

Miscellanea

CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF FRANCIS DRAKE'S VISIT TO SANTA CRUZ DE LA PALMA DURING THE AUTUMN OF 1585

During the Spring of 1969 I made a brief visit to the island of La Palma and learned that Drake's flagship had been sunk in 1585 during the abortive British attack on the island. My keen diver's reflexes were stimulated and, with my curiosity and enthusiasm for nautical archaeology being increasingly helped by the encouragement of a Canary friend, born in La Palma and now resident in Lanzarote, I was all set to go. In February 1970 I presented my Land Rover and diving equipment, including compressor for recharging bottles, for shipment in Lanzarote aboard a boat allegedly bound for La Palma and, having left them ready to go, as I thought, took plane for Sta. Cruz, armed with various weighty introductions.

The nice young men who welcomed me appeared to have mixed feelings. To some I was clearly a pirate. After all, I was British; one even asked me if I was after treasure, apparently considering me an adventurer of the worst kind, notwithstanding, I hasten to add, his formidable hospitality. The others were less forthright. But of one thing everyone was assured: any fisherman I cared to ask would be happy to show me where the flagship was lying. Even the depth was mentioned; some 40 metres. A piece of cake, I thought to myself. Even if one cannot stay long at 40 metres, at least I should manage some photos and a few measurements—just enough to obtain positive evidence of the identity of the craft.

Due, however, to one of those muddles which appear to bedevil the hapless foreign traveller on, or close to, the coast of West Africa, my car and diving equipment got only as far as Las Palmas and no further. Eventually, much later, it appeared that, having accepted my car for shipment in Lanzarote, the company had then been "unable" to embark it on board the boat on which it was firmly booked. Eventually it turned up in Tenerife, after the local agents in La Palma had refused to admit liability or to pay for a hired car during my visit to the island. On the way back, some military pigeons to be shipped on deck caused my car and I to have to wait for another boat, notwithstanding my valid ticket and reservation for the boat on which the pigeons travelled.

A friend, resident in the territory, murmured consolingly that this kind of thing often happened. When things went wrong, he said, one should regard the financial loss as a form of direct taxation (in these tax-free islands) and the wear on the nerves as indirect taxation. I found this a happy alternative to a coronary and have ever since been grateful to him.

On this one occasion (of many), however, the particular muddle of which I was the victim may well have saved me much time in other directions. Specifically, I was unable to dive and thus found myself forced to adopt more restful pursuits, such as reading in the library, mentioned to me by one of the nice young men. Armed with a "billet doux" for the librarian, nothing was too good for me; very shortly I found myself ensconced for the day with some formidable tomes before me.

The most detailed seemed to me to be the work of Antonio Rumeu de Armas¹, wherein I found a mass of prose—and poetry—dealing with the sea-attack in question, from the Spanish point of view, with numerous references to foreign works.

It seemed that the poor relations existing between Spain and England suffered little change between 1579 and 1589. Queen Elizabeth continued to pursue her anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish policy; and King Felipe II was obliged to resort to the same tactics. (Having burned Joan of Arc some time before, it may be that the British and now wearied of such methods of saving souls, which, in Spain, had not long been in fashion. What is more likely is that religion was used in England as an excuse to turn a blind eye to privateering, which had already shown itself to be a profitable line of business. The Spaniards, on the other hand, were apparently keen to stamp out anything that smelt of progress of a non-Catholic variety, to which end countless Moslems and

Jews were indiscriminately consigned to the flames, putting back the clock irrevocably in a way from which the country has yet to recover fully.)

In 1579 the famous Spanish attempt to provoke a rebellion after landing on the coast of Ireland at Smerwick failed dismally, notwithstanding the granting of a Papal Bull and allegedly due to the lack of support encountered on landing. Elizabeth continued to provoke open warfare between the two nations, undismayed in any respect, expelling the Spanish Ambassador in 1584, helping the rebellion in the Low Countries on the death of William of Orange and mounting the West Indies expedition under Drake.

