



## Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510 (The Middle Ages Series)

By Kim M. Phillips

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In offering a cultural history of the encounter between medieval Latin Christians and the distant East, *Before Orientalism* reveals how Europeans' prevailing preoccupations with food and eating habits, gender roles, sexualities, civility, and the foreign body helped shape their perceptions of Asian peoples and societies. Phillips gives particular attention to the texts' known or likely audiences, the cultural settings within which they found a foothold, and the broader impact of their descriptions, while also considering the motivations of their writers. She reveals in rich detail responses from European travelers that ranged from pragmatism to wonder. Fear of military might, admiration for high standards of civic life and court culture, and even delight in foreign magnificence rarely assumed the kind of secular Eurocentric superiority that would later characterize Orientalism. Placing medieval writing on the East in the context of an emergent "Europe" whose explorers sought to learn more than to rule, *Before Orientalism* complicates our understanding of medieval attitudes toward the foreign.

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**Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510 (The Middle Ages Series) By Kim M. Phillips Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #2438470 in Books
- Published on: 2013-11-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .88" w x 5.98" l, 1.40 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 328 pages

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"Well-argued and well-researched."—*Speculum*

"A detailed and stimulating portrait of the heterogeneity of Western travelers' responses to what they saw, heard, tasted, touched, and smelled during their journeys to the distant regions of Asia."—Suzanne Conklin Akbari, University of Toronto

"A richly detailed discussion of later medieval European travellers' accounts describing Eastern Asia. . . . Phillips's call for a 'precolonial studies,' in which the diversity of European responses to foreignness takes centre-stage, is a compelling point from which medieval and early modern historians might begin to question the historical specificity of language of conquest, ownership and desire outlined so influentially by Edward Said."—*English Historical Review*

"*Before Orientalism* argues that medieval travelers were not and could not have been writing from an imperialist perspective as later 'Orientalist' writers are alleged to have done. Kim M. Phillips proves her case most convincingly, and following these travel writers through her examination of their texts is an exceedingly interesting journey."—David O. Morgan, University of Wisconsin-Madison

### About the Author

Kim M. Phillips is Associate Professor of History at the University of Auckland. She is coauthor (with Barry Reay) of *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History* and author of *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270-1540*.

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### Introduction

I speak and speak, but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside my house the day of my return is another; and yet another, that which I might dictate late in life, if I were taken prisoner by Genoese pirates and put in irons in the same cell with a writer of adventure stories. It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.

To write a book is to make a journey. Yet as is so often the case with travel, the final destination may look

quite different from what was initially imagined. In the early stages of research for this book, influenced by some recent studies on travel writing, I thought the distant parts of Asia might represent "a location of definitive Otherness" for late medieval European writers and readers. However, I have since moved far from that view, having found that the end location has a much more varied landscape than first envisaged.

This book examines European travel writing on central, east, south, and southeast Asia composed or in circulation from around 1245 to around 1510. "Orient," "Asia," "far East" (with lowercase "f"), "distant East," and "farther East" will be employed as synonyms encompassing the whole area under discussion with due acknowledgment of the difficulties of these labels. Terms such as "Orient" and "East" have become problematic for modern commentators who rightly point to their geographic assumptions ("East" from where?), ideological baggage, and pejorative or romantic connotations. Yet to medieval Europeans the lands of Asia were literally in the distant "East" of their world. The book deals with descriptions of places we now call Mongolia, China, India, and Southeast Asia. It largely excludes the Holy Land and surrounding regions on the grounds that western Europe's relations with middle eastern (and, indeed, northern African and southern Iberian) people were shaped by Christian rhetoric that sought to emphasize the religious basis of relations with, and alienation from, Islam and Judaism to a greater extent than discourse on cultures further east. Although Christian crusading rhetoric and anti-Judaic traditions had their own complexities—indeed, were not univocally damning—one cannot deny the persistence of later medieval Christian tendencies to condemn most stridently the religious and cultural traditions closest to its own. John Tolan is among a number of scholars who have commented on Christianity's harsher treatment of Judaism and Islam than more distant faiths, such as Animism and Buddhism, with whom they would seem to have less in common: "It is precisely because Christians and Jews [and Muslims] are fighting for rightful ownership of a common spiritual heritage that their disputes are so bitter." Geographical proximity and military threats may similarly raise tensions. As we will see, Europeans were most hostile in portrayals of Mongols in the early to mid-thirteenth century when the physical peril of "Tartars" was nearest.

