Straits, Capes and Islands as Points of Confluence in the Portuguese Ocean Route between the Atlantic and the East (in the Fifteenth Century)

Abstract. In this paper, I will present a reflection on the role of straits, capes and islands as geographical references in the oceanic route from Europe to India. All three have a double dimension; geographical and cultural. So, the challenge is how to explain the nautical and intellectual process in which the generation of the oceanic concept operated. To support this idea, I will consider three successive aspects of these reference points: first, their importance in medieval oceanic doctrines; second, their role as reference points in the maritime routes of the central and southern Atlantic; finally, based on the linkage between the initial Atlantic experience and the emerging notion of oceanic space, I will emphasize two specific issues: their role in the shaping of the doctrine of a maritime rearguard, as well as their importance in fifteenth-century Portuguese diplomacy.

The Medieval Oceanic Imaginary

As this is a fairly well-known topic, I will limit myself to pointing out some general notions relevant to the theme of this paper.

For medieval men the sea was the space of the marvelous; the substantive horizon of what they feared because of its strangeness. It is the *topos* of the unknown. Characterized by its exterior position in relation to the inhabited world, the peripheral dimension of the Ocean is evident in the cartographic design of several medieval maps. However, at this point, we also find variations and contradictions. Sometimes, the Atlantic was conceived of as completely different from the Indian Ocean, which was assumed to be an Interior Sea according to the Ptolemaic worldview and due to this, as a peripheral reality and therefore a nebulous one. ²

¹ This is the case, for example, of the T/O type maps. See Armando Cortesão, *História da Cartografia Portuguesa*, vol. 1, Coimbra 1969, 168; Lloyd A. Brown, *The Story of Maps*, New York 1979, 96–97.

On the other hand, not yet knowing of the existence of the American continents, but assuming that the earth was round, people had no difficulties to accept that one might reach the East by sailing straight to the West. The West could be viewed as the beginning of the eastern oceans. Thus, in the early fifteenth century, Pierre d'Ailly (in his work *Ymago Mundi*) wrote—and this is an allusion that Columbus would not forget to note—that the region of the Columns of Hercules (that is, the Atlantic) and India are bathed by the same sea.³

This vision, deeply rooted in late antique geography, had important consequences. The Ocean surrounding the inhabited lands became a disturbing element (adverse, destructive, and even dangerous), while the actual non-destruction of creation by the waters was almost considered a *permanent miracle*. As Isidore of Seville said, the Ocean had its name from its shape as a circle which surrounds the globe; or alternatively because it gleams with blue color, *ut caelum*, like the sky.⁴

In this view, the Ocean emerges as an entity which is *beyond the world*; in fact, it is *beyond the land* because it is outside the inhabitable space. It is the space of the unknown that is beyond the frontiers of the known world, it is understood as an inhuman space. In sum, the Ocean is *savage* and *immeasurable*.

Thus, one can say that the medieval oceanic imaginary bears a strong dimension of both, the unknown as well as the adverse, destructive, and dangerous. In a certain sense, the Ocean is associated with the idea of fear: it is an open space from where, beyond a certain limit, it is impossible to return. One only needs to consider chapter 8 of Zurara's *Chronicle of Guinea* (this Portuguese chronicler lived in the mid-fifteenth century [c.1410/1420–c.1473/1474])

- 2 Jacques Le Goff, L'Occident médiéval et l'océan Indien: un horizon onirique, in: *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident,* Paris 1977, 280–298, here 282–283
- 3 António Ramirez de Verger (ed.), Ymago Mundi y otros opúsculos de Pierre d'Ailly, Madrid 1992, 43.
- 4 These are his words: "Do Oceano. Gregos e Latinos chamam assim ao oceano porque, a modos de um círculo, cerca o orbe da terra [...]. Ou mesmo, porque, como o céu, resplandece de cor purpúrea: o oceano, seria, então algo assim como cyáneos." (I use my own translation of Isidore' published in *Do Imaginário do Atlântico ao Atlântico Imaginado*, vol. 1, ed. Luís Adão da Fonseca, José Adriano de Carvalho, Porto, 1993, 49). Similar words in Ramirez de Verger, *Ymago Mundi* (cf. n. 3), 111. See the interesting observations of Patrick Gautier Dalché, Comment penser l'Océan? Modes de connaissance des *fines orbis terrarum* du Nord-Ouest (de l'Antiquité au XIIIe siècle), in: *L'Europe et l'Océan au Moyen Âge. Contribution à l'histoire de la navigation*, Nantes 1988, 217–233; Danielle Lecoq, L'Océan et la mer entre mythe et questions naturelles (XIIe-XIIIe siècles), in: *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*, N.S. 32,2 (1992), 257–281.