Up to June 1585 it appears that the queen did not decide irrevocably upon the project devised by Drake. Once permission was granted, however, he was given two naval ships, HMS Elizabeth Bonaventure and HMS Aide, and financed by British sources for the supply and equipping of the rest of his fleet. It is worth noting here that Rumeu de Armas considers "A summarie and true discours . . ." ² a most valuable work, as well as one of the most complete dealing with the subject.

Having set sail on 24th September, we learn that Drake landed near Bayona (Galicia) and managed to burn a Franciscan monastery on the island of San Simon (this account varies considerably from that given in "A summarie and true discours", which also goes into far more detail). In fact, the Spanish and British accounts might almost be dealing with a different campaign, although Bayona and Vigo are mentioned in each. The British mention that Carleill took some caravels around Vigo, in one of which was "the principal church-stuffe of the high church"; and that the merchants complained at having lost about thirty thousand duckets in this place.

Nothing further now comes in the British account cited until the arrival of Santa Cruz de La Palma. It is therefore necessary to turn to the Spanish history book meanwhile. It is mentioned that the Marquess of Santa Cruz was lying in the Straits of Gibraltar with the Spanish Fleet, preparatory to falling on Drake as soon as he should come within range. However the Spanish intelligence reports appear to have been unreliable, as far as Drake's intentions were concerned, since he passed by in safety, probably a great way out to sea.

Even if he set a course direct from Vigo towards the islands to the north of Lanzarote (Alegranza, La Graciosa), he would have been some 450 km west of the Straits at that latitude. Unfortunately we have no inkling of what the Spanish fleet expected him to do if he did enter the Straits, nor how they proposed to deal with him. Why he was thought to be passing that way at all is also a mystery. Clearly it was hard for anyone to foresee his movements once he left Vigo; the Spanish fleet must have been in a quandary when he did not show up near Gibraltar some days after his known departure from Galicia. But only an inspired guess could have been made as to what he had actually done.

About 24 October an unspecified English source is quoted as mentioning the presence of the British fleet in Lanzarote, although the Spaniards disclaim all knowledge of this, which, in itself, seems incredible. They do admit, however, that many powerful vessels were sighted of Santa Cruz de la Palma on 7 November, disappearing shortly afterwards in an unknown direction. The Spanish account then speculates as to what Drake can have been doing between that date and his reappearance off La Palma on 13 November."

To this we would add other questions. Did Drake indeed visit Lanzarote at all around 24 October? If so, what transpired? And how is it that the Spaniards seem ignorant of such a visit? (On 25 October news is reported to have reached La Laguna, Tenerife, of seven large ships in the island of Lobos. Even allowing as much as one week for the news to travel between Lobos and Tenerife, only six days difference can be observed between Drake's alleged visit to Lanzarote and the presence of the large boats in Lobos, which is very close indeed to Lanzarote. Note, however, that Millares Torres considers that Drake was certainly on the Galician coast at this time ³)

There is a further mystery. Some 17 British sailors are reported landing in Fuerteventura, where they were detained, allegedly at a time which would have fitted in well with the arrival of Drake in the Canaries. They said that they were part of the crew of a British boat, the Prima Rosa, bound

on a fishing trip, sacked by some French pirates, who gave them a caravel in which to continue their journey. These men are mentioned as being tried by the Holy Office, well treated and given a kind of provisional liberty to live in various islands.

The similarity between the name *Prima Rosa* and *Primrose*—one of Drake's vessels—is also remarkable. If the sailors were striving to conceal the presence of Drake in the islands, they could surely have picked a better name. And how is it that, at such a time, they appear to have been leniently dealt with by the Inquisition, unless that body did not know the names of Drake's vessels?

One Spanish report quoted⁴ mentions Drake anchoring in Puerto de la Luz about 11 November and being eventually discouraged by the immediate warlike preparations made by the defenders. It is also stated that no other source, Spanish or English, speaks of this episode. Again, bearing in mind the apparently detailed reports of the Cabildo of La Palma, respecting Drake's attack there, why was some official report not drafted in Las Palmas by the Cabildo there?

