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Beyond the Horizons of Legends: Traditional Imagery and Direct Experience in Medieval Accounts of Asia

Jana Valtrová*
Department for the Study of Religions, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic
jvaltrova@phil.muni.cz

Abstract

The article deals with several medieval travel accounts about Asia, which were produced during the 13th and 14th centuries, in the time of the so called Mongol mission. These reports were written by Franciscan and also some Dominican missionaries, namely William of Rubruck, John Plano of Carpini, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Marignola, Jordanus Catalanus and a few others. The aim of the article is to analyze the encounter of European travelers' "traditional" ideas about Asia with the actual reality. Did the friars mostly rely on their anticipations, or were they open to new information, even if this could destroy views often advocated by eminent authorities of European medieval thought? The article analyses three "traditional" *topoi*, each of them in the context of the above-mentioned reports: earthly paradise, the kingdom of Prester John and human monsters. All of them belonged to the medieval lore regarding the East, as testified by many literary as well as pictorial documents. Each of the authors adopted a slightly different strategy for how to solve the potential conflicts between "tradition" and experience. Finally, I suggest conceptualizing the problem of "tradition" and experience in medieval travel accounts with reference to a typology of "otherness" created by Karlheinz Ohle. According to Ohle, a "cognitive Other" (1) is an unknown, never encountered Other which can only be imagined, whereas a "normative Other" (2), is an Other which is directly encountered and gradually explored. In my opinion, the friars' medieval travel accounts actually reflect a shift from imagination towards gradual encounter and exploration — in these reports

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the imagined (cognitive) fabulous East gradually turned into an explored (normative) reality.

Keywords
medieval mission to Asia, western imagination, encountering “the Other”, personal experience vs. traditional imagery

Introduction

During the Mongol invasion of Europe in the early 1240s Europeans unexpectedly encountered people from then unknown parts of the world. This marked the beginning of a period, lasting approximately one century, of intense contacts with the cultures and peoples of Asia. One result of these encounters was a number of noteworthy written accounts, authored mainly by Franciscan missionaries. The goal of this paper is to highlight the significance of these texts as sources of medieval knowledge of Asia, point out their contribution to furthering this knowledge, and above all examine the ways in which individual authors handled their expectations, based on traditional images of Asia, when faced with reality. I will demonstrate that these travelers showed a combination of extraordinary observational skills and original ways of revising various elements of the traditional legends. On a more general level, this paper will also attempt to refine the methodologies used to study Western accounts of “the Others.”

Describing the Unknown in the Service of Cross and Crown

The main initiator of European missions to Asia was Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254), who in 1245 dispatched four groups of monks to the khan of Mongolia (Richard 1998). Unfortunately, no reports of the first mission, led by the Franciscan friar Lawrence of Portugal, have been preserved and it remains unclear whether the mission took place at all (Guzman 1971:234).[1] The next mission was more successful: John of Plano Carpini (1182–1252), accompanied by Benedict the

[1] The dispatching of Lawrence of Portugal is recorded in the letter of Inocent IV “Dei patris immensa.”

Pole and, for part of the journey, by Stephan of Bohemia, arrived in Karakorum after the death of Ögedei Khan and witnessed the enthronement of his son Güyük. After his return in 1247, Carpini produced a detailed report (*Sinica Franciscana*:27–130),[2] complemented by another written account attributed to his companion Benedict (*Hystoria Tartarorum*). No direct testimonies are available about the two other embassies, one led by Andrew of Longjumeau and the other by his fellow Dominican friar Ascelin of Lombardia. There are only indirect accounts in the encyclopedia *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais (†1264) and the *Chronica Majora* by Matthew Paris (†1259) (Guzman 1971:236–249). The *Speculum Historiale* draws on Carpini's account and on a now lost report by Simon of St. Quentin.[3]

King Louis IX of France also sent an emissary to the Mongols with an aim to establish relations. In 1253, the Flemish Franciscan William of Rubruck (1215–1270)[4] was originally only sent to Sartaq Khan in the steppes of today's southern Russia, but in the end he travelled all the way to Great Khan Möngke (1209–1259) in Karakorum. On his return to France in 1255 he recorded detailed observations in his *Itinerarium* (*Sinica Franciscana*:164–332).[5] One of the other Franciscans deployed in Asia, John of Montecorvino (1247–1328),[6] became archbishop of Kambalyk (today's Beijing).

Less known to Europeans at that time but very noteworthy in many ways was a report by another Franciscan, Odoric of Pordenone (1286–1331).[7] Sent by the pope on an extensive journey through Asia in 1316–1330, he sailed via Constantinople to Baghdad, Sri Lanka and on to Canton and Kambalyk. From there he travelled back on land and probably became the first European to visit Tibet. On his

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[2] For an English translation of his report see Dawson (1955:3–72).

[3] Chapters which Vincent of Beauvais recorded as coming from the report of Simon of Saint-Quentin were published by Jean Richard separately as *Histoire des Tartares*.

[4] About his life and journey see Jackson (1990:1–55); *Lexikon des Mittelalters* IX (1998:184–185).

[5] For an English translation of his report see Dawson (1955:89–220) or Jackson (1990:61–278).

[6] For details of his life see Rachewiltz (1971:160–172). His letters are published in *Sinica Franciscana*:340–355. For an English translation see Dawson (1955:224–231), or Yule (1866a:197–218).

[7] For details of his life and journeys see Rachewiltz (1971:179–186).

return to Padua in 1330, already in poor health he dictated his memories of the pilgrimage to a fellow Franciscan friar, William of Solagna. Odoric's narrative (*Sinica Franciscana*:413–495)[8] became a major source of information for *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, whose fame and popularity overshadowed by far the memories of Odoric (cf. Higgins 1997).

Last but not least, European knowledge about Asia was significantly enhanced by the travel writings of the famous Venetian trader Marco Polo (1254–1324),[9] who spent 24 years travelling in Asia.

Particularly important for the exploration of India are the notes of the Dominican missionary Jordanus (†around 1336). He first visited India in 1320/21–1328; he was supposed to return in 1330 as the bishop of Kollam, where he probably later died (Gadrat 2005:65–67). Before his second departure, Jordanus left behind a description of his observations, entitled *Mirabilia Descripta*.[10] A special type of primary source is the work of John of Marignola (†1358/59),[11] an Italian Franciscan commissioned by Emperor Charles IV to write a chronicle of international as well as Bohemian history; the text includes Marignola's experiences from a journey to India and China undertaken in 1338–1352/53.

Before analyzing these texts, it is important to examine shortly what the authors themselves say about their own sources (cf. Guéret-Laferté 1994:113–160). The travelers were fairly careful to separate their own observations from second-hand knowledge. This separation is most visible in the accounts by the Franciscans Carpini, Rubruck, Montecorvino and Odoric, who all adopted the form of travel narratives.

