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COLUMBUS IN THE AZORES

by Rebecca Catz

A little known incident occurred in the Azores that placed Columbus's life in jeopardy. It happened in February of 1493, on the first homeward bound voyage from America. Columbus made two unscheduled stops in Portuguese territory before returning to his home port in Spain. The first stop was at the little island of Santa Maria, in the Azores, and the other in Lisbon.

He had not intended to stop at either one of those ports but he was over-taken by two storms, one that struck as he was approaching the Azores, and the other, a few days after his departure from the Azores.

The Portuguese chroniclers of the period have described the stopover in Lisbon in great detail¹, but they have absolutely nothing to say about Columbus's brief stop in the Azores during the ten days from February 18th to 28th, 1493. And were it not for the fact that Columbus himself has told us so, in his logbook², we might never have known about it.

Santa Maria is a mountainous little island only 10 miles long by 5 wide. It is situated in the Atlantic Ocean about 900 miles from mainland Portugal. Together with São Miguel, the largest of the nine main islands of the archipelago, it forms the eastern group of the Azores, which are administratively part of Portugal. Under the auspices of Prince Henry the Navigator, Gonçalo Velho Cabral discovered the uninhabited island of Santa Maria on August 15th, 1432, but colonisation did not take place until 1445. By the time Columbus arrived in Santa Maria, it was already settled with small villages where they were raising cereals, grapes and citrus.

Columbus begins the journal of the first homeward passage from America to Europe in the following manner: "On Wednesday,

January 16th, 1493, three hours before dawn, I departed from the Gulf, which I have named the Gulf of the Arrows, first with a land breeze and then with a west wind³. It proved to be a far more difficult feat of navigation than the outward passage of discovery, for there were no gentle trade winds to blow the two remaining ships of the fleet - the *Nina* and *Pinta* - back to Spain. The third ship with which he had left Spain, the *Santa Maria*, had foundered off the coast of Hispaniola.

It was now the winter season in the North Atlantic when the westerly winds are often accompanied by heavy rain and high seas. There were days when the caravels were averaging ten knots, something that would be considered good for many a modern ocean racer with all the technology of the twentieth century behind her. On February 10th, Columbus reckoned that they were about on the latitude of Flores in the Azores. The other pilots reckoned that they were much further north, near Madeira. As it turned out, Columbus was more accurate. They were in fact still south of the Azores and more or less on the latitude of Cape Spartel in northern Morocco.⁴ Two days later there were all the signs of an impending gale. In winter the area of the Azores can be one of the most unpleasant in the Atlantic Ocean. *Pinta* and *Nina* were in for a difficult time, bearing in mind that they were vessels that had not been designed for the North Atlantic in the winter, nor were they freshly fitted out. They had only been careened once since they had left Europe.

The two caravels ran before the wind under bare poles. There was nothing else they could do. On the night of February 13th, the two ships lost contact with each other. It was the worst moment of the entire expedition. There was thunder to the north, a howling westerly gale, and the sea pitched into a cross-confusion, which meant that everyone on board was drenched from head to toe. They all prayed, and as they ran before those monstrous seas, they drew lots to see who should make a pilgrimage of devotion to *Santa Maria of Guadalupe*, if they were spared. The Admiral drew the lot, which was a chickpea, marked with a cross. Another penitential pilgrimage was then proposed and one of the seamen drew the lot for making a pilgrimage to the shrine of *Santa Maria of Loreto*. Then a third was

agreed upon, a night watch and a Mass at *Santa Clara de Moguer*, not far from their home port of Palos. Once again the Admiral drew the marked chickpea. After this, since the sea and the storm continued to surround them with their noise and fury, all hands aboard the *Nina* vowed to make a pilgrimage, clad only in their shirts, to the nearest church of Our Lady at whatever place they should first make land.⁵

Shortly after sunrise on Friday, February 15th, a seaman named Ruy Garcia sighted land dead ahead. Some believed it to be Castile, others, the Rock of Sintra, near Lisbon, still others, Madeira. Columbus alone insisted that it was the Azores, and as usual he was right. It was Santa Maria, southernmost of the group, and one of the smallest.

