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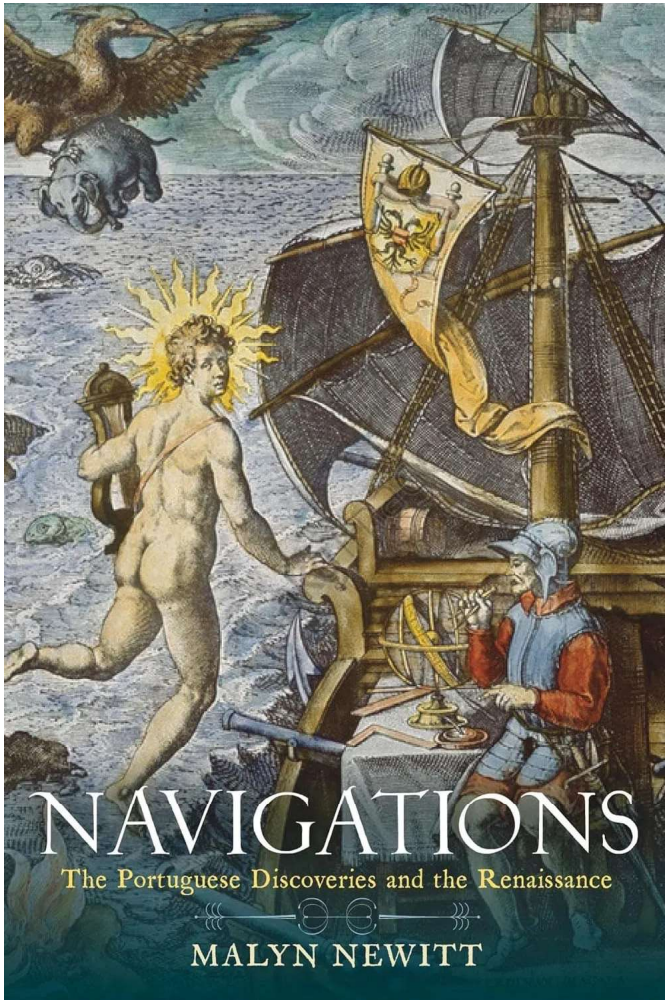
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Book review: Navigations: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance.

reviewed by Rhys Stevens

Malyn Newitt. *Navigations: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 368 p. \$40 US. ISBN: 9781789147025 (cloth); 9781789147346 (EPUB/PDF).

During the 15th and early 16th centuries, Portuguese sailors and explorers embarked on a series of ever-more ambitious, state-sponsored maritime voyages that would see



them exploring vast areas of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans from the coasts of West Africa to Brazil, India, and beyond. These and other European “voyages of discovery” during the Renaissance period resulted in the communication of new knowledge and commercial opportunities. Examples included contact with West African peoples previously unknown by Europeans, establishment of overseas trading forts including those, like Elmina, used for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, development of a new and lucrative sea trade route to India, and the revolutionary circumnavigation of the entire earth by sailing west across the vast uncharted Pacific Ocean. In his book, *Navigations: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance*,

author Malyn Newitt, a retired professor of history, explains how these seminal discoveries would, over time, prove to have a tremendous impact on global economies, population movements and the scientific information systems now used in the modern world.

Much of what has been written previously about the Portuguese discoveries has overly focused on the famous individuals, usually men, who led these explorations and the kings and queens who funded them. However, as Newitt points out in *Navigations*, “... since the end of the European colonial empires, some perspectives have begun to change... [the Portuguese discoveries] are now being viewed in a different way” (p. 300). As such, one of the purposes of Newitt’s book is to re-examine and re-contextualize this fascinating and significant period of history. He does so by using a less Euro-centric approach which takes into far greater consideration the political, cultural, religious, and technological influences at play in Europe during the Renaissance and prior eras. He also makes a point of shining a brighter light on the considerable contributions made by women while also recognizing lesser-known, unheralded individuals whose ranks

included the sailors, interpreters, pilots, mapmakers, and indigenous peoples whom Newitt considers the critically important yet unsung members of the Portuguese voyages.

