

## **PRINCE HENRY THE NAVIGATOR: A LIFE**

(PETER RUSSELL)

*April 22, 2024*

Henry the Navigator, prince of Portugal, never king although he often acted as if he were, made the modern world. He lived from 1394 to 1460, and it was through him that Europe began its unprecedented domination of the globe. By sheer strength of will he initiated the Age of Exploration, so for half a millennium he was therefore seen, quite correctly, as a hero all should emulate. In our own decayed age, to be sure, he is forgotten, and if mentioned castigated. No matter; this excellent biography broadly shows how America can relaunch itself. Most of all, it demonstrates how the attitudes of elites can be guided by the right leader, who can thereby determine the course of history.

Detailed hard information about the Prince is fairly sparse. The author, the late Peter Russell (this book was published twenty-five years ago), dials back past hagiography somewhat, mostly by closely examining semi-official biographies about the Prince written contemporaneously or near-contemporaneously with his life, but this is not a revisionist biography in the sense of one trying to tear down old verities. Russell also uses other sources, such as a famous autobiography by the Venetian explorer Cadamosto about his voyages to Guinea in 1455 and 1456, which were sponsored and directed by Henry, as well as the only private letter surviving written by Henry, to his father in 1428, written from the wedding of his older brother, which shows a lighthearted side of Henry otherwise missing from the historical record.

Beyond these sources which revolve around Henry, Russell spent much of his long life examining many different types of medieval Portuguese documents, so he was the ideal man for the task of finding new information about Henry, and about Henry's times. Even so, most documents surviving today are official government documents, from the royal chancery, and Henry, not being king, did much of what he did, including nearly all the exploration he initiated and directed, as personal business, the records of which were not retained as official records. As a result, much of the light shed on Henry is oblique. Moreover, many records of all types were destroyed in the great Lisbon earthquake of

1755. Still, Russell seems to have compiled what will probably always be the most detailed view of the Prince.

Before our twentieth-century loss of confidence and falling back in confusion, Henry was correctly seen by Western elites as the ideal leader: a man who combined zeal for scientific inquiry, directed at improving the flourishing of mankind, with zeal for spreading the Gospel. He certainly exemplified muscular Christianity, in a time when the Muslim invaders who had occupied much of Iberia for hundreds of years were losing ground to Christian counter-attack, the heroic Reconquista. And while his pursuit of abstract scientific knowledge may have been exaggerated somewhat, given that gold and glory often took precedence in his mind and actions, he certainly had a curious, spacious mind, and encouraged, directed, and guided many other men who drove the West forward.

Henry was half English, which in part explains his prominence in the self-told stories of the Anglosphere during its era of confidence. His mother was Philippa of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt, sister of the English king Henry IV, and wife to the Portuguese king John I. While Philippa's was a political marriage (aimed at benefitting joint Portuguese and English interests against the Castilians, at a time when Spain was still fragmented), it was also an extremely successful one. Philippa, considered old to be married for the first time at twenty-seven, bore nine children. Henry was the third son, so never likely to ascend to the throne, nor did he, but from an early age he seems to have made clear that he was also never going to be subordinated. Not that he ever tried to seize the throne; rather, he just acted, very frequently, almost as if he were king, and his father, brother, and nephew, kings throughout Henry's life, usually went along, either presented with a *fait accompli* or overawed by Henry's personality and drive.

When Henry was born, Portugal was a very poor country, on the far edge of Europe, with a population of perhaps one million. It was still recovering from its wars against the Castilians, revolving around the Castilian attempt to use a disputed royal succession to annex Portugal. The wars had been won by King John, but the Portuguese were still on prickly terms with the Castilians. Henry was highly educated (something in which his mother took a direct hand), both in matters spiritual and matters temporal, including in astronomy and cartography, for which

he showed an early interest. King John had to scrape around to grant barely adequate lands as a patrimony to his sons, and foreign adventuring was the obvious way for someone with great ambition, such as Henry, to both satisfy the demand for chivalric honor and to acquire more lands of his own (although he never married). So at twenty-one, he launched a fresh war.

