

Didier Henrion, an enigmatic introducer of Dutch mathematics in Paris

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Abstract

The renewal of scientific thinking in the first half of the 17th century, along with the use of new methods of computing by engineers on the battlefield had to impact mathematics which was taught to future officers. The Kingdom of France needed the officers to be trained in the new methods, but no college, not even Universities such as the Sorbonne, offered courses on these matters. Paris had no military Academies comparable to the Academia Real Mathematica in Madrid, except Pluvinel's Academy, where young noblemen were trained in horse riding and fencing, but probably no or few mathematical topics.

From 1613 to the middle of the 1630's, the only available mathematical textbooks in French were written by an unknown mathematician named D. Henrion, who introduced himself as a private teacher in the prefaces and the dedications of his numerous books. In fact, many new subjects could be discovered in his treatises, sometimes for the first time, like logarithms, trigonometry, fortification and the use of the proportional compass.

The starting point of our research was a basic question: what does D stand for in "D. Henrion"? This question may be of no importance to historians of mathematical thought, but it's so simple that it had to be solved first. The search for Henrion's first name led us to investigate his family affairs, and allowed us to better understand how he became the most important mathematical popularizer of his time.

Keywords: biographic research; practical geometry; circulation of knowledge; mathematics textbooks

Introduction

In 1610, Henry IV, King of France, was killed by a religious fanatic at the time he was about to send his armies to support the Protestant side in the War of the Jülich Succession. The alliance between France and the young Dutch Republic would survive the death of King Henry, as the two countries had Spain as a common enemy. France had overcome the religious wars thanks to the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes in 1598, but Louis XIII, and then Louis XIV, carried the war beyond the borders. The Kingdom of France needed a disciplined army, and therefore well-trained officers. Many young French noblemen gained experience with military matters in the Low Countries during the Eighty Years War, but being a nobleman, even adept at fencing, couldn't be enough for modern war (Parker, 1988). You had to learn mathematics to become a rational leader, capable of understanding new theories of

fortification and ballistics. The new Art of War came from the United Provinces, along with new practices in mathematics and physics. There was a need in France for this new knowledge.

Till the end of the 16th century, very little mathematics and physics were taught in French colleges, and it appears that mathematics teaching would develop in Paris through private lessons (Le Dividich, 1998). One of the most prolific writers on that subject in the beginning of the 17th century signed under the pen name 'DHPEM', which stands for "D. Henrion professeur és mathématiques". Some of his treatises were amongst the first ever published in France on a variety of subjects already known in the Low Countries, such as logarithms, trigonometry, Dutch fortification and even the slide rule.

But we hardly know Henrion's life, as a teacher as well as an engineer or even as a person. His relationship with the Low Countries, especially the Leiden Engineering School, is still to determine. His personal scientific skills remain particularly obscure, numerous parts of his books having been identified as translations of major works by Clavius and others. Nevertheless, he certainly played an important part in the restoration of mathematics studies for the French nobility in the first half of the 17th century. His books may have been the only available sources in vernacular to young noblemen preparing for an officer career in the French Army, as Jean Itard stresses in his biographical note for the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (Itard, 2008). So, Henrion is one of the first (self-proclaimed) teachers of mathematics, and if his contribution to mathematics is insignificant, his role as a pedagogue must not be underestimated. However we know almost nothing about him, his training in mathematics, his lessons, etc. To the contrary, we know much more about the life and works of mathematical giants such as Descartes, Huygens or Newton, who did not have to teach to earn a living. Yet without teaching, it is likely that mathematics wouldn't have developed so well. Research about mathematics teaching can't be done without taking into account teachers, and this should be undertaken from an external point of view, considering the living conditions of the educational actors in their time and places.

When these teachers are also mathematical practitioners, we must expand our view to other circles, such as engineers, instrument makers or printers. Given the rare information that is preserved about people from these circles, the task is quite difficult. The existing literature about Parisian mathematicians and private teachers in the first half of the 17th century is very poor so far (Le Dividich, 1998). Even if we may not be able to trace down the real conditions of the circulation of knowledge in non-academic circles, our goal is to contribute to a better knowledge of this topic. To dig deeper where we stand, this paper focuses on our current research about Henrion, his personal life and his role as a transmitter of the new mathematical techniques of his time in Paris.

