Prince Henry ‘the Navigator’: A Life

Peter Russell
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Geographers know much less about Henry the Navigator than we think we do. What we think we know goes something like this: Dom Henrique of Portugal (1394–1460) was a scholarly pioneer who devoted his life to the expansion of geographical knowledge. He retired at age 22 to the remote promontory of Sagres in the Algarve, and remained there for the next 40 years. There he established an astronomical observatory, a map library, and a school for scientific navigators and explorers that became, in geographer Peter Hugill’s words, “the world’s first technical ‘university’” (World Trade Since 1451, 109). There he studied, and taught his bold navigators, the rudiments of classical and Islamic geography, as well as astronomy, mathematics, cartography, and navigation. He was aided by a large assemblage of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars, cartographers, and ship designers, who lived there near his palace.

From this location he financed a continuous series of voyages of exploration intended to roll back the curtain of geographical ignorance and find a sea route to India. His well-known portrait, a sort of male “Mona Lisa,” is held to testify both to his inscrutability and to his prescient gaze toward the future. In short, he was the prototypical Renaissance man who, if given the opportunity, would make a fantastic chairman for a modern geography department. He would certainly have the appropriate credentials; my Concise Columbia Encyclopedia assures me that Henry established a school for geographers at Sagres in 1416.

It is indeed an impressive portrait. It has provided geographical writers from Samuel Purchas through the 1990s with a princely culture hero—otherwise a pretty scarce commodity in the history of the discipline. Unfortunately, little or none of the story is true. No
such technical university or naval school or cosmographical institute ever existed (pace Carl Sauer, in *Northern Mists*, pp. 15–16, 21). Geographers are not the only culprits, of course; even historians are not exempt. My former professor Daniel Boorstin, whose book *The Discoverers* (1983) is sometimes used in history of geography courses, refers (pp. 161–162) to a “primitive Research and Development Laboratory” and “a center for cartography, for navigation, and for shipbuilding” at Sagres. Yet the nonexistence of such a school is made clear even in Elaine Sanceau’s romantic biography of Henry, published in English just after World War II and given me as a birthday gift by a great-aunt 50 years ago. Even the famous portrait, into which so much of Henry’s personality has been read, is now believed by some art historians to be of someone else.

Sir Peter Russell, former Director of Portuguese Studies at the University of Oxford, has been studying Henry and his times for more than half a century. He is the foremost Anglophone scholar of the Henrican legend, grounding his work in the extraordinary collection of documents assembled by generations of Portuguese scholars. Like a good geographer, he has also explored the sites associated with the activities he describes. In two important lectures, “Prince Henry the Navigator” (1960) and “Prince Henry the Navigator: The Rise and Fall of a Culture Hero” (1983), unfortunately published in limited editions and not well known to American geographers, Russell laid out the main elements of the contemporary critique. At the age of 87, he has now published a massive, 450-page *magnum opus* in which he carefully and candidly evaluates the surviving evidence to give us a more nuanced, if less appealing, portrait of the enigmatic Prince we all thought we knew.

Russell states his purpose bluntly on p. 12: “to reclaim Prince Henry and his achievements for the Middle Ages.” Gone is the Renaissance M.I.T. at Cape Sagres. Down with the image of the half-English grandson of John of Gaunt and cousin of England’s Henry V, whose Portuguese cousin overcame the genetic handicap of being half-Portuguese (and son of a bastard, at that!) to translate his Plantagenet cousin’s prowess at Agincourt to the life of the mind. Out with the Salazar regime’s propagandistic saintly Christian knight, without fear and without reproach. Away with the tool of
emergent bourgeois capitalists found in the Marxist counter-critique (an interpretation Russell finds “decidedly dubious”). Rubbish, all of it.

Back to the medieval world of an ambitious younger son who longs for the military and religious glories of the Crusades, who is a fanatic about chasing infidels and gold, and whose lifelong priority is to amass landed property and wealth to satisfy the demands of his time that a great prince be a master of display and largesse. Back to the paradox of a lifelong virgin in a hair shirt, the administrator of a charitable religious order who diverts its funds for his own purposes, who lysts after kingly power and very nearly manages to secure it. Back to a thought-world in which to convert pagans to Christianity was to rescue them from the slavery of Satan and confer on them the benefit (after a time of trial, to be sure) of the freedom of life eternal with the Christian God. Back to reading medieval chronicles not as scientific history but as a branch of rhetoric, with different rules. And back to the jolting reminder that, like the humanists of the 16th century who first limned the Henrican legend, we shall be in dire straits if, neither understanding nor in sympathy with the medieval mind, we start selectively revising that mind-set to accord with our modernist standards, values, and beliefs.