This book does not tell the travelers' stories of discovery again, apart from some necessary background material on authors, books, and audiences, nor is it a history of exploration and discovery. It does not treat the travelers' narratives as sources of information on Asian cultures historians might use to supplement or support what they have learned from non-European sources. Rather, it attempts something different: a cultural history of aspects of the encounter between late medieval Latin Christians and Asian cultures with a focus on themes that have not usually been granted headline attention. In particular, it asks how prevailing European preoccupations with food and eating habits, gender roles, sexualities, civility, and the human body helped shape late medieval perspectives on eastern peoples and societies. It aims to contribute to European cultural history, not Asian history. Its central argument is for a distinctive European perspective on Asia during the era c. 1245-c. 1510. Attitudes were moving away from tendencies to create a homogenous "India" of marvels and monsters yet were little touched by the colonialist mentalities that would emerge through the early modern era and dominate the modern. It argues that desire for information and for pleasure were two chief impulses guiding late medieval readers' interest in travel writing on Asia. In regard to the first motivation, some authors supplied specific information to help with immediate military and evangelical necessities. Other travelers, particularly when writing on China, sought to satisfy a more generalized hunger for knowledge about civilized living that pervaded late medieval bourgeois and noble life. Readers' appetites for pleasure were also variously satisfied. Some representations of eastern peoples fulfilled the urge to wonder, which has been noted as an important characteristic of medieval cultures, while other elements of their descriptions met desires for amusement or delight. Monstrosity or alien customs were comprehended within ancient conventions on the "barbarian" and could assist an emerging European sense of selfhood or in some cases provide a kind of pleasure through horror.

Some studies of Christian engagement with Islam and Judaism have justifiably spoken of a "medieval Orientalism" identifiable in literature, art, and learned texts—a particularly valid approach given the middle

eastern focus of Edward Said's work and his neglect of medieval testimonies—and a few have extended the term to medieval travelers' characterizations of Mongolian and east Asian peoples. As I will show in Chapter 1, the "Before" of my title is potentially provocative but is not meant as a quarrel with those who have explored all the complex configurations that western Orientalism can take. In arguing that the term, in the ways it is defined by Said, is a mainly postmedieval development, my title points to the distinctiveness of late medieval views on the peoples and cultures of the distant East before concerted colonialist ventures were initiated. While Muslims and Jews occupied regions throughout Asia, and indeed Muslims were becoming dominant in places such as India under the Delhi Sultanate and the islands of southeast Asia, the animosity characterizing Christians' perspective loses some of its sting in the travel narratives dealing with places in the distant East. In the latter, Jews and Muslims were among many religious groups including Buddhists, Confucians, Hindus, Animists, Shamanists, and Nestorian Christians, and battles over territory or holy sites were irrelevant. To be sure, differences between perspectives on nearer and more distant Easts were never absolute and Christian rhetoric (for example, against "idolaters") naturally had some role in shaping the latter. The relevance of traditions of crusader and pilgrim discourse for works that also deal with a farther Orient is perhaps seen best in *The Book of John Mandeville*, the first part of which incorporates pilgrim narratives and presents Jerusalem as the center of the world, seeks the garden of Eden at the earth's eastern edge, and constructs a world image dominated by spiritual concerns. This overflow of narratives concerning the Saracen Orient and realms further east will occasionally be noted in the thematic chapters that make up Part 2. Yet where Christian perspectives on closer peoples were formed out of religious confrontation, late medieval Europeans' reactions to the peoples of India, Mongolia, and *l'extrême orient* were more often dominated by pleasure, pragmatic fears, and curiosity.

Late medieval Europeans were no strangers to colonialist enterprises, but few were seriously contemplating such ventures in the ancient civilizations of the distant East. A concise definition of "colonialism" may be helpful, such as one provided by Christopher LaMonica: "The term *colonialism* refers to a process of domination of one group (the colonizing *metropole* or *core*) over another (a colonized *other* or *periphery*)."  
Jürgen Osterhammel's summary is also incisive:

*Colonialism* is a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.