The common knowledge about Henrion

As far as biography is concerned, the major source about Henrion's life is the classical *Biographie de Michaud* (Michaud, 1857), which conveniently gives essential information in a minimum of lines:

HENRION (DENIS), mathematician, born in France towards the end of the 16th century. He entered the service of the United Provinces as an engineer very early. In 1607, he came to Paris where he taught mathematics, and had for students many young men of noble families. He died around 1640 after having published a lot of works and translations as follows [...] (pp. 212–213)¹

Itard (2008) corrects several details, including the date of death, brought back to 1632. This is attested by a mention of Henrion's widow on the title page of the 6th edition of his translation of *Euclid's Elements* (Henrion, 1632). But Itard admits that “information about Henrion is very scarce and imprecise”. The lack of identified personal documents led the former biographers to take as a truth all information they found in Henrion's own works. As a matter of fact, he only gave details about his life when he had to justify priority or legitimacy, but we can infer at least two major points from his prefaces.

First of all, he surely was a teacher, as we can understand from his own prefaces, which contain many references to his “schoolboys” or his “Gentlemen disciples” (Henrion 1613, fol. ã iij). We can read that he started his teaching in Paris twenty years before the publication of the second volume of his *Memoires* (Henrion, 1627, fol. ã iij), namely around 1607. It is notable that he calls himself a mathematician at the frontispiece of his first treatises, but from 1621 on, he chooses to introduce himself as a mathematics teacher. We can't explain this change yet, but it could be linked to a growing notoriety as a Parisian teacher.

Second, he may have followed Jacques Alleaume, who had been recruited by the States General of the United Provinces to work along with Stevin and Marolois (De Waard, 1912, col. 17-19). Henrion himself mentions several trips to Holland (Henrion, 1627, p. 339; 1630, pp. 25 & 38) and reports various aspects of Dutch practices in the field (Henrion, 1627, fol. ã vj). We eventually find the nature of his job in his own words in 1623, justifying the low quality of his *Euclid* by his absence: “while I was in Holland for the exercise of my duties as an engineer at the service of Mr. Prince of Orange and for the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries” [pendant que j'estois allé en Hollande pour l'exercice de ma charge

1 « HENRION (DENIS), mathématicien, né en France vers la fin du 16^e siècle, entra fort jeune comme ingénieur au service des Provinces-Unies. En 1607, il vint à Paris où il professa les mathématiques, et eut pour élèves beaucoup de jeunes gens de familles nobles. Il mourut vers 1640, après avoir publié un grand nombre d'ouvrages et de traductions dont voici les titres [...] » (*All translation are by the present author*)

d'ingenieur de Mons^r le Prince d'Orange & de Messieurs les Estats generaux des Provinces unies du pays bas] (Henrion, 1623, p. 4).

We should add that Henrion was certainly not poor. Almost all of his books were published at the author's expense and sold at home "A Paris, en l'Isle du Palais, a l'image St Michel". If we consider for instance the *Memoires mathematiques* (Henrion, 1613), with their 365 pages full of tables, figures and formulas, the expense might have been quite high for an unknown mathematician without patrons. In fact, the *Memoires* are dedicated to Sully, former French Prime Minister, whom the author confesses not to know personally. This could be considered as miscalculation, because Sully was no longer as powerful as during the reign of Henry IV, but he remained a prominent figure of the Protestant party. Henrion's dedication was a first (miss)step in a sponsorship search strategy, which would be improved over time.

