

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**COUTINHO, Carlos Viegas Gago** (Lisboa, 1869 – Lisboa, 1959)

Carlos Gago Coutinho was born on 17 February 1869 in Belém on the outskirts of Lisbon, on the “old Restelo Beach” as he liked to say, and not in the Algarve or Luanda as some people suggest (*Precursor da Navegação Aérea* [Precursor of Aerial Navigation], 1969, p. 3). His father, José Viegas Gago Coutinho, had been a naval gunnery sergeant. His paternal grandparents, who were also from the Algarve, had been booksellers in Faro – a fact that may explain his love of both books and the sea. However, it is not only these genetic or cultural factors that make him different. It is above all his life story. His mother’s early death (1877) and his father’s absences meant that he ended up being raised by a lady called Maria Augusta Pereira, until 1914, when she too passed away. His life experiences made the young Gago Coutinho stand out early on. When he was thirteen, he went to Lisbon Central High School (now Camões High School), where he enthusiastically studied Orography, Hydrography, Climate, Ethnography and History up until the then third grade. When asked if he had already been to Africa, he replied: “No, I have never left Lisbon, but I am interested in everything to do with its thousands of years of civilisation and the customs of its aborigines.” (*Gago Coutinho - um talento invulgar e multiforme* [GC – an unusual and multiform talent], 1969, p. 164). After leaving high school, he enrolled at the Polytechnic School (Escola Politécnica, 1885), where he received excellent marks in Mathematics and Astronomy. Because his father could not afford to send him abroad to study Engineering (bridge and road-building) at l’École des Ponts et Chaussées in Paris, he went to the Portuguese Naval School the following year. During this period he visited the National Archive at the Torre do Tombo quite assiduously, focusing on the journeys and routes taken by the Portuguese explorers.

He completed the Navy course at the head of his class in 1888. He had to pawn the family silver to pay for his first uniform and was only able to get it out of hock later on, with the money he earned during his time at the Mozambique Naval Station. As a cadet midshipman, during his first sea voyage he visited London in December 1887. The next year, he embarked with the rank of ensign on the corvette "Afonso de Albuquerque", bound for Mozambique, where he took part in the military operations on the River Tungue. He stayed in the country until 1891, when he went to Angola, where he remained until 1893. In April 1899, his travels took him to almost every continent, with stops that included Macau, Hong Kong, Japan, Honolulu, San Francisco, Chicago and New York. Of particular note among the various vessels on which he completed his service commissions were the armed launch “Loge” (1892), the steamer “Pero de Alenquer” (1896 - 1897), and the gunboat “Pátria” (1911-1912), which supported the land forces in Betano (Timor) by



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bombarding Dom Boaventura's insurrectionists during the Manufai rebellion. He commanded his vessel on the first and last of these missions.

As Field Geographer, he traced colonial borders in Timor (1898), Zambezi (1900), Northern Angola (1901), Barotze (1902) and Tete (1904). By 1910, Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral had established the Mozambican geodesic network all the way from Ponta do Ouro to Bazaruto, covering more than 32,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Finally, on 1 October 1912, twenty-two years after the signature of the Luso-British Treaty (11 June 1891), Gago Coutinho left for Lobito and the Benguela plateau in the company of Vieira da Rocha and Sacadura Cabral. He crossed the African continent on foot twice (around 5,200 km<sup>2</sup> from Angola to Mozambique). He demarcated more than 2,000 km of border using a pedometer and a compass, and triangulated areas covering more than 800 km<sup>2</sup>. He returned to Lisbon in 1914, and the next year took his licence in France on a "Maurice Farman". His first flight took place on 23 February 1917, at the School of Military Aviation at Vila Nova da Rainha. In September 1915, he was appointed head of the São Tomé Geodesic Mission, and in 1919, a full member of the Cartography Commission.