The war was not against Christians, but against the Marinids, the Muslim dynasty which at the time controlled Morocco. The target was the crucial city of Ceuta, located on the Mediterranean just east of the Strait of Gibraltar. What permeates the discussion about how this war was conceived and launched is the Portuguese cultural mood, one of growing self-confidence and expansionary desire. This translated, inevitably at that time and place, to the crusading impulse, and Henry was the main force in converting that largely inchoate desire into a permanent desire for expansion by the Portuguese elite, beginning with the plan to capture Ceuta. It was not necessarily a hard sell; the Portuguese elite, especially the younger generation, were eager to find a new outlet for chivalric ambitions, now that the wars with Castile were over. But it was Henry who took and focused these desires—as always, the great man theory of history is the only theory with any demonstrable connection to reality.

Ceuta both dominated the sea inside the Straits and was an important trading port for trans-Saharan trade, where Arab traders transported goods from African kingdoms further south and east. It also sheltered pirates who preyed on Christian shipping and who raided the Iberian coast to take slaves. Conquering Ceuta would not really expand trade for the Portuguese, or the Spanish, however—Christian merchants were welcome to trade at Ceuta, and often did so. Thus both the Aragonese and Castilians were less than thrilled with Henry hampering their ability to trade by attacking Muslims with whom they had a working relationship. It was not that Henry wanted to capture the trading networks and profit thereby. Rather his conquest was about, plainly and simply, gloriously reconquering Christian lands from the infidel. After tireless effort, Henry persuaded King John to approve the expedition, which was extremely expensive for the country, requiring not just the collection of thousands of troops but the renting of several hundred ships

from foreigners. Amazingly, though all Europe knew of the coming expedition, its target was kept secret.

In July, 1415, the Portuguese launched their ships. Interestingly, given our own recent solar eclipse, they launched shortly after Portugal experienced a total eclipse of the sun. Perhaps that was a portent; at about the same time Queen Philippa died, at age fifty-five, though not before issuing injunctions to her sons and giving them specially-made swords to use in the conquest of Ceuta, or so the chroniclers say. Among her injunctions were to Henry, “that he should make it his special responsibility to watch over the interests of all the lords, knights, fidalgos and squires of the kingdom, making sure their rights were defended and that the royal grants they were entitled to receive were duly made to them.” Her rationale was, perhaps thinking of troubles in England, that “it often happens that kings, misled by false information and exaggerated assertions made by other people, do to some what they should not do.” We see here how very different medieval monarchy was compared to the propaganda version we moderns are fed. Monarchs for the most part cared deeply about their responsibilities to God and their people, and every monarch was constrained within a web of custom, relationships, and duties, including with powerful men not king, such as Henry. Monarchs were not the extractive, all-powerful monsters portrayed by hostile later thinkers of the so-called Enlightenment. And, as usual in the West, women played a crucial role, but a role mostly behind the scenes, as it should be.

When the Portuguese landed, only announcing their destination to the fleet a few days before landing, it took them a mere thirteen hours to conquer the city, which Russell says “was by any standard a most remarkable victory in the annals of medieval warfare.” Part of success was luck, part was very high morale among the Portuguese, and part was “the tactical insight and determination of their leaders.” Henry fought in the front, earning “his lifelong reputation as an exceptionally brave but also impetuous and imprudent soldier.” The victory “astonished Christian Europe,” which did not usually think much about Portugal. Still, now that they had the city, it was an expensive burden for a poor kingdom to maintain—both to supply it with food, given the Marinids were certainly not going to do that, and to protect it from counterattack. Here, as several times throughout this book, Russell details written

discussions among the Portuguese who advised the king, where arguments varied widely in their quality, and oftentimes involved groups talking past each other, along with frequent ignoring of practical arguments in favor of chivalric arguments, buttressed by "God wills it!" These writings are a fascinating slice of medieval life.

The conquest of Ceuta set the pattern for the rest of Henry's life—but it was by far the most successful military conquest he made. King John assigned to him the financing and provisioning of the new Portuguese outpost, which Henry accomplished with drive and verve, showing preternatural organizational skill, something he applied throughout his life. It was probably also at this time that Henry began to realize the possibilities of using, and improving, the caravel, a wholly Portuguese-invented ship of unique sailing flexibility, most importantly in its ability to tack almost directly into the wind, which was crucial in his later African explorations. Henry was creative in his financing, obtaining various special taxes and using other sources of funds, including redirecting money from religious knightly orders which he controlled (notably the Order of Christ, which had succeeded to the Templars in Portugal), and he also went into debt himself (something regarded as a virtue, not a vice, in those days of chivalric magnanimity).