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8) For an English translation of his report see Yule (1866a:43–162).

9) For details regarding Marco Polo see Yule (1993); for an English edition of Polo's text see *The Travels I–II*.

10) On Jordanus, see *Lexikon des Mittelalters* VI (1983:1574). For the Latin text of the *Mirabilia* with a German translation see *Mirabilia Descripta*; the Latin text with a French translation can be found in Gadrat (2005). For an English translation see Catalani (2005).

11) For details on John of Marignola see *Lexikon des Mittelalters* IV (1989:292). For his narrative in Latin see *Kronika Marignolova*; an English translation of selected parts can be found in Yule (1866b:335–394). For further information on his narrative see Hilgers 1980.

These authors predominantly describe their own experiences, accompanied by more detailed expositions on the regions they visited, the peoples they met and their customs. For explanations of unknown phenomena and customs they typically relied on their local guides as well as on other Christians they met on their way.[12] To establish their credibility, they usually assure the reader in the preface or the conclusion of their texts that they only render the truth, based either on their own observation or on reports they heard from persons they regarded as trustworthy. Odoric says exactly this in the conclusion of his account (*Sinica Franciscana*:494). Rubruck states at the beginning of his report that, in line with the king's order, he has depicted everything the way he witnessed it (*Sinica Franciscana*:164). Carpini, besides assuring the reader of his credibility, also expresses a wish that his report should be quoted properly:

> We beg all those who read the foregoing account not to cut out or add anything, for, with truth as guide, we have written everything that we have seen or heard from others who we believe are to be trusted and, as God is witness, we have not knowingly added anything. (Dawson 1955:71; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:129–130)

It seems as if this comment fittingly anticipated the writing of the most popular travel book of that time, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (cf. Deluz 1988). As I. M. Higgins points out, Mandeville in many cases unfolds his fantasies precisely where Odoric, one of his main sources, ends his authentic descriptions (Higgins 1997:143).

The other authors were less explicit when it came to defining their sources. One reason of this in Polo's case is probably that his narrative covers large number of years and a very extensive geographical area (Yule 1993:108). With Jordanus, the somewhat lighter genre of his *Mirabilia Descripta* must have been one of the reasons: Bound by no specific instruction on what he had to report, his primary goal was to intrigue the reader — as the title already suggests — with "things astounding." Yet, rather than being a product of mere fantasy, his work also includes much valuable information, albeit interspersed with mythical motifs adopted from the traditional European imagery of the

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[12] Thus Carpini reported having collected information from Russian priests and other Christians living at the khan's court (*Sinica Franciscana*:75, 125).

East. Marignola too was limited by the genre of his text; he had to "smuggle" his travel experiences into the chronicle through digressions from his expositions on the world's biblical history and geography.

It is obvious that the purpose of compiling these texts differed, which is most apparent from the aforementioned examples of Marignola and Jordanus. With these two authors, I will primarily focus on the way they present reality and reconcile it with traditional imagery, an issue the two had to face despite the fact that their accounts were not primarily intended as sources of encyclopedic knowledge about Asia. A comparison of travelogues with texts of other genres will also help us to better understand how medieval travelers constructed their image of the East.

The Medieval Image of the East and its Study

The travelers of the 13th and 14th century set out on their journeys with certain predetermined images of the East in mind; these were based on earlier accounts by authors of antiquity, who wrote primarily about "India,"[13] as well as by the authorities of the Christian era, above all Isidore of Seville (†636) and other encyclopedists.[14] Images of the East were also widely reflected in the fine arts. During their journeys, the medieval missionaries had to confront their expectations with reality, which in many cases completely differed from what they had imagined. The proportion of space these authors devoted to traditional imagery and to their personal observations, as well as the manner in which they reconciled the two, differs among the texts. The differences are based on a range of factors, including the genre and purpose of the work, the intended audience and, last but not least, potential interventions by later editors (cf. Ostrowski 1990). A detailed analysis of these

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[13] The exact meaning of the term "India" often varies in ancient and medieval sources. It was used not only to designate the Indian subcontinent, but also parts of China, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula or Ethiopia. Among the most important ancient authors writing about India Ctesias of Knidos and Megasthenes can be mentioned.

[14] Motifs of East can be found also in the literature concerning Alexander the Great, as well as in various bestiaries such as *Liber de natura rerum* by Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–1278). For an overview, see Lach (1994).

differences for each individual author, or even for each version of their manuscripts, would in itself suffice for an extensive study. Here I will limit myself to the analysis of the relationship between empirical knowledge, acquired through direct observation, and traditional beliefs in the travelogues of that period. I will also attempt to point out various aspects of this type of enquiry that need to be taken into account and to show what implications they may have for the conceptualization of the research question.

What was then the traditional image of the mythical East in the minds of these missionaries as they were setting out on their journeys? There was obviously no authoritative canon, and images of the East appeared in different numbers and modifications. Yet some can be described as almost universal, including those that appear, for example, in the world maps from that time.[15] In order to analyze in more detail how these authors worked with these traditional images, I will focus on three frequently recurring motifs associated with the earth's eastern lands and trace them and their contexts in the individual authors' accounts. The three motifs include those of, (1) the earthly paradise, (2) the mythical empire of Prester John, and (3) human monsters. These represent only a narrow selection from a much more abundant medieval imagination; the purpose of this selection is above all to show specific examples of a high diversity and originality in the aforementioned authors' approaches.

The study of images in texts from the remote past has one potential methodological pitfall: Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (Said 1978) has prompted scholars to study western ideas about the East in various types of texts and time periods and to uncover the background and process of the formation of these ideas (cf. Inden 1990; Clarke 1997; Lopez 1998 etc.). Yet this interest in representations may encourage ahistorical attitudes (Macfie 2000:4–6); some scholars tend to study the historical transformations of a certain image, often without a sufficient understanding of the original context in which the image was deployed. What at first sight may seem as a consistent image associated with the East — such as the figure of Prester John — in reality acquired different forms and meanings in different texts,

[15] E.g. the maps from Hereford (around 1276–83) or Ebstorf (around 1235).

depending on factors including genre, language and the author's social background. An analysis of these representations outside their original contexts may result in an application of today's scholarly constructs — such as the assumed body of traditional images associated in medieval Europe with the East — to what are typologically different texts. A simple comparison of isolated images in different texts may result in the conclusion that a mere appearance of a traditional mythical motif in a written account is evidence of the author's excessive dependence on European stereotypes and his or her inability to authentically perceive and describe reality.[16]

On the following pages I will attempt to demonstrate that the relationship in the aforementioned travelogues between traditional imagery and empirical knowledge based on direct observation is much more complex than previously thought. The two sources of knowledge may not necessarily contradict each other; on the contrary, the authors may deploy them as two complementary colors on the unusually rich palette of the "authentic" medieval imagery of reality. To demonstrate that, I will first analyze in detail the selected medieval images of the East in individual works and then discuss their overall context as well as their authors' narrative and interpretive strategies.