Gago Coutinho's constant astronomical observations showed that the Equator passes through Rolas Islet and not between it and São Tomé as had previously been thought. This contribution to terrestrial geography earned him the construction of a commemorative stone (*"padrão"*) at the highest point on the islet, precisely at the coordinates he himself had determined. Later, on the anniversary of Coutinho and Cabral's arrival in Brazil, the provincial government in São Tomé decided that Rolas would be renamed Gago Coutinho Islet and that the channel between it and São Tomé Island would become Sacadura Cabral Channel.

When the Mission's work ended in 1919, he began to prepare what was to become known as the greatest Portuguese adventure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the first air crossing of the South Atlantic. This flight was to differ from earlier journeys because the project was not going to benefit from any naval beacons or radio coverage. The fact was that the aviators could only count on a combination of dead-reckoning and the stars to navigate by. In order to make the former easier, they needed to find a solution that would enable them to graphically calculate the angle between the longitudinal axis of the aircraft and their heading, while taking into account both the speed and direction of the wind, which disrupted the aircraft's movement in relation to the ground, "and the reference plane used to measure the elevation of the stars" (*A Extinção da Aviação Naval* [The Abolition of Naval Aviation], 2002, p.8.). This was necessary in order not to have to make drawings in flight, and to overcome geometric difficulties caused by the aircraft's drift to one side or the other, which is inevitable in any flight between two fixed points. The two friends first named their invention the "Drift Plaque", but then changed this to "Course Corrector". To deal with the problems that arose when it wasn't possible to see the line of the horizon on the water, Gago Coutinho revolutionised aerial navigation by creating a sextant with an artificial horizon using a spirit level and an auxiliary mirror to reflect the image of the air bubble, in such a way that the distance between the image and the observer's eye was equal to the radius of the curvature of the plumb. He called this a "precision astrolabe". It was equipped with an electrical system for lighting the spirit level, which was added by Jorge de Castilho and permitted observations at night. All that remained was to try the inventions by putting them to use, and this was the reason for the 1921



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trip from Lisbon to Funchal, albeit they first tested the sextant in the air by flying to Cabo da Roca headland on the coast near Lisbon. On 22 March 1921, they took off from the Bom Sucesso dock, arriving in Funchal after a flight that covered 530 nautical miles in 7 hours and 40 minutes. In addition to Sacadura Cabral (mission commander and pilot) and Gago Coutinho (navigator), the crew included Ortins Bettencourt (co-pilot) and Roger Soubiran (mechanic). In 1922, in a journey that lasted in all from 30 March to 17 June, with no radio support, they made the first air crossing of the South Atlantic, beginning in Lisbon and arriving in Rio de Janeiro. The 4,527 nautical miles took a total of 62 hours and 26 minutes in the air. Various political regimes during both the First Republic and the New State took advantage of the public prestige that resulted from this feat, with the crossing of the Southern Atlantic recalling the exploit of the Discoveries, both through the symbolism of the Cross of Christ on the seaplane's wings and in the shape of the new world which the Atlantic – thus far unknown airspace – continued to represent.

At the beginning of the 1930's, the German aircraft manufacturer Dornier invited Gago Coutinho to join the crew of the huge Do X seaplane as co-navigator, on a trip to South America that also used his sextant. In later life, already aged seventy-four, the desire to reconstitute his journeys and the search for results – particularly the route taken by Pedro Álvares Cabral – led him to undertake a sea journey aboard the "Foz do Douro" that lasted 105 days (103 of them out of sight of land) and covered 8,740 nautical miles. In 1925, as both its longest-standing member and the one who had submitted the largest number of works, he was appointed President of the Cartography Commission. He held this position until the Commission was reorganised and renamed the Board for Geographic Missions and Colonial Research (JMGIC, 1936), of which he was the first President. In 1928, the Ministry of War chose him to chair the committee charged with reorganising the country's geographic, land survey and cartographic services. The next year he became the first President of the National Education Board, which was later to become the Institute for High Culture (IAC) and now the Camões Institute (Instituto Camões). He was also chosen to be a member of a committee that was to evaluate both the future creation of an airport in the Azores and air travel in the colonies. The ministry in charge of this project delegated him to carry out cartographic studies in France and Italy, and in 1931 to go to Brazil to look for documentation that would help understand the history of Portuguese cartography. He was Secretary-General of the Lisbon Naval Association (ANL), where in 1900 he had been the instructor on the first "Sailing Master" course. In 1926, he became a member of the committee that organised the future Maritime Museum. On 16 June 1933, he joined the "commission charged with conducting the study on the plan for a monument to Prince Henry the Navigator in Sagres" (*Diário de Governo*, Series II, 16 June 1933). In 1936, he was on the organising committee for the First Congress on the History of the Portuguese Expansion in the World, and the Supervisory Commission for the Historical Exposition on the Occupation. Three years later, he retired from the Navy. In 1950, he was elected Vice-President of the International Aeronautical Federation, and four years after that, Colonel Pinheiro Corrêa invited him to join a committee to study the creation of an Air Museum. In June 1958, the National Assembly promoted Gago Coutinho Admiral with distinction.