After dark, on the evening of February 17th, they came to anchor off some houses, in the hope of hailing someone to tell them where they were, but the cable soon broke on the sharp rocks.⁶ So the weary sailors, robbed of the night's rest they had anticipated, made sail and stood off and on all night. It had never been Columbus's intention to call at the Azores on the way home. As a matter of fact, he had carefully avoided all the Portuguese islands, but ship and seamen had taken such a beating that he decided to take a chance in the hope of obtaining wood, water, fresh provisions, and a bit of rest.

After sunrise on Monday, February 18th, Columbus again searched the northern side of the island, found a spot he thought was appropriate, dropped anchor, and sent the boat ashore. His sailors spoke to the local people who told them that they were on the island of Santa Maria in the Azores, and showed them where they could find a safe anchorage for the caravel.

At this point, the first land where Columbus's men went ashore after leaving Hispaniola, there is a green coastal plain about half a mile wide. On the edge of it, where a small sandy beach makes a good boat landing, the first settlers of Santa Maria had established the village of *Nossa Senhora dos Anjos* (Our Lady of the Angels). The anchorage chosen by *Nina* off Anjos being far from safe, she

changed her position as the villagers advised, to the eastward, on the other side of a high rocky cape called *Punta Frades*. There, in a bay open to the northeast, *Nina* lay secure as long as the wind held southerly. Three men were left on shore at Anjos, a mile and a half away, in order to obtain fresh provisions and water.⁷

All that afternoon *Nina* rode at anchor in this lonely bay out of sight of the village, and without communication from shore. After sunset, three islanders appeared on the cliff and hailed. Columbus sent them a boat in which they came aboard. Fortunately, it was Shrove Tuesday, for, as Columbus writes in his journal: "They brought with them fowls and fresh bread, and other things that were sent by the captain of the island, who was called Juan de Castaneda, saying that he knew me very well, and that as it was night he did not come to call, but at daybreak he would come and bring more refreshments with the three men of the caravel who remained there, whom he did not then send back because of the great pleasure that he had with them, hearing about events of the voyage."⁸ Of course, the name Juan de Castaneda would be João de Castanheira in Portuguese.

Informed by the men who had come aboard with the refreshments that there was a little shrine near the sea dedicated to Our Lady, Columbus decided that this was the proper time to fulfill the third vow which had been made at the height of the storm. At daybreak on Tuesday, February 19th, Columbus sent half the crew ashore in *Nina's* one boat, asking the messengers who returned with them to seek out the village priest to say Mass; after which, the men were to return to the ship while Columbus with the other half of the crew performed their vows. As the men were saying their prayers, clad only in their shirts, unbeknownst to Columbus, they were attacked and seized by all the villagers, on horseback and on foot, and by the Captain as well, and taken prisoners.⁹

About eleven in the morning, Columbus, anxiously awaiting the return of his boat from the village that he was unable to see, decided that either the boat had been wrecked on the rocks or the people detained. Weighing anchor, he sailed the *Nina* around *Punta Frades*

and saw many well armed horsemen, who dismounted, got into the boat, and came out to the ship, commanded by Castanheira. Their obvious intention was to arrest Columbus. A parley followed between ship and boat, amusing for us, but trying for Columbus. He attempted to lure Castanheira aboard in order to hold him as hostage, while the Portuguese endeavoured to inveigle Columbus into the boat, in order to take him prisoner along with the men who had been captured at prayer. Columbus showed them his credentials over the bulwarks, but refused to allow the Portuguese near enough to read them. Rash and angry words were exchanged. Columbus said that he was "the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the Indies which belong to Their Highnesses,"¹⁰ and that he would return to Castile with half his crew if the others were not released, and see to it that the offending Portuguese were suitably punished. Captain Castanheira replied that "they did not recognize the King and Queen of Castile here, nor their letters, nor were they afraid; rather, they would have us understand that this is Portugal, and they said this in a threatening way."¹¹ Columbus then lost his temper and swore that he would not leave until he had depopulated Santa Maria and captured a hundred Portuguese to carry home as slaves. He returned to anchor in the harbour where he had first come, because wind and weather were very unfavourable for doing anything else. This anchorage was the one against which the villagers had warned him, and on the twentieth, as was to be expected, when he was employing his remaining crew in filling casks with sea water for ballast, the cables broke and Columbus made sail for São Miguel. The island of São Miguel is visible from Santa Maria in fair weather, but it was extremely foul that day and the *Nina* was unable to reach the island by nightfall. Also, it was very difficult to handle her because only three of the crew left aboard were seamen and the rest soldiers, landsmen or Indians, who were not very useful for navigating the ship.

