

## Self Through the Other

Production, Circulation and Reception in Italy  
of Sixteenth-Century Printed Sources on Japan

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# 1 From Myth to Geography Towards the Shaping of a Conceptual Map of ‘Japan’

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## 1.1 ‘Myth’ and ‘Reality’ in the Medieval Discourse on Asia

### 1.1.1 Classical Myths and Legendary Traditions on Asia in the Early Middle Ages

The medieval discourse on Asia was deeply rooted in the images of ‘India’ produced by the Greek and Latin literary traditions. The Indian subcontinent was known to the Greek world at least since the sixth century BC. The history of Greek Indography traced back to the officer Scylax of Caryanda, who, in the early years of the reign of Darius of Persia (presumably around 519 BC), was sent by Darius to explore the sea route down the Indus and towards the Arabian Peninsula. Scylax produced a ‘practical’ report on his voyage, and while, judging from the paucity of direct references to him by later writers, he was probably “more known about than known” (Parker 2008, 16), his writings set off an early tradition of oral and written narrations of India. This was to be further developed by Herodotus (c. 484 BC–c. 425 BC), who, with his *Histories* (written from 450 BC to 430 BC), gave birth to a new, ‘discursive’ Indography, that mingled ‘factuality’ and ‘myth’ and included many *topoi* that medieval writings would come to associate with the ‘Orient’.<sup>1</sup> Writings on India flourished after Alexander the Great’s India campaigns, undertaken from 326 to 324 BC. His military

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1 See Parker 2008, 21-2. These recurring traits included gold and cannibalism, that would also, as we will see, be associated with Japan, through Marco Polo’s writings.

effort did not go as far as to penetrate India thoroughly, but it established a more direct intercourse between the subcontinent and the Greek world, and expanded Greek understanding of India beyond the realm of the territories surrounding the Indus River (Lach 1965, 6-12).

During the *Pax Romana* regions and populations existing beyond the Eastern fringes of India also entered the intellectual landscape of the inhabitants of the European continent. From the first century BC up to the third century AD, thanks to political stability, to the relative safety of the terrestrial and naval routes that connected Rome to Asia (guaranteed by a more severe control over brigandage and piracy), and to the reduction of the fiscal impositions affecting commerce within the territories controlled by Rome, not only the connections established by Alexander with the Indian peninsula were maintained and expanded, but a regular commercial intercourse also flourished between the Latin world and the Chinese territories. Trade routes, originating from Antioch and Alexandria of Egypt, headed South, to Peshawar and India, or North, along the Silk Road that led to Tun Huang and China. Travellers from the eastern regions of the Roman Empire, and particularly Syrians and Egyptians, came to travel towards the Chinese regions on a regular basis (Tucci 2005, 18). The driving force in the intercourse was probably the Roman demand for Asiatic luxury goods (and particularly Chinese silk), which made the balance of the trade overtly in favour of the Asiatic counterparts. As Sansom (1965, 18) underlines, in the developing economy of the Roman Empire the levels of consumptions were subjected to a constant rise, and these articles, above all spices and plants, became common in the majority of Roman households. Asian products came therefore to play an important role in the everyday life of the urban Roman population.<sup>2</sup> The exchanges prompted the circulation of knowledge, as well as money. And as a consequence to this intercourse, as early as in the first century AD, a number of Latin writers were able to include mentions and even sketchy descriptions of China in their works.

Pliny was one of the first historians to use the term 'Seres' in reference to the Chinese population. The word, of Iranian origin, had previously been applied to Central Asian populations trading gold from Siberia to Persia. By Augustus' time, it came to be associated with the production of silk and with

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary diplomatic contacts were also, possibly, established. In the second century BC, an envoy of the Han Emperor Wu-ti apparently reached the Eastern fringes of the Roman dominions, paving the way for a number of subsequent missions directed in those areas. The first reported case of a mission originating from the Roman territories and directed to China is instead dated 166 AD, when some travellers reached the Chinese court bearing tributes and declaring themselves to be ambassadors of An Tun (Marcus Aurelius). No definite proof exists, however, that this expedition was sent directly from Rome to the Chinese Court: possibly, in this and other similar cases, the expeditions were privately set up by merchants, hoping to establish new commercial relationships (Sansom 1965, 17).

the Chinese territory. Virgil and Statius, among others, used it with such connotations in their writings (Tucci 2005, 22). Pomponius Mela, the author of the earliest known Latin geographical work,<sup>3</sup> also mentioned the Seres. His work largely relied on earlier Greek sources, without adding much to the existing geographical knowledge of Asia. However, he seemed to be aware of the travel accounts of his contemporaries, reported of the existence of rich lands beyond the realm of eastern India (the imaginary Chryse and Argyre, whose soil he claimed to be of gold and silver) and described the Seres as “a people full of justice and best known for the trade they conduct in absentia, by leaving their goods behind in a remote location” (Romer 1998, 118). Ptolemy of Alexandria (c. 100-175 AD), whose work, as we will see, was most influential to the development of early modern cartography, based his work not only on Greek antecedents, but also on the accounts of the merchants that, from his native city, travelled back and forth along the terrestrial and naval routes that led to Asia. He accounted with remarkable detail (though with many inaccuracies) for the complex geographical divisions of India and South Asia, and mentioned the Seres, placing them “above [i.e., to the north of] the Sinai”, that is, in what he identified as the north-easternmost part of the civilized world (Berggren, Jones 2000, 79). In spite of their wider horizons, however, the Roman sources did not differ from the Greek ones in mingling factual elements and myth.

The impact of these early sources on the general public was probably fairly limited. The merchants, and more generally the inhabitants of the Eastern fringes of the Roman Empire, had to be well aware of the possibilities opened by the commercial routes to Asia. The sources, moreover, testify an awareness of the complexity of the cultures coexisting on the Asian continent from the part of at least the learned section of the Roman population. However, the territories beyond India were still treated as such remote a concept that it is unlikely that they made a lasting impression on the Latin world in its entirety.<sup>4</sup>

After the third century, the Roman control on the routes that connected the European continent to China and India began to waver. With the shift of the Imperial power to Constantinople and the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (as well as the subsequent collapse of the Gupta Empire in India), the sea routes lost their importance in the exchanges, and the land routes gradually gained centrality. At the same time, new political forces (the Axumites first, and later the Arabs) acquired control over the territories that separated Europe and Eastern Asia and began to act as mediators

3 The *De Chorographia*, that appeared in many descendant copies as *De Cosmographia*, and as such would be reissued, both in Italy (with several Venetian editions) and in the rest of Europe, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On Pomponius and his work, see Romer 1998.

4 On the impact of the sources in Europe, see Lach 1965, 6-12.

in their commercial intercourse. As a consequence, throughout the Early Middle Ages, only a limited number of individual travellers crossed the path to the two areas.<sup>5</sup> Just as China was about to enter a great era of expansion and openness under the Tang dynasty, direct relations between the European continent and both India and China were severed. And with the loss of commercial opportunities in Asia and the incumbent Islamic threat, the interest of Latin Christendom progressively focused on the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, the Bible gained increasing relevance as a reference for geographical knowledge. Encyclopaedic works such as the *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) became standard models for literary descriptions of Asia. Greek and Latin literature remained the main source for geographical representations, but the classical myths and notions were filtered and remoulded, incorporated into the writings of the early Christian thinkers and given authority through the Scriptures. The titbits of factual information that the Greek and Latin writers had included in their works became even more diluted in the myths, as no contemporary travel account reached the level of authority necessary to corroborate them.<sup>6</sup> It was only in the Crusades era that the intercourse between Asia and Latin Christendom displayed once again some of its previous dynamism. Travellers from the Christian kingdoms were, for the first time in centuries, brought in significant numbers to the western fringes of Asia. In the era of the so-called late medieval European Commercial Revolution, the possessions they acquired through their military campaigns came to function as commercial outposts, where Asian products were purchased in exchange for Venetian and Byzantine coins.<sup>7</sup>

It's not easy to evaluate how much of an actual knowledge about the lands beyond Persia and Arabia they were able to accumulate through such exchanges. Surely, up to the end of the thirteen century, little information about Asia had been passed on to the rest of the European population. As suggested by Olschki (1957, 39-50), the merchants themselves might have

5 Like Cosmas Indicopleustes, author of the *Christian Topography*, who based his work as much on religious observations as on his travels, that took him to Ceylon. For a critical edition of Cosmas' work, see Lemerie, Wolska-Conus 1968-1973, or the more recent Italian translation Maisano, Wanda Wolska-Conus 1992.

6 For an in-depth account on the Medieval imaginary about the 'East' and its roots in the classical tradition, see Le Goff 1977. A schematic illustration of all the Medieval legends and myths related to Asia and an extensive bibliography on the subject are also included in Boscaro 1988.

7 At an early stage, the volume of the commerce was, however, fairly limited. Up to the thirteenth century, western merchants still dealt with Arab and Jewish intermediaries, and, likely, were not able to afford much more than common products - leather, cereals, fish and metals - from North-Western Asia. Lopez (1976) has written extensively about the European Commercial Revolution and its implications for the commercial relationships between Asia and Europe. Greif 1994 analyses instead its political premises.

had little interest in accumulating knowledge collateral to the trade; or, in spite of the factual and practical knowledge they did collect, they might have consciously aimed at perpetrating the traditional images of Asia, so as to surround the imported products with an allure of exoticism. The newly developed commercial relationships did not therefore immediately add to the objectivity of European literary representations of Asia. Not only the weight of the classical myths was not upstaged, but, by the beginning of the High Middle Ages, a number of more recently popularized legendary traditions also came to dominate the Christian imaginary of Asia.

The most popular of such traditions was probably the one related to the Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great. Tales about his life and deeds – including accounts of his Indian campaign – had begun to circulate in oral and written form in the fourth century BC, to be summed up in the *Anabasis Alexandri* by Arrian (ca. 86-160 AD). While this work soon after fell into oblivion (to be rediscovered much later, by European scholars of the Renaissance period), the conqueror remained at the center of a living popular tradition (Boyle 1974, 217). In literature, this tradition was perpetrated, among other writings, by the *Alexander Romance*, an anonymous work focused on the conqueror's advance in India, presumably composed in the third century AD by some Hellenized Egyptian resident of Alexandria. It was first rendered into Latin in the fourth century (another Latin translation followed in the tenth century), and was subsequently translated into a number of European vernaculars, as well as into Armenian, Pahlavi, Syrian and Arabic (Boyle 1977, 13-27). It became the source of a rich literary and iconographical production both in Europe and in Asia, and perpetrated the myth of Alexander well into the High Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

The Asian, and particularly the Indian imagery born of the *Alexander Romance* was paralleled by the one connected to the legendary tradition of St. Thomas the Apostle. St. Thomas was believed to have set out for the Indian subcontinent directly after the resurrection of Christ, when the Apostles split into different regions of the world for the sake of Evangelization. Sold as a slave to an Indian merchant named Habban, he was taken to an Indian court, where he supposedly converted the king, Gundafor (Gudaphara), to Christianity. According to the legend, he managed to create a consistent Christian community, before a slight to another Indian (or Persian) king, Mazdai, led to his martyrdom. The main source for the medieval tradition on St. Thomas were the *Acta Thomae* (Acts of Thomas), a Syrian work, part of the New Testament apocrypha and presum-

8 For a general overview of the historiographical materials produced on Alexander up to the Middle Ages, see Pearson 1960.

ably composed in the early third century.<sup>9</sup> It was through the subsequent translations of the *Acta* (in Greek, Latin, Armenian and a number of other languages) that the legend gained popularity throughout the Christian world. The figure of St. Thomas was then to be further popularized by the writings of the first missionaries that ventured to China through the newly reopened land routes, so that the tradition lived on well up to the era of the Great Discoveries (Vigneras 1977, 82-90).