Late on 12 November Drake apparently came in sight of some Tenerife fishing-boats off La Palma, about the level of Los Sauces, coming south next day and arriving in view of the city of Santa Cruz when his boats passed Punta Llana. He then manoeuvred his fleet into battle stations, part of it being detached to sail around the island to guard against surprise sea-attack. There appears, however, to be a wide divergence of opinion among Spanish sources as to the exact number of vessels used in the attack.⁵

A local-defence system having been installed about one week before, upon receipt of the general alarm proclaimed and passed from island to island, details of the various troops are given, as well as the names of various officers and their commands, including those of the Castle of Santa Catalina and Tower of San Miguel, both well-armed with cannon.

Going in close to sound the depth, with a view to attacking the beach of Norias de Bajamar, HMS Elizabeth Bonaventure eventually drew the fire of Santa Catalina, which fell short, encouraging the fleet to come closer inshore. Drake apparently gave just such an order, whereupon San Miguel was allegedly then able to score some direct hits on the flagship. Fortunately this fort is only noted as possessing four cannon, while Catalina possessed ten; in which case the damage could have been much worse. Drake is also said to have come close to losing his life from a flying piece of metal.⁶

The British then apparently began to shell the city, with little effect, much of the shot going harmlessly into solid rock. Then the wind prevented the fleet from manoeuvring further offshore and an attempt was made to land by troops from launches, which had meanwhile become separated from the fleet, being further hindered by the cannons on shore and by the unfavourable sea-conditions from advancing to the beach. They ended up, says the Spanish account, by re-embarking in the larger ships, which gradually made off towards the south. So ended the attack.

The Spanish account then concludes to the effect that Santa Cruz de La Palma thus had the honour of routing the greatest of the British pirates, DESTROYING HIS FLAGSHIP and causing damage to vessels and their crews. Hidalgo de Sotomayor⁷ goes even further, stating that the inhabitants cannonaded the British, who withdrew with the loss of two ships.

The charming poem of Juan de Castellanos, written 1586/1587, has this to say, relating to the loss of the two vessels: —

Las vanderas inglesas embarcadas
Por no perder mejores ocasiones,
en busca de las Islas Fortunadas
guian los bien armados galeones;
pero no las hallaron descuidadas,
antes con necesarias municiones;
luego La Palma saquear entiende
mas con valor insigne se defiende.

Anduvo la refriega de buen arte,
en ambas partes salitrosos truenos,

no dándole lugar al estandarte
contrario para ver aquellos senos.
En efecto, Francisco Draque parte
deste puerto con dos navíos menos
y algunas lanchas de las suyas rotas
con los ardientes globos y pelotas.

It should be noted that this poem was written only one or two years after this glorious episode of Spanish maritime history; memories would still be quite fresh and, indeed, the stirring words of the poet in themselves make it a simple matter to conjure up visions of the thunder of battle; great ships manoeuvring hopelessly in the teeth of an unfavourable wind, eventually withdrawing, leaving two of their number sinking, if not already on the bottom, abandoned at the last moment by their hapless crews, of whose fate we have no inkling.

Having come to this point in my reading, I was overjoyed to think that here lay, within easy reach of modern diving equipment, these great vessels to be investigated. I remembered my friend in Lanzarote describing how he had found a cannon, close inshore and in only five meters of water, some time previously; could it even be one of Drake's, I wondered? Towards the end of that year I was able to visit the British Museum, where I had access to some of the British works cited by the Spanish account.¹

One point was immediately clear. No British account, on which I was positively counting for the gory details apparently omitted from "Piraterías y Ataques Navales", made any reference to the sinking of any boats of warship calibre. Indeed, the whole question of an attack on Santa Cruz de La Palma was scarcely mentioned.