Henrion's patrons and sources

Henrion's dedicatory strategy has been analyzed in depth by Aurélien Ruellet in his study *La Maison de Salomon* (Ruellet, 2016, pp. 106-112). Ruellet shows that Henrion used three different kinds of targets and language registers:

- As we already mentioned for the *Memoires mathematiques*, the compilations intended for the education of the nobility were offered to important men in the Kingdom, but not randomly at all: Sully was a major figure of the Huguenot party, and he was still the Grand Master of Artillery. The dedication emphasizes their common acquaintances, especially Jacques Alleaume, whose great skills are praised. In the same way, the *Collection mathematique* (Henrion, 1621) is dedicated to 'Monsieur', the young brother of King Louis XIII, to draw his attention at the very moment when the question of allocating positions in his royal household would arise. In both cases, the text of the dedication refers both to a project of education for French noblemen and to the service of the country.
- More often, the books are dedicated to Henrion's pupils or their parents. Every time he mentions the mathematical and personal qualities of his students, intimately linking mathematical knowledge with military profession: the skills used in wartime are compared with the ones needed in times of peace, namely scientific knowledge. These dedications can be seen as acknowledgment of good wages or even of funds for publication. Anyway, they contribute to the promotion of the author and his pedagogical abilities amongst the Parisian society.
- Finally, minor works such as translations or reissues are dedicated to personal acquaintances. In this case, Henrion doesn't bother with writing; he just

copies excerpts from other dedications, borrowing more than once expressions from Jean Errard's works (see below).

There are no mathematicians in the group of patrons we just examined, but we noticed similarities of expressions in the dedications with another famous mathematical practitioner, Jean Errard, who is better known as the principal engineer and military architect of King Henry IV of France. As we have shown in our PhD thesis², we can find in Henrion's early works strong similitude with Errard's own works: for instance, his *Geometry* follows exactly the same pattern as Errard's one, whose last three books are even fully copied into Henrion's second edition in 1619; his *Fortification* is intended to complete Errard's one, giving rigorous demonstrations that were missing.

This is already visible on the frontispiece of the *Memoires*, "collected and prepared in favor of the French nobility" (fig. 1, left), clearly a sequel of Errard's *Fortification* "Preface to the French nobility" (Errard, 1600). Moreover, the *Memoires* last chapter is intended to "serve as an explanation and addition to the second and third books of Fortifications by M. Errard". This intention is actually implemented through extensive explanations of Errard's concealed computations, and new propositions of construction. Henrion rewrites the original text, keeping only the essential propositions and completing them by the precise vocabulary he could have found in Marolois' *Fortification* (Marolois, 1615). In fact, Henrion's initial project was a new edition of Errard's *Fortification*, but he had given up after hearing that it was also a project of Errard's nephew (Henrion, 1621, *Briefve instruction* p. 1). Henrion didn't give another plausible reason for giving up: the Errardian system had fallen into oblivion and the new trend had come from the Low Countries, namely the Dutch manner of fortifying initiated by Stevin, fully described by Marolois and many others after him. The main differences between the two systems lie in the initial choices. Errard recommends the use of right angles at the tips of the bastions, and the adjustment of all the lengths on a unit of 16 fathoms. For Marolois, the angles vary according to the number of sides of the fortress, and the lengths do not matter by themselves: they must only meet certain proportions.

In his first treatise on fortification (Henrion, 1613), Henrion tried to improve Errard's propositions by providing proofs and detailed calculations, plus new case studies. In the second one (Henrion, 1623), he leaves Errard's construction principles to concentrate on the new Dutch manner of fortification.

A similar change in Henrion's teaching subjects can be seen in practical geometry. His collected works in 1613 and 1621 contain numerous construction problems with

2 *La fortification géométrique de Jean Errard et l'école française de fortification, 1550-1650* [Jean Errard's geometric fortification and the French School of fortification, 1550-1650] (defended on December 6, 2016 under supervision of Dr. Evelyne Barbin at Nantes University).

his comments on them, intended to improve Errard's *Geometrie et pratique generale d'icelle* (Errard, 1594). In 1621, when Henrion decides to seize the counterfeit copies of his *Collection* (Henrion 1621), he provides the new printer with his commentaries on Errard's *Geometrie*; which will constitute books 2 to 4 of his practical geometry treatise. If we study the organization of this treatise, especially the order of the description and the considered objects, we can recognize Marolois' and Errard's works as the two major sources.

