named what is generally accepted as being Hottentot Bay, 35 miles north of Luderitz, and on 26 December Elizabeth Bay, 25 miles south of Luderitz. And the skeleton has recently been proved to be not that of a negress — or even of a female.

Barros's main error was in declaring that Dias after being detained in a bay for five days by weather which did not allow him to pursue his course, steered seaward, and 'the same weather drove them for thirteen days with their sails at half-mast' to where the seas became colder. E.G. Ravenstein wrote, as far back as 1900 (in *The Geographical Journal*, London, December 1900, p. 645), 'This statement we are not prepared to accept, for northerly winds are exceedingly rare along this coast, and the squalls from the north-north-east or north-north-west, which are experienced occasionally, are never of long duration.'

Dias left the coast, probably a short distance south of the Orange River, in January 1488. *South African Sailing Directions* (I, Hydrographer, South African Navy, 1975, p. 73) confirms Ravenstein's objection, for in January at Alexander Bay winds blow from the north-east, north and north-west on only 1% of the recording times; there are calms for 20% of the time; and for a massive 74% of the time the wind blows from the south-east, south and south-west. Obviously Dias and his crew, tired of beating against the prevailing southerly winds, exhausted by the labours of constant tacking (just how exhausting was proved by the crew of the caravel *Bartolomeu Dias* 1987—1988) steered deliberately out to sea, on long tacks west of south. After thirteen days they could have reached latitude 39° south, where they would have found strong westerly winds, which would have forced them to reduce sail, and where they would have encountered cold seas.

Barros failed to mention Dias's arrival, on 3 February 1488, at the Angra de Sao Bras,

the later Mossel Bay.

Barros continued that 'they came to an island in $33\frac{3}{4}^{\circ}$ south latitude, where they set up the landmark called da Cruz, that gave this name to the islet, which is little more than half a league from the mainland, and because there were two fountains here they called it the Penedo das Fontes.' Barros confused two different places. The Ilheu da Cruz (misnamed St Croix in the early nineteenth century, but re-named Ilheu da Cruz in February 1988) is in latitude $33^{\circ} 45'$ south, and lies two miles from the shores; but it contains no springs. Barros's word that Theal translated as 'landmark' was 'padrao'. A stone padrao was definitely placed farther up the coast, on False Islet, better known as Kwaaiohoek (fragments of which were recovered in 1938). Two padroes would not have been placed so close together. On the Ilheu da Cruz a timber cross was probably placed, not a stone padrao. There are no springs on Kwaaiohoek, but after rain fresh water stands in the hollows between dunes on the landward side of the feature; and after this has seeped in water can be found in shallow holes.

Another statement made by Barros, referring to the naming of the Cape of Good Hope, must also be corrected. Barros started that Dias and his men 'came in sight of that great and famous cape', and continued, 'Bartolomeu Dias and those of his company, because of the perils and storms they had endured in doubling it, called it the Stormy Cape, but on their return to the kingdom, king Dom Joao gave it another more illustrious name, calling it the Cape of Good Hope, because it gave promise of the discovery of India, so long desired and sought for so many years.' The Columbus note, already referred to, recorded that Dias reported to Joao II that he had sailed 'as far as a cape named by him the Cape of Good Hope ...'

There is further proof that it was Dias who named the cape the Cape of Good Hope. On his way home Dias rescued on the island of Principe a fellow mariner, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, who had been exploring river mouths on the Benin coast. During the passage to Portugal the two captains must have had long conversations. When eventually Pacheco Pereira put quill to paper he wrote that 'it was with good reason that this promontory was called Cabo de Boa Esperanca, for Bertolomeu Dias, who discovered it at the command of the late King John in the year 1488, when he saw that the coast here turned northwards and northeastwards towards Ethiopia under Egypt and on to the Gulf of Arabia, giving great hope of the discovery of India, called it the "Cape of Good Hope"' (G.H.T. Kimble, (trans. and ed.), *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis by Duarte Pacheco Pereira*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1937, pp. 153–154).

Dias, on his homeward journey, entered what we know as Luderitz Bay, and named it the Golfo de Sao Cristovao. Saint Christopher's day was 24 July. The next day, on present Dias Point, he raised a padrao, dedicated to Sao Tiago, Saint James. Barros described this padrao as the 'first' raised by Dias. It was the first only as it appeared on the charts, the nearest to Portugal. The Columbus note recorded that Dias described and charted the coast he discovered 'league by league'. It is tragic that those descriptions and charts have not survived. If they had, there would have been no problems, no fallacies!

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIAS VOYAGE

1. The Dias voyage was a great human and technical achievement, made possible by enlightened leadership and successful relationships between commander and crew, and by the right application of the most advanced nautical science of the day. The voyage proved the practicality of long ocean passages.

2. By rounding the southern extremity of Africa and entering into the Indian Ocean the Dias expedition proved the practicality of a sea route from Europe to the Indies.

3. Dias himself contributed directly to the Vasco da Gama expedition to India:

He advised Joao II that ships of greater burthen than caravels were necessary. The king ordered timber to be felled, which arrived at the Tagus in 1494, and Dias supervised the beginning of the construction of two square-rigged ships.

b. Appointed to a post which included responsibility for charts, he would have ensured the preparation of charts of the south African coast, and maps of the Indian Ocean incorporating information obtained by Pedro da Covilha who, travelling by way of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to India, had sailed down the east coast of Africa as far as Sofala. A scant 1 000 miles of coast between the Infante River and Sofala remained unmapped.

