Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship

Edited by
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Volume 9

This series seeks to stimulate fresh and critical perspectives on the interpretation of phenomena of cultural contact in both transhistorical and transdisciplinary ways. It brings together the research results of the graduate school "Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship," located at Rostock University and sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG). One of the concerns of the volumes published in this series is to test and explore contemporary theoretical concepts and analytical tools used for the study of intercultural relations, from antiquity to the present. Aware of significant recent changes in the ways in which other cultures are represented, and "culture" as such is defined and described, the series seeks to promote a dialogical over a monological theoretical paradigm and advocates approaches to the study of cultural alterity that are conscious of the representational character of our knowledge about other cultures. It wants to strengthen a recognition of the interdependencies between the production of knowledge about unfamiliar peoples and societies in various scholarly disciplines and ideologies of nationality, empire, and globalization. In critically investigating the analytical potential of postcolonial key terms such as "hybridity," "contact zone," and "transculturation," the series contributes to international scholarly debates in various fields oriented at finding more balanced and reciprocal ways of studying and writing about intercultural relations both past and present.

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Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge

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CHAPTER NINE

Traveling Texts:
De-orientalizing Marco Polo's
*Le Devisement du monde*

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Few medieval figures enjoy greater name recognition than Marco Polo. In the modern world, as historian John Larner has written, his name “has come to stand above all for prosperous East-West contact and sophisticated travel” (1). Examples of this are easy to come by: Marco Polo is a luxury hotel in Dubai, a whole chain of luxury hotels in China and Southeast Asia, “an embodiment of Asian warmth and Western comfort.”¹ His is the name of an exclusive frequent flyers’ club for Cathay Pacific airlines – appropriately, since ‘Catai’ entered Western Europe’s vocabulary as the name for northern China through the writings of Marco Polo and his thirteenth-century contemporaries. In Germany, Marco Polo is a series of travel guides and a line of clothing distinguished by its urban-casual chic. To the French, he is a secret blend of black tea scented with flowers from China and Tibet. In his native Italy, Marco Polo is a franchise of mobile gelato carts and the eponymous patron of the airport of Venice – ironically, since it evokes a mode of travel a world away from the long itineraries – of months if not years – that separated medieval Venice from Cathay.²

The source of all these associations is the text commonly known as *The Travels*, which resulted from the jailhouse collaboration in Genoa between the Venetian merchant Marco Polo and the Arthurian romance writer Rustichello of Pisa. It was composed in 1298 – almost the exact midpoint of the remarkable century chronicled by Janet Abu-Lughod (*Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*) in which the *pax mongolica* created by the conquests of Genghis Khan and his successors produced a cosmopolitan world of trans-Asian travel, communication, and the circulation of people, goods, and ideas on an unprecedented scale. Although the original manuscript has not survived,

¹ Marco Polo Hotels website.
² This opening itself is something of a topos. Larner begins his Introduction with the mention of “such curious phenomena as ‘Marco Polo Class’ (i.e., luxury class) on one Asian airline, the ‘Marco Polo Leisure Suitcase’ (made in Taiwan) which I once came across in a Woolworths, [and] the ‘Polo’ car marketed by Volkswagen” (1). Photographer Michael Yamashita writes: “I have stayed in the Marco Polo Hotel in Singapore, eaten in his namesake restaurant in Venice, taken a cruise ship named for him in Hong Kong, puffed on Marco Polo cigarettes in Indonesia and shopped for clothes at the Marco Polo shop in Beijing” (6).
it was likely written in Franco-Italian, the version of Old French that was the language of choice for nonclerical Italian writers seeking a broad international audience. It was then quickly translated and retranslated into French, Latin, Tuscan, Venetian, and a spate of other European languages (Gaunt, *Marco Polo’s Le Devisement* 11–21; Larner 184–86). Typically for the Middle Ages, no two versions were the same, and early French manuscripts circulated under three different titles: *The Description of the World (Le Devisement du monde)*, *The Book of the Great Khan (Le Livre du Grand Caam)*, and *The Book of Marvels (Le Livre des merveilles)*. Arguably, the text did not become *The Travels* until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Venetian humanist Giovanni Battista Ramusio published an Italian print translation (known to scholars as ‘R’), augmented with many passages found in no other version, as part of his series *Delle navigationi et viaggi*.

The history of modern English-language translations of Marco Polo is no less complex. In 1818, Orientalist William Marsden published a translation of Ramusio’s edition under the title *The Travels of Marco Polo, a Venetian, in the Thirteenth Century* (Polo [m], *The Travels*). This version was republished at midcentury by Thomas Wright, who added several chapters and abridged the original notes (Polo [n], *The Travels*). The resulting ‘Marsden-Wright’ translation, further revised by Manuel Komroff in 1926 (Polo [l], *The Travels*), has since been revised and reissued, notably with new introductions by travel writers such as Jason Goodwin (Polo [p], *The Travels*) and Colin Thubron (Polo [o], *The Travels*). Meanwhile, in 1871, the Scottish geographer Sir Henry Yule published *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (Polo [i], *Ser Marco*). Based on Guillaume Pauthier’s edition of the Old French manuscripts (Polo [g], *Livre de Marco Polo*), it retained the latter’s abridgments of the medieval text’s “intolerable proxilities” (Yule and Cordier in Polo [q], *The Travels* I, 141), while importing sections from both the Franco-Italian and Ramusio versions, and adding copious notes drawn from Yule’s own expertise as a geographer and scholar. At the beginning of the last century, the French Sinologist Henri Cordier, president of the French *Société de Géographie* and professor at the École Spéciale des langues orientales, published a revised edition of Yule (Polo [j], *Ser Marco*); this revision, in turn, has subsequently been...

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3 The significance of the *Devisement’s* being composed in Franco-Italian is threefold: it is not the language of the church; it is not the language of the intellectual elite, for whom the touchstone for anything having to do with the East would have been Pliny, Isidore of Seville, and other Latin authorities; and it sets it in conversation with the epics, romances, chronicles, and other texts then being written in the vernacular.

4 ‘F’ Text; cf. Ménard’s edition (Polo [e], *Devisement du monde*).

5 ‘BI’ Text.

6 ‘A2’ Text; cf. Hambis’ translation (Polo [d], *Livre des merveilles*).