to understand clearly what the theme of return means to the Portuguese in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁵

The Horizon of Straits, Capes and Islands in the Atlantic

In traditional geography, in which the sea surrounds the continents, land is, in fact, an *island*. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, an important Portuguese navigator of the fifteenth century (c.1460–c.1531/1533), gave an explicit expression to this idea when repeating the traditional image of the sea. He writes:

"And, therefore, we should first consider how the philosophers [...] have said that the whole earth is surrounded by sea, concurring in their understanding that the foundation of our life, the glory of our Empires, to the advantage of the waters, is made an island."

Here lies the importance of straits, capes and islands in medieval oceanic thought. As an *unknown* and open space, the Atlantic needed spatial references and horizons in order to be navigable, even if these points only existed in human imagination. Like the Mediterranean, the Atlantic was thus conceived of as a horizontal ocean filled with islands, as most of the medieval maps show: offshore, there are islands; along the coast, there are straights and capes. Though their actual functions differ, they nevertheless had a common purpose for seafaring: they served as reference points on the actually navigated maritime routes.

On the other hand, it is important to remember another dimension of these navigations: instead of being mere journeys of discovery, they have a strong religious paradisiacal connotation. That is to say, the new space was also

- 5 Gomes Eanes de Zurara, Crónica da Guiné, Porto 1973, chap. 8, entitled: "Por que razão não ousavem os navios passar a alem do Cabo Bojador" (49–51), here 49: Como passaremos (...) [os marinheiros do Infante D. Henrique] os termos que poseram nossos padres, ou que proveito pode trazer ao Infante a perdição de nossas almas juntamente com os corpos, que conhecidamente seremos homicidas de nós mesmos? Translation: The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, ed. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, vol. 1, London 1896, chapter 8 ("Why ships had not hitherto dared to pass beyond Cape Bojador"), (30–32), here 31: "How are we, men [the sailors of Prince Henry the Navigator] said to pass the bounds that our fathers set up, or what profit can result to the Infant from the perdition of our souls as well as of our bodies—for of a truth by daring any further we shall become wilful murderers of ourselves?".
- 6 Damião Peres (ed.), Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis por Duarte Pacheco Pereira, Lisbon 1988, 18: E, por tanto, devemos primeiro considerar como os filósofos, que nesta matéria falaram, disseram que a terra toda é cercada pelo mar, consentindo seus entenderes que [...] o assento de nossa vida, a glória de nossos Impérios, pera proveito das águas, em ilha seja feita.

understood as the route of imaginary navigation, which gave access to Eden. There are many references in Portuguese sources that show this other dimension, thus an excellent example for this idea accompanying the navigations along the west coast of Morocco and Mauritania can be found in Zurara's writings. According to him, Saint Brendan, an Irish monk, had already traveled through the same North African maritime latitudes. Sometimes, navigators openly admitted that they were on the way towards the Paradise Islands. For many, this may well have been the place where the rivers of Paradise flow, as Cadamosto says about the mouth of the river Senegal and Columbus about the mouth of the Orinoco. The cultural context against which these seafarers saw the mouth of big rivers is very clear from the meditations about the Nile that are found in chapters 61 and 62 of Zurara's *Chronicle of Guinea*.