Newitt is a retired professor of history who, since 1973, has authored more than twenty works related to Portugal's African and overseas settlements and the history of Portugal. As one might expect from a renowned expert in Portuguese colonial history, this book focuses heavily on the discipline of *history* though there is also a great deal of highly relevant material for those whose interests lean towards geographical themes. Examples include historical geography, cultural encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and the history of science – especially Portuguese contributions to the development of cartography, navigation, mapmaking, and exploration during the Renaissance. Newitt describes Portugal's greatest contribution to the European Renaissance as being its advancement of knowledge about the geography of the planet.

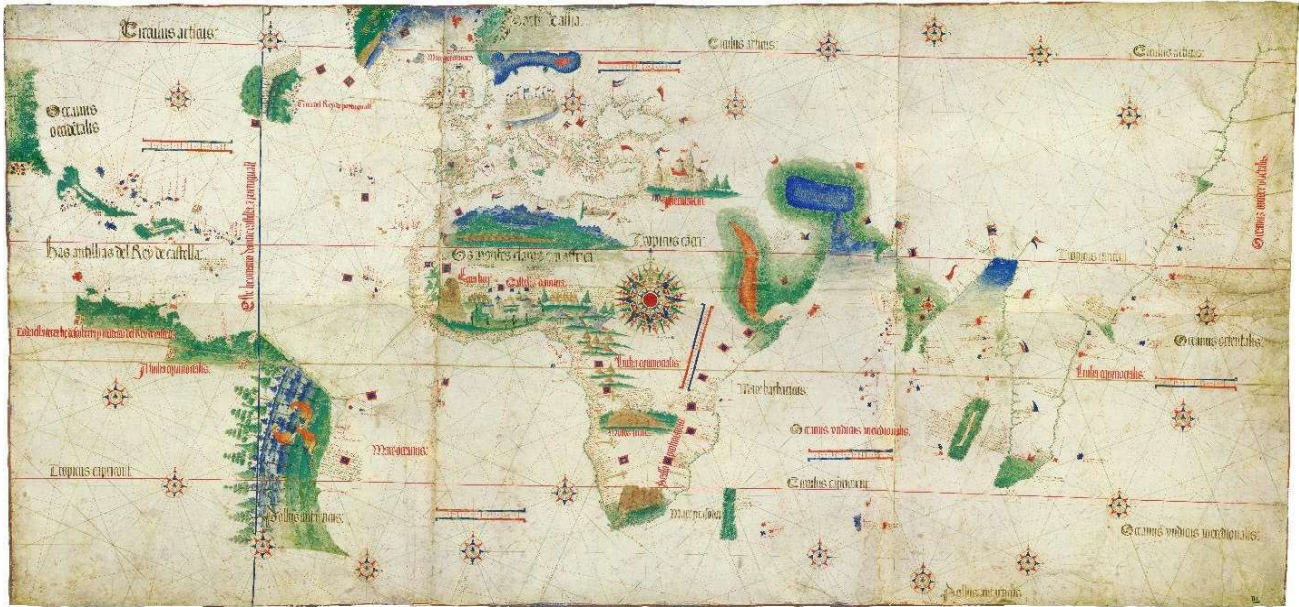
The content of Newitt's *Navigations* is arranged in a clear, straightforward manner which includes a brief introduction (pp. 9-13) and a useful period map of 'European Expansion at the End of the Middle Ages to c. 1540' (pp. 6-7). There are nine separate chapters presented with the book as well as a glossary, references, bibliography, index, and 57 illustrations, 20 of which are in full color.