Of course colonialism and colonization take different forms and do not always, even in the modern period, involve formal domination of a metropolitan center over a subjected territorial possession. "Informal" or "surrogate" empires, such as seen in nineteenth-century British relations with China, should be included in any history of colonialism and imperialism. Osterhammel also identifies a wider range of expansionary activities to be counted in a theory of colonialism: "total migration of entire populations and societies"; "mass individual migration"; "border colonization"; "overseas settlement colonization"; "empire-building wars of conquest"; and "construction of naval networks"; and he divides "colonies" into "exploitation colonies," "maritime enclaves," and "settlement colonies." In recent years historians have amply documented processes of conquest and colonization within the boundaries of Latin Christendom and on its margins. Thus, taking some notable examples, Frankish crusaders in the Holy Land, Spanish Christians in Iberia, Normans in England, Anglo-Normans in Wales and Ireland, Germans in Bohemia, Catalans and Genoese in the Mediterranean, and Castilians and Portuguese in the Atlantic may all be viewed as medieval colonizers of some sort. Expansion and settlement were recurring features of medieval European experience. Yet despite flexibility in definition, it is difficult to identify examples of European colonialist ambition toward the distant East before the late fifteenth century. There were certainly western mercantile and missionary presences as

far away as India and China from the later thirteenth century and those endeavors no doubt paved the way for later settlements, but it is hard to discern a European desire to possess and subjugate Asian territories in the fashion familiar to more recent epochs.

For these reasons, the book is envisaged as a contribution to an emergent "precolonial studies" rather than the better-established work on medieval "postcolonialism" that has emerged over the past decade and a half. Said's theory of Orientalism was instrumental in the formation of postcolonial theory more broadly, although earlier works by Frantz Fanon and critics of the British Raj were also among its foundational texts. The theory takes awareness of the inequality and injustice inherent in relations in any given colonial context as its starting point. Medieval postcolonialism, far from being a "mind-bending" concept, is a valid and important field that still offers scope for more detailed studies. For example, early medieval societies, as some recent scholars have helped us see, possessed languages, buildings, law codes, and mental outlooks marked by their then recent status as Roman colonies. Many studies offer subtle engagements that problematize any rigid concept of what counts as "postcolonial" and critique the work of Said, Bhabha, and others. Yet chronologies may be synchronous; thus medieval society was at once "colonial," with various colonialist enterprises under way in different times and places, and "postcolonial," having gone through numerous such processes already, but also "precolonial," in that not all of Latin Christendom's encounters with other peoples were driven by a colonialist impulse.

Perhaps the closest medieval powers came to pursuing informal colonial enterprises in the distant East was in missionary endeavors and the expansionist ambitions of the popes directing them. From the mid-thirteenth to late fifteenth centuries, the papacy sent Franciscan and Dominican missionaries to convert Asian populations to the Catholic faith. We might argue for a culturally colonialist *motive* in these efforts at evangelization; however, we would also need to acknowledge that nothing close to actual dominance of the Christian faith was ever achieved. The missionary efforts were tiny and scattered among vast and mainly unreceptive Asian populations. The latter's overwhelmingly indifferent response is notorious among Asian historians who point to the lack of oriental records of the western visitors. The notable exception was John of Marignolli (in China in the 1330s and 1340s), who made an impression on Chinese annalists not for the Christian message he sought to deliver but for the huge horse he brought as a present for the emperor. Moreover, although missionary work has often gone hand in hand with modern colonialism, we should recognize certain specific agendas and contexts among medieval missionaries. One of the chief concerns of Franciscans was a belief in an imminent apocalypse. Thus Franciscan missionaries to China, India, and other distant civilizations aimed to achieve the conversion of humankind to Catholic Christianity, even if it meant their own martyrdom, before the end of the world. Dominican friars, particularly active in central and west Asia and in India, regularly attempted to draw eastern branches of Christianity (such as Nestorian and Armenian Christians) into the Latin fold or to convert Mongols to Christianity to gain allies in crusades against Islam. The efforts of both groups *might* be read as ideological colonialism, but only with numerous provisos in place. The difference between medieval and more recent missionaries is well summarized by E. Randolph Daniel, who explains medieval Christians' evangelizing efforts in light of concepts of *societas christiana*: When non-Christians "adopted Catholicism, they were accepted into the *corpus christianorum*. . . . This is not to be confused with the attitude of nineteenth-century missionaries who believed that they were civilizing as well as Christianizing Africans and Asians. Conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century simply included the acceptance of the superiority of European civilization; it did not incorporate those converted *into* European civilization" in the way that medieval conversion assumed assimilation within the *societas christiana*. There are fundamental differences between medieval missions in Asia and more recent efforts accompanying economic, political, and settler expansion.