This was partly linked to the appeal of the idea that a large Christian community existed somewhere in Asia. European rulers of the Crusades era clung to this notion, in the hope of finding new allies against the Muslims. The same idea was also at the heart of the legendary tradition of Prester John, that acquired popularity in Europe in the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup> The first known testimony about the legend is the one included in the seventh book of Otto of Freising's *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* (chronicle of the two cities), written between 1143 and 1145. The book reported of a hearing granted by Pope Eugene III to the bishop Hugh of Jabala (Syria), in the fall of 1145. The bishop, born in France and loyal to the Roman Church, had set out for Europe in order to seek help against the Saracens (who, starting with the taking of the city of Edessa in 1144, had scored a number of notable victories against the crusaders, under the guidance of the general Imad ad-din Zengi). According to Freising's report, after relating to the Pope about the Syrian situation, the bishop added an account about a 'Presbyter Ioannes', a Nestorian priest king living somewhere East of Persia and Armenia; the king, who had posed a significant threat to the Persian army, had apparently been trying to reach Jerusalem, in order to bring help to the members of the Christian Church stationed there, but had been unable to cross the river Tigris with his army.<sup>11</sup> The legend gained remarkable popularity after the year 1165,

9 For a detailed account of the legend as narrated in the *Acta*, see Medlycott 1905. While the Indian Christians tend to identify themselves, still, as the 'St. Thomas Christians', no definite historical proof exists that the voyage of St. Thomas ever happened in the first place (even if the actual existence of a king Gudaphara in India, in the first half of the first century AD, has been substantiated by archaeological evidence); even more doubtful are the long-term effects of the Apostle's influence on the diffusion of the Christian religion in India (Brown 1982, 43-64).

10 For the connections between the St. Thomas tradition and the legend of Prester John, see Robert Silverberg (1972, 27-48).

11 Nowell (1953) and De Rachewiltz (1996) report of the many possible origins of the legend. Prester John has been associated by a number of scholars with Yeh-lü Ta-shih, a Mongolian conqueror who, in 1141, won a renowned victory against the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar at Qatwan, near Samarkand, exerting a strong impression on Latin Christendom. The (often oversized) reports of the achievements of the Nestorians in Asia may have prompted the belief that the conqueror adhered to the Christian faith. Others identify him with the Georgian commander Ivané Orbelian (who obtained a number of victories against the Turkish army between 1123 and 1124) or with the monarch of Ethiopia - a country that had been introduced to Christianity ever since

when the Byzantine emperor, Manuel Comnenus, forwarded to Frederick Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor, a letter supposedly composed by the legendary priest, who described himself as the ruler of 'India' (a term which could mean anywhere between actual India and the farthest East, or Africa). It subsequently took root both in Western and Eastern European kingdoms, and its influences lived on for more than five centuries, well after the reopening of the sea routes to Asia (Silverberg 1972, 11-16).

In cartography, as well as in literature, scholars of the Middle Ages assumed map models found in the Hellenistic and Roman traditions, modifying them in accord to the changing emphases in thought. World maps or *Mappaemundi*, in particular, developed into a number of defined graphical structures, according to their historical origins: Roman cartography, and particularly Sallust's *De Bello Jurgurthino*, inspired the so-called tripartite maps, which represented the inhabited world as a disk, with Asia on top, Europe in the lower left quarter and Africa in the lower right quarter; Erathostenes and the Greek *climata* theory were instead the root for zonal maps, that divided the world into five climatic zones following the parallels of latitude; a later source, a lost eight century map included in the *Commentary of the Apocalypse of St. John* by Beatus of Liebana (who stressed the idea that the Apostles had to travel in all parts of the world in order to spread the Christian truth) is believed to be the origin of quadripartite maps, which represented the world in the same fashion as the tripartite form, with the addition of a fourth part, identified with the Antipodes.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of graphical differences, however, maps of all typologies came to be structured more as an allegorical narrative rather than as a spatial description of the current world. As they were given meaning through biblical sources, the *spiritual* picture of Christianity was bound to prevail, in their representations, over the reality of geographical information (Woodward 1985, 515). As underlined by Harley and Woodward (1987, 288-94), the lack of accuracy in the *mappaemundi* did not necessarily imply a lack of current geographical knowledge from the part of compilers. Their format and the lack of factual information may very well have been, as in the case of literature, deliberate. Medieval maps served aims established by custom, more than determined by utility. *Mappaemundi*, in particular, formed a well-defined cartographical typology, that very rarely showed contact with other cartographical genres of more practical use (such as celestial maps, regional or local maps, and, above all, portolan charts - which showed, indeed, a faster evolution, but

the fourth century and, in spite of being later isolated from Europe by the Arab conquests, was by the twelfth century still rumored to host a Christian stronghold. Others suggest instead that Prester John may have been an allegorical creation altogether: the image of an utopian king, originally born to inspire the European public, which ended up being taken too literally.

12 For an overview of the different typologies and their origins, see Woodward 1985. For an accurate periodisation of the *mappaemundi*, see Harley and Woodward (1987, 296-318).

are, on the other hand, very rarely dated before the fourteenth century). *Mappaemundi* did not aim at producing a detailed geographical outline of the regions they represented. Their purpose was instead “philosophical and didactic: a schematic representation of the earth that in the more detailed examples was extended to give a great deal of information about its inhabitants and their relationship to the deity” (Harley, Woodward 1987, 284). The authors could be considered more as illustrators than cartographers in the proper sense of the term, as their maps, which were made to appeal to a learned public, could hardly be separated from the textual descriptions that accompanied them. While it is difficult to ascertain how much of the geographical knowledge of the present and of the past was available to the compilers of the *mappaemundi*, however, what is sure is that their willingness to “point out that the knowledge of information about the earth was of strictly secondary importance to the Christian, whose mind should be on a higher spiritual plane” (Woodward 1985, 515), prevented their work from conveying precise geographical information to their public, above all as far as Asia was concerned.

### 1.1.2 ‘Mythical’ and ‘Factual’ Representations of Asia in the Mongol Era

In the thirteenth century, the way Asia was perceived and represented in European literature underwent a progressive shift. By the beginning of the century, some of the barriers that had previously kept European travellers from personally reaching for Eastern Asia began to crumble. In 1204, the Byzantine Empire, that had previously banned foreigners from travelling beyond Constantinople, was temporarily overthrown, allowing Genoese and Venetian merchants to establish their commercial outposts around the Black Sea. At about the same time, in 1206, the Mongol prince Temüjin, having secured his leadership over the tribes of the eastern Eurasian steppe, assumed the title of Chinggis Qan. This was the start of the expansion of the Mongol Empire, which by the time of the Qan’s death, in 1227, would extend as far east as the Yellow Sea and as far west as the Caspian Sea, incorporating nomadic tribes and settled people alike. By mid-century, the Mongol Empire came to pose a very concrete threat to Christianity. In 1242, after reducing Georgia to tributary status, the Mongol general Baiju led his forces against the Seljuq Sultan of Anatolia. The following year, the Seljuq army was defeated, causing a large number of mercenaries, former subjects of the Khwarazmian dynasty, to flee towards Jerusalem. The city, that was, at the time, under the shaky control of the Latin Kingdom established there during the First Crusade, was sacked and left in ruins. An even more direct menace came at about the same time from the north-western Asian frontier. Between 1240 and 1241, Poland and Hungary were attacked, and



their major cities were raided. The Mongols retired without proceeding to annex the territories they had ravished, nor carrying their military operations further into the European territory, but their pressure on the eastern edges of Christianity was not to relent for decades (Jackson 1991). Internal divisions in the Mongol camp prevented further attacks in the years that immediately followed the raids, but a military campaign was again conducted against Prussia and Poland in 1259. While no other major Mongol strike against Europe followed, further minor raids were conducted against both Poland and Hungary throughout the 1280s and the 1290s.<sup>13</sup>

The reaction of the Christian political and intellectual élite to the expansion of the Mongol Empire was not as ready as might be expected. Early reports about the rising power of the Mongols were relayed to Europe by Syrian Christians and missionaries stationed in Hungary, who had been in touch with the Nestorians of central Asia. Probably as an effect of the long-standing isolation of Latin Christianity, though, the threat was not immediately perceived in its full force. On the contrary, due the weight of legendary traditions such as the narrative of Prester John, the news vaguely fed the hope of an alliance with a strong Asian force against the Muslims in Asia Minor (Lach 1965, 31).

The incumbent invasion of Hungary was what finally gave reality to the Mongol power. At the beginning of 1238, a Hungarian Dominican, brother Julian, came back from a missionary trip to the Volga regions and Russia, relaying second-hand information about the Mongol advance. He also brought back a letter that had been found in the hands of a group of Mongol emissaries, imprisoned by the Grand Duke of Suzdal, Iuri. It was a request of submission, directly addressed by the Gran Qan, Batu, to Bela IV, king of Hungary. Julian reported to the king and to the papal legate at the Hungarian court, relating about the Mongol victories in Asia. A copy of the letter, which had raised considerable worry at court, was forwarded to King Bela's uncle, Patriarch of Aquileia, and from there to several leaders in Europe. The earliest extant manuscript, transcribed in the German Benedictine monastery of Ottobeuren and dated 1241, includes, together with the letter, a copy of a prophecy, clearly associated with their advance, which anticipated dire times for Europe (Lerner 2009, 9-24). Soon after the diffusion of the letter, news of the devastation brought on Poland and Hungary by the Mongol hordes reached Christian leaders. By the time of his election, in 1243, Pope Innocent IV had been in possession of two letters from King Bela relating about the raids, and he had had occasion to talk with various refugees from West Asian lands that had been under attack. The alarming reports he collected prompted him to send no less than three embassies to the Mongols,

13 For a very general overview of the military campaigns directed by the Mongol against Europe, see Jackson (2005, 58-86; 1999, 703-719).

between March and April 1245, not even waiting for the opening of the Council of Lyons, bound to be held the same year (Jackson 2005, 87-97).

In spite of this, in the mid-thirteenth century, European Christian leaders still appreciated the potential role of the Mongols as an Asian ally to Christianity. From a religious point of view, given their known tendency to tolerate and recruit members of different religious sects, the Mongols were often associated with heterodoxy, and were deemed as a more approachable counterpart than the Muslims. The diplomatic and religious missions organized by Christian leaders set out therefore with the aim of accumulating knowledge about the ambitions and the military tactics of the Mongols, but also in the hope of spreading and affirming the Catholic faith amongst them. This intention was coupled with the underlying ambition of negotiating a military cooperation against the Muslims (Jackson 2005, 143).

In 1248, Louis IX, king of France, who had travelled to Cyprus preparing for a campaign against the Saracens of Egypt, was approached by the Mongol general Eljigidei, who started a negotiation for a joint operation against the Muslims. The king's attempt at invasion turned out to be disastrous, but, given this hopeful premises, he nonetheless pursued further diplomatic contacts with the Mongols. In 1249, he dispatched an emissary, André de Longjumeau, as an avowed diplomat to the Mongol capital, Qaraqorum. The Mongols, however, had been motivated by immediate and practical military circumstances, more than by a real correspondence of intents with the Christian leader. The aim of Eljigidei had been, in fact, to direct the crusading army towards Egypt, so as to deflect Europe's military effort from territories that were more immediate military targets for the Mongols, such as Syria (Jackson 1980, 483). This became apparent when André de Longjumeau reached the Mongol capital. His reception at the Mongol court was, in spite of all previous contacts, tepid and he returned to France bearing a request for annual tributes to King Louis IX (Lach 1965, 33). This made Christian leaders more wary in their subsequent interactions with the Il-Qans. By 1260, Pope Alexander IV advocated the need of a crusade against the Mongols, warning the fellow leaders of Europe that their pretenses of friendship towards Christianity were merely part of a military tactic (Jackson 1999, 716). All in all, in the second half of the century, the attitude of Christianity towards Mongol power became far more ambivalent and complex than it had been in the first half, affecting the diplomatic intercourse between the Mongols and Christian leaders.