Within Earshot of Paradise?

Jean Delumeau has demonstrated that the concept of a paradisiacal land has its roots in classical antiquity; in the Christian context the image of paradise was based on the biblical narrative, and the following passage contributed to its localization in the east: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed." (*Gn* 2:8) (Delumeau 2000:44–45). Early interpreters debated whether paradise was a real place or an allegory, but gradually the former opinion prevailed, partly thanks to St Augustine of Hippo (†430). Many prominent medieval scholars also describe paradise as a real place on earth, including Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede (673–736) and Peter Lombard (†1160) (Delumeau

[16] L. Olschki on Marco Polo's *Million* (Olschki 1972:15); several scholars have adopted his opinion, e.g. Lach (1994:35, note 105), and Jones (1971:399).

2000:44–46). The Garden of Eden can also be found in the most detailed world maps of that time, namely the Ebstorf map (around 1235) and the Hereford Mappa Mundi (around 1276–83).

In medieval travelogues, however, this motif appears much less frequently and the notions of what it may look like to some extent vary. Carpini and Rubruck make no reference to paradise on earth at all, which seems to suggest that it did not even occur to them that they could come anywhere near it. After all, given the hardship they report having faced on the way, they could have called their travels a "road to hell" rather than a journey to paradise. Odoric and Polo do not mention any eastern paradise either, although they do not shy away from other motifs of the medieval mythology. The letters written by Montecorvino show that he reflected on this notion, but despite all his effort had to admit he was not able to find out anything about this eastern paradise (*Sinica Franciscana*:342).

Jordanus briefly discusses paradise in a section of his work devoted to a mythical land he calls India Tertia. This textual framing of paradise is of major significance, as at the beginning of the chapter Jordanus states he did not visit India Tertia himself, only learned about the region from trustworthy persons (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134). Jordanus says that paradise is situated between India Tertia and Ethiopia and that there are four rivers flowing from paradise,[17] bringing with them gold and precious stones (*Mirabilia Descripta*:136). Living around one of the rivers are dragons, whose heads are topped with shiny carbuncles. Because of their large weight, the dragons tend to fall into that river, an event local people eagerly await; after seventy days only bones are left of a fallen dragon, after which time people take the carbuncle from the dragon's skeleton and bring it to Prester John, the king of Ethiopia (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134).

While Jordanus' paradise is part of the mythical India Tertia, in Marignola's chronicle the account of paradise is directly connected with his exposition on early biblical history: "God planted paradise at the beginning, in the eastern part, this place beyond India is called Eden." (my translation, Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:494). Marignola is

[17] *Gn* 2,10–14. The names of these four biblical rivers are Pishon, Gihon, Chidekel and Eufrat.

the only one of the travelers under discussion who discusses paradise in more detail and who believes that he stood in its immediate proximity. He reports having erected a stone column with an inscription, a cross and his as well as the pope's coats of arms "in the corner of the world" and "over against Paradise" (Yule 1866b:344; Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:496).[18] This "corner of the world" is believed to be the southernmost tip of India, Kanyakumari. According to his further description, paradise is located 40 Italian miles off the coast of Ceylon, "opposite a glorious mountain," i.e. opposite Adam's Peak (2,243 m). He claims that according to the locals one can hear the sound of falling water coming from paradise (Yule 1866b:346; Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:497). Marignola's paradise is surrounded by the ocean and located beyond "Columbine India" as the most elevated place on earth, touching the Moon's sphere:

> Now that fountain cometh down from the mount and falleth into a lake, which is called by the philosophers Euphirattes. Here it passes under another water which is turbid, and issues forth on the other side, where it divides into four rivers which pass through Seyllan... (Yule 1866b:346; Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:497)

So far Marignola's description is in line with the notions of paradise common in his time, with the exception of its localization "opposite Ceylon." Drawing on personal experience, the chronicler slightly modified the list of four paradisiacal rivers, stating they were the Nile, the Yellow River, the Tigris and the Euphrates. He listed the Chinese river instead of Ganges or Indus, which were then more commonly identified with the biblical river of Pishon (Delumeau 2000:45), because he had seen the mighty Yellow River with an abundance of gold and silk on its banks with his own eyes (*Kronika Marignolova*:497). Marignola mentions in several other places in his chronicle that he came close to paradise, namely during his description of a Buddhist monastery under Adam's Peak. He describes the mountain as "perhaps after Paradise the highest mountain on the face of the earth" (Yule 1866b:358) and as a place where Adam first descended upon his expulsion from paradise.

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[18] Henry Yule identified this monument with a certain column which was washed away by the sea in 1866 (Yule 1866b:344–345, note 2).

Footprints on a slope of Adam's Peak, a symbol of Buddha in Buddhist arts, Marignola interpreted as Adam's footprints (*Kronika Marignolova*:500), as did the Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/72) (Ibn Battúta 2005:8). Marignola continues to describe a house that once belonged to Adam, according to local Buddhist monks whom Marignola met there and who believed that this elevated place was spared the Flood — which Marignola dismisses as conflicting with the Scripture (*Kronika Marignolova*:500). The notion that paradise was located on a hill or another elevated place in order to evade the Flood was common to a range of other authors (Delumeau 2000:50–54). This episode is one of the points at which Marignola points out discrepancies between the Scripture and his own experience. Yet, he is satisfied with merely stating these discrepancies, without trying to explain or reconcile them.

While it may appear that Marignola "travelled with the Bible in his hand," as suggested by Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken (1967:298), his own observations are not without merit as they provide an abundance of detailed information.[19] Marignola used the ground uncovered by the Bible and the teachings of the Church Fathers and filled the gaps with his own findings, including a detailed description, following immediately his chapter on paradise, of the local flora and various fruits, including jackfruit ("inside it has a pulp of surpassing flavor, with the sweetness of honey and of the best Italian melon" [Yule 1866b:363; Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:501]). After this digression Marignola returns to his main narrative to discuss the diet of Adam and Eve and to conclude that, on their expulsion from paradise, the biblical couple lived on bananas, coconuts, jackfruit and other tropical fruits (*Kronika Marignolova*:501). Marignola reiterates the view that until the Flood people did not eat meat,[20] "nor to this day do those men use it who call themselves the children of Adam" — meaning Buddhist monks, whose life he then depicts with unconcealed interest and amiability (Yule 1866b:367; Lat. *Kronika Marignolova*:502).

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[19] In Marignola's account we can thus find the earliest mention of the existence of the cult of St. George in South India (*Kronika Marignolova*:496) and many other details about the life of the local population.