Let us cut to the chase. Henry was born in Oporto under astrological auspices indicating that he would accomplish great things, both for the faith and for the world; he alternates between crusading and oceanic exploration all his life. He was the principal force behind Portugal’s anti-Muslim war into Africa, which he advocated both on religious and chivalric grounds, for it gave young nobles (whose lifelong patron he became) opportunities both for glory and for the booty necessary to sustain their position in their poverty-stricken land. He was so obsessed with fighting Muslims, and so rash and imprudent in the conduct of war, that his relatives frequently had to restrain him. (Russell assigns substantial moral responsibility to Henry for the captivity and subsequent death in Africa of one of his brothers and, indirectly, for the death of another.) Henry had an equal hatred for Castilians, whom he persistently tried to boot out of the Canaries, yet he attempted to make himself King of Castile. He was parochial to a fault, and un-
like his brother Dom Pedro never traveled outside of Portugal except to make raids on the Moors.

What might geographers usefully learn from Russell’s book? First, that we must sweep away the errors enshrined in our lore and our texts. Portuguese scholars over the years have put together a fairly definitive chronology of Henry’s movements. From it, we are certain that Henry did not make his home at Sagres, much less build a palace there. At most, Sagres seems to have been a fortified safe haven for prudent sailors unable to venture out into the Atlantic in bad weather. Henry may have built the chapel that still stands there; some scholars think it of later date. As a great and powerful prince, Henry necessarily moved around a great deal with his large and costly entourage. He had responsibilities at court, in Lisbon and elsewhere (the court too was peripatetic). He had estates to visit in Vizeu and elsewhere. As administrator-general of the Order of Christ, he was often in Tomar on the Order’s business. He was chief organizer of the colonization of Madeira and the rediscovery and colonization of the Azores. As Governor of the Algarve (a patronage plum), he lived principally on his estate at Raposeira (where a chapel he may have attended survives from the period) and in his villa at Lagos, the true center of his maritime and shipbuilding operations. Scholars or cartographers, if any, were attached to his court and moved with him, or remained in Lagos or Lisbon, not at Sagres.

Henry’s vast assemblage of scholars of all faiths appears to have evaporated as a historical presence. He may have hosted an elderly Majorcan cartographer known as “Master Jerome.” But Russell calls the identification of Master Jerome with the Jewish cartographer Jaffuda Cresques, son of Abraham Cresques of Majorca, “improbable.” That judgment puts paid to recent claims by some Jewish scholars that Jews were the primary intellectual and scientific engines of Henry’s (nonexistent) academy. If indeed Henry had established a flourishing school of cartography at Sagres, it becomes difficult to explain why, 2 years before Henry’s death, his nephew King Alfonso V had to send information about the Portuguese discoveries all the way to Venice to have an accurate map of them made.

If anybody taught anyone navigation, it was his captains who instructed Henry, not the other way around. There is no evidence
that Henry was a scholar of classical and Muslim geographies, though he may have read his brother Pedro’s manuscript copy of Marco Polo’s travels, and certainly read contemporary works of geography and travel, some of them fictional. There is no evidence for an astronomical observatory at Sagres, and Henry showed little interest in mathematics and astronomy except in relation to cartography. The chair he founded at the University of Lisbon was in theology, his major intellectual interest.

The famous 12- or 15-year delay in getting his captains to venture beyond Cape Bojador, and thus to prove Arabic myths wrong by rational observation and empirical evidence, also goes by the boards. Henry almost certainly had access to materials indicating that there were settlements beyond Bojador (actually today’s Cape Juby). The delay occurred because his captains were busy raiding Arab trading posts along the Moroccan coast on his behalf. Only after they had cleaned out southwestern Morocco does the question of further African exploration engage Henry’s interest, and then only for a short time; there is a hiatus in voyaging between 1436 and 1441. His captains were not all heroic scientific observers, though some (such as the Venetian, Cadamosto) were very good people. Some of them were brutes, however, and many men joined Henry in the Algarve because their alternative was a prison sentence.