At a more popular level, and as a direct consequence to this evolving situation, literature often came to depict the advance of the Mongols in an apocalyptic light. The growing power of the Il-Qans was related to the prophecies of the seventh century Syriac work the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, and their military triumph was equated to the coming of the Antichrist (Jackson 2005, 143-6). On the other hand, many missionaries

travelling to the Mongol Empire compiled reports of their travels – and often proved to be keen observers. Religious missions, which were carried on well into the fourteenth century, granted therefore, for the first time in centuries, a consistent flow of information from Asia.

The work that inaugurated this new flow of writings was the *Historia Mongalorum*, by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, a Franciscan envoy sent from the Papacy to the Mongols.<sup>14</sup> The scope of his work, compiled upon his return to Lyons in 1247, was still somehow limited, in comparison with later writings. Giovanni only travelled as far as the headquarters of the Grand Qan, near Qaraqorum, and at a time when the influence of different Asian cultures had yet to plant deep roots in the Mongol society. While he was not able to accumulate significant knowledge on the Mongol Empire in its entirety, however, he marked

a transition in medieval literature on Asia, for it is primarily an itinerary and a factual description of what he and his companions saw, heard and surmised. He does not quote earlier writers except for Isidore, or incorporate in his narrative many of the traditional fables about Asia. He heard about Cathay [China], learned that it bordered the sea, and was apparently informed about its language, religion (somewhat mistakenly), and arts. (Lach 1965, 32)

Still, the *Historia Mongalorum*, employs ‘myth’ in a way that is indebted to the previous literary tradition on Asia. In his depiction of China, which he did not visit himself, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine doesn’t refrain from relying on authority and adopts a somewhat idealized approach, that calls back to an utopian imaginary that had gained popularity in the Middle ages. The ‘Kytai’ (Chinese) are described as

pagans who have their own script and a new and old testament and lives of the fathers and hermits and buildings built like churches in which they pray at their own times, and say they have saints. They worship one god, honor Jesus Christ, and believe in eternal life, but they are not baptized. The Kytai honor and revere our scripture, approve of Christians and give them many alms. They seem to be good and humane. (Hildinger 1996, 51)

This narrative recalls both the Greek and Latin tradition and medieval legendary narratives such as that of Prester John and of Alexander. This was not the only myth of classical origin that crept into Giovanni da Pian del Carpine’s writing – descriptions of Cynocephali (Hildinger 1996, 69), and

14 An annotated English translation of the work can be found in Hildinger 1996.

other monstrous creatures were included, albeit relegated to the representation of lands removed from the itinerary actually followed by the writer. On the other hand, Giovanni's descriptions of the Mongols and his considerations on the political and military organization of Mongol power, based on personal observation, opened a whole new perspective on the representation of Asia.

In 1253, Louis IX promoted a second mission to the Mongol capital, headed by the Franciscan William of Rubruck. While André de Longjumeau had travelled for diplomatic purposes, Rubruck was sent with a more strictly missionary purpose. He also appeared to be familiar with Giovanni da Pian del Carpine's work and the report he wrote for King Louis IX about his mission, titled *Itinerarium fratris Willielmi de Rubruquis de ordine fratrum Minorum, Galli, Anno gratia 1253 ad partes Orientales*, was very similar in approach.<sup>15</sup> While Giovanni had gone no further than the Mongol camp, however, William had actually been able to enter the city of Qaraqorum, and was the first European traveller to provide a detailed depiction of the structure of the Mongol capital, as well as of the exteriors and interiors of its buildings. He also included a description of the Qan's palace, that challenged the imaginary of the mythical, golden palaces of the 'East' and, instead, approached the described object through comparison.

The palace resembles a church, with a middle nave and two sides beyond two rows of pillars and three doors on the south side. The tree stands inside, opposite the middle door, and the Chan sits at the northern end, in an elevated position so that he is visible to all. There are two stairways leading up to him, and the man who brings him his cup goes up the one and comes down the other. The space in the middle, between the tree and the stairways that give access to him, is clear: there stands the cup-bearer, and also envoys bringing gifts, while he sits up above like some god. (Jackson, Morgan 1990, 210)

This dialectic relationship between similarity and difference would become recurrent in the representation of the 'Other' (including, as we will see, descriptions of Japan up to the sixteenth century) and, particularly, of the 'religious other'. Rubruck, as can be expected, reserves a special section of his report to the Nestorians of Asia, and to the Christians dwelling in the court of the Qan (Jackson, Morgan 1990, 211-16). He also, however, writes extensively of Buddhism, represented not per se, but through its dialectic relationship with Christianity. Rubruck describes foreign religions in the form of theological debate, a rhetorical device that would become

<sup>15</sup> The account is translated in Jackson and Morgan (1990). An older translation of both Giovanni da Pian del Carpine's account and of William of Rubruck's account (together with a few letters from other missionaries) can be also found in Dawson 1955.

common in Christian literature on Asia. Some of the arguments he includes in the section on Buddhism would recur, almost *verbatim*, in later Jesuit literature on Japan. For example, the way the roots of evil are explained to Buddhists.

“If your God is as you say, why has He made half of things evil?” “That is an error”, I said. “It is not God who created evil. Everything that exists is good”. All the turns were amazed at this statement and recorded it in writing as something erroneous and impossible. Next he broached the question: “Where, then, does evil come from?” “Your question is at fault”, I said: “you ought first to ask what evil is before asking where it comes from”. (Jackson, Morgan 1990, 233-4)

Aside from religion, Rubruck’s report focuses on a wide variety of matters, ranging from diet, to clothing, to funeral practices. He was overall able to immortalize the diversity of Mongol Empire, including descriptions of the Tangut and other Tibetan people that had been annexed to the Mongol Empire during the first decades of its expansion (Jackson, Morgan 1990, 157-8). Like Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Rubruck did not get to travel as far as China, but he was able to identify what his contemporaries knew as ‘Cathay’ with the land of the ‘Seres’ of the classical sources, and to make some perceptive considerations on Chinese writing (Jackson and Morgan 1990, 160-1). In this sense, his work constituted a further step away from the traditional narratives on Asia, and opened a new path that would be followed by subsequent writers.

The first European missionary report of some note to include a first-hand description of China was the one composed by the Franciscan missionary Odoric of Pordenone. Odoric had left Europe sometime between 1316 and 1318, when the roots of a Christian mission had already been planted in China. His voyage brought him through India, Quanzhou, Hangzhou and Yangzhou, and finally to Qanbaliq, where he arrived around 1325. He stayed in the Mongol capital for about three years, before embarking on his return trip. The exact itinerary of his journey back to Europe is not clear, but he seems to have gotten to visit Tibet and some of its peripheral areas.<sup>16</sup> He was back to Italy by 1330, after more than ten years of permanence

**16** The first Christian missionary to reach China was Giovanni da Montecorvino, sent to the Mongols by Pope Nicholas IV in 1289. Father Giovanni settled in the new Mongol Capital, Qanbaliq, located in the site of modern Beijing. There, favorably received by the Mongol authorities, he founded a Franciscan mission. Despite the opposition often met by the father from local Nestorians, the Christian community grew steadily and by the beginning of the fourteenth century, it was big enough to require the aid of further missionaries, causing another Franciscan, Arnold of Cologne, to be dispatched to Qabaliq. In 1313, three Franciscan bishops sent by Pope Clement V, Gerard Albuini, Peregrinus de Castello and Andrea da Perugia, consecrated Giovanni as first archbishop of Qanbaliq. Several missionaries were

in Asia. His travel report, related to a fellow Franciscan at St. Anthony's Convent (Padua) and commonly known as *Itinerarium de mirabilibus orientalium Tartarorum* (or, more simply, *Itinerarium*),<sup>17</sup> is probably the richest among the European missionary accounts compiled during the Mongol era.

The work was influenced by both the medieval traditional narratives on Asia and the new path opened by previous land travellers. Odoric mentions, in reference to his return trip, having passed through the 'Land of Prester John', possibly speaking of modern inner Mongolia, but he also specifies that it was different from the way it had been depicted in previous sources (Liščák 2011a, 4).<sup>18</sup> Odoric includes first-hand descriptions of the Malabar coast, of Java, Sumatra, Champa, and of all the major Chinese cities he visited on his way to Qanbaliq. He focuses mostly on the religious landscape of the localities he visited, taking note, above all, of the presence of Christians and Muslims, but includes also comments on customs and society, and on some geographical aspects – such as the types of cultivations and the species of animals he encountered.<sup>19</sup> Curiously, his narrative doesn't reserve much space to the missionary efforts of his fellow Franciscans in Qanbaliq, except by mentioning the number of conversions, above all among the authorities. He seems to have frequented the Qan's court regularly – a sign that the Franciscans were welcome there – and he describes the court in remarkable detail.<sup>20</sup>

The impact on the contemporary European readership of the 'factual' narratives included in the missionary reports (and 'diluted' in the more traditional narratives they included) is not easy to estimate. Popular traditions with a deeply rooted background, such as the legend of Prester John or the narrative of Alexander, as well as the classical and biblical myths, still retained much of their influence, acting as a counterbalance to the new images of Asia. Works such as the *Image du monde* by Gautier de Metz, or the *Trésor* by Brunetto Latini, published as late as, respectively, 1245-47 and 1260, were still very much indebted to Latin writers and the majority of the fourteenth century authors who included images of Asia in their

to join this first group in Qanbaliq in the following years, including Odoric of Pordenone himself. For further detail on the context of the mission and its itinerary, see Liščák 2011a.

17 The original manuscript being lost, there is no certainty about the original title. The report is also known as *Descriptio orientalium partium* or as *Relatione*. Other recurring titles include *Diversæ Historiæ*, *De ritibus hominum et condicionibus huius mundi*, *De mirabilibus orientalium Tartarorum* and *De (rebus) mirabilibus* (Liščák 2011b, 69-71).

18 As Lach (1965, 41) underlines, Odoric was the last medieval traveler to openly place the land of Prester John in Asia.

19 The factuality of the information included in the *Itinerarium* is discussed in Liščák (2011a, 4-9).

20 An English translation of Odoric of Pordenone's account was realized in 1866 by Sir Henry Yule and can be found, with an introduction by Paolo Chiesa, in Yule 2002.

works largely drew from them, as well as directly from the classics. Some writers, like Dante, did include mention of the Tartars in their works, but did so without challenging in any substantial way the traditional images of Asia (Lach 1965, 74-80).

The *Historia Mongalorum* circulated for some time as a separated work, in manuscript form, mainly in Giovanni da Pian del Carpine's circle. A few years after its composition, between 1256 and 1259, it was, moreover, included into a well known encyclopaedic work of the time – the *Speculum Historiae*, by Vincent de Beauvais, a Latin world history in thirty-one books, based on a combination of secular and religious sources. William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium* was similarly included as a source in Roger Bacon's natural science treaty, the *Opus Maius*. The work did not reach, however, a remarkable level of popularity, until much later, in 1733, when its first proper edition was published (Olschki 1957, 58). Odoric of Pordenone's *Itinerarium* was easily the most widely read work out of the missionary reports, as testified by the consistent number of manuscripts – over one hundred and thirty – that have survived up to our time. Moreover, even though a vast majority of them are in Latin, a few translations into European Vernaculars were produced, a sign, as we will see in relation to sixteenth-century works on Japan, that their readership might not have been limited to the learned clerical and university circles.<sup>21</sup> Both the *Speculum Historiae* (and, consequently, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine's account) and Odoric of Pordenone's *Itinerarium* became part of the source materials used for the compilation of the *Book of Sir John Mandeville*,<sup>22</sup> one of the most widely read pieces of travel literature of the late Middle Ages. The work was presumably composed between 1356 and 1357,<sup>23</sup> in Anglo-Norman French. It was subsequently translated into eight different vernacular languages and in Latin, and widely circulated throughout Europe. More than three hundred manuscript copies of it, in different versions, remain to this

21 Twenty-four manuscripts were produced in Italian, nine in French and seven in German throughout the fourteenth century, and one Spanish manuscript was created in the fifteenth century. (Liščák 2011b, 65-6)

22 This was the common medieval designation of the work often referred to in modern editions as the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* – on the basis of a printed edition dated 1586. On Mandeville's work and the way it represented the 'East', see Higgins 1997. On its circulation and reception, see Tzanaki 2003.