[20] The opinion that people before the Flood did not consume flesh is based on *Gn* 9, 1–4, where God gives all the animals to Noah and his sons.

These and similar examples raise the question whether the theme of earthly paradise was in fact in itself a key element of Marignola's narrative. Earthly paradise obviously has its central role in the biblical history of humankind; but its association with a concrete territory in the vicinity of a place visited by Marignola himself provided the author with a convenient pretext for his observations on tropical vegetation and the pious locals, who would be otherwise difficult to "smuggle" into a chronicle of primarily Bohemian history. The author did not cover emerging contradictions; he contrasted his own observations about Asians with traditional European beliefs and did not even shy away from challenging the views of European philosophers and earlier authors, as I will show later in this paper.

If we summarize the different travelers' notions of the earthly paradise "in the East", we will find rather dissimilar approaches. Marignola locates paradise in the vicinity of Ceylon and uses the motif to further his own travel writing within his history work. Jordanus removes paradise to India Tertia, which in his narrative represents an amalgam of traditional *topoi* and which is clearly distinct from the more realistic passages devoted to India Minor (north-western India) and India Major (southern India and countries further to the east). Neither Rubruck and Carpini, who were sent as envoys to Mongolia, nor Odoric and Polo, who focused their attention primarily on China, say anything about paradise. Only Montecorvino, who travelled through a major part of Asia, including both India and China, admits that he enquired about paradise, but with no success (*Sinica Franciscana*:342).

If Marignola was the only one of these travelers to testify to the existence of paradise in the East, what was the treatment of the empire of Prester John, which was believed to adjoin paradise?

The Bygone Glory of Prester John's Empire

In the 12th century, a legend spread across Europe of an empire ruled by a mighty Christian king and priest named John and located somewhere in the East, close to paradise. An important source of the imagery associated with this mythical empire was a letter written in 1170, whose author was believed to be Prester John himself and which was addressed to the Byzantine emperor, Manuel I Komnenos (Zarncke

1879:909–924).[21] The letter described the empire as extraordinarily astonishing, inhabited by strange creatures, fertile and rich in precious stones. The subjects of Prester John allegedly included the Amazons, Brahmans, the ten Lost Tribes of Israel and a range of other remarkable creatures. John was presented as a Christian ruler possessing a combination of secular and spiritual power. The letter astounded European rulers and incited attempts to establish contacts with this emperor; Latin Christians hoped John could help them fight Muslims. The background of the legend's origin is rather complicated,[22] but the character of Prester John was inspired by a real person and the legend itself is associated with Qara-Khitan victory over the Seljük Sultan Sanjar (Jackson 2005: 20–21).

The legend gained considerable prominence and was quoted by various sources until the 16th century. The mythical empire's localization frequently varied between India, Central Asia and Ethiopia. In the times of the Franciscan and Dominican missions, retrieval of information about this empire and, if possible, establishment of contacts complied with the European power interests of that time. Unlike paradise, whose supposed existence in the East lacked any urgency for European travelers since it was known to be inaccessible to humans, the empire of Prester John was a hot topic. Still, compared with imagery circulating within Europe, travel writing of that time marks a considerable decline in this mythical country's prestige, depriving the mythical empire of its original aura and describing Prester John no longer as the powerful "king of Indians," but as a local prince temporarily ruling a territory somewhere in Central Asia.

Ever since the emergence of the legend, there was one controversy about Prester John's empire, namely the widespread belief that John was a Nestorian. In a brief exposition of his rise, Rubruck writes that John was originally a Naiman Nestorian shepherd, but after the death of the khan the Nestorians there started calling him King John and

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[21] A partial translation of this letter into English is also included in Delumeau (2000:71–83).

[22] The work of Zarncke (1897) consists of an edition of a number of important documents. For an overview of the sources see e.g. von den Brincken (1973: 382–412); see also Jackson (1997) and Baum (1999).

"they used to tell of him ten times more than the truth" (Dawson 1955:122; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:206).

Nestorians of Central Asia had spread impressive reports of King John, but when Rubruck was travelling through what was believed to be John's country, no one knew anything about Prester John, save for a few Nestorians. Rubruck reports that this John had a brother named Unc, who lived three weeks from John in the town of Karakorum; Unc had abandoned Christianity to become an idolater and supported likeminded priests (*Sinica Franciscana*:206–207). Rubruck locates Prester John's territory to the southern foothills of the Tarbagatai mountain ridge, the place of Güyük Khan's encampment (Jackson 1990:122, note 6).

Montecorvino also placed Prester John's empire in Central Asia. In one of his epistles Montecorvino reports that he converted a Nestorian king named George, one of Prester John's descendents, to Catholicism (*Sinica Franciscana*:348) but makes no mention of the empire's legendary riches and power.

Carpini only mentions Prester John in his description of the rise to power of the Mongol empire: Genghis Khan is said to have sent an army to India Major, but its ruler, King John, faced the khan's army and dispersed it (*Sinica Franciscana*:59). Carpini does not say whether John was a Nestorian or not and makes no mention of John's riches nor of visiting his empire himself.

Drawing on his own travel experience, Odoric makes comments similarly skeptical to those made by Rubruck:

> I arrived at the country of Prester John but as regards him not one hundredth part is true of what is told of him as if it were undeniable. His principal city is called Tozan, and chief city though it is, Vicenza would be reckoned its superior. He has, however, many other cities under him, and by a standing compact always receives as wife the Great Khan's daughter. (Yule 1866a:146–147; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:483)

Close ties between the khan and Prester John are also mentioned by Polo, who states that John's empire used to be so powerful that the Mongols themselves paid him tribute, but later they rebelled against him and freed themselves from his rule by crossing a desert and heading north (*The Travels I*:226–227). When Genghis Khan became the

ruler of the Mongols, Polo continues, he asked Prester John for permission to marry his daughter, which John refused; in a subsequent battle Prester John was defeated and his descendents now rule his country under the Mongols' control (*The Travels I*:244–245).

In Jordanus's account, Prester John's empire is, similarly to paradise, made part of the mythical India Tertia, while John is described as the king of Ethiopia (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134). Marignola too places John's empire in Ethiopia without providing any further details (*Kronika Marignolova*:497).

In these travelogues, the original legend of a powerful empire underwent a major transformation. Without questioning the country's existence as such, the authors remained immune to its earlier fabulous descriptions and saw it as devoid of its supposed splendor, either because it had already vanished or had always been a mere legend. King John only preserves his majesty in Jordanus's *Mirabilia*, in a section devoted to India Tertia; Marignola mentions John's empire without further details. None of the travelers make a single mention of Prester John's empire being located anywhere near the heavenly paradise.