The absence of a true colonizing agenda among late medieval travelers to the distant East and their readers back home created a vision of Asia that admitted neutrality and often admiration as well as critique. This is hardly a new observation: there is a distinguished body of scholarship on different aspects of the topic. Its



influence has begun to have some effect on medieval Europeanists beyond the fields of travel and encounter; for example, Georges Duby notes that in the wake of the testimony of emissaries to the Mongols, Marco Polo, and other travelers, "a few Europeans began to perceive that the extremities of the world were not all populated by cruel monsters and that order, wealth and happiness could prevail, under wise monarchs, in countries that were not Christian." The goal here is to revisit the field with greater attention to some topics that have come into prominence with the rise of cultural anthropology. Alongside medieval travel writers' efforts to paint eastern peoples and cultures as "Other," we will find plenty of occasions when they noted sameness or at least similarities between East and West. Admiration and the willingness to learn are found, too, and where authors denigrated particular Asian cultures their attitude can be explained by the motives of authors and expectations of their audiences. For instance, much writing on Mongols up to the later thirteenth century was dominated by perceptions of ferocious enemies (actual or potential) and was additionally influenced by ancient prejudices against nomadic or non-urban "barbarians." Some of the latter stereotypes also affected portrayals of rural southeast Asians down to the end of our period. In contrast, most medieval writing on China was full of admiration and appealed to audiences' desire to revel in descriptions of natural bounty and civilized pleasures. Descriptions of India were varied, encompassing the full range of medieval responses to eastern contexts from enchantment to disgust.

Europeans had been traveling to ancient civilizations of the distant East long before they made journeys to the "new" worlds of the Americas and Oceania. Xenophon's expedition to Persia c. 400 BCE and Alexander the Great's advances across Persia and into India in the 330s-320s BCE endured in European memory. Alexander's campaign was transformed into literature and mythology in Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance*, composed in the third century CE and popular throughout the medieval period. Roman traders had sailed into the Indian Ocean from the first century CE and maintained trading posts as far as the Bay of Bengal. According to J. R. S. Phillips, "Roman products and occasionally even Roman subjects could be found as far afield as South-East Asia and China," while Asian products including silk and spices were traded westward. Roman geographer Pomponius Mela wrote c. 43 CE, "The Seres [Chinese] are . . . a people full of justice and best known for the trade they conduct in absentia, by leaving their goods behind in a remote location." Pliny the Elder stated he had heard from an Indian delegation that the Chinese "are of more than normal height, and have flaxen hair and blue eyes [*rutilis comis, caeruleis oculis*], and they speak in harsh tones and use no language in dealing with the travellers." Mela commented on the peoples of India, emphasizing their diversity. He says their dress and customs vary a great deal, from linen or wool to the skins of birds or animals to complete nakedness or covering only of private parts. "Some are short and puny, others so tall and huge in body that routinely and with ease they use even elephants—the biggest ones there—in the same way we use horses." Some think it wrong to eat any kind of meat, others eat only fish, and still others kill and eat their ailing parents. Some withdraw from society to die quietly, while others hasten death by hurling themselves on fires. Evidently, reliable information had to contend with rumor, exaggeration, and outright fiction from the earliest days of East-West contact.

European travel beyond the eastern Mediterranean slowed to a trickle after the decline of the western Roman Empire and Islam's advances in the seventh and eighth centuries. Pilgrimages (and, from 1096, crusades) kept up eastward passage of Europeans to the Holy Land, but the way to the more distant Orient was ventured by few before the rise of the Mongol Empire from the early thirteenth century. Benjamin of Tudela, a Navarrese Jew, managed to travel to Basra in the second half of the twelfth century and in his narrative mentioned lands as far east as China without benefit of eyewitness experience. His section on China ("Zin") amounts to only a legend of the Sea of "Nikpa," where ingenious sailors ensure their safety in fierce winds by making themselves false prey for "griffins." On India, he says only that the land is very mountainous and contains many Jewish communities. After Temüjin, renamed Chinggis ("Genghis") Khân (c. 1167-1227), had united the tribes of central Asia by 1206, the Mongols steadily conquered territories stretching from Hungary to Korea. In the 1220s, 1230s, and early 1240s, terror touched Europe as the Mongols ravaged Russia, Hungary, and Poland. A chronicler of Novgorod conveyed the foreboding: "The same year [1224],

for our sins, unknown tribes came, whom no one exactly knows, who they are, nor whence they came out, nor what their language is, nor of what race they are, nor what their faith is, but they call them Tartars." Realms as far west as France trembled before the threat of conquest. In Gregory Guzman's view, "It was clear that no military power in Europe was capable of withstanding the Mongols, who could easily have marched to the Atlantic if they had wanted to do so." A new era opened with the death of Ögödei in December 1241 when ensuing internal divisions among Mongols contributed to the halt of their westward advances. From 1245 to the mid-fourteenth century, during the perhaps ill-named Pax Mongolica, Mongolian policies of controlled dialogue with external powers complemented European attempts to build alliances in their crusades against Islam. The result was the Mongol Empire's opening to a number of Latin emissaries, missionaries, and merchants.

