



### The Conception: a 450-year-old mystery

All Chagos enthusiasts *know* that in 1555 a Portuguese merchantman (*nao*) was wrecked on Peros Banhos on her way to India. However, no trace of the vessel has yet been found nor have the documents describing the wreck and its aftermath ever been subjected to analysis. Indeed, the two accounts of the event do not appear even to have been translated into modern Portuguese, let alone any other language. So readers of *Chagos News* owe, as I do, a debt of gratitude to my son Jasper for delving into the original texts to extract sense from prose in which the Renaissance vocabulary and nautical expressions still baffle many Portuguese experts.

The main account of the disaster is by Manoel Rangel, a passenger aboard the vessel, first printed in 1557; the second, by an unidentified Jesuit priest writing in about 1620, relies on second-hand sources. Rangel makes sure that the selfish behaviour of the ship's officers and the nobility is fully recorded; the priest is more concerned with the selflessness of the three Jesuits aboard. Both leave many uncertainties, most importantly about the site of the accident, the course(s) taken by the survivors and the numbers of those who either perished or survived.

The *Conceição* left Lisbon on 1 April 1555, later than was considered safe by the experts, but had an uneventful and reasonably quick voyage round the Cape of Good Hope (passed on 18 July) and on into the Indian Ocean. South of Madagascar, the captain chose to take the more direct route to Cochin, rather than head up the Madagascar channel. This involved proceeding eastwards, then, in the longitude of Rodrigues, turning north-north-east, so as to make best use of the South-East trade winds and keep to the west of the dangerous shoals represented by the Chagos and Maldivian islands. The pilot may have possessed a chart similar to that illustrated. But he would also have relied on his own experience and on a *roteiro* (sailing instructions). Quite a number of these survive, but sadly none, so far as I have been able to discover, relates to the open sea route across the Indian Ocean.

On 21 August, the pilot reckoned he was six degrees from 'India'. The text suggests that this was a calculation of latitude, since it was based on a midday fix of the sun in good weather (the priestly version states that Peros Banhos lies at 7° S, which proves his later knowledge and nothing more). Later, we are told that this position meant that, at midday, the ship would have been 24 leagues (about 82 nautical miles) from any shallows. Thirteen hours later, when the *Conceição* ran aground, the poor pilot moaned that he had to be still at least 4 leagues away! This after ignoring all the warnings he was given: the weather was fine and there was a following wind; during that afternoon, some of those aboard, including the experienced Second Mate, had noticed that the sea was becoming greener and expressed concern that they were approaching shallows. The pilot refused either to alter course or reduce sail. As night fell, fears increased; the water was still green and increasing numbers of seabirds (*garajaus*) were following the ship. It was a clear moonlit night and the wind eased. The pilot maintained his course and confidence. Bird numbers became so large that their cries were deafening. On Thursday 22 August, the ship went aground with a 'huge crash', in which the rudder was carried away, and was then hurled some distance (2 leagues, says Rangel) over reefs, as the crew struggled, mostly in vain, to furl sails, pump water, and jettison cargo. An anchor was let go, but had to be cut away as the waves swept over the ship.

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