23 John de Mandeville, a knight native of St. Albans, England, supposedly composed the book on the basis of his own travels through Asia and Africa. While part of the narration could be ascribed to personal experience, however, a huge section of the work is actually acquired by other popular travel narratives of the time. The main sources used for the work, aside from Odoric of Pordenone and Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, are listed by Higgins (1997, 9-10). Even the author's identity, as no contemporary mention exists of a John Mandeville, has been the object of a long scholarly debate, summed up by Tzanaki (2003, 2-3).

day (Higgins 1997, 8). Even the *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, however, can hardly be defined 'popular' in the modern sense of the term. The public of the manuscripts, a highly costly and elite media in comparison to some of the later categories of printed books, was likely to consist in members of the aristocracy – even though they may have not been, above all in the case of knights, familiar with Latin (Tzanaki 2003, 4-5). Some of the books would, on the other hand, stand the test of time, and eventually undergo the transition from manuscript to print, in an era when literature was becoming growingly accessible also to the lower strata of the population. The first printed copies of Odoric of Pordenone's *Itinerarium*, for instance, would appear at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and at least six different editions would be produced by 1600 (Liščák 2011b, 70). Even more numerous would be the editions of the *Book of Sir John Mandeville* – first printed in 1515, and reproduced for at least seventy-two times before the end of the century (Tzanaki 2003, 1).

Diplomats and missionaries were not the only participants in the new flow of exchanges between Asia and Europe. By 1279, when they defeated the Southern Sung Dynasty, the Mongols had managed to unify virtually the entirety of the Asian continent under their dominance, and even with the internal conflict that derived from the division of the Empire into a confederation of rival Qanates, by 1261-62 the new order granted an overall stable and peaceful political asset to Asia. This made it relatively safe to travel, and opened a huge operation field for trade – one where the role of the intermediaries that had traditionally conducted the commercial exchanges under the Muslims dominance became inconsequential. The merchants, particularly the Italians, that had been operating in the outposts acquired during the Crusades era and around the Black Sea, were quick in taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the new Asian order. By the mid-thirteenth century, the most resourceful of them had already started to deal with luxury goods – textiles, gems and gold, mainly from Persia, India and Central Asia – purchased not merely in response to the European demand, but also, and mostly, as a way to appeal to the Asian market. The Qan princes proved to be avid purchasers of this kind of products, as the gold and the textiles were at that point (as an effect of both commerce and the tribute system) one of the bases of their economical system. The direct involvement of the Qans in the exchanges raised the stakes for the European commercial enterprise, further promoting its infiltration eastwards.<sup>24</sup>

While the role of the Polo brothers as pioneering figures in this new

24 For an in depth analysis of the role played by the Mongols in the trans-Eurasian exchanges (with a particular emphasis on the role of the textiles), see Lopez 1976 and Allsen 2002.



trade is widely recognized,<sup>25</sup> drawing a definite timeline of its development is not easy. Merchants mostly kept the details about their commercial transactions and about the routes they covered under extreme reserve. The majority of the information available about them is derived from writings not directly concerned with the trade (such as the above mentioned missionaries' reports), that, while registering the presence of the European merchants, do not include much more than sparse and obscure information about their activities. Given this lack of reports and commercial documents, it cannot be said, all in all, that the experiences accumulated by the merchants operating in East Asia came to influence the late Medieval European imaginary of Asia in a significant way.<sup>26</sup>

A few exceptions can, however, be mentioned. Sometime between 1310 and 1340, the Florentine professional merchant Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, agent of the Bardi company, wrote *La pratica della mercatura*, a work meant as a sort of handbook for commerce. The book included the description of one of the routes followed by the European travelers to China – the one from Crimea to Qanbaliq, that had once been covered also by the Polo brothers. Pegolotti himself had never travelled to China, but he had collected reports from a number of other merchants, possibly fellow Florentine citizens, as by that time at least the Florentine Frescobaldi company had reportedly begun to import silk from China (Lopez 1943, 166). He was therefore able to provide advice about the journey and about the equipment that was necessary to face it, and also to include practical information on how to conduct the transactions – such as lists of the spices commonly sold in Europe that could be purchased in Asia, lists of the products that could more easily be placed in Asia, and the current Chinese prices for silk, given in Genoese currency.<sup>27</sup> Pegolotti's book was, in this sense, very practical in scope. Being directed essentially to merchants, it was not meant to exert an impact on the more generic European readership.

25 On the role of Niccolò and Maffeo Polo in the expansion of the Italian trade in Asia, see Olschki 1957, 72-93.

26 In any probability, as the result of a deliberate choice, at least, in the case of the Genoese merchants. See in this regard Lopez 1943.

27 Pegolotti actually put a lot of stress on silk, a sign of how important a good it had become for Europe, whose own production was not, apparently, enough to meet the demand (Lach 1965, 45-6).

## 1.2 Marco Polo and ‘Cipangu’

Very different in impact was another, most notable merchant source on Asia: *Il Milione*,<sup>28</sup> Marco Polo’s account of his family’s and his own experience as merchant, diplomat and administrator in the Mongol Empire. The work was not meant for a popular audience; on the contrary, it catered openly to a noble audience, as was common for the romance literature of the time (Olschki 1957, 47). It was, nonetheless, widely circulated even before the author’s death, in 1324, in many different versions and translations, and given to print by 1477.<sup>29</sup> Its popularity is testified not only by the huge number – around a hundred and fifty – of manuscript copies of the work that have survived up to our days, but also by chroniclers, such as Ramusio, that reported of its diffusion, and by the number of direct and indirect references to the work included in other pieces of travel literature composed until the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>30</sup>

Marco left Europe in 1271, in the company of his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo, at about the time when the merchants’ “rush to the Farther East” (as defined by Lopez 1943, 164) was gaining full force. The two brothers had already travelled from their outpost in Crimea to China in 1260, and had been received, in Qanbaliq, by the Grand Qan, Qubilay, himself. The Qan had entrusted them with a request for the Pope, to send

28 The choice to refer to Marco Polo’s work with the title *Il Milione*, as opposed to what is presumed to be the original title of the work, the *Divissament du monde* (which put more emphasis on the geographic nature of the work rather than on its nature as a travel narrative), is linked to the focus the present work puts on the editorial history of the work in the sixteenth century. As Caputo (2016, 14) underlines, this title became in fact conventional in the Italian editorial tradition of the sixteenth century, as the consequence of a nickname commonly associated with the Polo’s family. It should be noted, however, that work would also become known, throughout Europe, as *The travels of Marco Polo* and other alternative titles such *The voyages of Marco Polo* and the more literal translation of the original title *The description of the world*. The most used and renown English version of Marco Polo’s work is Cordier 1920, based on the third, annotated edition of the Henry Yule’s translation of the work, completed in 1903 by Henri Cordier.

29 It was thereafter reproduced in various version until the first attempt to collate the different manuscripts was made by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, in his collection of travel literature, using a 1532 Latin edition by Francesco Pipino, integrated with four different manuscripts. See in this regard Caputo 2016, 94-5.

30 Summed up in Lach 1965, 35-9. Caputo (2016, 6) underlines, on the other hand, how the popularity of the book has sometimes been overstated, as, due to its growing lack of practical utility after the new stop in the relationships between China and Europe, it lost some of its impact (above all after the publication of the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*). The editorial history of Marco Polo’s work (both in manuscript and in printed form) is discussed in Iwamura 1949. For a thorough analysis of the contents of Marco Polo’s work in relation to the wider context of Europe’s ‘discovery’ of East Asia, see instead Olschki 1957 and Larner 1999. An in-depth discussion of the way Marco Polo’s work influenced European descriptions of Japan will be included in the following chapter.

learned European men to the Mongol capital in order to instruct the court about European religion, politics and military tactics. The Polo brothers, complying with Qubilay's request, had travelled back to Europe and sought audience with the newly elected Pope in Rome, managing to bring back with them, together with Marco, two Dominican Friars. The two missionaries actually chose to stop and turn back halfway on the voyage to Qanbaliq, leaving the Polos empty-handed. Nonetheless, when they arrived back in the Mongol capital, they were received again by the Qan.

Both the two brothers and Marco were welcomed into the Qan's services, as it was customary for the Mongols to employ strangers, as well as men from the populations under their dominance (Arabs, Turks, Persians, Qidan, Nüzhen), into their administration, so as to diversify its ranks. It was precisely Marco Polo's role as a member of the Mongol administration – a role that he retained for seventeen years – that allowed him to travel throughout China, visiting even some of its most peripheral regions, and collecting the knowledge and the experiences that he included into his work. This was composed a few years after his return to Venice, between 1298 and 1299, in the prisons of Genoa, where Marco had ended up after having being captured during a battle between Genoa and Venice. It was dictated to a fellow prisoner, Rustichello da Pisa, who, as an author of romances, impressed some of the stylistic peculiarities of the genre on the narration, such as the use of the Vernacular (French, intermixed with some Italianisms).<sup>31</sup>

*Il Milione* was easily the richest of the narratives on Asia produced in the thirteenth century. Contrary to many contemporary religious travellers, Marco Polo did not dwell on the variety of the religious creeds inside the Mongol Empire (even though he described, on occasion, the Buddhist practices he had occasion to witness). He proved however to be a keen observer when it came to portraying the complexity of the political and administrative system of the Empire, its internal power structure, its infrastructures and means of communications, the architecture of its cities, and also – an uncommon element, still, for the travel narratives of the thirteenth century, but befitting Marco Polo's role as administrator – its natural resources. *Il Milione* was peculiar also in that it underlined the cultural variety and complexity of East Asia in a more clear-cut way than what the earlier travel relations had done, and in that it introduced European readers, for the first time, to some peripheral regions previously unknown. The book shed some light on the cultural divide between what some previous writers already had identified as 'Cathay' (that is, Northern China), and Southern China ('Mangi', according to the Mongol terminology). Moreover, it tentatively traced the geography of the Southern Asian

31 For further reference on Marco Polo's journey, see Bergreen 2007.

regions and seas.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the structure of his account can be said to fit both in the realm of travel relations and in that of geographical works, an approach that, as Padrón (2002, 45) underlines,<sup>33</sup> was close to that of many much later – mostly, early modern – travel narratives, on which the work itself exerted a fundamental influence.

*Il milione* was also the first European book to ever make a recognizable reference to Japan. Marco Polo introduced it in the second chapter of his third book, under the name ‘Cyampagu’ – possibly a rendition of the Chinese denomination *Jih-pen-kuo* (Boxer 1951, 14).<sup>34</sup> Marco, himself, had not visited the archipelago, and the information he included in his account was collected during his voyages to the easternmost parts of the Chinese continent and during his stay at the Mongol court (where the invasions of the archipelago, attempted respectively in 1274 and 1281, were being planned). And while some of the narrative strategies he adopted, such as the use of an impersonal narrator, were specifically meant to reinforce the illusion of objectivity (Caputo 2016, 16), the information was in many respects inaccurate: he greatly overestimated Japan’s distance from China, misjudged the position of the archipelago, and unrealistically stressed its commercial isolation at a time when Japan had developed a rich history of maritime relationships with Eastern Asia (Oliveira e Costa 2007, 43).

