

**Dante, Sanudo and Polo.
From the Crusades to the Perpetuation of Early Modern Descriptions of the East as
a Literary Genre.**

**by
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My research focuses on the literary texts of the first half of the fourteenth century, such as those by Marco Polo and Odorico of Pordenone, which opened the path to the geographical and cultural exploration of the East in Early Modern Europe. In less than fifty years, a considerable number of innovative and successful travel accounts marked a sharp rupture with the previous thousand years of indifference towards the empirical description of Eastern lands provided either by Arab geographies, Greek and Roman cosmographies or even the accounts of European travelers to Asia such as Benjamin of Tudela in the twelfth century and John of Pian Carpini and William of Rubruck in the thirteenth century.

Two analytical approaches have predominated and reached disparate conclusions during the last two centuries in the pursuit of further understanding of the outgrowth and success of the fourteenth-century travelers' *Descriptions of the Indies*. From the vantage point of comparative literature, these texts are considered outstanding examples of creative writing and even seen as the ancestors of the modern western novel. This new literary creation seems to have been incorporated into the older traditions while at the same time marking a departure from some of their archetypes by showing a remarkable preference for the first person narrative. In doing this, the goal was to convey not only images and emotions, but the pleasure of experiencing parallel universes. Through these writings, the readers are made to see a new world and uncover something about themselves. Such narrative strategies were not wholly dissimilar from – although much less sophisticated than – those that brought immortality to other fourteenth-century writers such as Dante, Boccaccio, Lull and Chaucer.

In sharp contrast, experts in the history of scientific writing have labeled this phenomenon as a primitive one. These texts are commonly depicted as inaccurate, defective, and full of fantasy. In the last analysis they are seen disdainfully as medieval and as “a lost opportunity for science.” It is certainly revealing that the more the fourteenth-century literature of travel to Asia is devoid of contacts with the socio-political context, the more esteem was bestowed upon it. As a clear illustration of this point, the travels of Mandeville were proved more than a hundred years ago to be a forgery, consisting of a set of pieces extracted from other works, wisely rewritten, and cleverly put together by the mysterious Sir John. Ironically, this departure from reality is in part responsible for the increase in the literary status of Mandeville's work. At least, it resulted in a less harsh judgment of this work than of other fourteenth-century *Descriptions of the Indies* written by real travelers. From the historical perspective, the main value credited to these texts is the disclosure of the individual's extreme hardships in traveling to the remotest parts of the medieval world. However, the written reports themselves ultimately are not regarded as an autonomous field for inquiry since they are considered inconsistent manifestations of isolated epic deeds. They are commonly held to be an outgrowth of vague curiosity and are rarely weighed heavily for their achievements on the level of language and scientific practice.

My own research has aimed to find the historical foundations of 1300s *Descriptions of the Indies*. Along this line, archival work has shown that the dramatic increase in the number of treatises – none of which more famous than Marino Sanudo's *Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis* – composed after the definitive loss of the Holy Land in 1291 represented fertile ground for the advent of a new European literary product, which was engendered by merchants and mendicants traveling toward the Far East. Not only the particular spatial conception of the treatises on how to recover the Holy Land – the enlargement towards the Far East of the field of action of the crusade – but also the rise of the lore of merchants, mendicants, mercenaries and renegades, provided a suitable framework for the development of the coetaneous *Descriptions of the Indies*. In the four decades after the fall of Acre, the need for accurate knowledge about the internal dynamics that ruled the Indian Ocean and the vast Mongol empire was a strategic necessity introduced in the highest political circles by the numerous treatises that were composed by eye-witnesses, men with experience overseas, mercenaries, merchants and other members of the emergent social strata of fourteenth-century Europe. By so doing, the apostles of the new crusade provided European elites with fundamental keys for decoding the specific language used by Latin emigrants and travelers coming back from the still Farthest East.