At sunrise on February 21st, Columbus decided to return to Santa Maria and see what diplomacy could do. This is how he describes what led up to his return: "I beat about all last night in a very great storm, in constant danger and difficulty. The Lord showed His mercy for me in that the waves came only from one direction. If there had been a cross-sea, as in the past, I would have

suffered very serious injury. After sunrise, when I found that I could not see the island of São Miguel, I decided to return to Santa Maria, to see if I could recover my people, the boat, and the anchors and lines that I left there."¹² By late afternoon he was moored by his two remaining anchors in the bay east of *Punta Frades*. There he was hailed by a villager from atop some rocks they were facing, telling them not to leave. Presently, the *Nina's* own boat came around the point, carrying five of the captured seamen, two priests, and a notary public.

After such evening's entertainment aboard as the Admiral could offer, and passing the night, the priests and the scribe scrutinised the Admiral's credentials, expressed themselves satisfied, and granted them free entry. Captain Castanheira had apparently repented of his rashness, and perhaps had failed to extract any evidence of wrongdoing after putting his prisoners through some sort of cross-examination. The boat went ashore and returned with the rest of the *Nina's* crew, who said that the real reason for their release was Castanheira's failure to capture Columbus. The seamen alone were too unimportant for him, they said.

With her full crew restored, the *Nina* left this uneasy anchorage for the last time on February 23rd, and sailed around Santa Maria to the westward, in search of a good place to take on wood and stone ballast. She anchored at about 9:00 p.m. in either the Bay of *Vila do Porto* or *Vila da Praia* on the southern shore of the island, there being a good landing beach and plenty of loose rocks on each of them. However, at the passing of the first night watch at about 11:00 p.m., Columbus writes, "that the wind began to blow east and southwest. I ordered the sails raised on account of the great danger one finds here in these islands if he remains at anchor with a south wind, and a south-west wind easily shifts until it blows south. Since it was good weather for going to Castile, I gave up the idea of taking on wood and stone and ordered the course to the east." Before daylight, the *Nina* was well beyond the inhospitable island. Samuel Eliot Morison, whose masterful biography of Columbus won him a Pulitzer prize in 1942, sums up the incident at Santa Maria succinctly when he says: "Ten days had been spent in and around Santa Maria,

two or three anchors had been lost, and Columbus had nothing to show for the delay but fresh water, a few provisions, and a diplomatic victory over João da Castanheira."¹³

How can we explain the strange behaviour on the part of João da Castanheira? This man, who had ordered the cowardly capture of ten half naked seamen at prayer, was not the ruling captain of the island but one who was a *locum tenens*, acting on behalf of the appointed captain, one João Soares de Albergaria, who was away in Lisbon, getting married for the second time. Castanheira boasted, and Columbus believed him, that he had received orders from the King of Portugal to arrest him.¹⁴ It may be doubted whether Castanheira had any such orders, or he would have been more persistent in carrying them out, for he had already been rebuked for allowing a prisoner to escape. Morison gives the following explanation for Castanheira's behaviour. Since the Portuguese had been much troubled by the Castilians who had been poaching on the Guinea coast of Africa, contrary to the terms of the *Treaty of Alcacovas*; and since the Azores were natural places of call for vessels returning from Guinea to the Peninsula, it seems probable that Castanheira suspected Columbus and his men of having been on an illicit Guinea voyage, which they were trying to cover up by telling tall tales of the Indies.¹⁵

Morison's hypothesis is rejected outright by the modern Portuguese historian Jacinto Monteiro, who says that the Castilians had halted their depredations off the African coast in 1479, some 14 years earlier, when they had signed the *Treaty of Alcacovas* with Portugal.¹⁶

Monteiro raises a more interesting question when he asks why did the early Portuguese chroniclers of the Azores fail to mention the presence of Columbus on their shores?¹⁷ The first and most important of the insular chronicles was written by Gaspar de Frutuoso (1522-1591) sometime between 1570 and 1571, though not published until 1873. It is called *Saudades da Terra* which can be loosely translated as *Nostalgia for the Homeland* When composing this lengthy chronicle, it is known that Frutuoso spent some time in Santa Maria in the year 1570, interviewing the children and

grandchildren of Columbus's contemporaries, among whom the tradition of Columbus's presence was still very much alive. Moreover, he proves quite conclusively that Frutuoso read the works of Ferdinand Columbus and Bartolomé de las Casas, both of whom mention the incident at Santa Maria.