The Portuguese held Ceuta until the seventeenth century (when it passed to the Spanish, who hold it to this day). Henry saw it as a beachhead for further Moroccan conquest, of which more later. In the meantime, he had been spreading his wings elsewhere. In the 1420s, he began to try to conquer the seven islands of the Canaries, which while they had some French and Castilian settlers, were mostly occupied by a pagan, white, Stone Age people who resisted conquest vigorously. After a defeat in 1424 of an attempt to conquer Grand Canary, this effort continued the rest of Henry's life, but was never completed by the Portuguese. With less difficulty and cost, he occupied the (inhabitant-free) Madeira and the Azores, both of which proved to be richly rewarding for the Portuguese (and are Portuguese possessions even now), and both of which he administered as personal possessions during his life. He did none of these conquests in person, however—for a man with the sobriquet "the Navigator," Henry very rarely set to sea himself, and never for any great distance. But he was the sole driving force behind all of it.

The Age of Exploration really began, however, in 1434. Henry wanted to explore the coast of Africa by sea, which nobody had ever done, and directly access the African kingdoms that were the basis of the trans-Saharan trade. Part of this was crusade; the Muslims completely controlled the trans-Saharan trade, which was unacceptable on its face. Europeans knew that south and east of Muslim-controlled lands lay African nations that were not Muslim (though some were) and that some were rich in gold and other valuable commodities. For example, two-thirds of all gold used in Europe came from this trade, mostly from the Guinea region (although the idea that the Malian king Mansa Musa was the richest man ever to walk the earth is ludicrous modern ethnonarcissism; most of the profit was made by Arab traders). Moreover, many believed that a large river, the Rio de Oro, or alternatively a giant gulf, the Sinus Aethiopicus, bisected Africa south of the Sahara, and that by sailing east they could reach the fabled Christian kingdom of Prester John, south of Ethiopia, and perhaps join forces to crush the Muslims in a pincer movement.

In the early 1430s Henry correctly predicted, based on his scientific study, that ships sent south of Cape Bojador, "a promontory traditionally accepted by cosmographers, cartographers, and mariners, Arab and Christian, to mark the furthestmost southerly point on the coast of West Africa as far as which it was safe to navigate," would face no problems passing beyond. This was proven, after several abortive attempts, by ships sent by Henry, in 1434. From the beginning, Henry constantly discussed navigation and cartography with his ship captains, before and after each voyage, in a cycle of ever-reinforcing confidence in his decisions and commands. He and his mariners also developed the new science of oceanic wind patterns, realizing that by sailing in counterintuitive directions it was easier to reach certain locations.

Henry's opening of the way south set off decades and centuries of Portuguese expansion. In Henry's lifetime, his mariners reached as far south as the Senegal and Gambia, the area generally called at the time Guinea—that is to say, not all that far down the western African coast, and very far from the Cape of Good Hope, but much further than any person, European or not, had gone before. They sailed up the major rivers and initiated trading relationships, though they never found Prester John, of course.

These successes bolstered Henry's reputation. But he had not forgotten crusade, though his proposed further Moroccan adventures engendered more domestic opposition, both elite and non-elite, which increased after a disastrous attempt to march to Tangier and conquer it in 1437. That project had been broadly opposed from its inception, as more arguments from the time (again requested by the king as part of the decision process) show. In part it was opposed on economic grounds, but also on practical military grounds and on grounds of canon law (part of the larger Western debate about just war, revolving around whether war against the infidel was automatically justified in all cases, or had to be justified more specifically, including with reference to the burdens placed on the population of the Christian nation proposing to fight the infidel). The main argument by Henry and his allies for this new crusade was simply that it was a crusade, and necessary for the Portuguese elite to fight for both God and glory.

Henry was obliquely criticized as both rash and monomaniacal, including by his family members. But his Tangier project won out in the end. It was problematic from the start—recruitment flagged, and the Portuguese shipped out with far fewer men than wanted and needed. Morale was again very high, but it was not enough. Tangier was a tough nut to crack; the Marinids were expecting them this time and had prepared well; and the strategic brilliance on display in the conquest of Ceuta was nowhere to be found. When Arab reinforcements arrived, trapping the Portuguese, they had to agree to a humiliating capitulation to avoid annihilation—including agreeing to return Ceuta, and leaving Henry's younger brother as a hostage to guarantee the deal. In an example of *realpolitik*, the Portuguese, that is to say Henry, reneged, and his brother died an ill-treated prisoner in Fez. That was the end of military crusade for Henry.

