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**HUMBOLDT, Alexander von** (Berlin, 1769-Berlin, 1859)

Alexander von Humboldt was one of the most outstanding intellectual figures of his time, leaving behind an immense repository of information and methods for the scientists who followed him. A traveller, writer, orator, courtier and naturalist, he had a decisive influence on the epistemological fields of ecology, geography and European history of discovery, both in his theoretical reflection on the subjects under debate and in the establishment of international networks for the transmission of such knowledge. Born in Tegel in 1769, on his family's country estate, the "son of the German Enlightenment" studied at the commercial academy in Hamburg and the mining academy in Freiberg, and at the universities of Frankfurt and Göttingen. His travels through Spain, South and Central America, and the United States between 1799 and 1804 allowed him to meet Charles IV and the Spanish royal family, the archivist and historian Muñoz, and Thomas Jefferson, the erudite American president. On his return to Paris and Berlin (where he served as advisor, chamberlain and diplomat), he spent much of his long life publishing books on the materials and impressions he had gathered and compiling a colossal collection of some fifty thousand letters (Sandra Rebok, *Humboldt and Jefferson...*, 2014, pp. 5, 7-11, 13 and 53 and Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 2016, pp. 15 and 24-25). For the history of science and the historiography of the discoveries, it is important to note that the abusively named Baron Humboldt (Sandra Rebok, *Humboldt and Jefferson...* 2014, p. 47) maintained a correspondence and knew Abbot José Francisco Correia da Serra (1750-1823) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount of Santarém (1791-1856), in addition to influencing, through his travels, the discovery of a Brazil closed to foreigners until the arrival of the court in Rio de Janeiro and the marriage of the heir to the crown to an Austrian archduchess (in 1808 and 1817, respectively). Even though he never crossed the border between Spanish and Portuguese America, Alexander von Humboldt contributed decisively, through his first-hand accounts, both printed and oral, to the flourishing of a popular and scientific fascination with an unknown Brazil, which French and Austrian cultural and scientific missions would seek to explore under the regency and reign of King João VI.

Alexander von Humboldt is best known in Portugal because of the question of the priority of Portuguese discoveries and the respective nautical science. Humboldt was not a historian, nor did he have any specific training in the critical comparison of texts (the basis of the examination he set out to make of the history of

the Americas). He did not master the Portuguese language, which prevented him from gaining first-hand knowledge of the fundamental texts of the 15th-century discoveries (1420-1492). In 1847, in volume II of the French edition of *Cosmos*, he maintained that the boldness (*hardiesse*) of Christopher Columbus was the first link in the endless chain of mysterious events that constituted the Portuguese discoveries (Joaquim Bensaúde, *Les legendes...*, p. 223 and n. 3).

The main purpose of the *Examen critique de sur l'histoire de la Géographie du Nouveau Continent...* seems to have been, according to Armando Cortesão, "the glorification of Columbus, Vespucci and Behaim [Martin of Bohemia]". Armando Cortesão describes the work as one that "undoubtedly and extraordinarily contributed to highlighting the importance of the history of the discoveries and their links with the history of cartography" (*História da Cartografia Portuguesa*, vol. I, 1969, p. 27).

The Viscount of Santarém is well aware that the work in question, *Examen critique...*, contains methodological flaws, particularly in terms of the organisation of the arguments. He comments: "However, it is regrettable that this colossal work is not methodical. M. Letronne [curator of the Royal Library of Paris, professor at the Collège de France and editor of the French edition of 1836-39], who is one of his closest friends, asked me for my opinion, but did not wait for my reply and said, "n'est-ce pas que l'ouvrage de notre ami est un puits d'érudition et de confusion?" And Baron Walckenaer seems to anticipate what will be written the following year about the need to place the two texts, the Prussian and the Portuguese, side by side: "Walckenaer, the wisest man on these matters and a friend of Humboldt, wrote to me recently saying: "J'ai été charmé de voir dans votre dernière partie sur Vespuce [*Recherches critiques sur Améric Vespuce...*] autant d'érudition que de logique. Je me propose de vous relire lorsque Mr. de Humboldt terminera ses éternels épisodes, a fin de pouvoir en parler de tous les deux dans le *Journal des Savants* et dans les *Annales des Voyages*."

On 31 January 1840, the viscount commented: "And what shall I say of Mr. Humboldt's latest work [*Examen critique...*, volume V]! The episodes, the notes, the digressions, the discussions in the text, in the notes, in the appendices, are in their thousands. And how do critics outside this field view this work? Let the scientific journals and academic reports say so, despite the many comments and observations that have been made about this vast work" (Viscount of Santarém, *Correspondência do...* vol. VI, 1919, p. 77).

Alexander von Humboldt stood out for his gathering, collection and interpretation of scientific information, either locally or through his network of correspondents around the world. In this way, he built a multidisciplinary, innovative, original and solid body of work. One exception seems to have been the history of European discoveries, in which the gathering of material from writers and academics such as Estancelin and Avezac was carried out with a less rigorous and critical methodology. Reading sources in Castilian and French translations of Portuguese chronicles, he developed historical and geographical views that became a , a priori and undocumented theses about the Portuguese discoveries, namely the pseudo-priority of the Normans, the inhabitants of Dieppe and Jaime Ferrer over the proven priority of the Iberian peoples of



Portugal. The reactive but respectful work of the Viscount of Santarém impressed the universal scholar Humboldt, which did not prevent the Prussian author from persisting in such views (for example, about the pseudo-voyages of Amerigo Vespucci). The Franco-German scientific and cultural world naturally adopted the readings of the genius of his time, much more than those of the Portuguese author, who died without his essential books from the 1840s and 1850s being reprinted. Thus, self-perpetuating mythologies are perpetuated, generation after generation, with no apparent possibility of refutation.

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