7 William Marsden was retired First Secretary of the Admiralty. Born in Ireland, he had spent eight years of his youth with the East India Company in Sumatra, subsequently authoring books on the history of Sumatra and the grammar of the Malay language (Buckland 275).
reprinted several times – most recently in a lavishly illustrated edition, with preface and notes by historian Morris Rossabi (Polo [r], The Travels). 8

What most of these volumes – including the widely available Penguin edition by Ronald Latham (Polo [s], The Travels) – have in common is their title, that is, The Travels. What’s in a name? Presenting Marco and Rustichello’s text (‘F’ Text) as The Travels shapes the way we read it. 9 Travel narratives create expectations of an eyewitness adventure, the ‘truth’ of which is guaranteed by the author’s first-hand experience, often presumed to be both heroic and unique. Taking the Devisement as a travel narrative thus exposes its author to accusations of fraud: Did Marco Polo Go To China? asks Frances Wood in a book whose title aggressively suggests that he did not. 10 It prompts modern readers to try to map the places he names in his account, leading to further impressions of his ‘confusion’ and faulty memory when these places fail to cohere into a single itinerary. It predisposes us to view parts of the text not devoted to travel as peripheral or extraneous, fostering impatience with the passages recounting the turbulent histories of the rival Mongol khanates, or leading us to dismiss accounts of wonders and miracles as so many examples of medieval credulity.

In keeping with the interrogation proposed by this volume of the way travelers themselves “contributed to processes of transculturation, and how their lives and works have entered public space as well as academic knowledge,” this essay explores questions of travel, agency, and the circulation of knowledge in and about the Devisement du monde. We begin in part I with the ‘public’ Marco Polo of travel writers, journalists, and adventurers. Part II turns to academic appropriations of Marco Polo and his text, particularly in works of postcolonial and post-colonial medieval critics. Finally we turn to the Devisement itself, in the so-called ‘F’ version found in the manuscript Paris, BNF f. fr. 1116. Though not an autograph, its early date, c. 1310, and language of composition, Franco-Italian, make it the text generally acknowledged to be closest to the lost original. Assessing the Devisement’s place in medieval processes of transculturation is best accomplished, I will try to show, by redirecting attention from the long literary and historical genealogy into which it is often inserted – familiar names might include Mandeville’s Travels, the Diaries of Christopher Columbus (Diario), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan” (Coleridge 102–04), and Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities – toward what I have elsewhere called the “world empire of

8 Henri Cordier (1849–1925) spent his twenties in Shanghai and was president of the French Société de Géographie and professor at the École Spéciale des langues orientales from 1881 to his death (Ross 572). His portrait, by Gustave Caillebotte (1883), hangs in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (“Cordier – Portrait”).
9 Modern translations in other languages tend to retain one of the text’s medieval titles: The Description of the World (Polo [k]), La Description du monde (Polo [c], [d]), Beschreibung der Welt (Polo [a]), or The Book of Marvels (cf. Polo [f], [j]), Le Livre des merveilles du monde (Polo [d]), Die Wunder der Welt (Polo [b]) in English, French and German; II Milione (Polo [h]; cf. [b]) in Italian.
10 Historians, on the other hand, nearly unanimously agree on the general accuracy of Marco Polo’s descriptions. See de Rachewiltz for an energetic rebuttal of Wood’s reservations.
letters” (Kinoshita, “Worlding” 15, riffing on Pascale Casanova’s notion of the “république mondiale des lettres”), the textual reflex of the same historical conjunctures that produced Abu-Lughod’s precapitalist world system. Recontextualizing Marco Polo within this synchronic frame allows us to unpack the complexity of his historical moment, producing a text – and a world – surprisingly different from those known to most modern readers.

Marco Polo in the Popular Imagination

“Marco Polo did not go to Estonia,” writes Alexander Theroux on the opening page of his travel memoir, Estonia: A Ramble Through the Periphery. In this he was hardly unique: “Neither did Ibn Battuta, Richard Hakluyt,” he continues, nor did “Herodotus or Pigafetta, Burton or Speke, Geoffrey Moorhouse (sic) or Bruce Chatwin” (9). Theroux’s point, of course, is to underscore the remoteness of Estonia. Two pages later, Marco Polo’s name surfaces again, this time in the company of Columbus, Juan Ponce de Leon, Coronado, and Magellan (11). Even among a cast of celebrated writers and explorers, his name, more than any other, is synonymous with the intrepid adventurer. On September 21, 2011, two Americans (freelance journalist Shane Bauer and friend Joshua Fattal), held in Iran for over two years after straying over the Iranian border while hiking, were freed, to the rejoicing of their family and friends. An article relating the details of their captivity and release closes with this quotation—from Sandy Close, executive director of New America Media: “It will be a very short time before Shane goes out on the road again. I think that’s what his DNA is all about. He’s an explorer, a Marco Polo. He really wants to discover what’s going on and share it” (Bulwa, emphasis added).

The fascination that Marco Polo continues to exert over modern readers is best exemplified in the various attempts to retrace his journey. Where armchair authors (not to mention advertisers) sometimes see The Travels as witness to a precocious globalization anticipating our own, those following ‘in the footsteps’ of Marco Polo tend to stress the hazards of the road and rigors of the landscape. In the mid-1980s, then-Cambridge University student William Dalrymple spent a summer, accompanied by two different companions and armed with the Yule-Cordier translation, trekking from Jerusalem to Xanadu (the Mongol capital of Shangtu, north of Beijing), seeking out modern survivals or analogues of phenomena described in the Devisement.11 For freelance photographer Michael Yamashita, it began with a commission from The National Geographic to challenge Frances Wood’s contention that Marco Polo never went to China. Together with a National Geographic staff writer, he set out with “four cameras, a dozen lenses, a thousand

11 Dalrymple has gone on to author several books on contemporary South Asia and on the history of British colonialism in India and Afghanistan. See, for example, City of Djinns, Age of Kali, and Return of the King.
rolls of film and a copy of his book” on what was to be a four-month expedition (Yamashita 8). But, in Yamashita’s words,

[the] assignment soon became an obsession. ‘Marco Polo fever’ is what renowned China scholar Jonathan Spence calls it. ‘It is a strange disease. It can strike at any moment. The symptoms are quite clear: an overwhelming fascination with everything Marco Polo said or wrote about. There is no known cure.’ I have a bad case of it. (8)

The resulting book, *Marco Polo: A Photographer’s Journey*, chronicles the stages of their parallel travels, with Yamashita’s lavish photographs often captioned with quotations from *The Travels* (from the Yule-Cordier translation).

