

Volume 27, Number 4, April 2025

## Revision

# Henry the Navigator

*Nicholas Fellows*

Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

*'Religion was the most important motive for the Portuguese and Spanish voyages of exploration in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.'*  
*How far do you agree?*

## Student answer with commentary

The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries involved large-scale exploration as routes to Africa, Asia and the Americas were opened up and settlers and traders from both Spain and Portugal made their way to these areas. Individual explorers, rulers and patrons each had their own motives for undertaking or supporting these voyages, but while there is evidence to suggest that religious factors were the main motivator, economic and political factors were more important. Although large numbers were converted to Catholicism in the Americas and Indies, there was no crusade against Islam and profits were channelled into royal or individual coffers. This suggests that economic concerns were more important, while states also saw the acquisition of new lands as a way to increase their prestige and power.

The opening paragraph engages with the issue in the question – the relative importance of religion in motivating explorers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. While acknowledging its importance, it offers an alternative view, suggesting that economic and political factors were more important and offering some support. A clear view is therefore evident.

However, religious issues were still important in the voyages of both Portuguese and Spanish explorers and patrons. Henry the Navigator's patronage of the early Portuguese voyages was certainly inspired by his desire to find fellow Christians along the African coast who would act as allies in a crusade against Islam. There was also a desire to link up with the mythical religious figure, Prester John, who was supposed to rule a Christian land in Africa. Religious factors were also important in Spanish voyages. The Catholic monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, provided patronage for Columbus as part of their desire to spread the Catholic faith following the reconquest and defeat of Islam in Granada. Even Columbus, who although he wanted to acquire gold, wanted that wealth to supposedly help fund a crusade against Islam. The spread of Islam, and particularly the fall of Constantinople in 1453, encouraged both nations to look at acquiring both allies and new lands as a bulwark against the spread of Islam. Furthermore, the conversion by missionaries to Catholicism of large numbers of indigenous peoples in the Americas would suggest that religion was the central force

driving the voyages, a task encouraged by many of the religious orders in Spain. However, no crusade was launched against the Ottoman Turks despite appeals from the papacy and the sincerity of the mass conversions also brings into doubt the importance of religion as a motive.

The paragraph focuses on the main issue in the question: the role of religion. It considers the evidence that religion played an important role and provides a range of evidence to support the argument. However, it weighs up its relative importance and concludes that it cannot have been the most important reason as no crusade was actually launched.

Economic factors were more important. Although it had been claimed that the treasure found and profits made were to be used in a crusade against Islam, this did not materialise. Initial motives were also economic as European nations were increasingly resentful of the cost of spices brought overland from the East Indies and the dominance of Venice and Genoa in this trade. There were also concerns that the growing Ottoman power would enable them to dominate the trade and charge ever increasing prices. As a result, it was this that led to not only Portuguese explorers' voyages into the Indian Ocean, but also to others searching for a passage to the East Indies across the Atlantic – it was this that Columbus thought he had discovered. Economic motives were given greater prominence because of a gold shortage in Europe, which both Portugal and Spain hoped to exploit by dominating the African trade in it, and which Spain also hoped to acquire through its conquests in America. There were also large profits to be made from the trade in enslaved people, which the Portuguese initially developed along the west coast of Africa. However, perhaps the clearest evidence of the importance of trade, certainly for the Portuguese, was the establishment of trading posts in the East Indies, such as Goa, which gave them a virtual monopoly over the spice trade for over 100 years.

The response then discusses what it considers to be a more important motivator: economic issues. As with the previous paragraph, the role of economic issues is explained and again a range of evidence is used to support the argument. A judgement is reached at the end of the paragraph that supports the view offered in the opening paragraph.

Economic motives were closely linked to political motives. There is no doubt that the Portuguese viewed the voyages as an opportunity to turn the country into a major maritime power, strengthen the state and acquire financial gain from increased taxes on trade. As a small state, with a population of only one million, this would have had great appeal as it would allow them to increase their influence. For Spain, with the ending of the Reconquista and the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella bringing greater unity, the monarchs would have also viewed the voyages as an opportunity to show their power and strengthen the state through the strategic advantage of acquiring new lands. They would also have been motivated by rivalry with Portugal and an unwillingness to be left behind by their smaller neighbour. At the same time, with the population of Europe recovering after the Black Death, there was growing population pressure. Voyages offered the chance to settle in new lands or at least acquire food supplies to feed the growing population.

The response continues to support the view offered in the opening paragraph, noting how economic and political issues were linked. As with the other main paragraphs, there is a variety of evidence used to support the argument and assertion is avoided. Although there is no concluding judgement, the argument clearly supports the view that political issues were important factors.

Underlying these motives would also have been a sense of personal ambition and the desire for glory. Henry the Navigator, who as the fourth child of the Portuguese monarch had little chance of inheriting the throne, saw his patronage as a way of leaving a legacy that otherwise would not have happened.

This was perhaps similar to Columbus, who travelled around Europe seeking financial support for his voyages. Given the dangers involved in crossing the Atlantic, as with Columbus, or rounding Africa in da Gama and Magellan's cases, they must have also been motivated by a sense of adventure. This was perhaps inspired by the ideals of the Renaissance, although it has to be remembered that both Spain and Portugal were some distance from the centre of those ideas.

Although the opening has not raised the issue of personal glory and prestige, the response suggests that this may have played a role in driving those involved. It provides a good range of examples to support the claim and there is some evaluation of the relative importance of the factor, although this could have been developed.

There was perhaps a desire to raise funds for a crusade against Islam, and Ferdinand and Isabella saw the voyages to America as a continuation of the Reconquista that led to the defeat of the Moors in Granada in 1492 – the same year that Columbus set sail. However, the riches to be gained and the search for gold that many of the conquistadores hunted for in the Americas, and the wealth of the spice trade that the Portuguese sought, suggest that economic motives were more important in driving the voyages.

The conclusion does follow from the view outlined in the opening paragraph and does provide further support for the argument that has been pursued throughout the response. There is an overall supported judgement, but again this could have been developed further. The response would reach the higher levels as the factors are evaluated, but to reach the very top both the interim and overall judgements would need further development.

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine, go to: <http://www.hachettelearning.com/historyreview>