Having read various accounts of contemporary battles and engagements in Hakluyt, I was quite ready to think, at first, that the British had—in some way—managed to cover up a crushing defeat, including the loss of two warships. My imagination boggled at the idea of Drake explaining to Her Majesty, upon his return, how they had been set upon by a vastly superior force somewhere in the New World; and well and truly routed!

Then commonsense reasserted itself. I began to think of the practical difficulties of silencing the "survivors" of the two ships; someone would be sure to come put with the truth, no matter what the consequences. My mother-in-law then came to the rescue and prompted me to write to a relation of hers, a well-known naval historian, Mr. Oliver Warner.

My consternation was complete when he kindly wrote to me, pointing out that he "could see no mention . . . referring to a serious attack on Santa Cruz in 1585". He also reported that the "Bonaventure" of 1577 was afloat until 1618; and that the "Elizabeth Bonaventure" of 1567 was not broken up until 1610/11.⁸

Mr. Warner finished his broadside by being glad that I was interesting myself in the history of the Canary Islands. And betting that Nelson wished he had not lost an arm there!!

More recently, Mr. John Hampden has written to me that Drake's flagship, the "Elizabeth Bonaventure", was certainly not sunk, but that she was the flagship in his memorable raid on Cadiz in 1587, as well as being in the English fleet which met the Armada.⁹

Convinced now that I was—at the eleventh hour—to be deprived of a chance to investigate the alleged wreck, I hopefully showed the text of Piraterías and Ataques Navales to a Spanish friend, with particular reference to the wording of the passage describing the doom of the "Elizabeth Bonaventure".

He stated categorically that "destrozar" is the action of reducing something to powder; a learned foreign colleague confirmed this to be so. Sadly I concluded that not enough of the vessel had been "destrozado" to induce its permanently remaining in Spanish territory, albeit at the bottom of the sea.

Apart from these major differences in Spanish and English accounts of the actual attack, we appear to be faced with discrepancies in dates, not only that of the attack itself, but also with regard to the whole chronology of the early part of the voyage. It should also be mentioned in passing that one British author states that Drake made for the Madeiras, but that bad weather and

gunfire from ashore made landing too dangerous, whereupon he made for the Cape Verde Islands. Clearly this is an unfortunate slip and nothing more.¹⁰

Taking next the question of dates, we should first consider an account given in “Papers Relating to the Spanish War 1585–87”. Parts of some pages are worth quoting:

Page 1: “The discours and description of the voyage of Sir Francis Drake and Mr. Captain Frobisher set forward the 14th Day of September 1585” . . . “had sight of the town of Reff.”

Once more I am indebted to Mr. John Hampden for pointing out that the footnote to page 6 states “the town of Reff” was “probably Arrecife, now Port Naos, in Lancerotte”. Port Naos is now joined to Arrecife and is only one of the harbours belonging to that town.

Lámina III of “Piraterías y Ataques Navales” clearly shows Drake as passing between La Graciosa and Lanzarote—totally out of sight of Arrecife—before heading away towards La Palma.

Page 6 continues (paragraph 6): “On the 3rd day of November we put our ships into the island of Palme before the town called Palme, thinking to have anchored there, but they presently shot their great ordnance at us, about 20 shots and struck the Admiral quite through in 2 several places, and shot the Bark Talbot through the sails, but, thanks be to God! our men had no hurt. They had three platforms that they did discharge at us and flourished with their ensigns. We had a fair leading gale of wind and put into the sea, not meaning to leave them so.”

“The fourth day we went ashore on another island . . .” (Hiero)

Page 70 gives the “Plan of the Campaign”.

“Bayon, 11th Oct. He stayed there until the 11th day of October (when he continued) his voyage, and arrived at Ferro, the southernmost (of the Canary Islands) which lieth in 27 1/2 degrees and there refre(-shed). Thence he departed about the 24th October.”

“Santiago, 4th Nov. He then arrived at the Isle of Santiago . . .”