A similar case of “Marco Polo fever” smote New Yorkers Denis Belliveau, a professional photographer, and Francis O’Donnell, an ex-Marine and artist, in 1993. Armed with a copy of Latham’s Penguin translation, the two friends set out from Venice determined to retrace Marco’s journey “or die” (Casciato); they returned two years later, having (among other things) overcome border restrictions and security agents in Tajikistan, China, India, and Iran; crossed northern Afghanistan under the protection of a regional warlord; and momentarily been taken captive by Hazara rebels on the road to the ancient city of Balkh. Their adventures are recounted in a documentary, *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo* (Casciato), broadcast in the United States on PBS (the Public Broadcasting Service):

Equal parts travelogue, adventure story, history trek and buddy movie, *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo* finds present-day explorers Denis Belliveau and Francis O’Donnell surviving deadly skirmishes and capture in Afghanistan, crossing its forgotten ancient passageway to China (the first Westerners in a generation to do so), encountering the stinging sands of the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts in a Silk Road camel caravan, and living among cultures, including the expert horsemen of Mongolia. (Casciato, cover blurb).

The film and companion book have since spawned Explorer-in-Residence, an Inspired Project Based Learning program in which “the explorer,” Belliveau, leads students and teachers through a rich variety of Marco Polo-based educational modules, including “Cartography,” “Silk Road Artifacts,” “Making Paper,” “Global Studies – Marco’s World Today,” and the “Silk Road Subway Tour” of different ethnic neighborhoods, restaurants, and places of worship along subway line 7 in Queens, New York (“In the Footsteps,” Web).

Finally, Reed Resnikoff, the founder of Asian Motorcycle Adventures (motto: “If you can imagine it, we can take you there”) imagines Marco Polo as “a participant on our motorcycle tour [...] riding his own Harley Davidson motorcycle”

and records their group adventures from "his biker point of view." As Resnikoff recounts:

This is a story I had a lot of fun writing and it is one I am particularly fond of. While on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle tour across China's SILK ROAD, I was reading Marco Polo's THE TRAVELS, which incidentally, is a FANTASTIC BOOK!

It dawned on me, like a cartoon light bulb flashing on top of my head, that 750 years before us, Marco Polo had actually traveled this exact same Silk Road, and that some of the very cities we were visiting and staying in were described in detail by Marco Polo in his book.

Set "[w]hen Deng Xiao-Ping was ruler of China," Resnikoff's charming pastiche starts in Lanzhou, on the Yellow River, moves northwest through the Gansu (Hexi) corridor, and follows the northern Silk Road as far as Xinjiang, the modern capital of Xinjiang Autonomous Uyghur Province.13

Expositions of these attempts to follow Marco Polo's itineraries have some points in common. Both Dalrymple and Belliveau and O'Donnell visit Jerusalem to secure a vial of holy oil, like that which the Polos were charged with bringing to Qubilai Khan. And all of the travelers found that, whatever the rigors of medieval travel may have been, retracing Marco's journeys in the late twentieth century is made equally or even more difficult by wars, political conflict, and bureaucratic red tape. As Yamashita puts it: "[U]nlike Marco, we had no golden tablet, or paiza, from Kublai Khan allowing us safe and unrestricted travel through [his] lands [...]. Our itinerary was a logistical nightmare." UN no-fly zones limited access to Iraq, while "land mines and car breakdowns" replaced highway bandits and malaria as obstacles to be braved in Afghanistan (Yamashita 8–9). "Marco Polo never needed to forge a visa" (Casciato), as Belliveau and O'Donnell did in an Uzbeki border town.

Mostly, those who set out with Marco Polo's text as their guide return convinced of its authenticity. "Throughout the trip, we were constantly amazed at how accurate a reporter Marco was," writes Yamashita. "With each triumphant find, I became more and more convinced that Marco had to have been writing from first-hand experience. Not only were these sights exactly as he described, but we found each precisely where he told us to look" (Yamashita 10). "I can feel his presence here," says Belliveau, traversing the Wakhan corridor from Tajikistan to western China. "We kept seeing quote after quote coming to life from his

13 The Devisement du monde's account, on the other hand, starts in the west, at Kashgar ('F' Text, chapter 51; Polo [f], II Milione 355–56), and moves east, primarily along the southern branch of the Silk Road ('F' Text, chapters 53–58; Polo [f], II Milione 367–74). References to the Devisement give chapter (and, where relevant line) numbers from the 'F' version (Paris, BNF f. fr. 1116), with corresponding pages in Ronchi's edition (Polo [f], II Milione). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own, from my annotated translation in Polo [t], The Description of the World.
book” (Casciato). The consumption of raw meat that Marco reports in his chapter on Zardandan (‘F’ Text, chapter 120.9; Polo [f], Il Milione 474), Yamashita finds among the hill tribes of Yunnan, China (315–16, 332–33) – along with the gold teeth (312, 315) for which the province, in Persian, was named (Haw 103).

And the feeling of an experience shared across seven centuries produces a sense of identification. If Resnikoff channels Marco Polo from “his biker point of view,” Yamashita, by the end of his adventure, “was a true believer, feeling linked to Marco as a kindred spirit […]. I contemplated that if Marco were alive today, he surely would have been one of us, a writer or photographer for the National Geographic” (10).

Marco Polo and the Genealogies of Orientalism

If the popular press tends to imagine Marco Polo as the quintessential adventurer, academic writers have in recent years tended to see his work as “a first classic of Western Orientalism” (Schwab 45). In her essay “Traveling Literature, Traveling Theory: Imaginary Encounters between East and West,” Gabriele Schwab writes:

His tales abound in phantasms of Oriental exoticism replete with picturesque imaginary creatures lifted from well-known fairy tales – human with dog heads, evil spirits, and bizarre monsters. At the same time, Marco Polo became an ethnographer of sorts, recording foreign customs and listing cultural objects found in the Khan’s empire ranging from exotic spices and precious stones to paper money. (Imaginary Ethnographies, 45–46)

The essay itself has little to do with Marco Polo (largely filtered, in any case, through the inevitable/obligatory intermediary of Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities), focusing instead on the “California imaginary” that Schwab developed in her youth in postwar Germany, and concluding with a lovely anecdote of a visit to the Jewish quarter of Kaifeng, “known” to Schwab through her reading of Pearl S. Buck’s novel Peony (59–60). Though Schwab’s Marco Polo is relatively benign, her description offers in nuce many of the elements and assumptions that other readers not uncommonly take to more extreme, and distorting, degrees. If Marco the traveler-adventurer commands our attention as representative of a kind of rugged individualism, as author he matters more for his place in discourses about the ‘other’. If the Devisement (or Il milione, as Schwab refers to it) is “a