His account, moreover, projected on Japan some of the myths that it had contributed to dispel in reference to China. His description of the palace of the Emperor as entirely roofed and decorated in gold was a call back to the fabulous Eastern palaces of the literary tradition on Asia: China had been brought into the realm of the ‘real’, and therefore Japan had to become the new ‘golden land’. As far as the Japanese were concerned, his description fixed some narrative tropes that, as we will see, would become common, recontextualised, in later Jesuit literature. The Japanese were presented in way that made them ‘appealing’ to the European public, both in an aesthetic and in a moral sense: they were ‘white’ – a term that,

**32** Marco Polo’s work was, actually, only partly an exception to the merchant’s tendency to reserve. As Olschki (1957, 76-7) underlines, the account carefully avoided making reference to the commercial activities of the Polo family in Asia. Even the first encounter between Berke Qan and the Polo brothers, who had not at the time been invested with any official capacity, and who conducted with him what at all effects was a commercial transaction, was conveniently veiled under the pretense of an exchange of courtesies amongst equals.

**33** In tracing the purpose of Marco Polo’s work and its relationship with the literary genres of the time, Padrón defines it as “geography organized as a journey” (2002, 45), suggesting its similarity with the cartographical genre of the itinerary map. He underlines, on the contrary, its fundamental difference from maps of the Renaissance period, which put the readers in the position of a detached observer – while Marco Polo’s narrative treated them as travelers, moving through the routes he describes.

**34** The name recurs more frequently, in subsequent literature connected to Polo, as ‘Cipangu’, and in a number of other variants such as ‘Cypangu’ and ‘Zipangu’ (Caputo 2016, 16-17).

as we will see in the analysis of the Jesuit sources, was yet to be charged with the racial connotations of modern times; and they were obedient to 'reason' a category of Thomist derivation that, again, we will analyse for its application to the construction of a Jesuit cosmography in the second half of the sixteenth century. In a more general sense, as Caputo (2016, 21-9) underlines, Polo's narration of Japan is 'mythical' in the sense that Japan, as an object of description, is downgraded from ultimate meaning to instrument in the political and moral agenda of the writer.<sup>35</sup> While the modalities of representation would change, this would prove true also of later 'first-hand' accounts of Japan.

In spite of its popularity, the veracity of Marco Polo's account was questioned by many contemporary and later scholars. The work, also given its format and the persistence in it of some of the 'mythical' narratives of the classical tradition, was perceived by many as a romance more than as an objective geographical reference. It is not by chance that the geographical information included in the book would not be incorporated in world maps until late in the fourteenth century, with the Catalan Atlas of 1375.<sup>36</sup>

### 1.3 The Cartographical 'Reality' of Asia and Japan in the fifteenth century

Cartographical and geographical works were actually very late altogether, in accepting the influence of the travel narratives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

It was in the fourteenth century that most of the portolan charts that have survived to our day were produced, by the sailors travelling along the Mediterranean coasts and on the Black Sea. Contrary to the *Mappaemundi*, the portolan charts were very practical in scope, laid out for everyday use by sailors themselves. Objectivity was a requirement for them, and, in this sense, they contributed in a significant way to laying the foundation for the later developments of cartography as a science. Given the very different premises on which their construction was based, however, *Mappaemundi* did not immediately prove prone to receive their influence. The above mentioned Atlas of 1375 and some other Catalan and Majorcan maps of the late fourteenth century did include information derived from the charts, as well as from the factual travel narratives of Marco Polo and

35 "Viene declassato da significato ultimo della comunicazione a essenziale strumento della stessa a servizio dell'agenda morale e politica delle volontà individuali che se ne appropriarono mediante l'atto della scrittura". (Caputo 2016, 24)

36 Some data from Marco Polo's account were, however, included in an earlier portolan chart, the Laurentian portolan, dated 1351 (Lach 1965, 66-7).

Odoric of Pordenone. Thanks, above all, to the contributions of the Jewish merchants, who were able to travel with relative freedom through the lands governed by the Muslims, they were able to include strikingly objective information on Northern Africa, even though they still failed at conveying a convincing picture of the Southern African coasts or of the asset of the Indian Ocean (which was considered a landlocked sea throughout the Middle Ages).<sup>37</sup> These maps were, however, more an exception than a rule. It would be mostly in the so-called era of 'Great Discoveries' that the use of empirical data in map making would become more common even in the case of world maps.

On the other hand, the fifteenth century would significantly shift cartographical representation towards factuality. By the mid-fourteenth century, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty started to succumb, first to the pressure of rebellions and political struggles, and then to the Ming Dynasty, that progressively extended its control over China, conquering the last resistance in 1388. The fall of the Mongols was paralleled by a new rise of the Muslim power in West Asia, which would culminate, in the following century, with the Turkish conquest of Constantinople of 1453. This was coupled with Europe's own economic struggles and internal conflict – the Hundred Years' war erupted in 1337 – that caused most European leaders to project their attention and efforts inwards. All these factors contributed to a decline in the commercial land routes across the Asian continent. It is possible that a number of travellers nonetheless ventured to China, during the fifteenth century, but no record exists of such voyages. Merchants such as the Venetian Niccolò de' Conti did sporadically reach India via land, and left accounts of their travels. These were, however, scattered reports, and generally meant for limited audiences. In an era when the Catalan merchants were growingly challenging the Italian primacy in commerce, the urge for reserve was felt even more strongly than before (Olschki 1957, 59-65).

On the other hand, in the second decade of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese embarked on the path that would lead to the construction of their seaborne empire. The Portuguese Crown promoted a series of voyages of exploration, both by land and by sea, along the Atlantic coast of Africa, which would culminate in Vasco da Gama's achievements of the late 1490s and in the opening of the commercial sea routes linking Europe and Asia.<sup>38</sup> The Portuguese Crown focused, at first, mostly on the

37 On the issue of *mappaemundi* and realism, see Woodward (1985, 512-15).

38 The Portuguese Crown was not actually the only political entity to dispatch travellers to Asia during the fifteenth century. The Venetian Seignory, in particular, dispatched several embassies towards Persia, seeking an alliance against the Turks after the capture of Constantinople – and some of the ambassadors were able also to report news, albeit vague, of Eastern Asia (Lach 1965, 64). The Portuguese enterprise was, however, the most notable. The impulse behind it has often been identified with the country's own naval history

North-West African coast, where the Portuguese shared a long history of trade relationships and hostilities with the Muslims. In 1415, Portugal conquered the Moorish Island of Ceuta, on the Straits of Gibraltar, gaining control over a strategic African harbour and a fundamental Muslim centre for commerce. The conquest was partly meant to provide corsairs with a better field of action against the Muslim trade, at the same time shielding Portugal from possible invasions by the Muslims, and granting protection from naval raids both to the Italian merchants that travelled towards Northern Europe and to the Portuguese that traded in the Mediterranean Sea. The main ambition of the Crown was however to obtain at least partial control on the African gold trade, that originated from the Upper Niger and Senegal rivers and crossed the Sahara by means of camel caravans. In the end, however, the benefits of the conquest did not live up to the Crown's expectations. Holding the city against the Muslims put a considerable strain on the Portuguese finances, and the effort to extend Portuguese power on inland Africa brought no appreciable result in return. Nor did the attempt to control the commercial routes, as the Muslim moved their trade from Ceuta to other centres. This was what prompted the Portuguese crown to seek an alternative way to extend its control on the African commerce, by advancing along the Atlantic coast of the continent. Between 1418 and 1425, the Portuguese proceeded to occupy the previously uninhabited Madeira Islands, and by 1419 they had begun to explore the African coast. The progress was slow at first - the then known southern limit of the Atlantic Ocean, around Cape Bojador, was only crossed in 1434, after numerous failed attempts. However, the first, rocky years of exploration were functional to the accumulation of experience in the field of nautical science. By the fourth decade of the fifteenth century, the advance was progressing at a steady pace, and when Henry of Portugal, who had been the first promoter of the explorations, died, in 1460, Portugal was already concessionary of all the commerce along the West African coast, and had engaged in slave trade along the Sahara littoral, as a way to finance further explorations. The Portuguese

and richness in expert sailors. As Boxer (1969, 13-14) underlines, however, the importance of the sea for Portugal, as opposed to other European nations, has often been overstated. The country had few natural harbours and, even though the sea played an important role in its history, Portugal was not, by the beginning of the fifteenth century, a pre-eminently maritime nation. Its population was mostly composed by peasants, with a general shortage of deep-sea sailors and a definite prominence of agricultural activities over seagoing occupations. Probably, strategic and economic factors were at stake. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Portugal was relatively affluent, but overall backwards in comparison to the richest core of western Europe. The country was, on the other hand, favoured by peace, as opposed to neighbouring countries, preoccupied with foreign and civil wars. Open on one side on the vast operational field of the Atlantic Ocean, and on the other on the Mediterranean, with its flourishing trade, Portugal was therefore prompted to find in the sea those opportunities that were not available in its mountainous hinterland.

had also managed to divert to the coast part of the gold trade along the Saharan land routes – as they would continue to do, in growing proportions, throughout the second half of the century.<sup>39</sup>

The expansion was motivated, in this sense, by the strategic and economic benefits of the explorations. On the other hand, the crusading ardour against the Muslims and the quest for Prester John were also still, undoubtedly, a factor. The imaginary location of the realm of Prester John was, in fact, extremely ambiguous. Up to the thirteenth century, the kingdom had mostly been vaguely placed somewhere between Central or Eastern Asia. As an effect of the European encounter with ‘Cathay’, however, its position had progressively shifted, in European writings, to Eastern Africa, where a Christian stronghold had been believed to exist for centuries, in Ethiopia. Ever since 1402, a number of Ethiopian Coptic emissaries reached Europe, further reinforcing this belief. As the Portuguese advance progressed in the Asian Seas, however, the location of the kingdom might have verged again on being identified, generically, with India, or more generically Asia, thus motivating the further eastern penetration of the Portuguese naval effort.<sup>40</sup> As Boxer (1969, 20-4) underlines, the mixed nature of the motivations behind the Portuguese enterprise emerges very clearly in the Papal Bulls (the *Dum Diversas*, promulgated in 1452, the *Romanus Pontifex*, dated 1455, and the *Inter Caetera*, of 1456) that granted official support by the Roman Church to the Portuguese advance. The *Romanus Pontifex*, in particular, insisted on Prince Henry of Portugal’s ambition to make contact with those in the ‘Indies’ (used, in this case, in its general meaning) who honoured the name of Christ.

The search for the kingdom of Prester John, mixed with the ambition to participate in the Asian spice trade, worked as a central motive in particular for João II of Portugal, who became king in 1477, and who was the chief promoter of the quest for an alternative route to Asia via Africa. By 1485 or 1486, notice was reported to Europe of the existence of an African king named Ogané, who held “as high a position among the African people as the pope did among the Christians” (Diffie, Winius 1977, 159), and who was identified with Prester John. This prompted a new round of voyages, starting with the attempt to penetrate the African inland, by Alfonso de Paiva and Pero de Covilhã. The sea expedition guided by commander Bartolomeu Dias also left Portugal, in the hope of circumnavigating the African continent. Dias did round the Cape of Good Hope at the beginning of 1488 and was able to report back to Portugal, where he returned by December of the same year, that the ‘Indies’ could effectively be reached by sea. Covilhã and

39 On the capture of Ceuta, and for in-depth account of the Portuguese advance along the African Coast up to the 1480s, see Diffie, Winius (1977, 46-153).