The Guinean Gulf as an Exemplary Case

The manuscript entitled *Itinerarium Antonii Ususmaris civis januensis*¹¹ counts among those texts in which the association of ocean, rivers and islands is most

- 7 Zurara, Crónica da Guiné (cf. n. 5) and Idem, The Chronicle (cf. n. 5), chapter 7, entitled: No qual se mostram cinco razões por que o Senhor Infante foi movido de mandar buscar as terras da Guiné (43–47), where Zurara writes (43): Bem é que alguns diziam que passara por ali S. Brandão ("Some said indeed that Saint Brandan had passed that way") [refering to the area beyond the Canary Islands and Cape Bojador (27)].
- 8 Zurara, Crónica da Guiné (cf. n. 5) and Idem, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, ed. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, vol. 2, London 1899, chapter 59, entitled: *Das palavras que disse Gomes Pires e como foram a terra de Guiné* (251–254 and 173–176), in which Alvaro de Freitas mentions his wish to sail to the *Paraiso terreal* (253 and 174, respectively).
- 9 "It is said that this river is one of the four rivers that leave the Paradise, which is called Gion, [and] coming from there, it runs across Ethiopia; and finally from it the Nile is born." (Diz-se que este rio é um dos quatro rios que saem do paraíso terrestre o qual se chama Gion, [e] que de lá vindo, banha toda a Etiópia; por fim dele nasce o Nilo: Cadamosto, Navigations, quoted from José Manuel Garcia, Viagens dos Descobrimentos, Lisbon 1983, 96). See also: Consuelo Varela (ed.), Cristóbal Colón. Textos y documentos completos. Madrid 1984, 213–218 (letter sent to the Catholic Kings in October 1498).
- 10 Zurara, Crónica da Guiné (cf. n. 5), chapter 61, entitled: Como o autor fala algumas cousas acerca do Rio Nilo (263–267) and chapter 62, entitled: Do poderio do Nilo, Segundo os Astronimos e de seu crecimento (269–272). English edition, The Chronicle (cf. n. 5): "In which the author related some things concerning the River of Nile" (183–187) and "Of the might of the Nile according to the Astronomers, and of its increase" (187–190). These two chapters are largely copied from the General History of the Castilian King Alfonso X the Wise (see Joaquim de Carvalho, Sobre a erudição de Gomes Eanes de Zurara, in: Obra Completa, vol. 2, Lisbon 1983, 185–340, here 328–338).

evident. It contains a letter written by the Genoese Antoniotto Usodimare, dated December 12, 1455, a source published in several studies devoted to the first European navigations in the Sea of Guinea. What can be drawn from this manuscript?

The manuscript begins with a description of various geographic places, magical islands and fantastic regions with strange inhabitants. Beginning in the east, it ends in Africa. Along the way, references are made to historical expeditions carried out by Italians, the last of which is the one of the Vivaldi brothers (1291). Usodimare's letter, which gives an account of the voyage to Guinea, thus acquires credibility through this context. The initial text is followed by a brief treatise on universal geography, in which each continent (Asia, Europe, and Africa) is described, beginning with the rivers of each region: the description is therefore based on a fluvial sequence that is reminiscent of Isidore's *Etymologiae* (chapter 6 of book 14).

Actually, the manuscript contains two parts, separated by the copy of Uso-dimare's letter, the reference point that gives meaning to the entire manuscript. In the first part, a geographic image is presented, the descriptive components of which are inspired by books and endowed with a quality that is predominantly marvelous and fantastic, as has already been explained. If these components point towards a geographic imaginary that is well known, nevertheless, the form in which the narrative is presented (with references to real expeditions) leads the reader to associations both imaginary and real, establishing an illusion of continuity between them. In this sense, I believe that the reference to each of these expeditions was intended to introduce an unquestionable reality into the imaginary world that had been evoked just before. This would have been a way to invite the reader to give serious consideration to the wonders presented thereafter. In few words, it was a way to objectify the marvelous.

For the anonymous author of the manuscript, the seemingly only possible way to create an understanding of the reality described in Usodimare's letter was by making it probable; the letter would, in effect, have been read initially as a fantastic description because of the new world that is described in it. It refers to Guinea, a geographic space quite distant from the Mediterranean, where everything—land and sea—is different and, consequently, where the cultural understanding of the reality is not easy to achieve. Nevertheless, people of those times had to be offered some points of connection to their previous expe-

¹¹ Library of the University of Genoa, Manuscript B/1/36.

