

The search for Brazil (3)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THERE were two ways to imagine Brazil. Sometimes there were three.

A map made by the Pizigani brothers in 1367 shows one *Insola de braçir* a hundred miles west of Ireland. Another far west of France, in a place usually occupied by *Insola de Mam* or *Ysla de la Man Satanaxio* – “Isle of the Satanic Hand”. And yet another in a group of islands west of Portugal, clearly the Azores.

The northernmost *Braçir* is *Í Breasail*, “Hy Brazil” or St Breasal’s Isle. Breasal of Dearthach, an Irishman, was said to have been consulted by St Brendan before he set out on his famous sixth-century voyage. Another Breasal was seventeenth abbot of Iona and died in 801. This mythical island could have got its name from either of them. Medieval cartographers regularly drew it as a perfect sphere with a band around it – presumably to show that it was a parallel universe, an otherworld whose entrance lay at that location.

The southernmost *Braçir* is real enough. It’s now known as Terceira from being the “third” island in the Azores to be found by the Portuguese in the 1430s, but it may have had its original name from being a source of *brazil* or red dyewood. References to islands where brazilwood could be obtained are found as early as AD 982 in a Persian geography called *Hudûd al-‘Âlam* or “Regions of the World”. The identification is confirmed by the survival of “Monte Brazil” as the name of a volcanic peak on the south coast of Terceira.

The Piziganis’ middle *Braçir* is in the latitudes explored by the Genoese captain John Cabot. When he sailed from Bristol in the *Matthew* in 1497 and discovered Newfoundland, he gave the new continent the names of two fabled islands, Brazil and the Seven Cities. He was certainly thinking of Gaelic *Í Breasail*, as there was no dyewood in Canada.

Our southernmost “Brazil” is probably of Asian origin, then, and the name seems to have been around almost as long as *Í Breasail* itself. It’s in medieval Latin as *brasilium* and in Italian as *verzino*. A dyestuff called “grain of brazil” (*grana de brasill*) is listed as an article of trade in Ferrara in 1193 and in Barcelona in 1280. Abraham ibn Hayyim, a Moslem scribe in what is now Portugal, records its use to provide rose-coloured lettering for manuscripts in 1262.

A generation later the kings of Siam were gifting brazilwood to the emperors of China, while Marco Polo was told of brazilwood forests in Sumatra, Siam, the Nicobars, Ceylon and the Malabar coast of India. He tried to grow brazil seeds himself at Venice. By the 1300s the dye had reached England, and in his “Epilogue to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale” Chaucer tells of a man whose cheeks were so colourful that he need not stain them “with *brasile ne* with greyn of Portyngale” – grain of Portugal, a cosmetic probably.

In spring 1500 Pero Álvares Cabral, a Portuguese admiral, was bound for India by the Cape of Good Hope with a fleet of thirteen ships. Veering too far westward, on 22 April he sighted what he took to be a large island and dropped anchor in what is now Pôrto Seguro. His men went ashore in the evening to find some “Indians” for him to receive. Expecting oriental potentates, he waited for them on a chair, on a carpet, wearing his finest clothes, with a gold chain around his neck and his officers seated at his feet, all framed by lighted torches.

His visitors proved to be two handsome warriors, completely naked except that one was wearing a feather head-dress. They made no gestures of courtesy and paid no attention to him except to ask for his chain. The sailors showed them various objects and offered food and drink. They declined, choosing instead to lie down on their backs on the carpet to go to sleep. Cabral ordered one of his cushions to be put under each man’s head. The one with the head-dress took great care not to spoil it. Then they allowed cloaks to be spread over them.

Next morning Cabral sent them ashore wearing shirts, red hats and rosaries, but they reappeared later without them. Brazil is one of the best-watered countries in the world, and its natives seldom came to a stream without bathing, for they loved to keep clean and washed half-a-dozen times a day, so wearing clothes didn’t suit them. Medieval Europeans, by contrast, were notoriously filthy, and if they had fine clothes they didn’t care if they stank.

As the Portuguese celebrated mass on the beach, the natives gathered in fascination. They included a young woman whose nudity disturbed the sailors in the congregation. Cabral had a superb chronicler, Pero Vaz de Caminha, who reported to the king of Portugal: “She was given a cloth with which to cover herself, and we put it about her; but as she sat down she did not think to spread it much to cover herself. Thus, my Lord, the innocence of these people is such that Adam’s cannot have been greater in respect of modesty . . . And when the mass was finished and we sat down for the sermon, many of them stood up and blew a horn or trumpet and began to leap and dance.”

Cabral now ordered two ship’s carpenters to erect a large cross cut from the trees. “Many of them came there to be with the carpenters. I believe that they did this more to see the iron tools with which these were making it than to see the cross itself.”

It was the thrill of a Stone Age people at their first sight of the cutting power of metal. These “Indians” had always created skilled artefacts but, as a later chronicler explained, “they took a very long time to make anything”. They cut timber with wedge-shaped stones fixed into pieces of wood and firmly tied between two sticks. In Celtic society, likewise, we never lost our respect for the miracle of iron, or our reverence for those who worked it.