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14 Both Yamashita (380, 382) and Belliveau and O’Donnell (82, 150, 154), for example, find verification of the Devisement’s accounts of a Tibetan monastery or of the big-horned sheep today named for Marco Polo.
15 For my analysis of the ‘medievalism’ in Edward Said’s delineation of Orientalism, see Kinoshita, “Deprovincializing.”
16 On medieval writing as ethnography, see Phillips (with cautions from Kinoshita, “Review”) and Khanmohamadi.
foundering text of the genre of imaginary ethnographies,” today “widely acclaimed as an early piece of Italian national literature” (46, emphases added), it has also, for obvious reasons, become a core text in the emerging field of medieval postcolonialism.\(^\text{17}\)

The impulse to identify the *Devisement* as the source of a discursive tradition goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to define the text as the sum of its many medieval and early modern recensions and translations. In the lengthy headnote to his essay “Between Despair and Ecstasy: Marco Polo’s Life of the Buddha,” Michael Calabrese begins:

‘Marco Polo’, of course, is almost just a name we give to the combined cultural forces of authorship behind the *Travels*, including Rustichello, to whom Polo narrated the *Travels*, and early compilers and glossing translators. What Marco Polo originally said, and even what Rustichello wrote down – the archetype of all surviving versions – can only be hypothesized. *In some sense* this enhances our investigation into the text as a witness of the West’s study of the East.) (189ff., emphasis added)

The innocuous-seeming “almost” in the opening line imperceptibly flags a hesitation, a reluctance to surrender the proper name of the author to the “combined cultural forces of authorship” that poststructuralist-infected scholarship has long recognized as a hallmark of medieval textuality. This hesitation will develop into full-blown resistance as the article progresses; for the moment, however, Calabrese draws his definition explicitly from Mary Campbell’s seminal work, *The Witness and the Other World*:

We will consider as part of Marco’s book anything that has been believed to be so by medieval and Renaissance translators and readers. The book was in a sense the collaborative effort of a whole culture, enacting by its means its discovery of the orient. (Campbell 92, cited in Calabrese 189ff., emphasis added)

It is perfectly legitimate, of course, to take the Marco Polo corpus, thus construed, as an object of study.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, its multiple translations and recensions are tailor-made for a reception history, analyzing the various additions, deletions, and transformations to the textual tradition as so many clues to the shifting interests of adaptor-translators, audiences, and patrons across time, languages, and cultures. The Dominican Fra Pipino’s Latin translation (c. 1314–1324), made from

\(^{17}\) For Schwab, his ethnography is “imaginary because it [ignores] the boundaries between the factual and the imagined, between observation and fabulation, history and fairy tale” (46). On postcolonial medievalism, see Gaunt, “Postcolonial” and Lampert-Weissig.

\(^{18}\) Compare Leonardo Olschki’s oft-cited *Marco Polo’s Asia*, which allots “equal authority” to the Franco-Italian ‘F’ text (BNF fr. 1116), Ramusio’s 1559 Italian print translation, the (now lost) “adaptation into literary French” of 1307, “Z” (the Latin translation “written in Italy in the XVth century”), and “various others to be found in the separate codices and their groups, so far as they contain well-founded conclusions and information not to be found elsewhere” (Olschki 5–6, emphasis added).
an abbreviated Venetian redaction for a learned clerical audience, “introduced an
anti-Islamic and pro-Christian tone to the whole text that is not consonant with
the generally more open-minded tone of the Franco-Italian redaction” (Gaunt,
Marco Polo’s Le Devisement 19). It is this translation — not the ‘F’ version, where
“Islamophobe remarks are limited in number and confined to descriptions of the
Near East” (Gaunt, Marco Polo’s Le Devisement 19) — that gained greatest cur-
rency in the late Middle Ages.19 In contrast, the lavishly illustrated version of the
text included in the so-called Livre des Merveilles du Monde (Book of the Won-
gift for the great royal bibliophile, Jean duc de Berry (patron of the famous Très
Riches Heures) — featured illuminations of Plinian-style ‘marvels’ absent from
the text itself (Larner 82, 110; Rubiés 36–37).20 As art historian Debra Strickland
writes, the fact that courtly patrons “expected to find both Tartars and Monstrous
Races in their illustrated copies of the Devisement” produced a striking “verbal-
visual” disjunction between text and image (44, emphasis added).21

Yet, providing this sort of reception history is rarely the way the corpus is
approached. Instead, a composite version of the text is taken as representative
of the whole of medieval culture (and sometimes early modern, too), exemplify-
ing, as Calabrese puts it, “the West’s study of the East” (189f., emphasis added).
Lost in this impulse to generalize are all of the specificities — temporal, linguist-
cultural, generic — of Marco and Rustichello’s original, as represented by the ‘F’
text. For example, the capital-letter geocultural constructs (‘the West’, ‘Europe’,
‘the East’, ‘the Orient’, ‘Asia’) pervasive in modern secondary writings are absent
from the Franco-Italian, which “never […] simply opposes East to West, as if
the East were a homogeneous whole, but rather stresses its great variety” (Gaunt,
“Translating” 245).22 This makes historical sense: the binary distinction around
which Orientalism (in Said’s sense) is structured simply did not exist in Marco
Polo’s lifetime. The Devisement parses geographical space not in four but in eight

19 The Latin translation of Fra Pipino is represented by about 70 manuscripts (Gaunt, Marco
Polo’s Le Devisement 12). One reason that even editors, translators, and commentators
ostensibly presenting the Franco-Italian ‘F’ text often end up importing substantial passages
from various other translations is that the descriptions in these recensions (especially the
‘R’ Text, Ramusio’s Italian print translation from 1559) are frequently much longer and/or
more sensationalist than those found in the ‘F’ Text (BNF f. fr. 1116).

20 By the early fifteenth century, the Mongol empire — which had collapsed in Persia in 1335
and in China in 1368 — no longer represented a source of enticement for merchants and
travelers.

21 Elsewhere I have suggested that this expectation on the part of the secular nobility may be
linked to the late fourteenth-century revival of interest in classical antiquity (in the form of
numerous translations of Greek and Latin works) at the court of French king, Charles V the
Wise (brother of the bibliophile duc de Berry). In this light, the fascination with ‘monstrous
races’ evinced in texts like BNF f. fr. 2810, might be understood less as a symptom of
medieval credulity than as part of a humanist ‘renaissance’ (Kinoshita, “Tributary East”
82–83).