The heyday of medieval land-based travels to the far Orient was the mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century. A decisive factor in the decline of eastern travel was the Ming dynasty's seizure of Mongol-held China in 1368 and its initial hostility to Christianity. Despite gradual closure of land routes, some travelers continued to find their way east on Arab ships bound for India and the Spice Islands. Yet perhaps the most significant development of the fourteenth century took place not on sea or land but in the European imagination, with the growing popular and scholarly taste for tales of oriental lands. In the epigraph to this chapter, Italo Calvino's Marco Polo tells his Mongol host, "It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear." European audiences, not least Marco Polo's, were developing a sense of what they wished to hear about the distant East and commanded that certain tales be told.

The present book is based on written or dictated accounts of more than twenty European men who traveled or claimed to have traveled to Mongolia, China, India, Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), and southeast Asia from around 1245 to 1510 or who wrote important associated texts. Of these, the works by John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, Ricold of Monte Croce, John of Monte Corvino, Hetoum of Armenia, Jordan Catala de Sévérac, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Marignolli, "Sir John Mandeville," and Niccolò dei Conti, as well as *The Letter of Prester John*, have been most useful. The selection by no means represents every medieval text dealing with the far Orient but provides fair coverage of western European works that may be gathered under the heading of travel writing (to be defined in Chapter 3). Descriptions of eastern contexts in learned encyclopedic works are also relevant but used here only for purposes of comparison or to identify sources or results of some travelers' perceptions. Many other Latin Christians made similar journeys during the period, but most did not leave written accounts. I also pay attention to the texts' known or likely audiences, the cultural contexts within which they found a foothold, and the broader impact of their oriental descriptions. Some of the travelers and pseudo-travelers had large medieval reading publics while others were almost completely obscure before the modern era, and where many of the sources amount to only a few pages others fill whole volumes in modern editions. Some authors (such as Carpini, Rubruck, and Monte Corvino) produced accounts by their own hands that can *mostly*, but never entirely, be trusted as eyewitness statements. Certain authors (such as Ricold and Marignolli) worked alone but on texts affected by circumstances in their motives for production. Several others (notably Marco Polo, Odoric, and Niccolò) worked with amanuenses who had not been to Asia to produce hybrid works of unstable authorship and sometimes dubious veracity. A notorious few (especially "Mandeville," Witte, and the author of *The Letter of Prester John*) were solo authors of books founded in plagiarism and imagination. Even the apparently faithful eyewitness accounts are not always reliable as they often include hearsay material and snippets of older myths of the Orient, and all the works are complicated by the processes of textual transmission, scribal alteration, and the metamorphoses wrought by translation. The words "travelers" and "authors" are in this context sometimes only loose terms of convenience. Each author and his work are discussed in Chapter 2.

Medieval travelers' accounts of Asia have interested scholars for centuries. The Italian Giambattista Ramusio (1485-1557) and Englishmen Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552-1616) and Samuel Purchas (c. 1577-1626), the first travel anthologists of the age of print, published the travelogues of several medieval authors; Purchas, for

example, included versions of Rubruck, Polo, Hetoum, "Mandeville," and Niccolò in his anthology. Luke Wadding (1558-1657), an Irish Franciscan, published the letters of the early fourteenth-century Franciscan missionaries to China, which might otherwise have sunk into obscurity. From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Sir Henry Yule, Anastasius van den Wyngaert, A. C. Moule, Paul Pelliot, Christopher Dawson, and various editors for the Hakluyt Society produced translations and editions. The emergent discipline of geography had its own historians, notably C. R. Beazley, whose three-volume *Dawn of Modern Geography* (1897-1906) discussed most of these medieval travelers and provided information on surviving manuscripts. The later twentieth century also saw publication of a number of essential studies of late medieval contact with Asia. The key words of many works on premodern travels, especially those dealing with the Renaissance era of c. 1400-c. 1600, are "exploration," "discovery," and "expansion," as evident from titles of key works. A strong theme of existing scholarship is the wish to place exploration by early modern European travelers to the Americas in a longer context, showing the later travelers were the heirs of a long medieval tradition. However, if we read medieval travelers' accounts of Asia primarily within the framework of a longer history of expansion and conquest, we will find much within their writings that seems not to fit. More recent works have begun to emphasize the distinctive nature of late medieval travel writing on the East. The travelers' names are bound to become recognized among a still broader readership in medieval European studies (Asianists, of course, know them all well already), with the present renewal of interest in histories of travel and encounter.