40 On Prester John’s ‘translocation’ from Asia to Africa, see Brewer 2015, 214-27.



Dias' voyages were shortly followed by Christopher Columbus' enterprise. The explorer came back to Europe by 1493, having unknowingly paved the way to previously uncharted territories, but with the conviction of having discovered a group of islands on the fringes of Eastern Asia, among which, according to contemporary chronicles, Marco Polo's Cipangu was assumed to be included (Diffie, Winius 1977, 166). As Scammell (2000) underlines, the outcome and the premises of Columbus' enterprise set it apart from the other explorations by his contemporaries. While the voyages of Dias, Covilhã, and of their predecessors had been sponsored by the Portuguese Crown, as parts of an almost one-century-long exploration effort, Columbus, a man of obscure birth who had been refused the Portuguese patronage, had sailed mostly out of his own initiative, albeit at Spanish service. Yet, his expedition was inspired by very similar motives. On one side, the aspiration to find a sea route to Asia, in order to gain easier access to territories that were expected to enshrine great wealth and exciting economical opportunities. On the other, the religious impulse - the desire of extending the bounds of Christendom and of freeing West Asia from the Muslims. Columbus' expedition had the effect to ignite the rivalry between Portugal and Castile. The contention was actually the culmination of a contrast that had been lurking in the background of Portuguese explorations for the greatest part of the century, and that was solved in June 1494, with the Treaty of Tordesillas, that established a circular line of division, running from pole to pole 370 leagues west of Cape Verde Islands, and splitting the known world into two spheres of influence.<sup>41</sup> All territories east of the line were to pertain to Portugal, while the western sphere was assigned to Castile, that, given the still uncertain geographical outline of the world, presumably hoped to extend its influence on Eastern Asia and the land of 'Cipangu' - that was believed to have been reached by Columbus - and on its gold. The Treaty of Tordesillas officially sanctioned the Portuguese exploration of Asia. This encouraged João successor, Manuel I, in pursuing the search for the spice trade and for the realm of Prester John. It was under his patronage that Vasco da Gama sailed in July 1497, following the route around the southern tip of Africa and into the Indian Ocean that had been opened by Dias, and bearing letters addressed to Prester John and to the Raja of Calicut. His return, in 1499, marked the start of the full-fledged European exploration of the Asian seas.

In spite of their long-lasting effects on Europe's relationship with Asia, little to no information about the fifteenth century explorations of the Atlantic African coast and of the African and Western Asian inland was made available to the contemporary European public. Given the economic

41 The full text and translation of the Treaty, as well as a related bibliography, are available in Davenport 2012, 84-100.

and strategic motivations behind the expeditions, the Portuguese Crown was probably motivated to keep the discoveries and the achievements of the travellers it sponsored under strict reserve, even in the case of those voyages that could potentially hold the highest resonance.<sup>42</sup> There is, for example, no contemporary full-fledged report of Dias' enterprise - which would only be accounted for, and still in a rather rough and incomplete way, by João de Barros, in the following century. In the case of Covilhã's voyage, there is not even any certainty that a detailed account ever came in possession of the Portuguese Crown. While a report was dispatched by Covilhã to king João, in fact, no definite proof exists that it ever reached its destination.<sup>43</sup>

Given such reserve, and the shortage of people travelling on the land routes to Asia, all in all the fifteenth century did not add in a significant way to the amount or the quality of the factual knowledge on Asia available either to the learned or to the general contemporary European population. Moreover, the knowledge accumulated by European diplomats, missionaries and merchants in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries partly fell into oblivion, due to the lack of further contacts.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, however, the fifteenth century marked a fundamental development in the science of cartography. Old-styled *mappaemundi* were still being produced as late as in the 1470s - a 1472 edition of Isidore de Seville's *Etymologiae* was, for example, accompanied by a map representing the world in tripartite form, one of the later examples of *mappamundi* that has survived to our days. This cartographical genre, however, was to progressively disappear, and to be replaced by 1500 by new types of maps. This happened under the influence of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, that underwent a revival since the beginning of the fifteenth century. More than forty manuscripts of the *Geographia*, probably based on a tenth or

42 The Crown did not always succeed in this - as demonstrated by the fact that ever since the 1470s not only the merchants sponsored by the Spanish Crown, but a number of European sailors of various provenance had begun to appear on the Atlantic African coast, mining Portugal's monopoly on the trade conducted in such regions (Lach 1965, 54).

43 The report included information both on India and on the Arab trade, and in particular on the Arab shipping techniques, such as the way they made use of the monsoons. Diffie and Winius (1977, 165) argue that the way Vasco da Gama's voyage was later conducted makes it actually hard to believe that the contents of Covilhã's report were ever available to João or his successor.

44 From 1405 to 1433, the Chinese Ming Dynasty had actually promoted a series of naval expeditions in the Indian Ocean, under the command of the fleet admiral Zheng He, as a way to bring the peripheral regions of the Chinese empire under the influence of its tributary system. Lack of economic motivation from the Chinese part, and a subsequent ban on commerce, prevented however a further promotion of the naval explorations, which might have resulted in the establishment of contacts with the Portuguese travellers pursuing the route around the Cape of Good Hope. See in this regard Levathes 1997 and Hattendorf 2007.

eleventh-century byzantine manuscript, were produced by the end of the century, and the work was also given to print in 1475, an *edition princeps* shortly followed by many others (Lach 1965, 67-8).

The *Geographia* was especially influential on fifteenth century cartography in terms of its use of geometry – in the form of the grid of latitude and longitude – as a spatial armature for the representation of the surface of the Earth. Such use of geometry

allows the mapmaker to do something that his or her medieval counterpart could not readily do. That is, he or she can model, with an accuracy that would only grow between 1500 and 1800, the relationships of objects and locations on the surface of the Earth, conceived as a geometric grid. That geometric armature, moreover, in itself inscribes something that we cannot readily identify, an empty space that is entirely distinct from a ‘blank spot’. That space is not merely the blankness produced by ignorance of an un-discovered geographical or hydrographical feature – a ‘negative emptiness’ – but the abstract space into which geographies and hydrogeographies are plotted – a ‘positive’ emptiness. It subtends the entire surface of the map, but its ‘positive emptiness’ – its substantial independence from the objects and locations it serves to plot – only becomes visible when we realize that it logically extends far beyond the borders of the image. It extends into that vast part of the spherical Earth that is not represented here, but whose existence is presupposed by the geometry of the grid. (Padrón 2002, 30-1)

The fifteenth century revival in Ptolemaic studies established, in this sense, the basis for the development of cartography as an independent science – and for the construction of world maps as representations of the world rather as symbols for it.

At the same time, many of the conventional representations of the *Geographia* contradicted the factual geographical knowledge provided both by Marco Polo’s account and by portolan charts, which were being produced in growing numbers as a result of the naval explorations of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The *Geographia* perpetrated erroneous notions about the conformation of the Indian and Southern Asian coasts, and about the Indian Ocean, represented as enclosed by land – therefore feeding the belief in the impossibility to reach Asia by circumnavigating Africa (an assumption that would be dispelled by Dias’ enterprise). It also greatly overestimated the eastward extension of the Asian continent, postulating the existence of unknown land beyond the easternmost regions of China – an idea which would constitute the very basis of Columbus’ voyage and of his subsequent belief that the lands he had discovered belonged to Asia. Given the weight of Ptolemy’s name, in a century where classical authors were consistently being reevaluated, such notions re-

tained a lot of influence on most mapmakers, in spite of all the evidence pointing to the contrary.

Only a limited number of world maps integrated the notions included in the *Geographia* with information brought to light by more up-to-date accounts and charts. One of them was the *mappamundi* drawn in the 1450s by Fra Mauro, in the Venetian monastery of San Michele. The work, one of the most important cartographical achievements of the fifteenth century, largely drew on classical authors (not only Ptolemy, but also Plinius and Solinus), but relied also on the medieval narratives of Niccolò de Conti and of Marco Polo.<sup>45</sup> The influence of these travel narratives emerges in the way it pictures India and the Indian Ocean, and in the inclusion of the ‘Isola de Zimpagu’, placed north of Giava. This was one of the very few unmistakable representations of Japan included in a fifteenth-century map.<sup>46</sup> Henricus Martellus’ world map and Martin Behaim globe, both almost exclusively based on traditional sources, likewise included ‘Cipango’, but exaggerated Marco Polo’s inaccuracies, to the point that the country was located in the southern hemisphere (Oliveira e Costa 2007, 43).

Fra Mauro’s map is probably the most complete compendia of the knowledge of the Earth that was at the time available to the learned population. One can speak only in terms of learned population, as, as Woodward (2002, 16-17) underlines, this was still the only designed audience for world maps. In spite of the influence of Ptolemaic studies, European maps of the fifteenth century were still far from being a tool of common, practical use, or something that a private citizen would purchase. They were mostly meant to be approached by specialists, or destined to be hanged in public places. This is not to say that the public was totally oblivious of their existence. Woodward mentions, for example, a *barzulletta* (song) very common by the 1450s, which implied a knowledge, from the part of the audience, of the distinction between the *mappaemundi* and the portolan charts.<sup>47</sup> However, it would not be until the sixteenth century that the production of printed atlases and the birth of the cartographic industry would turn maps into a commercial object, familiar to a significant section of the European population.

45 For a fuller discussion of Fra Mauro’s map, its sources and its reception in connection to the general reception of Ptolemy’s *Geography* in Venice, see Cattaneo 2011.

46 Another one was included in a now lost map by Paolo Toscanelli, dated 1474 (Boscaro 1990, 101-10). Maps, on the other hand, showed progressive increment in the number of the Islands located in area where Polo had placed ‘Cipangu’, in what might have been a conscious effort to integrate the new knowledge in the representation of Asia. See in this regard Caputo 2016, 30-6.

47 “Aggio visto lo mappamondo e le carte di navigazione. Ma la Sicilia mi sembra la più bella del mondo. Ho visto tutte le isole del mondo, ma per l’isola più bella - Cecilia - non si trova su nessuna carta. È venuta dall’altro mondo” (Woodward 2002, 16-17).

In conclusion, the fifteenth century was a landmark in the progress of the relationships between Asia and Europe, but such progress did not immediately result in a growing conscience, among the general European population, of the 'reality' of Asia. A revolution in geographical knowledge was, however, inevitable in the long run. In the aftermath of the treaty of Tordesillas, control over the sea trade routes became a central point in European expansion strategies. The Roman and Canon laws that regulated international affairs in Europe were progressively remoulded so as to legitimise conquest and mass conversion. And while, as we will see, in the sixteenth century the real entity of the power held by the Portuguese over the territories facing the Indian Ocean is debatable, a door to Asia was opened for European travellers, that was never to be closed again. The naval exploration of the Atlantic Ocean paved the way for the access of Portuguese ships to the Asian Sea routes, and for the involvement of European merchants and sailors in the Asian trade. Following Da Gama's steps, and advancing along routes already established by native sailors, European merchants would settle into the existing Asian trade centres, mingling in an already thriving economy and reporting about it to Europe. Missionaries would soon follow on their wake, building up an even more stable flow of information from Asia to Europe. Their reports about their travels and activities would contribute to the accumulation, in their native countries, of a whole body of direct factual knowledge about Asia, challenging the mythical and religious visions of the world dominant throughout the Middle ages – even though some of the traditional narratives would only temporarily be set aside and still, at least partly, retain their weight until much later.<sup>48</sup> However, as we will see, this did not necessarily mean that Asia would be represented, in European literature, in an objective way.