At about the same time, the king (now Henry's brother, John I having died in 1433) also died, leaving a minor heir, resulting in another succession crisis. This distraction benefitted Henry, who slowly rebuilt his reputation, refocusing solely on exploration (with a veneer of crusade). His sailors pushed further and further down the African coast, making new discoveries (including the uninhabited Cape Verde islands) and carefully charting the land, the ocean, and the winds, while opening new trade routes, precisely as Henry planned. Conversion of the heathen,

both by conquest and by persuasion, took a back seat, although Henry was always certain to talk a big game to the Church about his activities in that regard. Military conquest of any kind soon took a back seat; it harmed trade, and the natives were mostly no slouches at fighting, nor were they overly impressed with cannon and muskets. Experience pointed the way to the successful strategy used for centuries by the Portuguese—ruling, or at least influencing, the lands of others by building strong fortress-cities which dominated the coast. In this way, the Portuguese captured much of what had been the trans-Saharan trade, and rapidly became rich (for example, they were able to mint gold coins, something they had been too poor to do before).

And so, never tiring, never dissuaded by failure, Henry died in 1460. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the will he wrote in the weeks before his death was focused on making sure the Portuguese did not forget him or his accomplishments, though this was clothed in religious language. “Henry’s death-bed account of his life’s work was not intended to remind God of his good works. It could be assumed that God, by definition, knew about them and the Prince, anyway, felt pretty secure of his place in Heaven.” No doubt he was self-confident to the end. We can hope it worked out for him. Within a few decades, Portugal had hugely expanded its global influence, all because of the exploration Henry began. In 1487 Bartholomew Dias rounded the Cape; in 1498 Vasco da Gama reached India; and a few years later the Portuguese had established military colonies along the coast of India, and had reached South America. But those times are another story.

All this is fascinating history. What we discern, however, as we survey the landscape of our own time, is that there is no Henry. A man such as he was, full of masculinity, strictly oriented toward reality, and driven by ambition combined with the love of Christ, would be expelled from the elite in kindergarten, or forcibly transed. And if he set out on an alternate path, much effort would be made to ensure he could make no dent in history. Even aside from the toxic ideology of our rulers, our society has lost the confident and outward-looking attitude it had a mere sixty or seventy years ago, when America was not that very different in its core ambitions than was the Portugal of Henry. Now we reject exploration and achievement, instead preferring turning inward, marinating in debilitating emancipation and destructive egalitarianism



while amusing ourselves with stupid, pointless activities. We are a weak, feminized society which takes no risks and believes that the good things in life generate themselves for free.

We must make a choice, to seize the future, to drive a new era of exploration and accomplishment, including the conquest of Space, for no static society without a binding goal outside of itself has ever accomplished anything. The good news is that the mechanisms of implementing that choice are no secret. They only require will and sacrifice. It will be an uphill battle, given our civilizational decline, and that no civilization has ever reversed such a decline. The medieval Portuguese, our example today, were fortunate in their elites, but even so, they required a Man of Destiny to steer them toward that destiny. We are, sadly, extremely unfortunate in our elites, so we have further to go (and that ignores that our non-elites are in terrible shape as well).

Thus, this week Christopher Rufo has been amusing the internet by making fun of one Katherine Maher, the new head of National Public Radio and former head of Wikipedia, for her innumerable statements that show her to be the anti-Henry: weak, fearful, eager to elevate worthless voices and tear down accomplishment, and completely divorced from reality, while at the same time happy to suffocate anybody who disagrees with her. But the truth is that she has, and has had for a long time, great power, and Rufo does not, except the negative power to expose the powerful, who in our time have an infinite reload capacity—and so far Maher has suffered no actual harm, at all. The princes of our time are harridans such as Maher, not bold men such as Henry.

This implies that expelling from our society, through confiscation, lustration, and rustication, nearly all of our current elite must be the first step on our path. Not the path back, for there is no going back, but rather the path forward, which will only be possible to travel once the barnacles which festoon our society, slowing it and ultimately sinking it, have been scraped off. It will require a complete civilizational overhaul, of politics, culture, and every aspect of how we live, including the creation of a new seedbed of elites and a revitalized common people. And both to accomplish that, and to thereafter reach the future that lies within our grasp, it will require men such as Henry. But great men of history require a great people to lead, and therefore the question of our century is whether America can be remade to make it, to coin a phrase, great again. Fifty-fifty, I say.