Therefore, he asks, why did Frutuoso choose to omit it from his own history of the Azores, which is filled with the most insignificant minutiae? Finally, Monteiro comes to the conclusion that Frutuoso omitted the incident because (1) at the time that he finished writing his chronicle (1591?), Portugal was ruled by Spain and he feared to write anything that would cause dissension between the two nations; and (2) he was also afraid to write anything that would discredit King John II or the descendants of Castanheira who were very powerful and who were living in the Azores at the time.¹⁸ Perhaps all these factors account for Frutuoso's silence on the subject of Columbus in the Azores.

Perhaps not. Still, he was the earliest of the insular chroniclers and the nearest in time to Columbus, and as such, one would naturally have expected him to mention the Columbus episode in his book. As for the other chroniclers of the Azores who came after him, such as Antonio Cordeiro (18th century) and Agostinho de Monte Alverne (19th century), they can be dismissed as mere plagiarisers of Frutuoso.

But have the people of Santa Maria forgotten Columbus? By no means. On August 3rd, 1892, exactly 400 years later and at the same hour that Columbus was supposed to have departed from the port of Palos on his first voyage to America, an official ceremony was held on the island of Santa Maria, marking the 400th anniversary of that memorable voyage.¹⁹

And according to newspaper accounts, on February 19th, 1992, 500 years later, Columbus's forced visit to Santa Maria will be celebrated by a solemn high Mass. This will be followed by a theatrical representation of Columbus's arrival and the unveiling of a statue to him. Also included in the projected program of activities

are the acquisition and remodelling of a building next to the Chapel of the Angels, where Columbus's men went ashore to pray, which will serve as a Columbus museum. All this, in addition to the installation of an exposition relating to the theme *The Azores and the Discoveries*. Not to be overlooked is the display of three anchors in Portugal's Naval Museum which reputedly belonged to the *Nina*, and which were found in the *Bay of the Frades* (or Friars), in Santa Maria, on May 18th, 1960.²⁰

All these programs and activities would seem to indicate that if the Azoreans paid no attention to Columbus in their near contemporaneous accounts, they are certainly trying to make up for it after 500 years.

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NOTES

(1)João de Barros, *Da Asia de Joao de Barros* 4 vols. (Lisbon: Regia Officina Typografica, 1778), Decada I, Book iii, chap. 11, 245-255; Rui de Pina, *Cronica d'El Rey D. Joao II*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida (Porto: Lello & Irmao, 1977), 1016-1018; Garcia de Resende, *Vida e Feitos del Rey D. Joao II* (Coimbra: University Press, 1798), 241-244.

(2)Robert H. Fuson, ed. and trans., *The Log of Christopher Columbus* (Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing Company, 1987), 187-192.

(3)*Ibid.*, 177.

(4)Ernie Bradford, *Christopher Columbus* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 149.

(5)Fuson, 185.

- (6) Fuson, 187.
- (7) Fuson, 188.
- (8) loc. cit.
- (9) loc. cit.
- (10) Fuson, 189.
- (11) loc. cit.
- (12) Fuson, 190.
- (13) Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), 334.
- (14) Fuson, 191.
- (15) Morison, 335.
- (16) Jacinto Monteiro, *O episódio Colombino da ilha de Santa Maria, nas suas implicações com o descobrimento da América* (Ponta Delgada: *Diário dos Açores*, 1969), 29.
- (17) *Ibid.*, 22-24.
- (18) loc. cit.
- (19) Victorino Bento da Cunha, *A Ilha de Santa Maria*, January, 1983. (Copy of article received from the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* with no indication of source.)
- (20) Ferreira Moreno, Staff writer. *The Portuguese Tribune*. Article entitled *Azores, Columbus and Marx* p. 24, 16 February 1989.