“*Padrão, erected by the Portuguese on the Mouth of the Zaire River*”, by Roque Gameiro, in *Quadros da História de Portugal* (“Pictures of the History of Portugal”, 1917). Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Several times throughout the text of *Navigations*, Newitt describes *padrões* which were the stone pillars erected by fifteenth-century Portuguese at significant points of landfall as they explored ever more distant locales along the African coast. A *padrão* proclaimed the Portuguese king’s rights to trade and served as an important navigational guide. Much like a series of these *padrões*, Newitt lays out navigational guides of his own throughout Chapters 1-3 that direct a reader towards a greater comprehension of the historical context surrounding the Portuguese discoveries. Largely following a linear timeline, these chapters describe the interactions between Western Europe and other parts of the world before the 15th century, Portugal’s involvement in the Moroccan crusades, and the factors leading to its maritime exploration and creation of an Atlantic empire. The background is also contained in Chapter 5 which discusses the key role of Portugal’s royal women in the politics of the period encompassing the discoveries.

Chapters 4 and 6-8 of *Discoveries* provide re-examinations of the accounts of Portuguese merchants and explorers who traveled the West African coast (e.g., Fernão Gomes, Diogo Cão, Bartolomeu Dias in Ch. 4), those who “discovered” routes to India and Brazil from Portugal (Vasco da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral in Ch. 6), Portugal’s greatest scientific explorer and documenter during the age of discoveries (Duarte Pacheco Pereira in Ch. 7), and the epic “Armada de Molucca” voyage across the Pacific led by Portugal’s Ferdinand Magellan on behalf of Spain (Ch. 8). Many of Newitt’s re-examinations delve into the available historical evidence about the lives of these explorers and the veracity of surviving accounts chronicling their explorations. Anyone curious about *how* we know anything about the voyages of discovery and how trustworthy and accurate they might be will appreciate the level of detail that Newitt employs when discussing key sources such as famous maps (e.g., *Cantino planisphere*, 1502), sailing guides (e.g., *Roteiro* of da Gama’s first voyage) and the manuscripts and diaries of participants (e.g., Pacheco’s *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*; Antonio Pigafetta’s *Magellan’s Voyage*).



Cantino Planisphere (1502). Image Source: Biblioteca Estense, Modena, Italy.

Descriptions of the individual voyages of discovery are certainly a highlight of the book, and Newitt features a multitude of fascinating details about the events themselves, how they were documented, and by whom. An example of one such journey was that of Diogo Cão in 1485 whom Newitt describes as “one of history’s great heroic adventurers” (p. 140). Cão and his party’s incredible accomplishments included mapping three thousand kilometers of the West African coastline, exploration of 160 km from the mouth of the Zaire River as confirmed by their rock inscriptions at Yellala Falls which were discovered in 1911 and being among the first Europeans to visit the Kongo kingdom.

Other re-examinations of events that occurred during the era of Portugal’s voyages of discoveries are much more disturbing and describe the mistreatment and exploitation of non-Europeans and indigenous peoples. Newitt certainly does not shy away from critiquing the unsettling violence perpetrated by the Portuguese while also providing his objective thoughts and explanations for why it occurred (pp. 218-222). Some of the worst examples are those involving Ferdinand Magellan and the crew of the Armada de Molucca against the local indigenous peoples of the East Indies. While acknowledging that Magellan’s voyage had all the hallmark elements of an epic, heroic tale of adventure, he states that another way of looking at it was as “...a savage assault by well-armed pirates on peoples whom they aspired to dominate and ruthlessly exploit – all in the name of Christianity” (p. 281).

The final chapter of *Navigations* (Ch. 9) concisely sums up the lasting impacts of the Portuguese voyages from a long-term perspective. Newitt concludes that Portugal's impact on Asia was somewhat less important than historians once thought. Portuguese attempts to establish commercial control over eastern trade did little to transform the existing structures of eastern trade and they exerted minimal political influence over the powerful empires of mainland Asia. More significant, however, were the commercial and cultural networks that the Portuguese built to link Asia with the newly 'discovered' world of the Americas.

In summary, professor Malyn Newitt's *Navigations: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance* provides an objective and reasoned re-examination of the events and factors that culminated in a series of significant and world-altering explorations by the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries. Highly recommended for academic libraries with collections in historical geography, cartography, and the European Age of Discovery and Exploration.

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