But even if Errard is the most important amongst Henrion's acknowledged masters, the priority should be given to Stevin, at least at the beginning of Henrion's career as a mathematics writer. Observing the frontispieces in figure 1 highlights the unspoken filiation. Several indicators confirm the importance of Stevin's *Memoires* (Stevin, 1605-1608) for Henrion. First, the mention of Stevin as reference author for the study of triangles and more generally for practical geometry. Henrion certainly had perused Stevin's volume, despite its size that prevented it to be used as a hand-book in the field (Henrion, 1613, p. 1). He even informs the reader that Stevin's text about the measure of the parabola must be corrected:

Now we will advise the reader, who possesses the *Memoires Mathematiques* of the learned Stevin (in the French version) to correct the impression here, which is the 16. p. of the second book of his practical Geometry practice. Instead of adding to rectilinear triangle ABC a third of it as said above, here is added its half: so that triangle ABC being 20, the content of the parabola is made 30, instead of being only 26 two-thirds (p. 328).

In fact, proposition 16 of Stevin's second book (Stevin, 1605-1608, p. 81) contradicts Archimedes' quadrature of the parabola it refers to. Surprisingly, Stevin uses a wrong method to calculate the area of the parabola passing through points A, B and C, by taking three halves of the area of triangle ABC, instead of its four thirds. In the 1634 edition, Girard will correct the 16th proposition, making 30 the area of triangle ABC in order to add 10 which is the third of 30, as if it had only been a typo in the former edition.

Even if the name of Stevin is quoted only twice in Henrion's *Memoires*, plus the correction we mentioned above, he remains along with Errard his main inspiration as far as contents are concerned. A large part of Henrion's *Geometry* (Henrion, 1613, pp. 159-343) is modeled on Stevin's one, after a list of definitions entirely taken from Errard. Similarly, the chapter on trigonometry (Ibid., pp. 33-158) is a paraphrase of Stevin's work on triangles. Nevertheless Henrion acknowledges his sources, even when he stresses the originality of 40 geometrical construction problems he created, and the use of the proportional compass to solve them. Let's recall that he pays his debt to Jacques Alleaume for this instrument too. But opinion is divided about his borrowings, and Henrion's contemporaries can be as fierce as him.



Fig. 1. Comparing the frontispieces of Henrion's and Stevin's *Memoires*

Henrion judged by his contemporaries

He surely was a controversial personality, as we will show through several excerpts from books published in his time. First of all, Honorat de Meynier, an independent Provençal mathematical practitioner, a Stevin's opponent who condemns Henrion's plagiarism (Meynier, 1614):

Monsieur Henrion, of whom I have heard the accusation by the best mathematicians in Paris of having attributed to himself and having uncovered in his said *Memoires* the most beautiful and useful secrets of Monsieur Alleaume, who has the honor of walking in the forefront of the French mathematicians (p. 80).

But we already know that Henrion recognized Alleaume as his master. Meynier's quarreling remarks should be taken more generally as a part of his anti-Protestant crusade. We find a defense of our "Professeur és mathématiques" written by another practitioner, René Le Normant, who had participated in the Dutch War of Independence (Le Normant, 1632):

I recognize M. Henrion as greatly skilled in all sciences of Mathematics, not by hearsay, but by having contact with him and noticing his very learned writings, which show that he is greatly versed in the fortifications according to the custom of Holland & France. I learned from him some sciences, a part of which was not used in Holland where I did my war studies. In Paris, there are some very learned Mathematicians, but on the opposite side, there are a lot of

ignorant, who call themselves Mathematicians, who interfere with this science, and teach their lessons without demonstration (p. 242, mispaginated 142)

But Le Normant was a soldier more than a mathematician. Would he be able to tell the difference between original works and translations? What we could take as the fatal blow was dealt by Claude Mydorge (Mydorge, 1630), another mathematical amateur, in his commentaries on a quadrature of the circle previously explained by Henrion, under his pen name DHPEM:

We are ashamed of the impudence of this presumptuous Censor, who asserts in his comment, that nobody so far would have taught this ratio between this curvilinear excess to the square [...] This piece, reported by him on this question is not his invention, but has the same quality as the rest of his remarks, that is to say furtive and stolen elsewhere. If you ask the good Longomontanus for news, he will show that he has already published it in Denmark [...] No offense to this new Cyclometer [i.e. Henrion] or his new Treatise on curves, it is a curvilinear understanding that leads you to admit such absurdities. If this counterfeit money is used in Denmark, France, or at least Paris, will never spot it, or it will be valued only amongst ignorant (pp. 60–62)³.