¹² Among other editions, see: Richard Henry Major, *The Life of Prince Henry of Portugal, surnamed the Navigator.* London 1868, 104–105; *Monumenta Henricina.* vol. 12, Coimbra 1971, doc. 99, 191–193.

rience, thus establishing a mental relationship between the old world and the new one just being discovered.¹³

Indeed, this central Atlantic novelty in the Sea of Guinea can only be understood based on inherited cultural constructs. In fact, it should be remembered that the rupture that finally opened doors towards a new mode of comprehension of the entire world only occurred much later¹⁴. We can thus say that Usodimare's text gives evidence of two things: on the one hand, the difficulties of cultural assimilation to any form of otherness, be it cultural, social or spatial; and on the other hand, the extreme limitations of this process being developed before the rupture that will give rise to oceanic modernity. In this specific case, despite all the constraints mentioned, the comprehension of the novelty required the organization of an urgent cultural understanding. In the following lines we will try to explain how this happened.¹⁵

The Innovative Role of Guinea in the Formation of the New Ocean View

In the middle of the fifteenth century, when Genoese merchants accompanied the Portuguese into the central Atlantic, this was still an unknown space without geographic certainties. Because it was still undiscovered, it did not yet have a specifically oceanic identity. Instead it evoked or produced only images.

When this perspective is applied to the first text contained in Usodimare's manuscript, it becomes clear that the allusions to successive expeditions were made precisely to restrain the imaginary of each one of those expeditions. This process conferred a topological dimension to an oneiric inheritance. The text

- 13 As Cadamosto writes, in those seas, "things are new, noticeable; [it is] another world" (são coisas novas e dignas de alguma notícia, é outro mundo, Garcia, Viagens (cf. n. 9), 77). See Ilaria Luzzana Caraci, Columbus' Otro mundo: The Genesis of a Geographical Concept, in: Renaissance Studies, 6, 3–4, (1992), 336–351, reprinted in: Ilaria Luzzana Caraci, The Puzzling Hero. Studies on Christopher Columbus and the Culture of his Age, Rome 2002, 183–201.
- 14 Luís Adão da Fonseca, A experiência da viagem da descoberta, in: O Atlântico: a memória de um Oceano, vol. 2: A descoberta do Oceano: saga e memória (sec. XI–XVI), ed. Luís Adão da Fonseca and José Adriano de Carvalho, Porto 1996, 301–328; Idem, Dal Mediterraneo all'Atlantico. Le scoperte e la formazione del Mare Oceano nei secoli XIV–XIV, Pisa / Cagliari 2004, 61–81.
- 15 What I wrote about this *Itinerarium Antonii Ususmaris civis januensis*, is a summary of Luís Adão da Fonseca, O Itinerário de Usodimare: inspiração livresca, experiência mediterrânica e navegações atlânticas em meados do século XV, in: *Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the History of Madeira*, Lisbon 1990, 963–971.

thus works as a conceptual itinerary from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, which becomes the link that guarantees the legitimacy of the process itself.

This is significant for two reasons. First, it reveals that in the middle of the fifteenth century the Sea of Guinea was figured—in terms of intellectual understanding—on a horizon of rivers and islands. Second, it indicates that at that time, some viewed these rivers and islands in terms of a Mediterranean conceptual framework. Only in this context does the aforementioned bookish inspiration from Isidore's *Etymologiae* make sense.

This is a crucial observation because it shows how the Sea of Guinea exercised a strong influence upon the oceanic transition from the previous pattern of navigation along the African coasts (in accordance with the coastal model of Mediterranean seafaring) to a new pattern that was destined to be used in the South Atlantic and was based on astronomic observation.¹⁶

This is not only a chronological sequence. The two patterns were opposed on all levels. As Duarte Pacheco Pereira (quoted above) explains, different geographies correspond to different histories: the water being the same, the conditions of navigability are nevertheless different.¹⁷

The New Oceanic Experience in the Last Quarter of the Fifteenth Century

The journey of Vasco da Gama in 1497–1499 is the exponential moment in the development of oceanic navigation in the South, which represents the advent of the modern Atlantic. It was a complex process that, as I suggested above, cannot be reduced to a geographical differentiation. In fact, it is not so much a simple process of substitution but rather a far more complex process of cultural genealogy, in which the transformation of ideas and perspectives was induced by a variety of experiences.