22 The one composite category widespread in the Devisement is that of ‘pagans’ or ‘idolators’,
comprising peoples of non-Abrahamic faiths, including Buddhism and Hinduism as well as
various local religions.
directions, the names of which are for the most part derived from common names for the winds (Moule and Pelliot in Polo [k], The Description of the World I, 55). In Marco and Rustichello’s Franco-Italian vernacular, ‘west’ and ‘east’ are ponent and levant, respectively, and the closest they come to being reified as cultural units are in the expressions “Tartars of the Ponent,” referring to the khanate of the ‘Golden Horde’, and “Tartars of the Levant,” referring to the Ilkhanate of Persia (‘F’ Text, chapter 222.1; Polo [f], Il Milione 646). Only during the late fourteenth century, as Suzanne Akbari points out, does “something like the modern notion of a European ‘West’” (Idols, 46–48) appear, several decades after Marco and Rustichello’s collaboration.23 Although the text does occasionally generalize about people, as in “all idolators” (‘F’ Text, chapter 58.3; Polo [f], Il Milione 371), it divides space into provinces and kingdoms, not geocultural units.

More problematically, however, even when multiple recensions and translations of the text (spanning over two and a half centuries) are collapsed into one, their content is often treated not as the “collaborative effort of a whole culture” (Campbell 92), the result of so many “combined cultural forces of authorship” (Calabrese 189f.), but as the product of Marco Polo as an individual writing (and traveling) subject. In a subsection entitled “Sex, Custom and Hospitality,” for example, Michael Calabrese writes:

All Polo’s various commentaries depict women that the West would eventually consider ‘typically oriental,’ to use Flaubert’s phrase (as glossed by Said). Constructing typicality lies partly in fetishizing Asian promiscuity, as in Polo’s approving report on a certain Tibetan marital custom. (197)

What follows is a notorious passage that Calabrese has compiled from three different versions of the text (in French, Latin, and Italian), alongside two modern translations. Yet despite obvious allusions, via Said, to the ‘citationality’ of Orientalist discourse, the “early compilers and glossing translators” acknowledged in Calabrese’s headnote (189f.) here disappear; rather, in an obfuscatory play of pronouns and ambiguous syntax, Marco Polo emerges as the subject of both the ‘énoncé’ and the ‘énonciation’, implicitly or explicitly ‘depicting’ “typically oriental” women, ‘fetishizing’ Asian promiscuity, and ‘approving’ a certain Tibetan marital custom (197).24 Even as Calabrese elsewhere acknowledges Marco Polo as “unburdened by a hegemonic project” (192),25 his relentless post hoc, ergo

23 Several authors have devoted space to countering the arguments of Syed Manzarul Islam in his book, The Ethics of Travel. In general I agree with their overall assessments and will not rehearse them here (see Larner 97–102; Gaunt, Marco Polo’s Le Devisement 161–63, 165; Phillips 56).

24 Descriptions of women made sexually available to passing travelers in Tibet (‘F’ Text, chapter 115) and Gaindu (‘F’ Text, chapter 117) have drawn much attention from modern commentators. In addition to Calabrese, see, for example, Phillips 128–29.

25 A strong point of Calabrese’s article is his contrastive analysis of the descriptions of Kublai Khan and the Buddha in relation to the topos of a king with an endless array of specially selected beauties at his disposal.
propter hoc logic interpellates Marco Polo as founder of an Orientalist tradition directly linked to “the modern ‘mail-order bride’ ideology that thrives by catering to an unending horde of men who alternately fetishize the prurience or the purity of the exotic female Other,” (201–02) or the “Saigon-style bars and prostitution” resurfacing in Vietnam at the time of his (Calabrese’s) writing (229). His essay abounds in sentences in which Marco Polo, not “the combined cultural forces of authorship” (Calabrese 189f.), is the explicit subject to whom agency, affect, or intentionality is ascribed. This grammatico-syntactic detail – encouraged, I am suggesting, by generic expectations surrounding the travel narrative – is laden with interpretive consequences.

It is, moreover, a widespread phenomenon. To personalize Polo-the-traveler as a speaking subject, modern interpreters attribute emotional content to the Devisement’s typically flat and formulaic prose. For Kim Phillips, the formulation, “They eat […]” (“ill menuent,” “F” Text, chapter 102.20) becomes “Marco Polo is disturbed that the people of Quinsai do not balk at eating ‘all flesh both of dogs and of other brute beasts and other animals which for nothing in the world would any Christian here eat’” (Phillips 85, emphasis added, with internal quotation from Moule and Pelliot I, 332).26 Most egregious in this regard is Laurence Bergreen; in his popular history (discussed in greater detail below), Polo is “fascinated and repelled” by Tibet and “troubled greatly” by the region’s anarchy and rampant superstition (nevertheless “succumbing to the spell” of local astrologer-magicians); he “experienced stabs of anxiety and dread” and a “sense of bewilderment at the chaos surrounding him,” and exhibits “disgust” at “dilapidated and ruined” regions (Bergreen 173, 175).

Perceptions of ‘Orientalism’ frequently rely on such selective interpretation and recontextualization. When Kim Phillips describes Marco Polo’s narrative of the Mongol princess who would marry only a man able to defeat her in combat as the “fullest and most vivid” version of the tale of a “Tartar virago” (104, emphasis added), for example, we may wonder what justifies such a label.27 In the ‘F’ version that Phillips quotes, the young woman is described as “strong and valiant […] so strong that there was no young man or squire in all the realm who could vanquish her” – which was no wonder, since “she was so well fashioned in all the limbs and was so tall and so big bodied that it wanted but little that she was a giantess” (Phillips 104, citing Moule and Pelliot in Polo [k], The Description of the World I, 455). The sole mention of “Tartar” occurs in the opening explanation that the princess’s name, Aigiaruc, is “tartaresche” for “shining moon.” (“F” Text,
chapter 201.1; Polo [f], Il Milione 618). Otherwise, she is referred to throughout the lengthy episode only as the “maiden” (“dameselle,” ‘F’ Text, chapter 201.2; Polo [f], Il Milione 618) or the “king’s daughter” (“fille au roi,” ‘F’ Text, chapter 201.8; Polo [f], Il Milione 619). The vocabulary — both of her defeat of a potential suitor and of her subsequent exploits at her father’s side — is entirely courtly, unmarked for ethnicity (Tartar or otherwise), and displaying no discomfiture at the princess’s military prowess. “Tartar virago,” then, is the characterization not of the thirteenth-century traveler but of the twenty-first-century historian.