Delumeau points out that the restraint adopted by these travelers in their accounts of Prester John's mythical land still did not prevent a further dissemination of the legend in the European literature (Delumeau 2000:84–86). The way the missionaries treated the motif of Prester John's empire was rather characteristic, as we will also see later: While never questioning the country's existence, they never gave up their intentions to describe everything the way they had seen it with their own eyes.

Human Monsters — Real or Mythical?

If these travelogues transformed the original image of a powerful empire to that of a province controlled by the khan of Mongolia, what then happened to the monsters listed among Prester John's alleged subjects? (Zarncke 1879:911) The idea that the East was home to various human monsters dates back to classical antiquity; medieval authors picked up the thread and their accounts also were reflected in the fine

arts.[23] These peculiar humanlike creatures of the East were believed to include Skiapods, Blemmyae, Pygmies, Dog-heads, Panotti and others. More comprehensive lists can be found especially in the works of Ctesias of Knidos (5th/4th century BCE) or Megasthenes (4th century BCE), frequently quoted by Strabo and Arrian.[24] In medieval Europe monsters mainly inhabited the pages of encyclopedic works, such as the *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville, *De Universo* by Rabanus Maurus or *Liber de Natura Rerum* by Thomas of Cantimpré. Monsters also appeared in epics, most notably about Alexander the Great, about the travels of Ernest the Brave, margrave of Austria,[25] or about the adventures of Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony (cf. Ott 1998). These accounts raised a range of questions, primarily concerning the extent to which these monsters could be considered human, whether they were eligible for salvation and what was the cause of their disfigurement.[26] An emerging issue within the medieval discourse on human monsters was the nature of their otherness in relation to people as well as their position in the world order.

Medieval travelogues did not avoid the monster theme, but instead of exploring the theological implications of their supposed existence they strove to either verify their authenticity or explain the origin of the monster tales. The travelers' findings were again less fascinating than the European accounts of monsters that were not based on direct experience.

When enquiring about monster tribes, Rubruck was told that none had ever been seen. His subsequent comment, that this "makes me wonder very much if there is any truth in the story" (Dawson 1955: 170; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:269),[27] is ambiguous and could either mean that Rubruck found the information hard to believe, or that he

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23) One of the best known architectural depictions of monsters can be found in the narthex of the church of St. Mary Magdalene in Vézelay (around 1130).

24) Regarding Megasthenes and his work see Karttunen (1997:70–76).

25) *Herzog Ernst* is a German epic from the end of the 12th century.

26) On this issue see Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XVI,8.

27) *"Quesivi de monstris sive de monstruosis hominibus de quibus narrrat Ysidorus et Solinus. Ipsi dicebant michi quod nunquam viderant talia, de quo multum miramur si verum sit."*

had always doubted the monsters' existence anyway (Jackson 1990: 201, note 5).

While Rubruck paid little attention to human monsters, Carpini discussed the issue in his chapter on the history of the Mongol expansion to the territories of neighboring nations. He does not comment on the monsters' authenticity, but merely states that he heard about them from locals (*Sinica Franciscana*:74),[28] who told him that during an expansion to the north Mongols met Dog-heads, Parossits, as well as with people with oxen's hooves and dogs' faces and Skiapods (*Sinica Franciscana*:60, 73–75).

While we can find all these tribes of human monsters, including Dog-heads, listed in Pliny the Elder's encyclopedia, it would be too simple to regard Carpini's monster passages as mere derivatives of older European sources. A comparison of Carpini's account with Benedict's *Hystoria Tartarorum* reveals some surprising elements, which support Carpini's claim that he based his description of monsters on Mongolian sources rather than on the traditional European imagery. *Hystoria Tartarorum* describes the same monster tribes as Carpini's travelogue; besides Parossits both accounts mention a tribe of creatures with oxen hooves and dog's faces. Carpini calls them with the Mongol name *u<co>rcolon*, adding that this translates into Latin as *bovis pedes* ("ox's feet"), which Denis Sinor has described as a faithful rendition of the Mongolian expression (Sinor 1970). *Hystoria Tartarorum* calls these creatures *nochoyterim*, which is in turn an equivalent of *cynocephalus* ("dog's head") (*Hystoria Tartarorum*:16).

Klaus Karttunen has demonstrated through a comparison of ancient Greek and Indian sources that images of mythical beings with similar features are not restricted to a single cultural environment (1989, 1997). Hence it cannot be ruled out that the aforementioned passages on monsters by Carpini and Benedict drew on both the European and the Asian mythology.

Dog-heads, humanlike beings with dogs' heads or faces, were among the most frequently mentioned monster tribes; their alleged locations included various parts of Asia from the continent's northern corners

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28) *"…ubi invenerunt quedam monstra, ut nobis firmiter dicebatur… quedam etiam monstra, ut nobis dicebatur pro certo,… invenerunt…"*

down to the Nicobar Islands. In a chapter about this archipelago in the Indian Ocean, Odoric writes that local men and women have dogs' faces, worship an ox as their god, are brave warriors but eat their captives; their ruler is just and travelling in his country is safe (*Sinica Franciscana*:452–453). Polo locates a tribe of Dog-heads to the neighboring Andaman Islands and describes them as cruel cannibals, whose women are beautiful, but men have the faces of dogs (*The Travels II*: 309–310, note 1).

These two narratives about people with dogs' faces in the area of the Nicobar and Andaman Islands are not isolated, as similar accounts are given by other travelers, including Ibn Battuta (Ibn Battúta 2005:272).[29] Dog-heads are the only monster tribe described by Jordanus, who locates them in India Tertia, as he does systematically with all other mythical elements (*Mirabilia Descripta*:137).

Odoric also met Pygmies in China: "These pygmies, both male and female, are famous for their small size. But they have rational souls like ourselves." (Yule 1866a:122; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:468–469).

Jordanus too mentions a small people living in Java, but does not label them as monsters; he says they are as small as three- or four-year-old children, all covered with fur and living on wooded hills; they are not many (*Mirabilia Descripta*:126). The interesting thing about these two quotations is that the authors classify Pygmies as *people*, not *monsters*, by which they completely dismiss earlier theological debates over their origin and nature.

Marignola gives more space to human monsters and their significance. Similarly to his treatment of paradise, he tries to address the discrepancy between traditional legends and his own experience. In his chronicle Marignola reports about physically deformed individuals (although he encounters these in Europe rather than in Asia)[30] and

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29) Cf. *The Travels II*:311–312, note 1. According to some travelers this motif occurs also in the local mythology. According to a local narrative, the first inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands resulted from the marriage between a man and a female dog, or between a dog and a woman (Kloss 1903:229).

30) Marignola mentions a girl with fur all over her body, who came from Tuscany, and a child from the same region which was born with two heads and lived for seven days (*Kronika Marignolova*:508). He also mentions meeting a hermaphrodite (*Kronika Marignolova*:510).

interprets their disfigurement as a manifestation of God's will, meant to warn people and make them fearful and grateful that they themselves are not similarly deformed (*Kronika Marignolova*:509).