He contributed to numerous periodicals, including: *Anais do Clube Militar Naval*; *Anais da Academia*



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*Portuguesa de História*; *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*; and *Boletim da Academia das Ciências*. His first more significant historical study was to be *O roteiro da viagem de Vasco da Gama e a sua versão nos Lusíadas* (The journal of Vasco da Gama's first voyage and the version of it in the *Lusíadas*), when he was already sixty-one, albeit his first-ever article was on the dirigible invented by Cipriano Jardim, which was published in 1889 when its author was only twenty and had just left the Naval School. He concluded that the practical knowledge the Portuguese acquired over the course of their voyages was crucial to the development of astronomical navigation, resulting from an accumulation of all the mistakes that occurred when they navigated by dead-reckoning without sighting land. He thus confirmed that the voyages were not the product of mere chance, but planned and prepared with an eye on winds and sea currents – a view that did not always match the prevailing historiographical opinion of the day. Gago Coutinho took the opportunity to better study the “rules” governing the winds and currents in the North Atlantic, which had led the Portuguese mariners to do what was literally known as “going round the sea”, which at the time of the Discoveries was called doing the “Guinea gyre” or the “Mina gyre”, because the ships that tacked out in an arc-shape in order to reach the latitude of a certain point on the Portuguese coast departed from Guinea or Mina. Gago Coutinho was mistakenly convinced that navigation by using the meridian altitude of the Sun to gauge latitude, which depended on knowing the star's declination, originated at the time of Prince Henry and that the instrument used in those days was the astrolabe rather than the quadrant. However, he was right when he said that astronomical navigation dated back to that period and that the meridian height of the Sun was repeatedly observed. He believed that the Nautical Astrolabe was, by its nature, Portuguese, and that the voyages of discovery had always taken place after others that served to study winds and maritime currents, thus determining latitudes and subsequently outlining the indispensable maritime routes. He also proved that under favourable conditions it was impractical to point to stars on board.

In 1925, Gago Coutinho spoke at a conference at the Portuguese Literary High School in Rio de Janeiro, at which he argued that the discovery of Brazil had been intentional rather than by mere chance. He subsequently published a set of works to prove his theory. In his customary brusque manner, he declared war on some of the historians of the time, saying that: “The History of the Discoveries, as written by the chroniclers of the past and repeated by the publicists of the present, is full of errors and fantasies.” (*Precursor da Navegação Aérea*, 1969, p. 53). Controversy erupted and there was immediately a direct confrontation between Gago Coutinho and one of his colleagues – his great friend Captain Quirino da Fonseca, with whom he had shared his younger years – about the question of the caravel. This was followed by other conflicts, with the naval historian and Rear Admiral Samuel Morison, Marcondes de Sousa, Roque Gameiro, and Henrique Lopes de Mendonça.