#### **1.4 Expanding Trade and the Evolving 'Maps' of Asia and Japan in the Era of 'Great Discoveries'**

When Vasco Da Gama left Europe in 1497, aiming for the circumnavigation of Africa, the pioneering quality of his voyage was, apparently, not something that even his patron, Manuel I of Portugal, was able to predict. Preoccupied with both internal and international struggles, the king had provided him with less than two hundred men – many of whom died during the voyage – and with a very little capital of diplomatic gifts and trade goods. Da Gama himself was a figure of only minor value at court, and

<sup>48</sup> Influences of the Prester John legend have, for example, been argued to be found in Russian representations of Japan as late as in the nineteenth century. See in this regard Manning 1922.

surely not one properly trained to deal with foreign rulers and dignitaries. Not by chance, the mission brought no remarkable result in terms of the establishment of diplomatic contacts – both on the African coast and in India (Newitt 2005, 57-8). On the contrary, Da Gama's antagonistic attitude towards the natives, and his openly suspicious stance regarding all Muslims, established a climate of mutual hostility that would hinder even future relationships – so that violence and aggression would remain, throughout all the early phases of the Portuguese expansion, a significant aspect of the intercourse between Portugal and Asia.<sup>49</sup>

In all other respects, however, Da Gama's mission was, from the Portuguese perspective, a success. His diplomatic and commercial achievements were not remarkable, but he nevertheless returned from his voyage bearing spices and Indian products for a value that yielded about 6.000 per cent of the expenses that had been necessary for his mission (Hamilton 1948, 37). His enterprise proved without doubt that the route around Africa could be profitably followed in order to reach India – and therefore the cities where the spice trade originated. The voyage prompted, as a consequence, a series of further missions, aimed at gathering information about the geography of India (and East Asia in general) and about commerce in the Indian Ocean.

The Portuguese Crown's major interest was in the pepper trade, which at the time was mostly based in Calicut, and inserted in a complex commercial network, constituted by a number of well-defined communities of merchants – held together by kinship, origins and, often, religious ties. Most of the harbours of the region included enclaves where the different communities – including Hindus, Jains, Jews, Armenians and Muslims – resided, paying taxes to local authorities but autonomously administering their affairs (Newitt 2005, 60).

In order to handle the Portuguese Asian affairs, in 1505 the Portuguese nobleman Francisco de Almeida was appointed viceroy and sent to Asia, formally establishing the *Estado da India* – a title that would come to encompass the totality of the possessions acquired by the Portuguese in Asia, from eastern Africa to the sea of Japan. The 'state' was to function as an Indian Ocean base from which to enforce Portuguese control over the Asian trade. In accordance to the treaty of Tordesillas, and to the Papal bulls that had sanctioned the Portuguese advance in the territories east of the Cape Verde Islands, it was to claim sovereignty over the Asian Seas, as well as over all the Christians residing in the territories facing them (Boxer 1969, 68). The main necessity detected by the Portuguese Crown's representatives of the *Estado* was to secure a number of fortified harbours, that could work both as commercial outposts and as naval and military

49 Even though more recent writings have partially reconsidered the emphasis put on violence by the more traditional historical narratives on the Portuguese enterprise in Asia. See in this regard, Disney 1995.

bases - both to conquer and defend against local competitors. After the appointment of Almeida as viceroy, the capture of the key bases for the Portuguese expansion was accomplished in a matter of no more than ten years. By the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century, supremacy had been secured over the east African coast. In 1510, under the lead of Almeida's successor, Afonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese were able to conquer the landlocked island of Goa, a strategic harbour involved both in the Cambay-Cape Comorin trade and in the horse-trade that interested the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar. Electing Goa as his headquarters, Albuquerque proceeded then to the capture of Malacca (1511) and of Ormuz (1515), which granted the Portuguese control over the Persian Gulf and access to the South China sea.<sup>50</sup>

While the central bulk of the Portuguese possessions was seized in this early phase, even after the death of Albuquerque in 1515, and at least up until 1580 - when the Portuguese and Spanish Crowns were united under Philip II of Spain (resulting in a temporary end of independence for Portugal) - the territory under the direct control of the *Estado da India* kept expanding. A number of minor fortified and unfortified harbours were secured throughout the century - notably Bassein (in 1534), Diu (in 1535) and some of the ports in the Kanara region (Barrett 2012, 2). In many cases, moreover, the Portuguese were able to establish merchant communities even in locations over which they could not obtain sovereignty - such as Cochin, Calicut, Chaul, Solor and Ternate - sometimes obtaining formal cessions of territory by local rulers, and sometimes abiding by informal agreements with them. Their territorial bases came to include a huge number of trading posts (*feitorias*), various fortified strongholds (*fortalezas*) and, more rarely, some urban settlements (*ciudades*), usually assigned to the control of autonomous town councils. Through such possessions, albeit scattered, the Portuguese managed to extend their influence on a vast section of the Indian Ocean (Barrett 2012, 4).<sup>51</sup>

50 For a more in-depth narration of the steps that led to the Portuguese capture of their principal bases in the Indian Ocean, see Diffie, Winius 1977, 243-71.

51 In spite of it being referred to as an *Estado*, the vast maritime area over which the Portuguese came to extend their influence was hardly a unit characterized by political homogeneity. While most historians refer to it in terms of a colonial empire, therefore, some, like Villiers (1986, 38) object to the use of such definition, arguing that the Portuguese control extended mostly over trade, without affecting the Asian territory in a significant way. In any case, surely, the *Estado da India* came to employ a set of institutions that rivalled in complexity with later colonial empires. In order to enforce its regulations, to protect its headquarters, to build and maintain its forts and ships, to collect taxes and other revenues, and to purchase the trade goods, a vast, dedicated body of royal bureaucrats was needed, as well as all the professional sailors and armed forces necessary to back them up (Newitt 2005, 70). This system of administration required in turn, in order to be kept in place, huge financial resources - resources that the Portuguese Crown, at the time, could provide only partially. This made it necessary, for the *Estado*, to develop a certain level of self-sufficiency,

The Portuguese control over trade was never totally effective. Their ships were not exempt from losses from corsairs attacks, and occasionally succumbed to insurgences and acts of resistance from the part of local authorities (such as in the case of Ternate, which had to be abandoned in 1575). Moreover, as Boxer (1969, 48-59) illustrates, the vastness - and great dispersion - of the Portuguese possessions inevitably put a great strain on the *Estado da India* in terms of man-power, and political circumstances occasionally forced the Portuguese Crown's representatives to opt for a 'light' enforcement of their regulations, so as to maintain good relationships with those local powers whose support was essential for keeping their supremacy in the region. Such losses and limitations were not enough to shake the foundations of the Portuguese seaborne empire, but they were effective in limiting the measure of its control on trade, above all as far as its capacity to annihilate the local competition for certain products was concerned. They were the reason why, ultimately, the creation of the *Estado da India* was enough to affect the panorama of Asian trade in the sixteenth century, but not to revolutionize it (O'Rourke, Williamson 2009, 672). One might also add that while the position of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean opened access for them to the seas East of Malacca - namely, the maritime area, encompassing East and South-East Asia, known as Greater China Seas region - their authority in the area was very limited.

Throughout their advance in the Indian Ocean, the authorities of the *Estado da India* had vaguely heard about the Chinese (referred to as 'Chijns'). The capture of Malacca was what first made the Portuguese familiar with them, as well as with the other populations of the China Seas region, and their thriving commercial activities. The city was a big window toward eastern Asia, and the most important emporiums along the trade route connecting the Indian Ocean and the Greater China Seas region. When the Portuguese first reached it, in 1509, several Chinese ships were stationed in its harbour, and when, two years later, they battled for its capture, some Chinese junk masters - acting independently from orders by the Ming central authorities (who, however, did not intervene to defend the city, in spite of its being part of the Chinese tributary system) - were instrumental in their success. In Malacca, the Portuguese interacted also with the merchants they identified as the 'Gores' - who were possibly inhabitants of the Ryūkyū Islands, or even of Southern Japan - and through

that primarily came from the revenues (rents, tributes and licences) collected from its harbours and trading posts - where local monopolies on products such as opium, indigo and palm-wine, were also enforced - and through tributes exacted from the Asian merchants shipping and trading along the Indian Ocean routes (Barrett 2012, 5). As Mathew (1986) illustrates, for example, the representatives of the *Estado* set in place, to this end, a complex custom system, based on the concession of trade licences (*cartazes*).



them they surely heard, if only vaguely, of the Japanese archipelago itself (Massarella 1990, 20-1).

West of the city, the Portuguese found themselves faced, much as in the Indian Ocean, with a solid commercial network, controlled by different communities of seafarers in close relationship with one another, and trading along well-established trade routes. The region encompassed a vast complex of seas – extending in longitude from the South China Sea to the East China Seas, and in latitude from the Japanese Inland Seto Sea to the Southeastern Asian seas of Sulu, Java, Celebes, and Banda. It

combined both diversity and cohesion. On the one hand, there was the multiplicity of peoples, cultures, languages and histories of Japan, China, and Southeast Asia; on the other hand, the seas were a unifying conduit for the transmission of goods, peoples, germs, ideas and religions. Like Braudel's Mediterranean, the China Seas tied an area of heterogeneous civilizations together through commercial and cultural exchange. [...] The China Seas region blended peoples and cultures from not only Asia but from around the world in a maritime melting pot. It provided an area of transit and a source of income for untold numbers of people. Despite their different languages and ethnic origins, the indigenous groups of 'sea peoples' – the ama of Japan, the Dan (Tanka) of Southern China and the 'sea gypsies' (Orang Laut), Iranun, Balangingi, and Bugis of insular Southeast Asia – shared a common maritime culture and life experiences that distinguished them from their countrymen living on shore. Throughout history, people continuously moved in and out of the region – migrants, sojourners, emigrants, missionaries, traders, sailors and slaves – first from India, China and Southeast Asia, and later from Japan, Europe and Africa. (Antony 2010, 5)

Many of the seafarers operating in the area were devoted to 'piracy' – a term which is to be intended, in the context of the Greater China Seas region, in a broader sense than the one of illegitimate armed robbery usually applied to it in Europe. It encompassed a variety of maritime activities – raiding, but also transport, trade and/or smuggling – which did not fall under the direct control of the land elites of the regions, and were therefore at times construed as illegal by them, but which were not necessarily conceived as such by the populations living in the maritime areas, prone to consider the sea as a lawless space (Reid 2010, 15). The groups that engaged in such activities were of many different origins – Chinese, Korean, Japanese and South-Asian – and were referred to, by the land-based authorities of the sixteenth centuries, with many names, ranging from *haidao* (or, alternatively, *haizei*, *haifei*, or *haikou*, 'sea bandits') in China, to the Japanese equivalent *kaizoku*, to the term *wokou*, used by the Chinese, more specifically, in reference to the groups of pirates raiding and

creating disturbances along their shores (Antony 2010, 7-8). They often cultivated stronger relations with each other than with the land-based populations of their respective territories – sea did not function as a border, for them, but as a way of communication, through which they created cultural and commercial connections that eluded the limits of existing political structures and went far beyond the official relationships entertained by the states' central authorities.<sup>52</sup> In Japan, the role of the *kaizoku* groups had come to be, by the sixteenth century, integrated in the existing power structures of the state, and *kaizoku* were sought for as allies by the *daimyō* (territorial lords) competing for power in the archipelago.<sup>53</sup> Quite different was the situation in China, where central authorities, faced with the impossibility to rein the commerce, attempted to stop it completely, by enforcing a ban against shipping and overseas trade (Massarella 1990, 20). As Seyock (2005) underlines, however, the restrictions were not really effective in containing private trade, above all in the southern provinces where, in spite of the risk of repercussions, many of the seafarers kept venturing through the old routes – often backed up by conniving local officials. Moreover, while the Chinese sea bans were the reason why, while in possess of a level of naval technology that would allow them to sail into long oceanic routes, the Ming war-junks never actually came to threaten the Portuguese hegemony over the Indian ocean, they were, however, equipped to pose a threat to the Portuguese carracks and galleons that roamed to the China Seas.