Marignola says that, although he travelled through a significant portion of the world and enquired about monster tribes, he could not find any evidence of their existence; he himself believes they do not exist (*Kronika Marignolova*:509). In subsequent passages Marignola describes, with the passion of an ethnographer, peculiar nations he met, but classifies them as people rather than monsters. He reports meeting a giant in India, who was so tall Marignola only reached to the waist of the giant's ugly, stinking figure. These giants reportedly live hidden in forests, walk around naked and are difficult to spot; they produce various things and grow grains and many other crops, which they sell by placing them on the road and hiding nearby before traders' arrival; traders then take the goods away and leave the corresponding sum on the road (*Kronika Marignolova*:509).[31]

Marignola never applies the term "monster" to tribes or nations he met in person, but only to physically deformed individuals (whose deformation he interprets as God's warning or as an ominous sign) and to strange animals (*Kronika Marignolova*:510). He expresses doubts about the existence of monster tribes previously described in the European literature and attempts to explain the origin of these myths through rational constructions. Rather remarkable is his explanation of the myth of Skiapods, who were widely believed to use their single large foot to protect themselves from sunburn while lying on their backs. Marignola argues that this was a tale made up by poets and inspired by a habit among Indians to carry parasols — similar to one Marignola himself had at home in Florence (*Kronika Marignolova*:509). The Italian traveler concludes that mythical monsters do not exist and that their images in European literature have to be understood as myths born out of a peculiar interpretation of reality.

Montecorvino showed less effort to come up with improvised explanations of mythical motifs associated with the East. In one of his letters he merely notes with a hint of despair:

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31) Similar practices in conducting trade have been recorded also in recent times (Reichert 1992:42, note 185).

> As regards men of a marvellous kind, to wit, men of a different make from the rest of us, and as regards animals of like description, and as regards the Terrestrial Paradise, much have I asked and sought, but nothing have I been able to discover. (Yule 1866a:213; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:342)

The examples above suggest that European travelers to Asia in the 13th and 14th century had an ambition to confirm or refute the authenticity of traditional images of human monsters. In doing so, they used their own observations of reality to rectify or explain many mythical motifs. Aboriginal tribes that the travelers encountered in person are never described as monsters, but rather as people of different appearance. "Real" monsters were thus restricted to the sphere of legends — not only the European ones, but also local tales, as is evident from the use of Mongolian names for monsters described by Mongols to the author of *Hystoria Tartarorum*.

Traditional Imagery vs. Empirical Knowledge — a Medieval, or Modern Conflict?

Several conclusions can be drawn based on the examples above. The European medieval travelogues to some extent reflect traditional imagery of the East and attempt to find answers to questions regarding the nature of legendary phenomena. That, however, does not mean that these authors were unable to also perceive reality around them and supplement or rectify earlier knowledge. Rubruck did not hesitate to dispute Isidore's earlier claim that the Caspian Sea is a sea gulf by pointing out that it is rather a sea or a large lake and that it is possible to travel all around it in four months (*Sinica Franciscana*:211). Marignola similarly did not shy away from rectifying earlier erroneous beliefs, whether they were related to the world's geography or to the way in which pepper was grown.[32]

The proportion of mythical elements and realistic description obviously differs between individual authors, partly depending on the

[32] He reported that he crossed a desert, which had previously been considered impassable (*Kronika Marignolova*:495). It was commonly believed that pepper turned black as a result of burning, but Marignola pointed out that the dark color resulted from drying in the sunshine (*Kronika Marignolova*:496).

purpose with which the reports were compiled. Carpini's and Rubruck's works reflect their effort to conscientiously and systematically describe Mongols and assess their power ambitions as well as the degree of threat they posed for Europe. Carpini devotes long passages to the Mongols' positive and negative characteristics in connection with the khan's frequent power claims over Europe, which were at that time viewed as a threat to Christendom. He gives a detailed description of the methods of Mongolian warfare and proposes ways Europeans could best resist this enemy on the battlefield. Carpini explains his effort to deliver accurate and true information by the following quotation from the Bible (*Prov* 1:5): "A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels."[33] In this Foucaultian observation Carpini points out that he strives for maximum accuracy since accurate knowledge is the basis of power (cf. Rachewiltz 1971:105).

Rubruck, whose account is a true *itinerarium* of countries he visited and nations and customs he encountered there, pays less attention to Mongols' warfare than to their everyday life as well as to their neighboring nations. Yet even he comments on Christianity's chances in a potential military conflict (*Sinica Franciscana*:331). It is obvious that both authors treated their simultaneous assignment in diplomacy and espionage with much responsibility.

Odoric, free of the urgent political and military objectives of his two predecessors, did not write his report to identify an enemy and his weaknesses, but to simply enlighten the reader on issues that Odoric found extraordinary and noteworthy: "Albeit many other stories of sundry kinds concerning the customs and peculiarities of different parts of this world have been related by a variety of persons, . . ., I, Friar Odoric of Friuli, can truly rehearse many great marvels which I did hear and see" (Yule 1866a:43; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:413).

Marignola justified his travel writing digressions from the central historical theme by a need to liven up the serious subject matter with entertaining yet beneficial stories (*Kronika Marignolova*:499). It is in

[33] "*. . . credimus enim quod [non]nulla meliora et utiliora cogitabunt et facient illi qui ad hoc prudentes sunt et instructi, poterunt attamen per illa que superius dicta sunt, habere de eis occasionem et materiam cogitandi; scriptum est enim: audiens [sapiens] sapientior erit et intelligens gubernacula possidebit.*" (*Sinica Franciscana*:101).

his chronicle that we can best observe the remarkable dialogue between traditional imagery and personal experience, which leads the author from reflections on the legendary to the description of the real. Marignola intersperses his presentation of biblical history with stories and episodes that demonstrate his observational skills as well as his interest in the countries he visited. He contrasts information related to him by locals with the wording of the Scripture and points out discrepancies where appropriate, without ruling out one or the other version (*Kronika Marignolova*:500). While interweaving and comparing traditional imagery with his own observations, Marignola consistently differentiated between the two by always either crediting his source[34] or by stating that a piece of knowledge was based on his own experience.

All these accounts also display an effort to rationally explain legendary elements; subjected to the travelers' detailed scrutiny, legendary images are gradually being displaced by a somewhat less fantastic reality. That is especially the case of the empire of Prester John, which preserved its name but lost its luster in these accounts. Similarly, Marignola's presentation of human monsters replaces their alleged monstrosity with mere difference.