In a sequence of several significant events, the 1480s led to what we can characterize as cultural consequences of synchronic processes: the treaty of 1479–1480,¹⁸ the accession to the Portuguese throne of King John II in August 1481,¹⁹ and the construction of the castle of St. George of the Mine in 1482.²⁰ Against this background, we might ask the question of how the Atlantic was

¹⁶ Fonseca, A experiência da viagem da descoberta (cf. n. 14); Fonseca, Dal Mediterraneo all'Atlantico (cf. n. 14), 61–81.

¹⁷ Luís Filipe Barreto, Descobrimentos e Renascimento. Formas de ser e pensar nos séculos XV e XVI, Lisbon 1983, 213–253.

¹⁸ About this treaty, see infra note 25. Cf. Luís Adão da Fonseca, *D. João II*, Lisbon 2005, 50–59 and 112–116.

viewed in the middle of the second half of the fifteenth century. Considering the history of the term and the concept of *descobrimento* (discovery) in Portuguese literature from 1055 to 1567, the conclusion is evident: the verb *descobrir* (to discover), in the sense of initial knowledge of new lands, appears for the first time in 1472, while the abstract concept of *discovery* appears only in 1486.²¹

In sum, beyond the changes in the experience of the Ocean due to the voyages during the 1480s, another intellectual dimension of fundamental change is visible, as has already been stated. In fact, the experience gained on the Atlantic surmounted the traditional coordinates—those of the coast and the route—only when the Ocean was thought of as a space to be discovered. This was a new vision and not merely a perspective that extended the previous one by a process of mere accumulation.

This intellectual shift was not easily accepted in Portugal. It was accompanied by profound debates, which, because of the problems underlying the argument, represented a heated political struggle within some sectors of Portuguese society. The problem posed by the Southern Atlantic could not be more clear: between the discovery of the coast and the voyage on the high seas, the debate concerned two forms of navigation: one that valorizes places and one that privileges position. It is well known that with Bartolomeu Dias in 1487-1488,22 it happened, still in an embryonic form. Then, with Vasco da Gama, in 1497-149823 it took a much more significant way, and it was this second type of navigation that finally imposed itself. An epoch when straits and capes constituted both identifying and differentiating references on coastlines was followed by another one in which, away from coastal horizons, the concern for location became dominant. In order to determine the location, stars were the most important physical element as they allowed determination of the latitude, but the physical expression of location were the islands. That is the reason why navigation within this *new Atlantic* was essentially a route to islands.

Many examples could be given for this tendency. Nevertheless, I will only provide two examples that I really consider emblematic. First, attention should be drawn to the Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494 between the crowns of Portugal and Castile. In this treaty the division of the seas was agreed on, by

- 19 Fonseca, D. João II (cf. n. 16), 50-59.
- 20 Joseph Bato'ora Ballong-Wen-Mewuda, *São Jorge da Mina. 1482–1637*, vol. 1. Lisbon / Paris 1993, 45–70.
- 21 Joaquim Barradas Carvalho, Â la recherche de la spécificité de la Renaissance portugaise, vol. 2. Paris 1983, 539.
- 22 Luís Adão da Fonseca, O Essencial sobre Bartolomeu Dias, Lisbon 1987.
- 23 Idem, Vasco da Gama: o homem, a viagem, a época, Lisbon 1997.

means of a meridian line drawn 370 miles west from Cape Verde. In this definition, the geographic reference is a set of islands chosen precisely because—starting from this location—it was possible to clearly distinguish two types of navigation in the Atlantic area: on the one hand the navigation to the west, which, through the circuit of the northeastern trade winds, leads the fleets to the West Indies; on the other hand the navigation to the south, which through the circuit of the southeastern trade winds leads to the Cape of Good Hope and to the Indian Ocean. Therefore it appears that an expression of a nautical conviction with the insular dimension as its fundamental point of reference was at the bottom of the treaty's provisions as diplomatic decisions.²⁴