The cross made, Cabral told his men to kneel and kiss it so that the Indians could see how it was venerated. “We did so, and motioned to them to do the same. They at once all went to kiss it . . . Any belief we wish to give them may easily be stamped upon them, for the Lord has given them fine bodies and good faces, like good men.”

Cabral called the place *Isla de Vera Cruz* after his cross. He sailed up and down the coast for nine days in search of a way round it, then renamed it *Terra de Santa Cruz*. He found no gold or anything else of value except dyewood. The natives called it *ibira-pitanga* (“red wood”) but he gave it a name from his own language, *pau braza*. He knew that the Spaniards had found it in the Caribbean area and called it *brasil*.

In exchange for axes and knives, the natives were delighted to cut some *ibira-pitanga*. Cabral loaded the logs on board the *Lemos* along with parrots, monkeys, and Caminha's report to the king, sent her on her way to Lisbon, then sailed eastward for the real India with the rest of the fleet.

For the next thirty years Terra de Santa Cruz was treated by the Portuguese merely as a place to get *pau braza*. It's a hard, heavy, thorny timber producing a powerful dye that ranges from maroon to ochre. The tree is tall, with grey bark and perpetual pale-green leaves. It looks like an oak with brilliant yellow blossoms. The wood is a creamy colour when first cut, but soon blushes a deep red. The dye is not particularly stable, but reds were fashionable in Paris, the natives did the hard work, and profits were enough to justify the risks. The logs were always shipped back to Europe, where they were rasped into sawdust and soaked in water for a few weeks to form the dye.

Trading-posts were built, but French adventurers got involved too, either by capturing Portuguese vessels or by settling translators among the natives and trading from shipboard. A French cleric, Jean de Léry, recorded an interesting conversation with an elderly Indian who asked him, "Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come so far to seek wood to warm you? Don't you have wood in your own country?"

"We have plenty," said Léry, "but not of this quality, and we don't burn it but use it for dyeing, just as you do to your cotton cords and feathers."

"And I suppose you need a great deal of it?"

"Yes, for in our country there are traders who own more cloth, knives, scissors, mirrors and other goods than you can imagine. One single trader buys all the brazilwood carried back by many ships."

"Does he not die?"

"Yes, he dies like all the rest."

At this point Léry explains to his readers that "savages" are great debaters and like to pursue a point to its conclusion. The old man says: "When he dies what becomes of what he leaves?"

"It's for his children if he has them, or for his closest brothers and relatives."

"Indeed," continued the old man, who as you can see (remarks Léry) was no fool, "I now see that you French are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience, as you always say when you arrive, and you work hard to accumulate riches for your children or for those who survive you. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them? We too have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. So we rest without further cares."

Léry concludes: "Although this tribe may be blind in attributing to nature more than we do to the power of God's providence, yet it will rise up in judgement against plunderers who bear the name of Christians. May God let the Tupinambá act as demons and furies to torment our insatiable gluttons!"

Gluttons indeed, who saw Terra de Santa Cruz merely as a source of wealth which was carried on the bleeding shoulders of naked slaves. They often got what was coming to them. For all their beauty and innocence, the Tupinambá were cannibals who ritually killed and ate their enemies. So Europeans could see little that was holy about the new land. A Venetian trader wrote in 1502: "The caravels sent last year to explore the Land of Parrots or of Santa Cruz returned on 22 July. They arrived loaded with brazilwood and canafistula wood, but brought no spices."

An account published in Germany about 1515 was called "Newen Zeytung auss Presillg Landt" (New Gazette from Brazilwood Land). The name was changing, and the Portuguese gave in after 1530–32 when one of their own chroniclers called it *Terra do Brasil* in print in his "Diario da navegação de Pero Lopes de Sousa".

It's been Brasil or Brazil ever since, and as far as I know Brazilian historians are satisfied that their huge country is named after the wood. But there's such a thing as a duonym – a name that sticks because it has two meanings and seems prophetic. A good example is the capital of Skye, which would probably be called Scorrybreck were it not that *Port Ruighe*, Slope Harbour, was visited by James V in 1540, allowing it to masquerade as *Port Righ*, King's Harbour. Would *Terra do Brasil* have stuck if mariners like de Sousa had not seen "Hy Brasil" on their charts?

This seems to be the view of writers like Andrew Marshall, who points out in his book "Brazil" that the name is believed to derive from a tropical dyewood which the Portuguese called *pau braza* because it was the colour of glowing embers, but that others attribute it to *Insola de Brasil*. "The familiar association of Brazil as the name of an island in these latitudes," he says, "probably prompted early navigators to refer to the new land by the same name."

I wonder if that's what the republicans who created the Brazilian flag in 1889 were trying to tell us. The blue globe with the white stripe is based on an "armillary sphere", a skeleton of the world which was a popular symbol of Portuguese exploration around 1500 and appears on today's Portuguese flag. Why, then, does it look like *Í Breasail* as it appears on medieval charts – a dark circle with a band around the middle?

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