An original solution of the discrepancies between traditional imagery and personal experience is offered by Jordanus. He is primarily interested in that which is unusual, but his interest ebbs once the unusual crosses the limits of believability (*Mirabilia Descripta*:108).[35] In Greece he found almost nothing worth recording (*Mirabilia Descripta*:104); the further east he travels, the more detailed his presentation. Still, this does not mean he moved to the sphere of fantasy; on the contrary, he was the first European to record a number of interesting factual details.[36] While neither Scripture nor the Church authorities feature explicitly in his travelogue, Jordanus shows a strong desire to come to terms with the legendary *topoi* traditionally located in the East. Although the reality he witnessed was in itself so astonishing that

34) Apart from Scripture, Marignola often refers also to Augustine's *De civitate Dei*.

35) *"Alia autem narratione ad mirabili in hac Maiori Armenia minime vidi."* (*Mirabilia Descripta*:108).

36) These concern especially passages describing Buddhist monasteries in the Mongolian region (*Mirabilia Descripta*:138) and Parsi funeral rites (*Mirabilia Descripta*:118).

it could have been the sole subject of his account, he did not leave out mythical motifs, but instead he locates them in India Tertia. Jordanus emphasizes that he did not visit the region himself, but heard about it from trustworthy persons (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134).[37] Hence he located legendary motifs in a designated geographical space to distinguish them from descriptions based on his own experience.

An example of this strategy, adopted not only by Jordanus, is the French Dominican's treatment of the unicorn. He first mentions the mythic animal in a chapter on India Minor, where he lists the region's rich fauna and adds: "There is also another animal, which is called *Rhinoceros*, as big as a horse, having one horn long and twisted, but it is not the *unicorn*." (Catalani 2005:18; Lat. *Mirabilia Descripta*:116).[38] Real unicorns live in Jordanus's mythical India Tertia, along with dragons and rukh birds: "In this India are the true unicorns, like a great horse, having only one horn in the forehead, very thick and sharp, but short, and quite solid, marrow and all." (Catalani 2005:42; Lat. *Mirabilia Descripta*:134).[39]

This is a truly artful solution to the discrepancies between traditional imagery and the author's personal experience. Jordanus did not fail to realistically describe what he himself witnessed (a rhino is not a unicorn), but at the same did not disappoint his readers by depriving them of some famous *topoi* they may have expected. The author thus avoided the same unpleasant situation in which Polo found himself due to his strong sense of realism. Unlike Jordanus, the Venetian traveler disregarded the reader's traditional dreamlike imagery and instead presented things the way they were: Unicorns live in Sumatra, have bison's coat, elephants' legs and a thick black horn in the middle of the forehead; their weapon is not their horn, but their thorn-covered tongue; their head resembles that of a wild boar and they always carry it low to the ground; they like lazing in mud (*The Travels II*:285). No

37) *"De Tertia Yndia dicam, quod non vidi eo, quod ibi non fui, verum a fide dignis audivi mirabilia multa…"* (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134).

38) "*Est etiam aliud animal, quod vocatur rinocerunta, magnum ad modum equi, unum cornu habens in capite longum et tortuosum; non tamen est unicornis.*" (*Mirabilia Descripta*:116).

39) "*In ista Yndia sunt unicornes veri, magni ad modum equi, cornu habentes in fronte unum tantum grossissimum et acutum, sed breve, totum solidum, etiam et (an sine?) medulla.*" (*Mirabilia Descripta*:134).

wonder that Polo's travelogue, sometimes called *The Million*, was believed to contain a million lies — as every child knows that *that* is not what the unicorn looks like.

Umberto Eco uses this example of the unicorn to demonstrate the medieval understanding of realism: the concept remains, but its content is completely transformed (Eco 1998). In the same way John Prester's empire becomes a Mongol province and human monsters become people of different appearance.

In view of these conclusions it seems appropriate to ask whether the concepts of *personal experience* and *traditional imagery* are the most suitable for grasping and deciphering the message of the medieval travelers. I believe that the strategies the missionaries adopted to describe a previously unknown reality can be very usefully expounded from a different angle. The sociologist Karlheinz Ohle has proposed that there are two types of the Other, namely the "normative Other" and the "cognitive Other." Normative is that Other which is being directly experienced; its familiarization depends on the observer's subjective predispositions; the discovery and recognition of this type of the Other is followed by a systematic description of the previously unknown parts of the world with the help of structures familiar to the observer. Cognitive is then that Other which we do not familiarize through direct perception, but the existence of which we are aware of or which we assume (Ohle 1978; cf. Jandesek 1993).

In line with this theory, the process of reconsidering traditional wisdom when faced with reality, as we have witnessed it in the European medieval travel writing, could be understood as a shift in perception from a cognitive Other, previously unavailable to direct experience, to a normative Other, with which the observer is in a direct contact and which he or she tries to apprehend. In this way *otherness* is gradually transformed into *difference*, which can be apprehended and described relative to the world the observer already knows. In this way, the traveler to an unknown land can fittingly enlighten the reader even on completely new, unheard-of phenomena. A telling example is Odoric's description of a sand desert which is compared to a sea:

> Now that sea is a wondrous thing, and right perilous. And there were none of us who desired to enter on that sea. For it is all of dry sand without the slightest moisture. And it shifteth as the sea doth when in storm, now hither, now thither,

> and as it shifteth it maketh waves in like manner as the sea doth; so that countless people travelling thereon have been overwhelmed and drowned and buried in those sands. For when blown about and buffeted by the winds, they are raised into hills, now in this place, now in that, according as the wind chanceth to blow. (Yule 1866a:52; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:419)

A major difference between a cognitive Other and a normative Other is that a normative Other can be studied, especially through comparison with familiar phenomena and through identification of differences, a process that often surprised the missionaries as much as the inhabitants of Asia. Such a surprising encounter with a normative Other then allows the observer to realize that what he or she has regarded as a set of universal habits or views is in fact a cultural construct that is as unobvious to the Other as the Other's habits and views are to the observer. A typical example of this is Rubruck's first audience at Möngke Khan: In an effort to represent European monkhood in its best light, the Flemish emissary shaved his beard; as a result, local Nestorians at first mistook him for a *tuin*, a Buddhist monk (*Sinica Franciscana*:248).[40] Such situations then serve to challenge what would otherwise seem as an obviousness and universality of the meanings of symbols commonly used in "our" world.

Which Tradition? Whose Empirical Knowledge?