The geographical boundaries of this study are harder to draw than the chronological ones. The eastern, southern, and northern edges of the territory included are not so difficult, as none of the travelers went east of Hangzhou and the East China Sea, north of the Altai Mountains, or south of Java. Marco Polo includes a description of Japan (Cipangu) in his book, but it is based on secondhand accounts. Carpini and Polo offer descriptions of the lands and peoples of mysterious northern realms but did not visit them. The western boundary is more difficult to draw. As a rough guide, I focus on regions east of the Indus valley, but it has sometimes been relevant to mention parts of the Mongol Empire west of that line for the purposes of discussing Mongol peoples and cultures. In addition, some descriptions of places or peoples, such as Temür's (Tamerlane's) court at Samarkand, the legendary "Isles of Men and Women" located somewhere south of the Arabian peninsula, and Odoric's (and Mandeville's) account of the men of Ormuz, are included. In essence, the geographical region covered consists of what medieval authors often referred to as "Nearer" or "Lesser" India (roughly, the northern part of the modern Indian subcontinent), "Further" or "Greater" India (which could cover the southern subcontinent or everything beyond the Ganges, covering Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, southeast Asia, and even modern China, depending on the author), and the eastern Mongol Empire.

The first three chapters paint the backdrop. Chapter 1 examines concepts of Orientalism and the East in both medieval and modern perspectives. The second chapter (which scholars with substantial prior knowledge of the texts might choose to skip) provides information on the travelers and pseudo-travelers with some discussion of the manuscript traditions of their works, circulation, audiences, and influence on subsequent perceptions. The third chapter most fully develops the book's fundamental theses, examining travel writing as a genre; placing medieval writing on the East in the context of a newly forming "Europe" that did not yet invariably view itself as superior; and considering the motivations of travel writers ranging from pragmatism to "wonder." Part 2 (Chapters 4-8) embarks on lengthier analyses of key themes: food and foodways, femininities, sex, civility, and bodies. The afterword will briefly make a case for the development of medieval "Precolonial Studies." The selection of chapter topics reflects preoccupations of the medieval authors as well as those of current cultural historians but is far from comprehensive. For example, medieval Europeans' desire for moral and spiritual edification through reading about the religious and ethical systems of Asian cultures deserves detailed separate treatment and is therefore largely set aside for future study. This would, I predict, test, extend, and complicate but not undo this book's fundamental arguments. The perception of the Christian faith as true and all others as erroneous led travelers frequently to make pejorative

comments on the "idolatrous" or otherwise faulty religious traditions of Asian cultures, and yet their criticism was not as total or always as demonizing as one might expect. Other potential topics such as perceptions of Asian geography, flora, fauna, and minerals, which do tend to emphasize marvels and difference, are also minimized in order to focus more on cultures and peoples.

Medieval travel books allowed readers to turn their gaze to an oriental vista of variety and magnificence. Thus they saw marvels but also much that was ordinary; earthly pleasures as well as terrors; advanced civilizations and primitive ones; otherness but also sameness and similarity. Because they lacked territorial designs on far eastern lands, they rarely assumed the kind of secular Eurocentric superiority we are more familiar with. They were prepared to be impressed by cultures that had reached high standards of civic life, court culture, and social organization, while also reveling in an Orient of fertility, abundance, and sensual pleasure. All the time they retained a willing regard for marvels and the occasional monstrosity. This book tells part of the story of how European people looked at other cultures, the motivations for their interest, and the consequences of their changing gaze. As we engage with medieval accounts of encounter we find diverse responses that complicate our understanding of medieval perceptions of foreign cultures.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Mary Grays:**

The book *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510* (The Middle Ages Series) has a lot info on it. So when you make sure to read this book you can get a lot of help. The book was published by the very famous author. The author makes some research prior to write this book. This kind of book very easy to read you may get the point easily after reading this article book.

#### **John Ashcraft:**

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