Caught red-handed? We could play Henrion's advocate, noticing that he never claimed to be the inventor of this quadrature, but only the first one to explain it in France.

Apparently Mydorge did not know the identity of his opponent, hidden behind his DHPEM acronym. It is true that this pseudonym allowed Henrion to advertise for his own books when editing or translating other mathematicians' works. According to his contemporary Claude Hardy, he even paid scholars for translations, because his knowledge of Latin was too weak to allow him to read major mathematical authors as Clavius and Ptolemy. We'll probably never know exactly who were the translators (business confidentiality), but we can notice troubling coincidences. The name of Pierre Herigone (ca 1580-1643) has been often mistaken for Henrion's pen name, and we can argue that Herigone was one of the aforesaid translators. In fact, Herigone's *Fortification* (Herigone, 1634, t. 3, pp. 179-231) or his edition of Euclid's *Elements* (Ibid., t. 1, not paginated) contain many texts and figures similar or even identical to Henrion's ones. But Herigone acknowledges Clavius as the source of his own Euclid's edition, so we can reasonably assume that Henrion's edition of Euclid's *Elements* consists of a commented translation of Clavius's one.

So, who was Henrion actually? What was his relationship with the Parisian mathematical circle? How did he get money to publish so many books without needing

3 By this figure of style, Mydorge ridicules his opponent's crooked mind with reference to his project about a treatise on curvilinear objects.

the support of booksellers? In order to gain deeper knowledge of his personal life, we had to turn to the notarial archives.

Studying notarial archives

Fortunately, Henrion lived in Paris, so that we could expect getting information at the French Archives Nationales (AN). The Parisian AN center owns the complete records of the 122 historical notarial firms of the city from the end of the 15th century. Its website provides several constantly evolving research instruments. Even if it is still far from complete due to millions of documents held, the catalogue gave us a first success with keyword ‘Henrion’.

We know that the revelation is not terrific, but as it was our first simple question we are pleased to confirm that *D.* stands for *Didier*. In February 1612, Henrion signed a lease agreement (fig. 2) about two cellars in a house situated “en l’Isle du Palais, à l’image Saint Michel”, that is to say the same address at the frontispiece of Henrion’s books.

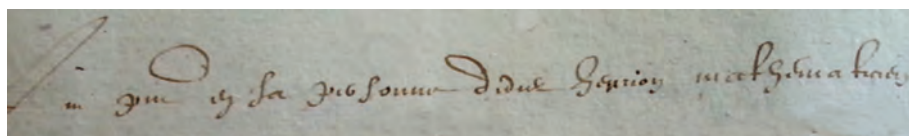


Fig. 2. First line from the 1612 lease agreement

This first line reads: “Fut p[re]sent en sa personne didier henrion mathematicien” [Was p[re]sent in his person didier henrion mathematician]: no doubts about his first name. We learn from this contract that Henrion was not the owner of the place but had a lease agreement himself. Twice again in 1613 and in 1618, the same kind of lease agreement was established between Henrion and new tenants. The cellars were to be used as warehouses and shops by a wine dealer, a carpenter and finally a merchant, all of them living in the neighborhood. Thus, different parts of the basement were subleased at least till 1622, but we’ve lost track of the house after that year (search still in progress).

Keeping on researching in the catalogue, we only found further mention of Henrion as the deceased husband of Jehanne Le Villain, from 1633 on. We had to follow this family track to learn more about our mathematics teacher. Surprisingly, a notarial act dated April 1633 relates to repair estimates for two houses and a farm we had never heard about before. In 1635, Le Villain benefits from an income annuity, constituted for her and her daughters. So it is now possible to describe Didier’s nuclear family (fig. 3):

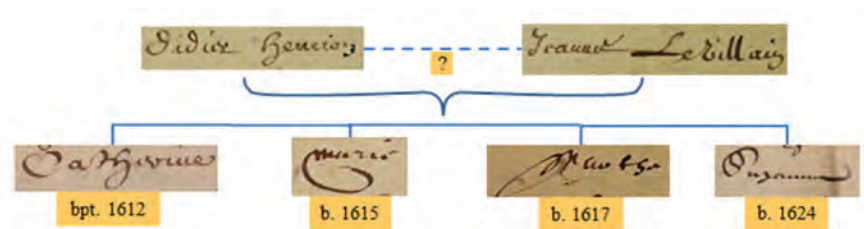


Fig. 3. The Henrion couple and their daughters Catherine, Marie, Marthe and Suzanne