Few passages reveal the mutual imbrication of the composite textual tradition, the personalization of Marco’s subject position, and orientalist thematics than the Devisement’s account of Badakhshan (Balascan), the high mountain region in the eastern part of present-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The section, chapter 47 in the Franco-Italian recension, begins by specifying the region’s religion, language, and type of rule — the formulaic opening of chapters throughout the Devise: “Badakhshan is a province whose people worship Mohammed and have a language of their own. It is a large kingdom and [has] a hereditary king” (“Balascan est une provence que les gens aorent Maomet et ont langajes por elz. Il est grant roaines et se roit por hereditajes”; ‘F’ Text, chapter 47.1–2; Polo [f], Il Milione 360). The historical explanation that follows, however, is exceptional in its precision:

They [the kings] are from a single lineage, descended from Alexander and King Darius, the great lord of Persia. What’s more, all these kings are named Zulkarnein in their Saracen language (meaning ‘Alexander’ in French), for love of the great Alexander.

[C]e est que de un lignajes sunt, desendu dou roi Alexandre et de la fille del roi Dqyre, le grant sire de Persie. Et encore s’apelen tuit celz rois Çulcarnein, en saraisin lor langajes, que vaut a dire en frasçois Aixandre, por le amor dou grant Aixandre. (‘F’ Text, chapter 47.2–3; Polo [f], Il Milione 360)

This “Alexander” refers less to the historical conqueror than to the legendary figure found in the Alexander Romance — a network of interrelated texts “in several dozen languages and well over a hundred different versions, [...] in poetry as well as prose, [...] from the third century BCE through the nineteenth century CE, across a geographical expanse that ranges from Afghanistan to Spain and Ethiopia to Iceland” (Selden 32). Strikingly, this reference to a single lineage descended from Alexander and the Persian king Darius recasts conven-

28 “Tartar,” used inaccurately but systematically throughout the Devise and other western European texts to refer to the Mongols, is the ethnic name ‘Tatar’ (a Central Asian group conquered and absorbed by the Mongols early on), inflected by echoes of ‘Tartaurus’, the ancient Greek name for the underworld.
29 A telltale sign here is that she is favorably compared to other knights (“chevalier,” ‘F’ Text, chapter 201.25; Polo [f], Il Milione 620).
tional Western understanding: no longer cast as victor and vanquished, the two become coprogenitors of this autonomous ruling dynasty of Badakhshan. Likewise, the ease with which the text equates Alexander with Dhul-Qarnain ("the two-horned") – the name given him in the Qur'an and other Arabic and Islamicate texts – sets aside large geocultural divisions between 'East' and 'West', recoding the Macedonian conqueror as part of a shared Eurasian legacy. Turning next to Badakhshan's mineral wealth, the text describes at some length the king's monopoly on the extraction and circulation of "the precious stones called balasci" ('F' Text, chapter 47.4; Polo [f], Il Milione 360), and then mentions in quick succession the region's fauna (very good horses that "run well and do not wear iron on their feet," very good saker and lanner falcons, an abundance of game animals and birds; 'F' Text, chapter 47.4; Polo [f], Il Milione 360), and agricultural crops (good wheat, huskless barley, and olive oil "made from sesame and walnuts"; 'F' Text, chapter 47.12, 47.14; Polo [f], Il Milione 361). Finally, after noting that this mountainous area has many narrow paths and fortifications, the chapter concludes with some observations about the people: they are good archers and hunters, and, although most wear animal leather for lack of fabric, noble ladies wear trousers stuffed with cloth to make their hips appear bigger, "because their men take pleasure in fat women" ('F' Text, chapter 47.17; Polo [f], Il Milione 362).30

Like the range of topics covered in this section – animals, crops, means of livelihood, dress, and customs – the description of the landscape is at first glance typical of those found throughout the Devisement; the 'F' text version reads:

This kingdom has many narrow paths and natural fortresses, so that the inhabitants are not afraid of any invader breaking in to molest them. Their cities and towns are built on mountain tops or sites of great natural strength. (Latham in Polo [s], The Travels 77)

Ef[n] ceste roiame ha maint estroit pas et maint forti leu, si qu'il ne ont doute que nulles jens hi peusent entrer por lor daumage[r]: et lor cités et lor caustiaus sunt en grande montagnes, en fortisme leus.31 ('F' Text, chapter 47.15; Polo [f], Il Milione 361)

At this point, however, the Penguin translation inserts the following:

It is a characteristic of these mountains that they are of immense height, so that for a man to climb from the bottom to the top is a full day's journey, from dawn till dusk. On the top are wide plateaux, with a lush growth of grass and trees and copious springs of the purest water, which pour down over the crags like rivers into the valley below. In these

30 For Kim Phillips, this declaration that the women stuff their trousers "because their men take pleasure in fat women" (emphasis added) is an example of the way that "Marco Polo treats [...] eastern women as objects of erotic appeal" (Phillips 111, emphasis added).

31 In the Tuscan translation, commonly known as Il Milione, this passage is reduced to a single line: "Lo luogo è molto forte da guerra" (chapter 46.12; Polo [f], Il Milione 55). Ronchi's edition (Polo [f], Il Milione) is based on that of Valeria Bertolucci Pizzorusso (Polo [li], Versione Toscana).
streams are found trout and other choice fish. (Latham in Polo [s], *The Travels* 77, emphasis added)

Where does this passage come from? We are not told. What does it change? If anything, it bolsters the image of Marco as lone adventurer – scaling the mountain heights, there to revel in an edenic scene of the plenitude of untouched nature. This edenic quality is reinforced in the subsequent passage:

On the mountain tops the air is so pure and so salubrious that if a man living in the cities and houses built in the adjoining valleys falls sick of a fever, whether tertian, quartan, or hectic, he has only to go up into the mountains, and a few days rest will banish the malady and restore him to health. *Messer Marco vouches for this from his own experience.* (Latham in Polo [s], *The Travels* 77–78, emphasis added)

This sort of third-person narration of a first-person experience also appears elsewhere in the ‘F’ text (alongside the more direct “I, Marco Polo”); here, however, a footnote informs us: “According to R, he was ill in these parts for a year (perhaps since his stay at Hormuz), but recovered immediately after acting on the advice to go up into the mountains” (Latham in Polo [s], *The Travels* 78f., emphasis added).