Dias made significant geographical discoveries. Particularly important was his experience of the south-east trade wind off the coast of south-west Africa, and the westerlies at his greatest southing. It is possible that some time after his return to Portugal he was sent to investigate the wind pattern in the mid-Atlantic — Pacheco Pereira certainly was — which made it possible for Vasco da Gama (and subsequent sailing vessels) to describe the best course on passage from Europe to the Indian Ocean.

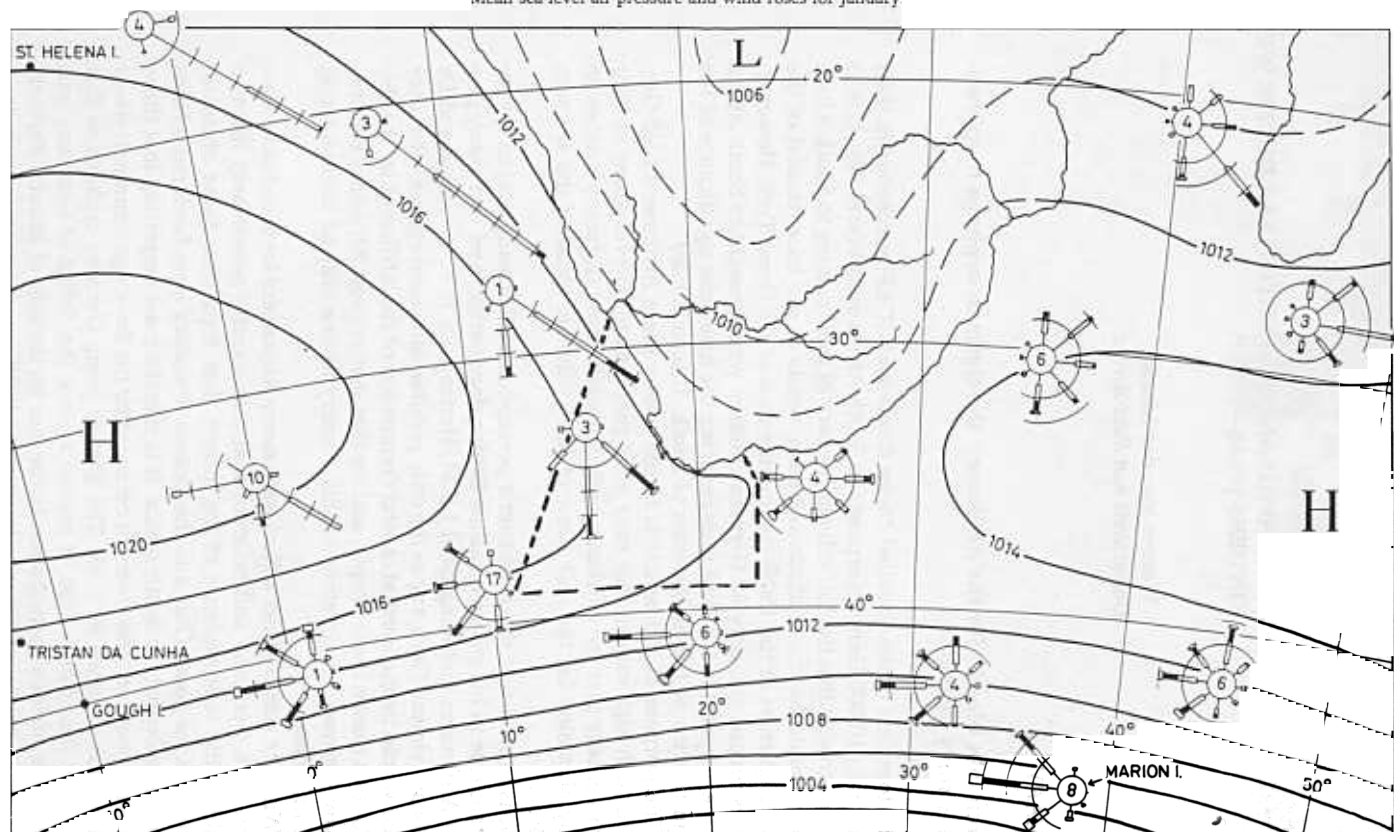
4. And Dias must have been party to the false information given by Joao II to Christopher Columbus that in rounding Africa Dias had had to go as far south as 45° latitude. This had the effect of discouraging Columbus and the Spanish monarchs from attempting to reach India round Africa, and encouraged them to look westwards for Cathay. Joao II's insistence in the negotiations for the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494, that the north-south line should be 370 degrees west of the most westward of the Cape Verde Islands ensured that there was to be no Spanish interference with Portugal's discovery of the route to India, with its tremendous impact on countries flanking the Indian Ocean and Europe — and which enabled Portugal officially to discover Brasil.

For South Africa of particular significance were

- a. the geographical information which reached Portugal, and eventually the rest of Europe, of the natural features along the coast, of the adjacent waters, and of the weather;
- b. the anthropological information about indigenous inhabitants of the coastline;

appreciation of the strategic position of the Cape of Good Hope sea-route, which resulted in visits, competition and settlement by Europeans.

Mean sea-level air pressure and wind roses for January



④ CALMS AND NEAR CALMS; — 4 TO 10 Kt; == 11 TO 22 Kt; == 22 TO 33 Kt; □ OVER 33 Kt.

Source: *South African Sailing Directions, I*, 1975, page 47. With acknowledgements to the Hydrographer, South African Navy. The superimposed dotted line shows the possible course of Dias, January to early February, 1488.