In 1517, the viceroy of Goa, Lopo Soares de Albergaria, sent to Canton the commander Fernão Peres de Andrade, who successfully established contacts with local authorities. When the commander headed out of the city, he left behind Tomé Pires, who had sailed with him as ambassador of the viceroy, in charge with the task of establishing diplomatic relationships with the Ming authorities in Beijing. Pires, however, did not achieve much in terms of his mission – mainly because, while he was in Beijing, an envoy came to the city from the Sultan of Malacca, lamenting the Portuguese advance on his city, and advocating a Chinese intervention. A decisive rupture in the diplomatic intercourse came, moreover, when the Portuguese tried, by force, to establish in the South China Sea the same order that they had achieved in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese that had settled in Tunmen after Alvares' landing strived to turn the island into one of their bases – building fortifications and using them as military and naval headquarters, so as to attack and rob Chinese ships and collect prisoners and

52 For an in-depth treatment of the *wakō*'s activities in the sixteenth century see Kwan-wai 1975 and Carioti 2006. On the role of the sea as a bridge between Japanese maritime populations and the other coastal area of the Greater China Sea region, see Amino 1993, 1997, 1998).

53 The process is described in Shapinsky 2010.

slaves. The Portuguese behavior led to retaliation from the Chinese part. Pires was arrested (to die in prison a few years later), Tunmen was liberated and a ban was declared against commerce with the Portuguese. Between 1521 and 1522, in a succession of naval confrontations, the Portuguese ships were easily defeated, with many casualties, by the Ming coastguards fleets, and repelled to Malacca (Zhidong 2011, 9-18). After the defeat, the Portuguese were quick in lowering their ambitions. They did not attempt at establishing further official contacts with the central Chinese authorities, and they generally threaded very carefully in the Chinese territories, avoiding to impose their presence, in fear of a possible Chinese retaliation attack against Malacca. In other words, even though “they [...] gained admission to the coveted China trade, it was on the terms laid down by the Chinese authorities and not on those imposed by themselves” (Boxer 1969, 49).<sup>54</sup>

The more immediate effect of the Portuguese expansion in both the Indian Ocean and the China Seas – in terms of the circulation of information on Asia – was, as far as the first half of the sixteenth century is concerned, its impact on the developments of cartography. Da Gama’s voyage had provided European cartographers with a whole new body of information concerning the Atlantic coast of Africa, and that body soon expanded, to encompass knowledge of the coastal outline of the Indian Ocean and of the China Seas. The Portuguese Crown strived to keep geographical notions secret, keeping all written reports and maps in the archives of the *Casa da India*,<sup>55</sup> but at least part of them were bound to leak outside the circles of the royalty, and into the hands of foreign competitors. The opening of the trade route around the Cape of Good Hope had in fact created much distress among the leaders of the main competing commercial centres, and most of all among the Italian merchants that had, up to that moment, dominated the spice trade in Europe. Growingly, spies were sent in the thriving commercial scenario of Lisbon, so as to gather information about the discoveries (Braudel 1995, 543).

**54** A more favourable turn in the relationships between China and Portugal only came in 1552, when the Portuguese merchant Leonel de Sousa reached the Kwangtung coast. Sousa realized the necessity to comply with Chinese practices, striving to remove the violent reputation that the Portuguese had accumulated in the previous years, and, above all, making sure to openly recognize Chinese sovereignty by paying duties over the commerce. Sousa found an open-minded counterpart in the vice-commissioner for the maritime defence circuit (*haitao*), Wang Po, leading, by 1554, to an agreement that legalized the trade with the Portuguese. Following this agreement, in 1557 the Portuguese were finally able to obtain from the local authorities permission to create a local outpost, in Aomen (Macao), which was thereafter elected as their East-Asian headquarters (Mote, Twitchett 1998, 343-4).

**55** The *Casa da India* (House of India) was the Portuguese crown administration office in charge of Portugal’s non-European trade, that held the responsibility for all exports to and from Asia – taking care of all practical aspects, from the storing of the merchandise, to arranging the shipments to and from the Indian Ocean. For an in-depth discussion of its responsibilities and structure see Barrett (2012, 5-6).

One of such spies was the Italian Alberto Cantino, who, in 1501, reached the Portuguese capital, travelling on account of the Duke of Ferrara, Hercule d'Este. He was, in theory, to be engaged in horse-trading, but had been unofficially entrusted with the task of collecting intelligence about the Portuguese advance in the Indian Ocean. During his stay, he managed to bribe one unknown Portuguese cartographer into drawing for him a planisphere, including the most recently collected geographical information.<sup>56</sup> The planisphere, that has come to be known as the 'Cantino map', represented the whole known world – which did not, yet, include Japan, but comprehended, for the first time, all of the Americas (including the Brazilian coastline), the entirety of Africa, and a great part of Asia (including China and Indo-China). It was “the first map to project the sphere of the earth onto a plane (i.e. two-dimensionally) on a truly global scale” (Devezas, Rodrigues 2007, 175).

The Cantino planisphere represents, in other words, the earliest known example of 'modern' world map, combining the impact of Ptolemaic studies (that, as seen above, had dominated cartography in the last decades of the fifteenth century) with that of the European Oceanic expansion. It was the expression of a new cartographical genre, cosmography (*cosmographia*), which came, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, to fully replace the tradition of Medieval *Mappaemundi*. This genre was, in a way, a direct product of the geographical explorations. The newly encountered territories led to the expansion of the scopes and forms of cartography, not only inspired to the inclusion of a new range of territories, but also to a redefinition of the geographical categories that had been established by Ptolemy's work (i.e. chorography, intended as the representation of limited territories; geography, intended as the representation, with the application of geometry, of ampler territories within the boundaries of the 'inhabited world' – the *oikoumene* of the Greeks – known to Ptolemy; and cosmography, intended as astronomical cartography). By 1500, cosmography had evolved into a form of 'universal geography', representing the surface of the earth in its entirety, with the application of both the mathematical standards previously adopted in geography and the astronomical notions that had pertained to Ptolemaic cosmography – in other words, using parallels, meridians, tropics and poles as a reference grid so as to read and 'contain' the whole world. The term geography was, in turn, applied to the representation of smaller regions – usually not vaster than provinces – characterized by political unity or by physical coherence.<sup>57</sup>

56 As stated in his letters to the Duke of Ferrara. On the Cantino map, see Devezas, Rodrigues 2007, 175-9.

57 Topography was also born, and joined chorography in representing single locations, such as fortresses and castles. See Woodward 2002, 20-1; 29-36.

Cartographers had, for their part, evolved into professionals who, contrary to their medieval predecessors (who often worked anonymously), were valued as the recognized authors of their works. Their stance was not that of 'artists', or of 'narrators', as in the case of the authors of the *Mappaemundi*, but that of scientists - who had to be versed in a variety of matters, ranging from geometry, to geography and astronomy. Their reputation was a primary requisite for the credibility of their works, as well as their sources. Among them, at least for the first half of the sixteenth century, the classical geographers - Ptolemy himself, but also Strabo and Pomponius Mela - continued to hold a significant weight. With the advance of the century, a growing influence was also derived from the nautical world maps that, as a consequence of the discoveries, began to be produced alongside the regional portolan charts that had circulated in Europe ever since the fourteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

The evolution of the standards for the representation of the surface of the Earth was not the only development in the science of cartography in the first half of the sixteenth century. It was precisely by this period that, starting with Italy, publishers began to turn maps, including world-maps, into commercial products of large diffusion. The cartographical industry, born in Florence in the late fifteenth century, underwent a quick development in Rome and Venice (that took Florence's place in the industry when the city was deprived of the centrality of its role in the commercial network linking Europe to Asia by the opening of the routes in the Atlantic). By 1530, the two cities had become the two major cartographical producers in Italy and, more generally, two leading centres in the European publishing market - a role they were bound to maintain up to the last decades of the sixteenth century (Woodward 2002, 16-19). Their production underwent a steady growth, tied, conversely, with a flourishing commerce for the maps, that was tied to an expansion in their public, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. By the 1560s, maps had completed their evolution from instruments used for travel, war, and administrations, or as pictorial decorations to be hanged both in public places and in the houses of the aristocracy (who had had an almost exclusive access to manuscript maps), into consumer

58 As seen above, maps of this kind, disconnected from the classical sources, were more directly based on the routes traced with compasses by the sailors shipping through the oceans, and included a whole range of practical information (such as wind directions) that did not pertain to Cosmography. Cosmographers strived to find room for such knowledge into their works, but, throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, the two genres co-existed without entering into a successful combination. Only in 1569 they finally merged, in Gerard Mercator's work, which would become, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, a standard in map-making. Mercator produced a projection which "sought to reconcile the navigator's need for a straight-forward course with the trade-off inherent in flattening a globe" (Monmonier 2004, 7).

and divulgation goods, penetrating the everyday life of a huge section of the European middle classes.<sup>59</sup>

The expansion of the market was tied with an inevitable stylistic renovation. The advance of the century was marked by a drastic format change – with the abandonment of Latin in favour of Vernacular languages, and the adoption of smaller dimensions. By 1565, moreover, Venetian producers had opened to clients the possibility to order and purchase bound-together compositions of maps originally conceived to be sold singularly, put together according to the interests of the buyer. The practice would soon spread to other publishing centres, and the Roman (of French origin) publisher Antonio Lafréry was the first, in 1570, to add a front-page to such compositions, giving birth to the atlases genre, thus known as *lafreeriani*. The catalogue produced by Lafréry, in 1572, for all the titles on sale in his house (*Indice delle stampe in vendita nella bottega*), counts more than 500 works of this kind, and shows how florid the commerce for cartographical products had grown out to be by the final decades of the century (Collari 2012, 1).

As a consequence to this commercial growth, maps came to play a growing role in the way the European public viewed the world as a geographical entity: they sealed the passage from the religious perception conveyed by the medieval *Mappaemundi* to a secular representation – one that implied the idea of a world which could be captured in a uniform, ordered image and over which dominance, both rational and material, could be systematically extended. With the new cartography,

geometric space – abstract and homogeneous – came to be deployed for the first time in western culture. The consequences of this development were felt by Europeans and non-Europeans alike, especially as the universalist claims of the new, abstract spatiality empowered modern, western European culture at the expense of premodern others. (Padrón 2002, 31)

In this sense, the new type of map, that in the first place was connected to the above described geographical explorations, created in turn further ground and motivation for maritime expansion. How map collecting impacted the effective diffusion of up-to-date geographical knowledge is, on the other hand, doubtful. What reached the hands of buyers were hardly ‘current’ geographical notions (those, even when sneaked away from the hands of the Portuguese, tended to be kept quite firmly in the hands of

<sup>59</sup> As Woodward (2002, 59-60) underlines, studying sixteenth and seventeenth-century private inventories shows how maps were largely collected in the residencies of the professional lay classes (and only in a lower measure in the houses of the clergy and the lower strata of society) – a sign that their possession must have been, much as in the case of art collections, a way for them to affirm their growingly relevant social status.

state leaders).<sup>60</sup> Printers in Rome and Venice, for the most, marketed their products as modern and new, describing them, in their prefaces, as “nuovo, recente, vero, esatto, ricco, aggiornato” (Woodward 2002, 35). However, as a matter of fact, they not always had the means to get in possession of truly updated information (and the majority of their clients, for their part, did not know enough about the discoveries to discern correct knowledge from outdated one).

Nonetheless, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the progressive diffusion of print in Europe would turn cartography, as well as travel and geographical literature, into an object of commercial diffusion, granting to the new narratives on Asia a popularity previously unthinkable of. It was in this context that the first direct contacts between Europe and Japan happened, and that the earliest first-hand reports on Japan began to circulate in Europe.

60 The Cantino map, itself, was never given to print or divulged to the general public. Completed by 1502, and sent back to the Duke of Ferrara, it was kept in the archives of the Ducal Library in Ferrara, and then, after 1598, in the palace in Modena where the D'Este family transferred. The map only came to light again in the nineteenth century, and is currently reserved in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria of Modena. See Devezas, Rodrigues 2007, 177.