‘R’, as we recall, refers to the Italian print translation published over two and a half centuries after the composition of Marco and Rustichello’s [lost] original. Many of its interpolations, though found in no other versions, prove irresistible to editors, translators, and commentators. As Marco’s nineteenth-century translator Henry Yule writes, in an uncharacteristically effusive note: “This pleasant passage is only in Ramusio, but it would be heresy to doubt its genuine character. Marco’s recollection of the delight of convalescence in such a climate seems to lend an unusual enthusiasm and felicity to his description of the scenery” (Yule and Cordier in Polo [q], *The Travels* I, 163, emphasis added). That is, a description found only in Ramusio’s 1559 print translation (‘R’ Text) attains orthodox status – “it would be heresy to doubt its genuine character” – precisely because of its ‘unusual’ (read: uncharacteristic) features, which transform a third-person military-strategic assessment of well-protected mountain fortresses into a first-person experiential memory.

The hint of romanticism that momentarily grips Henry Yule is nothing, however, compared to the fancy spun around this passage by Laurence Bergreen in

32 On the complexities of the use of the first person in the *Devisement*, see Gaunt, *Marco Polo’s Le Devisement* 42–62.

33 As Phillips points out, modern translations frequently include Ramusio’s attribution of the fall of “Mangi” (the kingdom of the Southern Song) to its “pusillanimous” king’s “continual dalliance with women” (Phillips 137–38).
his 2007 popular history Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu. At such an altitude, Bergreen writes, it is unlikely that the unidentified malady was malaria; perhaps it was syphilis, "or severe emotional problems. But more likely, he had tuberculosis" (71–72). After all, it was prevalent in Europe; Marco could have contracted it when he was young, and it would have lain dormant until activated by the stress of travel, manifesting in a fever and cough. Opium was a common treatment for these symptoms, and, "as he recovered, he might have become addicted to the remedy," Afghanistan, Bergreen explains, was then as it is today, "the leading opium producer in the world" (71). Thus "the unusual length of time that [Marco] languished in Badakhshan could be" (72) that in treating his tuberculosis, he had become addicted to opium and had to detoxify — an excruciating process that Bergreen describes in vivid detail in the past conditional:

The symptoms of withdrawal that he might have suffered include nausea, sweating, cramps, vomiting, diarrhea, depression, loss of appetite, anxiety, and rapid changes in mood. He would have become edgier, moodier, more sensitive to light, and more highly suggestible. Where his father and uncle saw a road or a bridge or a storm, Marco might have seen evidence of impersonal cosmic forces at work, sweeping them toward an inchoate destiny. (72)

Bergreen later makes reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem “Kubla Khan” (cf. Coleridge 102–04), triggering speculation that Marco and the neurasthenic Romantic poet may have shared a common drug addiction, “which would have heightened their perceptions and imparted unnatural vividness to their literary works” (Bergreen 352–53).

As Marco learned to tolerate opium, it may well have altered and sharpened his perceptions — and the Travels. In this case, it would be more accurate to say that he was an amplifier rather than exaggerator, that he was unnaturally prone to suggestion. That would explain why extensive parts of his account display a high degree of acuity and detail, while other parts are so fanciful. If Marco stopped using drugs such as opium when he returned to Venice, his withdrawal could have contributed to his transformation from the exuberant emissary who traveled from one kingdom to another to the vindictive merchant who pursued one lawsuit after another. (Bergreen 352–53)

Based on a passage unattested before 1559 (whose “genuine character” it would nevertheless be “heresy” to doubt), Marco has become a tubercular, vindictive, and litigious opium addict.

34 Bergreen is the “prizewinning author” of works on Magellan, James Agee, Louis Armstrong, Al Capone, and Irving Berlin (author biography, frontmatter). His Marco Polo mostly adheres fairly closely to Marco’s text, surrounding it with contextual information but occasionally, as here, indulges in fanciful speculation.
The World Empire of Letters

In the *Devisement*, such “picturesque imaginary creatures” as “humans with dog heads, evil spirits, and monsters” (Schwab 45–46) are, as we noted earlier, exceedingly rare; instead, the book often seems to demystify the most clichéd examples of medieval credulity (Larner 82), challenging (for example) traditional accounts of the unicorn by calling it “a very ugly beast” with “hair like buffalo and feet like elephants” – “just the opposite of what we all say it is like” (‘F’ Text, chapter 166.15–15; Polo [f], *Il Milione* 543–44). Nevertheless, in one notable exception, “humans with dog heads” (‘F’ Text, chapter 172.3; Polo [f], *Il Milione* 549) – cynocephali, one of the canonical monstrous races of antiquity – do appear in the account of the Andaman Islands (but compare Larner 82), located in the Bay of Bengal, about a third of the way between the Malay peninsula and the Indian subcontinent:

Andaman is a very large island; they have no king; they are idolators and are like wild animals. And I will tell you about a kind of people well worth telling about in our book. Now know in complete truth that all the men of this island have heads like dogs and teeth and eyes like dogs: for I tell you that they are all like the heads of great mastiffs. They have a lot of spices; they are a very cruel people; they eat as many men as they can catch, if they are not their people. They have all kinds of spices in abundance; their food is rice, milk, and meat of all kinds; they also have fruit which is different from ours.

Angaman est une ysale bien grant; il ne ont roi; il sunt ydres e sunt come bestes sauvages. Et si vous dirai d’une meincr de jens que bien fait a conter (en) nostre livre. Or sachiés tout voirement que tuit les homes de ceste ysale ont chief comme chien et dens et iaux come chiens: car je vous di qu’il sunt tuit semblable a chief de grant chienz mastin. Il ont especeries aseç; il sunt mout cruel jens; il menuient les omes, tuit cil que il puent prandre, puis qu’il ne soient de lor jens. Il ont grant abonda(n) ce de toutes meincnes d’especeries; lor viandes est (ris) e lait et cars de toutes maineres; il ont encore fruit devisece a les nostres. (‘F’ Text, chapter 172.1–5, emphasis added; Polo [f], *Il Milione* 549)

Framed by the same kind of pedestrian details of rule, religion, commodities, and customs that characterize numerous other geographical entries, this passage conjoins dog-men and cannibalism in the briefest of descriptions; the savagery of the people and the abundance of their spices are each mentioned twice, and are intertwined in ways that suggest the tension between the merchant and the adventurer.35 Strikingly, the dog-headed people are nowhere described as a ‘wonder’ or a ‘marvel’; rather, their noteworthiness is marked not lexically but syntactically, by two of the formulae (“know in complete truth” and “for I tell you that”) that recur