The approach to Marco Polo's text in relation to crusade ideology, as I argue, alters considerably the previous literary and historical analytical perspectives on the fourteenth-century travel literature to the Indies. Literary analysis has not fully considered the weight of actual and verifiable data in the inception of these texts. The clinging to verisimilitude shown by the *Descriptions of the Indies*, in addition to displaying a new and superior sensibility towards "the other", is also intimately linked to the specific compromises contracted between the informant and his intended audience. Indeed, the multiple layers of language displayed by these texts are not simply narrative experiments purveying a new and revolutionary sensibility confronted - if only implicitly - with tradition; the historical context of production and consumption of these texts shows the multiple levels of style as the traveler attempts to supply his intended audience with the potential complexity and fullness of the experience he can express. Such a challenge could not be fully accomplished without the assistance of old narrative conventions. The intermingled styles, the embedding of the new in the old, of the fragmentary into the whole, is what made it possible for the *Descriptions of the Indies* to stop, capture, and represent otherness.

Some literary critics have been particularly sensitive towards the political compromises revealed by the fourteenth-century *Descriptions of the Indies*. Quite intuitively, references to the crusade agenda have been identified in the texts of Marco Polo, Odorico of Pordenone and the rest. However, the lack of historical evidence pointing in that direction has given the imperialistic flavors of the *Descriptions of the Indies* the appearance of mere desires, secret cravings, or stealthy hopes inextricably mingled with sublimation and allegory. Paradoxically, the link between the *Descriptions of the Indies* and the neo-crusade agenda belies the alleged plain ascription of the travel-writers to the expansionistic agenda of the Pope or the king of France. Quite the opposite : inasmuch as they can be read as by-products of the crusade for the recovery of the Holy Land, the *Descriptions of the Indies* emphasize the various ways in which texts could negotiate not only the epistemological but also the political challenges posed by travel. In

fact, the Christian supremacy defended by the *Descriptions of the Indies* did not work as a legitimating tool for pontifical or imperial European institutions. On the contrary, by equating the excellence of the old and praiseworthy Chinese or Indian civilizations to an idealized, almost utopian Western Christianity, the *Descriptions of the Indies* might have worked more effectively as an undermining of the universal supremacy claims made by the Pope and the king of France.

Due to its actual proximity to the crusade dream and to the allegorical conception of the Indies (the end of the world, the threshold of Paradise, the Augustinian land of monsters and wonders that secure the wholeness of reality) the first ethnographical language developed by Western civilization shows a clear structural duality. Its great dependence on unitary ideals and on a synoptic vision of reality was extremely difficult to match with a language trained to analyze, to mark differences, to isolate individual entities, and to fix the quality of a particular experience as such. The alleged lack of scientific value of the fourteenth-century *Descriptions of the Indies* seems to be more the result of an odd relation between the structure of knowledge and its contents. Actually, such specific language worked better inside the framework for thinking of later periods.

The first *Descriptions of the Indies* were followed by tumultuous times. The many and devastating consequences of the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, and the Schism of Avignon undermined the old dream of a Latin Europe united and victorious against Islam. The strengthening of vernacular traditions and insular conceptions of power at the expense of universal-roman-catholic-imperial ideas of legitimacy reached a definitive turning point by the end of the fifteenth century. As much as the Castilian and Portuguese expansionistic agendas were confined to specific and often competing political aims, they added unexpected meanings to the fourteenth-century *Descriptions of the Indies*. It is only after the political fragmentation of the European expansion at the arrival of the Modern era that the scientific-ethnographic discourse predicated on the idea of an empirical difference becomes increasingly efficient in order to deliver military, economical, intellectual, and any other kind of mastery upon the object of description.

It is widely assumed that the evolution of ethnographic practice required confrontation with the larger world, accumulation of experience, and guaranteed possibilities for verification. By focusing on the ascendancy of a given set of beliefs, my research points to the changes in the structure of knowledge as an equally determinant factor in the inception of a scientific language suitable for a discourse about the other. Being variable, the relationship between the specific and the synoptic throughout the thousand years of European ethnographic practice cannot be reduced to a coherent, unidirectional, unchangeable discourse about the other as has been assumed by authors such as E. Said (1979), M. B. Campbell (1988), S. M. Islam (1996), and G. Heng (2003). Orientalism, in this sense, seems to work as a powerful framework for thinking which biases the travel-experience in a way not completely different from the myths, desires, and imperialistic attitudes of other times and societies.

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