If Drake did indeed, on 3rd November, arrive “before the town called Palme, thinking to have anchored there”, his actions or intentions were not necessarily warlike. He may only have been seeking provisions, although not with intent to pay for them *Piraterías y Ataques Navales*, however, seems to have no doubt that an invasion was attempted. And that such was intended from the first.

“The fourth day we went ashore on another island”; this arrival at Hierro would be about 6/7 November, while page 70 puts the fleet as departing Ferro (Hiero) on 24th October and arriving Santiago on 4th November. Between these two pages alone—both British versions—we seem, on the one hand, to have Drake arriving Palme on 3rd November and, on the other, arriving Santiago—a great way off—on 4th November, this latter date being some nine days before the date given by “*Piraterías y Ataques Navales*” as the date of the attack on Santa Cruz de la Palma, apparently well-supported by Cabildo records.

Considering the different calendars in use at the time, we find that 24th October by Protestant calculation seems to be 4th November for Catholics, according to their Gregorian calendar, this being mentioned specifically by “*Piraterías y Ataques Navales*”.

Thus 3rd November (from page 6 quoted above) tallies with 13th November, the date given by Spain as that of the attack. But departure from Ferro on 24th October must be the same as departure on 3rd November (by Gregorian calendar); this date is four days before “*Piraterías y Ataques Navales*” mentions a large fleet off La Palma and ten days before the Spanish date of the actual attack.

Ferro departure on 24th October also clashes with the date given on page 6, the attack on Santa Cruz, according to the British being 3rd November.

What can we deduce from the above? Probably that times have not changed, in the sense that history often depends on the nationality of the historian himself. Baulked in my attempt to be the man to report on the wreck of the “*Elizabeth Bonaventure*”, I derive enormous comfort from this happy thought.

When a British spokesman, speaking of Aden only a few years back, reported acidly that

military aircraft had strafed rebel tribesmen attacking an isolated post in the Radfan area, he was talking of the same incident praised in glowing terms by some Arab broadcaster; that gallant freedom fighters of the Army of Liberation had been prevented from attaining their glorious victory through the dastardly intervention of aircraft belonging to the western capitalist imperialist warmongers.

The same broadcaster might have added—just for good measure—that a couple of the jets had been brought down by rifle fire, Praise be to Allah.

And even if Drake's flagship is not down there in the harbour in 40 metres of water, there probably is a sunken boat—still to be visited—just as the old fishermen say.

NOTES

- 1 Rumeu de Armas, A.
- 2 Byggs, W.
- 3 Millares Torres, Vol V, p. 251.
- 4 de Sosa, p. 191.
- 5 Salazar, J. de. was Captain-General. Indicates that 19 ships attacked. Other figures are also mentioned by Rumeu de Armas; see note (19).
- 6 Lemonnier, L.
- 7 de Sotomayor. "Relación . . ."
- 8 Warner, Oliver. Personal communication of 21 June 1970 (Author of many naval works)
- 9 Hampden, John. Personal communication of 4 Sep 1973.
- 10 Andrews, K. R. See p. 102.

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1941 *Piraterías y Ataques Navales contra las Islas Canarias*, Vol II, 1st Part, Chapter XIV, Madrid, and the titles by MILLARES TORRES, Fray J. de SOSA and Diego Hidalgo de SOTOMAYOR in the bibliography of the book mentioned.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Autor hat versucht, jenen Berichten und Traditionen nachzugehen, denen zufolge in einer Tiefe von 40 Metern vor der Küste der Kanaren-Insel La Palma das Wrack des 1585 versenkten Flaggschiffes von Francis Drake auf dem Meeresgrund liegen soll. Obwohl eine submarin-archäologische Untersuchung der Stätte nicht möglich war, ergaben historische Nachforschungen, daß die betreffenden Berichte irrig bzw. irreführend sein müssen. Wenn an der bezeichneten Stelle im Meer ein versunkenes Schiff liegt, so kann es sich unmöglich um das Wrack der „Elizabeth Bonaventure“ von Francis Drake handeln, da dieses Schiff noch 1587 an einem Angriff auf Cadiz teilnahm.