In reply to an open letter from Mendonça in *Diário de Notícias*, Gago Coutinho pointed to the importance of seeking, “not to convince artists to portray caravels in one way or another, but to study the old documents before drawing them”. He decried the fact that neither Henrique Lopes de Mendonça nor Quirino da Fonseca had used many reproductions of old Portuguese engravings, whose rarity made them harder to consult, quite apart from the obvious lack of time spent on their research. On the discovery of Mina, Gago Coutinho



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subscribed to the idea that: “It is as easy to believe that Mina was discovered by caravels with just lateen sails – like Prince Henry’s ones – as it is to accept that they carried the Cross of Christ on their triangular sails. I believe that those which carried it on the square-rigged foremast also carried it on the other sails, albeit triangular.” He considered that his friend Quirino’s position on the discovery of Mina resorted to sentimental arguments, and he criticised Roque Gameiro’s publication in both *História da Inquisição* (History of the Inquisition) and *História da Colonização Portuguesa no Brasil* (History of the Portuguese Colonisation in Brazil) of images “as false as the sea they are sitting on, which looks like a field (...) they (*ought to*) try to use better grounds for their drawings of old Portuguese ships.” (Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, Reserved Collection, *Ms 1933/1956*). Convinced that he was in the “presence of a technical error that is unacceptable in a country in which the caravel was most widely used”, he made his claim in the name of the Cartography Commission, which was legitimated by the fact that it was specifically made up of officers with maritime experience on sailing vessels and experience with the hydrographic cartography of the colonies. Quirino da Fonseca differed from both Gago Coutinho’s understanding that the sails of the caravels had been identical to those of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian dhows, and his view that the Azores had been discovered by chance on a return journey from the African coast, the explanation for which Fonseca accused of being “not very nautical”. Gago Coutinho’s opinion was that “the caravels used sails as flat as those of the caiques of the Algarve, which enabled them to sail close to the wind and made it practicable for them to come back from the coast of Africa to Lisbon, tacking against northerly winds and currents, without any need to go to the sea around the Azores in search of favourable winds.” (*A Náutica dos Descobrimentos* [Nautical Science in the Discoveries], vol. I, 1959, pp. 160-162). The intellectual dispute between the two of them was primarily fought on the field of naval archaeology, but also in the waters of the maritime voyages.

Gago Coutinho held that the 1928 Imprensa Nacional edition of *Os Lusíadas* organised by José Maria Rodrigues and Afonso Lopes Vieira contained a geographical map that was nothing more than a copy of the map in Diogo Kopke’s *Roteiro de Vasco da Gama*, which wrongly suggested that Camões had sailed round Africa on a route that took him close to São Tomé Island; that Kopke, who was a literary expert on Camões, had deduced from reading it that there were two different but interlinked routes; and that this deduction was based on interpretations of nautical language, such as the terms “to pass”, “in sight”, “to round”, or “to go around”, which were erroneous because they were made by someone who was not familiar with sailing. The ensuing large-scale controversy, which fuelled a number of publications, led Gago Coutinho to accuse the researcher of misusing and misinterpreting the sources consulted by Camões and making omissions and attenuations. He advised reading the English edition of da Gama’s journal by Ernest George Ravenstein, which was published in 1898 by the Hakluyt Society and enjoyed the collaboration of Admiral Markham. He completely rejected the idea of a dual track, or the outspread of the track, which Rodrigues argued for. He said that the latter ignored the winds and tides. According to Gago Coutinho, Rodrigues’ lack of nautical knowledge led him to base himself on grounds that were more literary than technical, and that it was not possible “to reach any conclusion other than that Gama followed a double-curved track” (*O Roteiro da viagem de Vasco da Gama e a sua versão nos Lusíadas*, 1930, p. 41); but that Rodrigues preferred to say