These unexpected misunderstandings, combined with responses to local legends as rendered for example by the *Hystoria Tartarorum*, point to yet another, so far little discussed issue: In the context of the theory of Orientalism, the East is an object of "orientalization", i.e. of western imagery and interpretation. Yet to regard the East as a mere object would be somewhat oversimplified. The inhabitants of medieval Asia were not merely idle objects of European scrutiny and interpretation; rather, their narrations and behavior largely shaped the European accounts of the East. When studying the general role of travelers' accounts of medieval Asia and their various sources (traditional myths,

[40] "*Et hoc querebant quia feceramus barbas nostras radi, de consilio ductoris nostri, ut apparemus coram Chan secundum morem patrie nostre. Unde ipsi credebant quod essemus tuini, hoc est ydolatre.*" (*Sinica Franciscana*:248).

direct observation, etc.), we should not forget about the part played by locals on whose accounts the European travelers often relied and which they further interpreted. The travelers' traditional imagery may even have intermingled with locals' narrations potentially containing local mythical motifs (cf. Rachewiltz 1971:22–23). This makes the study of medieval missionaries' travel writing even more complex and new factors enter the relationship between traditional imagery and personal experience.

First of all, this raises the question of the extent to which the missionaries and locals were able to understand each other (cf. Richard 1977). Latin travelogues, including but not limited to the *Hystoria Tartarorum*, adopted a number of words from oriental languages, if often in a more or less garbled form.[41] The linguistic and communicational aspects of these encounters would deserve a separate study. Right now it will suffice to say that a number of explicit comments made by the medieval authors reveal a lot about the communication with natives. The most detailed notes on this issue come from Rubruck, who in his text often complains about his interpreters' incompetence, which he blames on their considerable predilection for alcohol (*Sinica Franciscana*:191, 196, 240, 251, 255 etc.).

At the same time we cannot ignore another aspect of the mutual interaction between the missionaries and the locals, which is humor. As Karttunen pointed out when discussing Megasthenes' report on India, it is possible that the locals may have made up some of the most fantastic stories and related them to the travelers just for the travelers' or their own amusement (Karttunen 1997:80). (This after all happens from time to time even to today's anthropologists.) We will probably never be able to tell with certainty when the locals were just joking, but the awareness of the potential influence of humor may at least spare the scholar some sleepless nights he or she may otherwise spend trying to interpret some fantastic motifs.

[41] One such attempt at recording a local word is the use of the term *tuin*, designating Buddhists, which is in fact an accurate transcription of the Turkish word *toyïn*, which is in turn a loan word from Chinese *daoren* — "man of the way." Cf. Clauson (1972:569). For this information I am indebted to Prof. Samuel N. C. Lieu.

These examples demonstrate that the Other did play a certain active role, often ignored by contemporary scholars, in the perception and interpretation of the East.

Last but not least, the study of the medieval accounts of Asia is often affected by contemporary scholars' expectations and ideas about all the things that the medieval traveler should have recorded. However, we have to realize that the travelers themselves did in no way pretend that their accounts were complete or perfect. Carpini, whose account displays a refined sense for systematic and exhaustive description, admits at several points that he does not know further details (*Sinica Franciscana*:66, 67), or that he is incapable of describing certain phenomena: "To conclude briefly about this country: it is large, but otherwise as we saw with our own eyes, for during five and a half months we travelled about it, it is more wretched than I can possibly say." (Dawson 1955:6; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:32). He also admitted a lack of suitable vocabulary for the description of previously unknown phenomena in a passage on the Mongolian clothing: "The caps they have are different from those of other nations, but I am unable to describe what they are like in such a way as you would understand" (Dawson 1955:8; Lat. *Sinica Franciscana*:35).

Odoric frequently points out that he is leaving out many facts from his narration, as if his report was only an outline of sorts for a later, more detailed account, the execution of which was prevented by the author's death. He has several ways to explain the reasons for and nature of these omissions. The most prosaic explanation is that to describe everything he saw would simply take too much time (*Sinica Franciscana*:445)[42] and would still be only a partial representation of the whole reality. A more serious reason for brevity was Odoric's disapproval of some local habits, which seemed to him better not to describe (*Sinica Franciscana*:441, 444). (Fortunately for us, he often did not abide by this resolve.) The author also admits omitting many good and useful details (*Sinica Franciscana*:447, 455 etc.). Towards the end of his account Odoric says he kept some phenomena for himself simply because they were too unbelievable (*Sinica Franciscana*:494).[43]

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42) "*Et sic de aliis que in ista insula reperiuntur, que etiam nimis longum esset scribere.*" (*Sinica Franciscana*:445).

43) "*Multa etiam alia ego dimisi que scribi non feci, cum ipsa quasi incredibilia apud aliquos viderentur, nisi illa propriis oculis perspexissent.*" (*Sinica Franciscana*:494).

Despite making the peculiar and even the unbelievable the main subject of his account, Jordanus often admits something is so amazing that he cannot describe it (*Mirabilia Descripta*:14, 118, 120, 130 etc.). Marignola too complains about a lack of words to express all the "glory of the world" that he saw at the imperial court in Kambalyk (today's Beijing) (*Kronika Marignolova*:496). His other comments only hint at all the other things he could have described had he been writing a travelogue rather than a chronicle of Bohemian history.

That the medieval missionaries did not record some phenomena which seem completely impossible to overlook to today's scholar does not necessarily undermine the authenticity of their accounts. This is especially true for the missing mention of the Great Wall of China in *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Wood 1995)[44] or for Odoric's frequently discussed failure to record the Chinese custom of binding females' feet. These and other omissions are certainly a valid subject for contemporary research. Yet the scholar should beware of making the methodological mistake of comparing his or her own ideas about what is worth recording with what the medieval author actually did record. Doing so would mean the researcher is incorrectly applying present criteria to texts that are in this case hundreds of years old.

People today can hardly imagine the situation of the medieval Franciscan and Dominican missionaries, who were entering a space that was virtually unexplored by Europeans and yet filled with products of human imagination. Despite this difficulty, the authors resisted the influence of traditional legends and images and faithfully described the reality that to them was often no less unbelievable and astonishing than the initial expectations.

I believe that the process of familiarizing Asia that we can see unfold in the reports of medieval missionaries should not be seen as some competition between direct experience and traditional legends, but rather as a significant shift from contemplations of an *unknown Other* towards the study and description of a *difference*. This shift above all required the authors' ability to reconsider their original expectations and to perceive reality in new and fresh ways, largely independent of the traditional imagery. The medieval travelers showed their

[44] Wood's opinion that Polo actually did not visit China was refuted by Rachewiltz (1997).

willingness to revise the content of traditional concepts, such as that of Prester John's empire, while also pointing out that beyond the borders of the then known world there was still a lot newness to discover and describe. Hence Odoric's attempt to win the readers' trust by the following comment from the beginning of his report:

> Nor, indeed, could I myself have believed these things, had I not heard them with my own ears or seen the like myself. (Yule 1866a:43)

Precisely this ability to be astonished by reality and open to its perception is the first major step in the process of studying the Other. The effort, physical as well as intellectual, that medieval emissaries to Asia exerted to meet this objective, is without doubt worthy of our admiration as well as further scholarly interest.

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