With regard to this point, the treaty of 1494 has, however, a significant antecedent: the Luso-Castilian Treaty of Alcáçovas-Toledo signed in 1479–1480. As is known, the basis for this treaty is related to the contentions between the two kingdoms over the explorations in Guinea. Without delving too far into the diplomatic problems addressed in this treaty, I would like to highlight an aspect that relates directly to the islands. Because of the conflicts between the two kingdoms, the Atlantic Ocean is divided into two parts, separated by a line that passes to the south of the Canaries. The parts of the Ocean situated to the north of this line should belong to Castile and those situated to the south should belong to Portugal. The actual terms of the division could not be more revealing:

"[...] And all of the islands that have until now been discovered and any others that may be found or conquered, the Canary Islands and below to Guinea, because everything that is found or will be found, conquered, or discovered in terms of the limits beyond what has already been found, occupied, and discovered will belong to the king and prince of Portugal and his kingdoms, with the only exception of the Canary Islands."²⁵

When in the spring of 1500, a new Portuguese fleet on its way to India anchored in the territory that would later be known as Brazil, this scale was located at the western extreme of the eastern Atlantic zone reserved for Portugal by the already mentioned Treaty of Tordesillas. Indeed, to the Portuguese people of those times this land was not located in the West but at the western extreme of the East. In this case, too, they chose an insular designation for the land: the

²⁴ Idem, O Tratado de Tordesilhas e a diplomacia luso-castelhana no século XV. Lisbon 1991; Fonseca, D. João II (cf. n. 18), 120–134.

²⁵ João Martins da Silva Marques (ed.), Descobrimentos Portugueses, vol. 3, Lisbon 1971, doc. 142, 205: E qualesquier otras yslas que se fallaren o conquirieren de las yslas de canaria para baxo contra guinea porque todo lo que es fallado e se fallare conquerir o descobrir en los dichos terminos allende de lo que ya es fallado ocupado descubierto finca a los dichos rey e prinçipe de portogal e sus reynos tirando solamente las yslas de canaria [...].

Island of Vera Cruz.²⁶ Thus, we better understand what Vespucci meant when in his letter dated 18 July 1500 he referred to the eastern limit of the Portuguese Sea: "I hope to bring many great news and discover the Island of Taprobana, which is located between the Indian sea and the Gangétic sea."²⁷

Concluding remarks

This reference to Taprobana finally brings me back to the significance of the islands that has accompanied this contribution from the very beginning. As we can see, islands have always played a role in Portuguese navigation, from early history to the maritime expansion itself. Beginning as a merely oneiric reality, they occupy a critical place in the medieval imaginary. In addition, with the oceanic advance in the fifteenth century, they never lose this function. From the middle of that century, islands became ports of call in the direction of the Southern Atlantic. Then towards the end of the fifteenth century, they were appropriated by the political power (for example, the Treaty of Tordesillas) and served a fundamental role in the conceptual formulation of maritime space.

To use an expression by Christian Grataloup in his book entitled L'invention des continents, 28 we can state that the Atlantic Ocean was and is an invention. I stress this because the concept of ocean should be seen as a cultural construct, in the formation of which specific geographical references (straits, capes and islands, especially the latter) played a key role. However, taken as nautical and intellectual references, they played a key role in the formation of the modern concept of the Atlantic. To paraphrase the words of Michel Mollat du Jourdin, I would conclude that the aforementioned references—whether imagined or real—were an active motor during these years of transformation. 27

- 26 William Brooks Greenlee, *The Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral to Brazil and India*, London 1938, 33 and 60.
- 27 Luciano Formisano (ed.), Amerigo Vespucci. Cartas de viaje, Madrid 1986, 64.
- 28 Christian Grataloup, *L'invention des continents*, Paris 2009.
- 27 Michel Mollat du Jourdin, Les îles océaniques: du mythe aux réalités (Moyen Âge et l'époque des Découvertes), in: Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria N.S. 32,2 (1992), 85–95, esp. 95. About this topic see also Luís Adão da Fonseca, O horizonte insular na experiência cultural da primeira expansão portuguesa, Portos, Escalas e Ilhéus no relacionamento entre o Ocidente e o Oriente, in: Proceedings of the International Conference Commemorating the Vasco da Gama Return to Portugal, vol. 1, Lisbon 2001, 57–93.