Russell’s detailed, yet sympathetic deconstruction of the Henrican legend is fascinating in itself. That said, however, what is left in place of interest to geographers? Why should we remember Henry, the (misleadingly named) Navigator?

Henry’s geographical interests were a byproduct of two characteristic late-medieval obsessions—to acquire lands and power, and to smite (or convert) the infidel. That his exploratory behavior did not stem from a disinterested scientific impulse, however, does not make him any the less significant as a contributor to Western geographical knowledge. He had a lifelong interest in marine cartography and was recognized as an authority in this area by surprised contemporaries. He also had great talent for administration and practical experience of managing large-scale enterprises. Henry was inconsistent in financially supporting his African expeditions, preferring at times to let others bear the risks through using his power
to license their ventures. This of course became easier after the im-
portation of slaves (from which he took the royal 20 percent share)
became profitable.

Yet what is most important for his geographical contribution
were his obsessions: his obsession with outflanking Islam to team
up with the Christian forces of Prester John, his obsession with gain,
and his obsession about recording the facts of coastlines, products,
customs, and countries. He sent his squires out to prove their chiv-
alry and to reward them for their services, but also with instructions
to survey the coastline and make charts. Each ship had a “scriv-
ener,” a young courtier whose task it was to make detailed reports
for the Prince’s eyes alone. Henry instructed each captain to seize
and bring back one or two natives to describe and interpret their
localities. Each ship’s logs, charts, reports and native informants were
brought to Henry, who then digested the new findings.

From these, Henry was able to instruct his captains about what
they would encounter, as well as what he wished them to accom-
plish in unknown areas. It is unnecessary to hypothesize a formal
“school” for this. These instructions took place at Henry’s court,
wherever it was at the time; princely courts had been the locus of
education for young nobles long before Henry’s time and would
continue to be so long afterward. The important point is that these
activities, regardless of motivation, led Henry willy-nilly into a kind
and level of organized exploratory activity that no one in Europe
before him had fostered. His genius lay in part in persuading others
to join him in these obsessive leaps of faith.

Russell’s Chapters 5 (“Beyond the Cape of No Return”), 8 (“Dis-
covery Resumed: The Portuguese Sahara”), and 12 and 14, which
together treat the later voyages, are the most germane to the histo-
rian of geography. One or more of them might be assigned as
collateral reading in history of geography courses. Chapter 12,
“Cadamosto: A New World Observed,” is a good introduction to
the appealing Venetian merchant-explorer Alvise da Cadamosto.
Students might find Cadamosto more approachable than Henry, in
part because the Venetian was only 22 years of age when he met the
Prince in 1454. Cadamosto’s Navigazioni, which Russell calls “his
remarkable autobiographical account of his expedition to Guinea,”
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is available in English as a Hakluyt Society publication, and might well be excerpted for class discussion, along with Zurara’s moving eyewitness account (which Russell quotes) of a slave auction in Lagos.

Russell’s book is valuable to geographers for three reasons: (1) it explodes the accumulated myths of altogether too many previous geographical and historical writers, (2) it leads us away from our own and into a late-medieval mind-set, and (3) it provides us with a careful analysis of just what the Henrican voyages did and did not do for geographical knowledge at mid-15th century. Having been over the ground myself in 1995, I am persuaded that his sense of place is true. A judicious, balanced synthesis of the surviving documentary evidence, Russell’s book will set the standard for Henrican scholarship for some time, though we may expect that a thorough search of Italian archives (which Russell admits he has been unable to undertake) may yield additional information.

One more thing. As an exercise in the use of the Internet, I “Googled” Henry the Navigator. To my amazement, the search engine turned up references to some 63,700 Web sites. If the 10 I checked are a representative sample, however, 80 percent of them will contain major or minor inaccuracies, most centering on the mythical “School of Sagres.” Teachers of geographic thought courses might find it a useful exercise to have students track the Sagres story on their computers. Then they could be taken to the library, shown the difference between critical scholarship and Internet spew, and be guided through the first steps toward mastery of the skills they will need to evaluate what they find on that pornutopia of misinformation, the World Wide Web.