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throughout the ‘F’ text for emphasis or to delay skepticism — often taxing the patience of the modern reader in the process. Once again, however, the Penguin translation adds an interpolation:

The island lies in a sea so turbulent and so deep that ships cannot anchor there or sail away from it, because it sweeps them into a gulf from which they can never escape. This is because the sea there is so tempestuous that it continually eating away the land, scooping out trees at the root and toppling them over and afterwards sweeping them into this gulf. It is truly marvelous how many trees are driven into the gulf without ever coming out again. Hence it happens that ships that enter the gulf are jammed in such a mass of these trees that they cannot move from the spot and so are stuck there for good. (Latham 258)

The indication that any ships reaching Andaman can in fact never leave again encloses the island within a kind of narrative Bermuda Triangle. The interpolation thus calls attention to and puts pressure on the veracity of the account in a way totally absent from BNF f. fr. 1116 (‘F’ Text).36

The Andaman chapter, then, is the exception that proves the rule, justifying the text’s subsequent circulation under the title Book of Marvels (‘A2’ Text, BNF f. fr. 2810) while marking the forbidding foreignness of these forbidden lands. In fact, this account turns out to be part of a widespread textual tradition, recognizable across the following three variations.

[#1] Behind [Langabalous] are two islands called Andaman, separated by the sea. Their inhabitants eat people alive: they have black skin, kinky hair, a horrible face and eyes, and big feet. Their sex — that is, their rod — is about one cubit long. They go around completely naked. They have no embarcations: if they did, they would eat everyone who passed near them. It happens that, because of the wind, ships of this sea slow their pace and the sailors tarry in their vicinity, exhausting their shipboard supply of water. Sometimes [the inhabitants] capture them; more often, they escape. (Sauvaget)

[#2] When sailing from [northwest Sumatra] to Ceylon, if the wind is not fair, ships may be driven to a place called [Andaman]. This is a group of two islands in the middle of the sea, one of them being large, the other small; the latter is quite uninhabited. The large one measures seventy li in circuit. The natives on it are of a color resembling black lacquer; they eat men alive, so that sailors dare not anchor on this coast. (Hirth and Rockhill)

[#3] Its inhabitants are Negroes (Zanj), with pepper-like hair. When a foreigner falls in their hands, they eat him alive. They devour human flesh like dogs. They share their women. They have long faces, long legs, and a deformed appearance. (Rapoport and Savage-Smith)

36 The passage comes from the so-called ‘Z’ text (on which, see note 14, above).
The confluences among the accounts are quite striking. Passage #1 combines two features familiar from the augmented version of the Devisement: cannibalism, and the logistical difficulties in sailing to or from the islands. The people have been deanimalized (no dog heads) but racialized in a way that conjoins physical characteristics with a monstrous sexuality. In Passage #2, some of the same features occur (the blackness of the inhabitants, their cannibalism, and the outsiders’ wariness of the shore), but in less sensationalized form. Like #s 1 and 2, Passage #3 racializes the description of the inhabitants; like the Devisement, it associates them with dogs, and specifies that their cannibalism is limited to foreigners. The point to be made here is that it is precisely where the Devisement seems most outlandish that it most closely conforms to the discursive expectations of its world.

That is perhaps no surprise. What is surprising are the parameters of that world. Marco’s text is typically considered in relation to other Western texts, like the mid-thirteenth-century reports on the Mongols by the Franciscans John of Plano Carpini (Dawson) and William of Rubruck, or fictive works like the Book of John Mandeville. Yet the Devisement’s account of Andaman proves to be a point of intersection of several textual traditions. Passage #1 comes from a mid-ninth century Arabic text, ’Aḥbar as-Sin wa l-Hind (Tidings on China and India; Sauvaget), thought to have been composed in the port of Siraf — the major Persian Gulf entrepôt at the time the Abbasid caliphate was establishing trade connections with China.37 The second text comes from China — from the Description of Barbarous Peoples (Hirth and Rockhill) penned in the latter part of the twelfth century by Chau Ju-Kua (Zhao Rugua), Inspector of Maritime Trade in Zaytun (current day Quanzhou), the great port linking China with the Indian Ocean, and described at length in the Devisement. The third quotation is from Kitāb Gharāʾib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-ʿawāyn (The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes; Rapoport and Savage-Smith), an Arabic cosmographical treatise compiled in Egypt in the first half of the eleventh century; it includes “an unparalleled series of diagrams of the heavens and maps of the earth” extraordinarily important for the history of astronomy and cartography (Savage-Smith and Rapoport). The only known manuscript, acquired by the Bodleian in 2002, dates from late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Egypt, circling us back to Marco Polo’s Mediterranean.

What emerges from these confluences, as well as from the semantic range and cross-linguistic, transcultural potentiality of the Marco-Rustichello text’s three medieval titles, is, I suggest (with due respect to Pascale Casanova) something like a world empire of letters, predating but enhanced by the century of Mongol dominance, “before European hegemony” (Abu-Lughod). As Thomas Allsen writes (in contrast to our previous assertions on Marco Polo’s entrenched Orientalism): Marco’s “expectations for East Asia, his geographical nomenclature,
and his manner of organizing space all bear a clear Muslim, if not distinctly Persian, imprint.” Moreover, since the Yuan rulers “accumulated Muslim astronomers, cosmographers, and mathematicians; collected their charts and maps; and appropriated their techniques and terminology, the Chinese viewed Africa and the Mediterranean through the same ‘Arabo-Persian spectacles’” (Allsen, “Cultural Worlds” 380–81).38

Only in reassembling the many components of that world – configured in ways that often run counter to modern normative expectations – can we begin to grasp the complexity of the Devisement and of this astonishing century before European hegemony, whose cross-cultural adaptations seem in other ways uncannily familiar in our allegedly postnational moment.

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38 Internal quotation from Paul Wheatley, “Analecta” 113–14. Allsen has written extensively on cultural exchange in the Mongol world. See also, Kinoshita, “Worlding.”

'Z' Text: 'Zelada Codex' (Manuscript), 'Z manuscript of Toledo'. Latin translation of Marco Polo's account, probably 15th century. Catedral de Toledo, Biblioteca (Cathedral Library at Toledo, Spain). There also is another 'Codex Z', a Latin copy of the Toledo manuscript, made in 1795 by order of Giuseppe Toaldo. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, Italy.

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