The fact that the eldest daughter was baptized in 1612 in Charenton is precious because Charenton hosted the unique Protestant Church of Paris. Thus Didier Henrion and his wife worshipped there and consequently they were Protestants. Did they marry there too? Unfortunately, the registers of Charenton Protestant Church disappeared in 1871 in the great fire of Paris City Hall, so we may not know more about Le Villain this way. The last deed for 1633 is dated December and reveals more important matters. We can read that all previous deeds concerning Le Villain are consequences of the due execution of the Will of Jean Henrion. But who was he? And what was his relationship with Didier?

This appears to be the essential point of our story. Jean Henrion, Didier's uncle⁴, was an important lawyer at the Châtelet of Paris and the provost of several towns in the Parisian region, including the Savis farm in Belleville. This farm was a huge food supplier for Paris, so as an administrator, Jean Henrion was certainly wealthy. In fact, we found his Will, dating back to September 1602. The list of his properties is considerable: he definitely was very rich. At the very end of this Will, Didier Henrion is described as "absent", and consequently unable to hold the position of universal legatee of half the properties of his uncle. But in case he would "come back", Didier would recover the legacy. Absent? Coming back? We have at least two interpretations: the physical absence of an engineer at the service of the United Provinces or the spiritual absence of a heretic. The second one seems the most plausible, considered the phrasing of the Will, but we still have to discover whether Didier had to abjure his faith, and when. Nevertheless, another good surprise was given by Jean Henrion's wife, Jacqueline du Lis (or du Lys) (fig. 4):

Jacqueline du Lis survived her husband by ten years. She was the executor of his Will, but we have not managed yet to untie the thread of her relationship with the heirs (her two nieces and Didier).

The important fact is that Jacqueline had two brothers, Luc and Charles, who were apparently good friends of Jean. Charles du Lis is well-known as private secretary of François Viète, who committed him to deciphering the correspondence

4 This relationship is evidenced by Jean Henrion's will, which mentions Didier as his nephew.

of the King's foreign enemies. Before becoming an advocate in Paris Parliament, Charles had edited "with the author's agreement" a French translation of Viète's mathematical works, for which the King gave his royal privilege in June 1606. Unfortunately, the book has never been put to press.

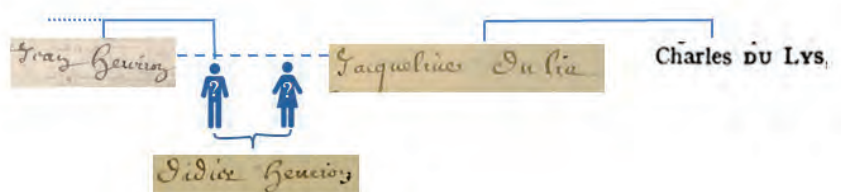


Fig. 4. The previous generation track

Charles du Lis was not alone to undertake this huge work. The privilege mentions another famous Viète's secretary, Pierre Alleaume, whose son Jacques Alleaume was a close friend of Didier Henrion's. The world of Protestant mathematical practitioners was a small world.

What next?

This archival research was quite new for us, but it allowed us to investigate the world of 17th century lawyers, as well as secret family affairs. It is sometimes strange to read documents related to life and death of real persons without regards to their mathematical achievements, but in our opinion it should be done more often to understand the real conditions of mathematical thinking by human beings.

We still have to find many things before having a good view on Henrion's life, for instance his Will, the date and place of his death, and how he managed to "come back" in the execution of his uncle's Will. We need more information about his visits to the United Provinces, to clarify the matter of his possible training at Leyden School of Engineers. We would also like to know more about his relation to Pierre Hérigone, whose *Cursus mathematicus* (Hérigone, 1634) borrows many elements from Henrion. So many things we do not know about a simple Parisian mathematics teacher of the beginning of the 17th century!

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