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that Camões had falsified the route “in order to lend more variety and animation to the news about African coasts and islands”, dividing the stops referred to in *Os Lusíadas* between the two routes he had taken. The dispute raged from 1929 to 1934, with Gago Coutinho using arguments based on geographic principles while José Maria Rodrigues employed those of a literary nature. During this period Gago Coutinho was to publish various other studies: *Desdobramento da derrota de Vasco da Gama nos Lusíadas* (A breakdown of Vasco da Gama’s track in *Os Lusíadas*, 1931); and *Possibilidade da rota única de Vasco da Gama em Os Lusíadas. Impossibilidade de Vasco da Gama ter navegado de Cabo Verde para o Sul* (The possibility that Vasco da Gama took a single route in *Os Lusíadas*. The impossibility that Vasco da Gama sailed southwards from Cape Verde, 1931); *A possibilidade de se ler pela segunda vez em Os Lusíadas, uma rota única de Vasco da Gama* (The possibility of reading for the second time in *Os Lusíadas* that Vasco da Gama took a single route, 1933); *Continuação dos erros em que se apoiou o desdobramento da rota de Vasco da Gama em Os Lusíadas* (Continuation of the errors used as a basis for the taking of a dual route by Vasco da Gama in *Os Lusíadas*, 1934); *Apreciação crítica da viagem de Vasco da Gama* (Critical appreciation of Vasco da Gama’s voyage, 1945); and *Discussão sobre a rota seguida por Vasco da Gama entre Santiago e S. Brás* (Discussion on the route Vasco da Gama followed between Santiago and São Brás, 1949), which he presented to the Portuguese Academy of History (APH).

Note was taken of his irreverence when he decided not to accept the Catholic Church’s dogmatic position: “(...) I began to disagree with confession and other Catholic things. I became a free thinker, but I am a Christian complying with his fair moral principles.” (*Precursor da Navegação Aérea*, 1969, p. 5). Politically he sought to be independent, albeit he had been a convinced adherent to the republican cause – a conviction that only lasted until 1914, because according to him: “The politicians who counselled the kings failed. After the revolutions of the Republic, which also proved the failure of their men, I began thinking it would be preferable to have a constitutional monarchical regime, like the British one... but more socialist than labourite. The latter is breaking England, and if Queen Victoria were to come back to this world, she would immediately escape to another one ...”. (*Precursor da Navegação Aérea*, 1969, pp. 5-6). He also said: (...) “that the regimes and the parties changed, but the men were the same or persisted in the same mistakes” (*um talento invulgar e multiforme*, 1969, p. 164).

When the republican regime was installed, Gago Coutinho was “asked” to sign a declaration that was worded as follows: “I declare on my honour that I will guarantee the most absolute loyalty to the new regime of the Republic that is currently in force in Portugal.” Not satisfied with a mere signature, he wrote: “I have always served Country, and have never declared or considered myself to be serving the King – I thus declare on my honour that I will continue serving the Country, whatever the political format – monarchical, republican or socialist – the Country may choose. I reserve myself for more explicit declarations, but I always agree with my former and current form of action, in Lisbon in the hands of the Minister. Lourenço Marques, 4 November 1910 Gago Coutinho Naval Captain” (Historical Archive of the Central Navy Library [ACM], Sundry Documentation: *Republic – Adherences to the republican regime*. 1910, Box 1244).

Given Gago Coutinho’s enormous popularity, Raul Proença and the Seara Nova group proposed that he



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stand for President of the Republic in an article entitled “*A República e o Exército*” (The Republic and the Army). In it, they expressed their “concern about the question of the government’s competence:(...) ‘an authentic national government of competencies, presided over by a figure with great prestige who could count on the support of all the Portuguese’, and who could be Admiral Gago Coutinho, inasmuch as ‘only a man of exceptional quality will be able to restore peace within the Portuguese family’ and restore order in the Armed Forces. This appeal went unheeded and did not garner any support.” (*Raul Proença*, 2003, pp. 478-479). On 10 December 1925, when Manuel Teixeira Gomes left office, there were those who considered electing Gago Coutinho by plebiscite.

A few of the institutions he belonged to: the Academy of Science (AC); the Portuguese Academy of History (APH); the Grande Oriente Lusitano (Free Masonry); the Royal Portuguese Reading Office – Rio de Janeiro (RGPL); the Lisbon Geography Society (SGL).

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APOIOS:

