There is a common misconception that travel narrative as I define it above is rare, or virtually nonexistent, in the Middle Ages. This alleged dearth supposedly reflects the Middle Ages’ aversion to empiricism, its disinterest in individual experience, and its dogmatic fixation on theological authority. It is true that some of the most successful works of medieval travel writing—including the accounts of John of Plano Carpini, Burghard of Mount Sion, John Mandeville, and Marco Polo / Rustichello da Pisa—privilege geoethnographic description over the narration of experience. However, as my analyses of these works suggest, each of them appears to do so with different aims in mind, and not because they all subscribe to the same benighted set of epistemological beliefs. In any event, the truism that travel narrative is rare in the Middle Ages does not withstand scrutiny for long once one focuses on texts written after 1350, many of which were composed by pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Finally, travel book refers to the work of travel writing in its dimension as a material object, usually a manuscript codex. This term is particularly useful in situations in which the form and content of a given text are somehow illuminated by a consideration of the material practices and social networks that sustained its production and circulation. Though this nested set of terms was not used by medieval authors and readers, it will hopefully furnish basic coordinates that will facilitate synchronic and diachronic comparisons of various works of travel writing without fetishizing or overlooking their formal differences.

P A R T  1

Subjectivity, Authority, and the "Exotic"

According to Giovanni Boccaccio’s biography of Dante, some early audiences of the Divine Comedy believed that its author had been—quite literally—to hell and back. While strolling one day through the streets of Ravenna, Dante reportedly overheard a group of townswomen marveling at him in hushed tones:

"Ladies, do you see that man who goes back and forth to Hell as he pleases, and returns with news about those who are there?" To which another of them naively [semplicemente] responded: "Truly, you are right: Do you not see how his beard is crisped and his complexion darkened [la barba crespa e il color bruno] by the heat and smoke of that place?" Hearing these words spoken behind him, and realizing that they were due to the women's credulity, he was pleased by the high opinion they had of him, and—smiling a little—he moved onward.1

On the one hand a cautionary tale about the importance of leaving literary interpretation to the professionals, this anecdote also highlights the evidentiary limitations of one of the medieval travel writer’s most cherished bids for authority: an appeal to the physical travails of travel.2

Dante and Boccaccio were born into a world of expanding geographical and literary horizons—factors that inform the above-mentioned anecdote and that spawned novel forms of travel writing. Starting in the 1240s, European travel writers began following the Mongol Empire’s secure overland routes into central and East Asia. They returned with astonishing, improbable accounts of regions that had been but dimly known even to the Roman Empire. Prior to this point, travel writers tended to be monks or cathedral clergy, who wrote about places [such as the Holy Land or Rome] that had also been described in the works of ancient authorities. Most of them envi-
sioned concrete and relatively unproblematic readerships—usually a royal patron or the religious community to which they belonged.

None of this was true for those who wrote about their travels to East Asia between 1240 and 1370. These authors were members of emergent and increasingly self-assertive groups: merchants, friars, and the nobility. Faced with the advent of new reading communities, most anticipated broad, socially mixed audiences who—like the women from Boccaccio’s vignette—might interpret their efforts in ways that they had not intended. The most common fears that travel writers voiced were that their accounts would be dismissed as untruthful or that they would fall into hands ill equipped to derive the benefits that they sought to impart to their readers.

References to travail were central to how exotic travel writers negotiated their amorphous and potentially fractious audiences. Previous scholarship on exotic travel writing during the Middle Ages has focused primarily on the analysis of ethnographic discourses and has underestimated the conceptual importance of travel to these works. However, even accounts that invest little rhetorical energy in detailing the experiences of their authors ask that their readers view the text’s geographically descriptions through the lens of the pains and labors that produced them.

The rhetoric of travail was also leveraged by medieval readers of travel writing. Particularly successful accounts—like those of Marco Polo, Odorico of Pordenone, and John Mandeville—passed back and forth between clerical, courtly, and bourgeois readerships. As they did so, they were not only translated from one language to another, but often also revised to conform to the expectations of different audiences. Radical revisions of the text’s content and/or form were common. Many of these changes were ideologically motivated rewritings of the author’s statements about how and why he embraced the labors of travel and travel writing. What this means is that the manuscript tradition of any given account is also potentially a document of ongoing cultural debates about the nature of the benefits gained through travel—and about the role that travel writing plays in transmitting those benefits to others.

While monographs on individual travel writers such as Marco Polo and John Mandeville have examined manuscript traditions in order to identify broad areas of consensus and disagreement among medieval readers, surveys of exotic travel writing have made limited use of the evidence provided by manuscript variants. However, as the following two chapters will show, the medieval invention of travel was a project in which both authors and readers played essential parts (albeit to the occasional consternation of the former group).

CHAPTER ONE

Exoticism as the Appropriation of Travail

The Greek-derived word exotic entered into written English (via French) in 1600, in Ben Jonson’s Every Man out of His Humor. The turn of phrase that marked its debut was fittingly sensationalist: “Magique, Witchcraft, or other such Exotick Artes.” In 1633, Thomas Johnson’s revision of John Gerard’s The herball, or, Generall historie of plantes classified the fruit of the clove tree as “Exoticke,” in part because of the strange sensations that its English investigator experienced upon putting it inside his mouth.

By 1650, exotic was both an adjective and a noun, applied not only to species and customs imported into England from “outside” but also to the resident aliens that were one’s neighbors and to foreign authors—both ancient and modern—whose works paved the way for one’s own scholarship. As these examples suggest, many early uses of exotic describe phenomena that, in après coup fashion, give rise to the very boundaries that supposedly preexist them and that they allegedly breach.

The rise of postcolonial studies prompted scholars of travel writing to consider how their objects of study participate in such ideologically motivated constructions of “the outside.” In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said remarked:

If you were British or French in the 1860s you saw, and you felt, India and North Africa with a combination of familiarity and distance, but never with a sense of their separate sovereignty. In your narratives, histories, travel tales, and explorations your consciousness was represented as the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and peoples.

According to Said, exoticism is an aesthetic mode that reifies cultural difference in ways that alternately naturalize and dissemble the violent foun-
dations of imperial hegemony: "The exotic replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity." While Said focused on highbrow exoticism, Anne McClintock subsequently argued that the Victorian marketing of soap, fruit salts, and tea relied on exoticizing tableaux to sell not only household commodities but also nationalist and imperialist ideologies to masses who were not necessarily clattering to read Flaubert or attend the latest production of Verdi's Aida. Meanwhile, Gayatri Spivak and Graham Huggan have suggested that the literary works of authors from postcolonial countries are commodified by the Anglo-American academy in ways that perpetuate the exoticisms of the nineteenth century.

Like the term exotic itself, postcolonial critiques of exoticism emerge from realities that postdate the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, there was a medieval analogue for the aesthetic mode that modern scholars call exoticism. This chapter focuses on one of medieval exoticism's characteristic expressions: the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge. This term refers to a constellation of symbolic conventions, material practices, and structures of feeling that enabled medieval people to accrue social, political, and economic advantage through their association with the foreign. The travails of the traveler, and the symbolic appropriation thereof, were the foundation of this economy.

Anthropologist Mary W. Helms has shown that, in nearly all preindustrial societies, the field of inquiry that we call geography overlaps significantly with cosmology. For this reason, the act of overcoming geographical distance is charged with the powers of the sacred. Because knowledge of faraway lands attains this mystical character, it proves fundamental to cults of royal and priestly charisma. In some cultures, monarchs and high priests bolster their authority by traveling to distant places in person, returning as what Helms calls "long-distance specialists." In others, elite persons appropriate the mystique of long-distance specialists without ever leaving their native lands, through ensuring their privileged access to foreign visitors and the exotic commodities that accompany them. Among medieval rulers, this second approach tended to prevail over the first (which might partially explain the ambivalence of medieval attitudes toward the heroic travels of Ulysses and Alexander the Great). Long-distance specialists also stand to profit by making their labors available for appropriation, economically (through financial awards and social promotion) and symbolically (through their prestigious proximity to the powerful).

Just as the critical interrogation of nineteenth-century exoticism cast the era's attitudes toward travel and travel writing in a new light, an appreciation of the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge is indispensable to analyses of the same phenomena in the Middle Ages. This is certainly the case with two frequently compared works of travel writing: the Itinerarium of William of Rubruck (1253) and the Divisament dou monde of Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa (1298). Scholars have often treated the Itinerarium and the Divisament as a contrasting diptych. The account of William of Rubruck is generally lauded for its skepticism, its dialogic approach to ethnographic description, and its vivid personal rendering of its author's experiences. Featuring "a plot and a character," the Itinerarium balances narrative and exoticizing description in a way that conforms to modern expectations of how travel writing should be done. By contrast, the Divisament is faulted for confining its discussion of the Polo family's experiences to a slim preface. The rest of the bulky work is given over to impersonal geoethnographic descriptions of Asia, with occasional anecdotes about Marco's travels scattered throughout. Even Polo's nineteenth-century champion Henry Yule conceded that, in the Divisament, "impersonality is carried to excess." Making matters worse for the Divisament is its allegedly crude style, particularly its penchant for oral formulaic refrains and its inconsistent use of the first-person narrative voice.

Recent scholarship has softened the tone of such negative comparisons, observing that Polo and Rustichello did not set out to write a first-person travel narrative. However, there is still no consensus about what they actually did intend to write. The unanswered question of why these texts might have adopted the formal and stylistic tendencies that have shaped their critical fortunes is a compelling one. After all, it was not inevitable that William of Rubruck—even though he was writing a letter—would situate his description of the Mongol Empire within the framework of a relatively continuous first-person narrative. Likewise, nothing prevented the makers of the Divisament—a work that drew heavily on the conventions of Arthurian fiction—from embedding geoethnographic description within the framework of a highly subjectivized series of episodes based on Polo's real-life adventures.

In following pages, I argue that the formal tendencies that distinguish the Itinerarium from the Divisament are more meaningfully contextualized as traits that allow the two works to express their divergent attitudes toward the role played by the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge in cross-cultural exchanges with the Mongol Empire. The notorious instability of the 'I' in the Divisament and the work's apparent suppression of Marco's experience are deliberate choices that allow the work to rationalize its transformation of Polo's travels into a novel kind of exotic commodity: a travel book designed for lay readers within—and outside—courtly set-
nings. The displacement of Polo allows the *Divisament* to bring the figures of Khubilai Khan and Rustichello to the fore, a rhetorical maneuver that is key to the work’s self-rationalization. By contrast, the prominence of the first-person voice in William’s account asserts his alienation from the materialism and cultural relativism of the Mongol court. Among its other narrative effects, the “I” of the *Itinerarium* registers its author’s resistance to the manner in which he is exoticized by his foreign hosts. William ultimately concludes that the relativistic impulses of courtly exoticism are structurally incompatible with the universalizing claims of his faith, a conviction that prompts the Franciscan—whom modern readers have admired for his urbanity—to call for a crusade against the Mongol people.

**EXOTICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: WILLIAM OF RUBRUCK**

In 1253, Friar William of Rubruck subjected himself to a harrowing trek from the Crimea to Caracorum, where he stayed at the court of the Mongol ruler Möngke Khan (ruled 1251–59). At some point: prior to this journey, William had been sent by his order to the Palestinian port town of Acre, at the time still under Latin Christian control. It was there, or perhaps in Cyprus, that William crossed paths with king and future saint Louis IX of France, who was about to lead his followers into the disastrous Seventh Crusade. Taking advantage of William’s plans to visit the western edge of the Mongol Empire, Louis asked the Franciscan to carry a royal “letter of friendship” to the Mongol baron Sartach, who had reportedly converted to Christianity. The French king also donated lavish books, liturgical instruments, and probably traveling money, all intended to support William’s ministry. Upon his return to Acre in 1255, William of Rubruck discovered that his royal patron, having suffered crushing defeat and captivity at the hands of the Egyptian sultan, had been ransomed and returned to Paris. Unable to get permission to leave Acre for France, William dispatched a book-length letter to Louis IX—the richly observed first-person travel narrative now known as the *Itinerarium*.

The disconnect between the appealing stylistic qualities of the *Itinerarium* and the murderous agenda that they serve has no doubt contributed to the scholarly tendency to pass over its conclusion with scant comment. The traits for which the *Itinerarium* is praised—its dialogism, careful observation, and immediate rendering of experience—are not ends in themselves; they are marshaled to paint William’s journey as a failure. The Franciscan’s plot-driven narrative makes the pain, hunger, humiliation, and fear of its

author the center of attention. The final, bloodthirsty pages of the account clarify what is at stake in this persistent emphasis on William’s wasted pains. Taking leave of Louis, William advises the crusade-happy monarch to wage a holy war against the Great Khan. According to William, “It would be a very easy thing to subjugate the lands between Constantinople and the Mongol Empire. He adds:

Of old, brave men made their way through these regions [i.e., Hungary, Armenia, Anatolia] and all went well with them, although they had very brave men resisting them, whom God has now wiped off the face of the earth. . . . I say to you with confidence, if your peasants, I will not say kings or knights, were willing to [travel overland] as do the Kings of the Tartars and to be content with the same kind of food, they could take possession of the whole world.16

In contrast to fellow Franciscan Roger Bacon—a medieval admirer of the *Itinerarium*—William is pessimistic about the prospect of bringing the Mongol Empire into the Christian fold through peaceable means and eager to embrace violence as an alternative.17

William’s famous first impressions of the Mongol Empire would seem to foreshadow this grim perspective: “It seemed indeed to me as if I were stepping into some other world [aliud seculum].” Nevertheless, the *Itinerarium* does not, in fact, attribute the futility of its author’s mission to Mongol alterity. Instead, it implicates an area of cultural common ground shared by Christendom and the Mongol Empire: the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge. The *Itinerarium* points to the travails endured by William as evidence of the futility of engaging the Great Khan through conventional diplomatic appeals to exoticism. William suggests that such efforts have not only failed to contain the threat of Mongol expansion but have also created an environment in which preaching has been rendered all but useless as a tool for negotiating cultural and confessional difference.

As a Franciscan, William of Rubruck had taken a vow of poverty that barred him from full participation in the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge, which, throughout the medieval world, was inextricably bound to the exercise of temporal power and the traffic in luxury goods. Farfeithed animals, rare gems, and foreign handicrafts were among the commodities most commonly exchanged within courtly and diplomatic settings. Like many politically symbolic gifts, these objects were "luxuries" valued for their scarcity, craftsmanship, beauty, utility, or ownership history; however, they can also be considered "symbolic," in the sense that they captured and indexed the exchange of actual or potential power—what the French termed the "globe de l'homme," the "sphere of the world."
part of their value derived from their distant origins—and, more specifically, from the effort expended in conveying them to the places where they changed hands. Spices were one of the more widely diffused exotic luxuries in medieval Europe. In the Middle Ages, the high prices commanded for pepper, cinnamon, and aloes were propped up by fanciful accounts of the perils involved in harvesting them in the East and transporting them to their point of consumption in the West. In contrast to their Roman counterparts, then, the commodities that circulated within the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge do anything but conceal the truth of structural inequality; on the contrary, their exchange makes a spectacle of the alienation of labor.

This is one reason why the ceremonial presentation of distantly fetched gifts became a standard gesture of political submission in “tributary economies” throughout the premodern world. The exotic aesthetics that were so carefully cultivated at the courts of medieval rulers were grounded in the logic of microcosm. The ruler constitutes a cosmic center, an “unmoved mover,” whose majesty pulls the world’s diversity into his or her orbit. The distance traveled by an exotic object to that center is an index of the ruler’s wealth and power. The greater the number of distant places represented by such objects, the better.

In fact, in the cosmopolitan courts of medieval Europe, Asia, and Africa, even people entered into the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge as so many reifications of the labor involved in overcoming the geographical distance between the sovereign center and points outside. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the prevalence of this cultural logic in different medieval settings. Take, for instance, Murasaki Shikibu’s description of fictional festivities at the court of the Japanese emperor, from her eleventh-century epic The Tale of Genji: “The entire court accompanied His Majesty on the progress itself, as did the Heir Apparent. The musicians’ barges rowed around the lake, as always, and there were all sorts of dances from Koma [Korea] and Cathay [northern China].” Iberian traveler Benjamin of Tudela, writing in Hebrew roughly a century later, describes a procession orchestrated by the caliph of Baghdad in this way: “He is accompanied by all the nobles of Islam dressed in fine garments and riding on horses, the princes of Arabia, the princes of Tabaristan and Daylam [Gilan], and the princes of Persia, Media and Chuzza, and the princes of the land of Tibet, which is three months’ journey distant.” “The Story of Jullanan and the Sea”—included in the oldest extant manuscript of the 1001 Nights (early fourteenth century)—opens with the description of a former king of Persia whose vast wealth and power is measured by his ability to collect cubines from every known corner of the world. Petrarch lauded his patron Robert I of Anjou, the king of Naples, as a ruler whose magnificence was shown by the fact that, much like a Roman emperor, he ruled over “multi-lingual and multi-customed people [dissonantes lingua et moribus populi].”

These economic and political frameworks help explain why the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge was at once an opportunity and an obstacle for William of Rubruck. In agreeing to deliver Louis’s letter of friendship to Sartach, William unwittingly guaranteed that his words and actions would be evaluated according to the protocols of international diplomacy. Despite his repeated protestations to the contrary, William is treated as though he were the king’s official representative. As a consequence of this misconception, William had to renounce what appears to have been his original plan—to minister to Christian captives at the western edge of the Mongol Empire—in favor of a much more physically demanding itinerary. Sartach—perceiving the potentially treasonous odor of arrogating to himself the sovereign’s prerogative to receive the representative of a foreign ruler—sends William higher up the Mongol hierarchy, to his father, Batu. The same logic impels Batu to pack William off to Caracorum, in order to confer with his superior, Möngke Khan.

In addition to being rerouted roughly two thousand miles eastward in the blistering cold of winter, William was perpetually inconvenienced by the expectation that he came bearing exotic valuables. Having heard reports of previous friars’ journeys to the Mongol Empire, William knew enough to try to manage his hosts’ expectations regarding gifts. In 1246, John of Plano Carpini stated that “so many gifts were bestowed by the envoys” to the Mongol ruler “that it was marvelous to behold.” These gifts included “silk, samite, velvet . . . girdles of silk threaded with gold . . . [and] camels decked with brocade and with saddles on them having some kind of contrivance on which men could sit.” Though armed with such foreknowledge, William probably did not anticipate the prospect of offering the Great Khan a basket of fruit after diplomats from India had presented the Mongol ruler with “eight leopards and ten greyhounds trained to sit on the back of a leopard like a horse.” In an effort to extricate himself from the materialistic expectations of international diplomacy, William continually insists that, even though he carries letters written by Louis, he cannot give rich gifts because has not been vested with the wealth and authority of a royal representative: “I took care never to say I was your ambassador [nuncio].” This legalistic distinction recalls the kinds of arguments that were, waged during the contemporaneous Usus pauper controversy, in which the Franciscan
Order sought to define the acceptable parameters for “using” property that the friars were prohibited from “owning”—such as land, clothing, money, and books.52

Unfortunately, most of the Mongol officials William encounters have no time for such scholastic subtleties. From the moment the travelers cross over into Mongol territory, they are importuned for gifts (and for their unofficial counterpart: bribes). Border guards demand the “knives, gloves, purses, and belts” of William’s servants and decry him as a fraud (baratafior) when he declines their request.53 The Franciscan vow of poverty also prevents William from receiving luxury gifts from his hosts, which also proves problematic. As he prepares for his departure from Möngke’s court, William feels obliged to make a parting concession to the Great Khan’s magnanimity:

The scribes were holding three garments or tunics and they said to us: “You do not wish to receive gold or silver and you have been here a long time praying for the Khan; he begs you at least to accept each one of you, a simple tunic, so that you may not leave him empty-handed.” We then had to accept them out of respect to him, for they take it ill when their gifts are disdained.54

(The Itinerarium hastens to add that William ordered his servant to sell these gifts and distribute the proceeds to the poor.)

On account of their poverty, William, his Franciscan traveling companion, and their servant suffer the derision and neglect of their hosts. The guide who conveys them across the frozen steppes to Caracorum “had the greatest disdain for us, and felt disgusted at having to conduct such insignificant men.”55 At one point, William’s guides decolute in his presence without disturbing themselves “so far as one can toss a bean” (and without even ceasing to converse with one another while heeding the call of nature).56 The food rations were so meager during the trek across central Asia that William’s companion repeatedly became “so hungry that he would say . . . almost in tears ‘it seems to me as if I have never had anything to eat.’”57 A lack of basic provisions continued to plague the travelers, even after they arrived in Caracorum, where they had to weather arctic temperatures without sufficient food, fuel, or blankets. At one point, Möngke supplies William’s company of three with “one thin little ram,” meant to sustain them for six days. Out of compassion, the travelers share this meager repast with “many starving people.” Of this experience, William states: “There I experienced how great a martyrdom it is to bestow bounty in one’s poverty.”58

The distance that William of Rubruck strikes from the materialism of courtly culture has an obvious precedent in Francis of Assisi’s visit to Sultan Al-Kamil of Egypt (1180–1238). In the account found in Bonaventure’s Legenda maior (ca. 1260), Francis and his companion illuminates a crusading battle line in order to speak with Al-Kamil about matters of faith.59 The sultan, impressed by what he hears, invites Francis to dwell permanently at his court. Francis consents, on the condition that Al-Kamil and his subjects renounce Islam. Naturally, this proposal is met with less than enthusiastic support from the court’s Muslim scholars. Undaunted, Francis challenges the Islamic clerics to an ordeals by fire, in order to settle the question of whose religion is the authentic one. The Sultan—fearing civil unrest—squelches the incendiary challenge. As a consolation prize, the ruler offers Francis generous alms to be used for charity work and church building. Francis, however, declines “because he was accustomed to flee the burden of money and did not see a root of true piety in the Sultan’s soul.”60

This episode suggests that the Franciscan mandate to reform and universalize Christianity is structurally incompatible with the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge. In his fresco The Trial by Fire (also known as Proof of Fire before the Sultan), Giotto put a finer point on the crux of this impasse. The painting depicts the sultan ensconced above and behind a fire that separates the astutely clad Francis (who, it should be recalled, was the son of a silk merchant) from an extravagantly frocked group of multietnic Muslim clerics (fig. 1). Giotto suggests a causal relationship between the overvaluation of courtly luxury on the one hand and stubborn adherence to doctrinal “error” on the other. This link is embodied in the bearded figure on the left, who—stalking away from the confrontation—uses the luxuriant folds of his robe to stop his ears against Francis’s discourse. Giotto’s painting and the vignette on which it is based associate courtly exoticism with the sovereign’s self-serving cultivation of ethnic and religious pluralism. These same positions animate the Itinerarium’s fine-grained depiction of William’s travels, which are treated as the outcome of his steadfast rejection of the norms that lubricate cross-cultural exchange throughout the medieval world.

That said, the precedent furnished by Francis of Assisi’s exchange with Al-Kamil was not entirely restrictive. In fact, it authorized William of Rubruck and other Franciscan visitors to foreign courts to engage in acts of tactical self-exoticization. On the occasion of their first audience with Möngke Khan, William and his companion enter the imperial court chanting a hymn in celebration of the Nativity. Though liturgical chant was a standard expression of piety for William and other Franciscan travelers to Asia, the unfamiliar beauty of polyphony was also something that could potentially
praises to God, who has brought us safely from such a long distance away as far as here (de tam longinquuo usque huic perdixit). 42

Unfortunately, these self-exoticizing gestures do not produce their desired effect. The Franciscans' clean shave initially leads Möngke's guards to mistake them for a far more common sight: tuins, or Buddhist monks. This episode and others like it illustrate that William cannot necessarily control the spirit in which his tactical exoticism is received. In fact, the bellicose conclusion of the Itinerarium is best understood as the outcome of several frustrated attempts on the part of William to turn the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge to his pastoral advantage. The surprising call to arms that concludes his travel narrative grows out of a sustained analysis of the cultural logic of exoticism.

TACTICAL EXOTICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SACRED

As one of the growing number of Franciscans who were also ordained priests, William of Rubruck's views on the psychology and sociology of courtly exoticism were influenced by theological discussions of wonder. The objects that fed the premodern appetite for the wondrous were various: the eclectic collections of cathedral treasuries and Renaissance Wunderkammern, monstrous births and meteorological omens, and the ornate costumes and special effects of courtly spectacle, to name just a few examples. 41 One of the most common medieval Latin words for wonder is admiratio, a concept that encompassed an equally diverse range of affective responses, including stupelaetion, terror, puzzlement, titillation, disbelief, reverence, and morbid curiosity. 42 As Caroline Bynum has shown, theologians developed a concept of sacred admiratio, which introduced a principle of nonappropriation into medieval economies of wonder. Bynum argues that the dictum that the lives of martyrs should be "admired but not imitated" was born of the same impulse that viewed the miracle of transubstantiation as a marvel whose terrifying sublimity made it qualitatively distinct from other object-causes of wonder. In both cases, it would be reckless and prideful to attempt to domesticate the sacred or to appropriate it to oneself. 43

The theological delineation of sacred admiratio was closely related to the development of a theoretical distinction between two object-causes of wonder: the marvel and the miracle. 44 The wonder experienced in the presence of the marvel was widely depicted as subjective in origin, usually the product of the viewer's ignorance about the existence, origins, or underlying
causes of the marvelous object. Marvels included natural phenomena—such as the magnetic properties of the lodestone—as well as man-made artifacts such as automata. In many cases, the ignorance of the wondering subject was a function of the geographical distance that separated the beholder from the places where the marvel was found with greater frequency. The spatially determined nature of many marvels was apparent to medieval travel writers, who self-consciously recorded their astonishment when they discovered variations on otherwise banal sights. Marco Polo rhapsodized about the variety and beauty of China’s chickens. In Damascus, Thietmar was wonder-struck to find ordinary violets blooming in winter. By contrast, the wonder experienced in an encounter with the miraculous was not the product of geographical accident or some other trick of perspective. The miracle was a divinely authored suspension of nature’s laws—a testament to God’s omnipotence. It engendered wonder by virtue of the majesty of its origins, and it did so regardless of where in the world it happened to occur (and was, perhaps, more marveled at the closer it occurred to the viewer’s home).

Repeatedly, William of Rubruck strives to stir his hosts to sacred admiration, only to discover—time and again—that he and his teachings are received with what appears to be an undignified mixture of cultural relativism and politico-economic calculation. The liturgical books and instruments that William uses in his missionary activities are the catalyst for many of these disappointments. These problems start early on, when William stages a liturgical procession at Sartach’s court. The Itinerarium takes palpable delight in the theatricality of the occasion, lavishing uncharacteristic attention on the richness of the objects that surround William and his companion:

Wearing the most precious vestments, I held before my breast a very lovely cushion, the Bible that you gave me, and the most beautiful psalter presented to me by Her Majesty the Queen, in which there were some fine illuminations. . . . Then, we went in singing the “Salve Regina.” There was a bench standing near the entrance with cosmos and some cups on it, and all his wives had assembled, and the Mongols coming in with us thronged about us. Coicac took Sartach the thurible with some incense and this he examined carefully, holding it in his hand. Next he handed him the psalter, which he had a good look at, as did the wife who was sitting next to him, then he took the Bible. Sartach enquired if the Gospel were included. I replied, “Yes indeed, the whole of Holy Scripture.”

The emphasis on the splendor of William’s “props” is, on the one hand, an acknowledgment of the generosity of his royal donors. On the other hand, the pride taken in the material and craftsmanship of the objects is justified by the assumption that their splendor will dazzle William’s non-Christian spectators, making them more receptive to the truth claims of the Roman church.

As this exchange makes clear, the danger of using “exotic” objects to promote the universalizing truths of Christianity is that William cannot prevent his interlocutors from valuing them solely on account of their novelty, beauty, and exchange value. Sartach appears to inspect the thurible and gilded manuscripts with a disappointing mixture of aestheticism and anthropological detachment. In asking if William’s Bible contains the Gospels, Sartach seeks to classify his visitors: to which of the many sects known to the Mongols do these strange newcomers belong? William answers the relativistic spirit of this question with the universalizing assertion that his version of the Bible is the only true version, containing not just the Gospels but also every other text that has any right to be considered sacred.

The disappointing denouement of this liturgical performance alerted William to the potential pitfalls of ecclesiastical exoticism, an issue that preoccupied many medieval writers. Throughout the Middle Ages, mummified crocodiles, nautilus shells, ostrich eggs, and “dragon” bones (usually whales’ ribs) sat in monastic and cathedral treasuries alongside consecrated liturgical instruments and the relics of saints. The didactic use of such objects was widespread, but even proponents of such pedagogical methods felt the need to rationalize them. In his Moral Treatise on the Eye (ca. 1274–89), Peter of Limoges defended those who hung ostrich eggs in their churches, on the grounds that these decorative objects would remind prelates to serve their congregations well and not to “imitate the ostrich in its neglect of its young.”

Durandus of Mende offered a completely different rationale for the same practice, claiming that, because ostrich eggs are “seldom seen,” they “will cause admiration” and “attract the people to the church to touch them.” Hugh of Saint-Victor, meanwhile, found no redeeming justification for clerics who kept pet apes in order to inspire awe in the laity. Though a knight, Arnold von Harff also had strong opinions about clerical appeals to the exotic, which he felt were too often used to cheat gullible pilgrims. Von Harff arrived at this conviction through experience, his eastern travels taught him what a crocodile looked like, and—by extension—that the “dragon” he had been shown in a Roman church was actually one of them.

The aftermath of William’s audience with Sartach suggests that the problems inherent in ecclesiastical exoticism are greatly magnified in multicon-
fessional contexts. The illuminated manuscripts and liturgical instruments that William brandished during his procession attract the unwelcome attention of a Nestorian official named Coiac:

We ... [had loaded] one cart with the books and the things for Mass [capella] and another [cart] with bread, wine, and fruit. Then [Coiac] had all the books and vestments spread out, and a crowd of Tartars, Christians, and Saracens on horseback surrounded us. Coiac examined these things, then asked if I would not give them all to his lord. On hearing this I was terrified (expavio). I did not like his words, but, putting a good face on it, I replied: "Sir, we beg that your master will be so good as to receive this bread, wine, and fruit, not indeed as a gift, for it is little enough, but as a blessing, so that we may not come into his presence empty-handed. . . . The vestments, however, are blessed (sacrate) and it is not lawful (non licet) for any but priests to touch them." He then bade us to put them on to appear before his master, which we did.

Though William prevails on this occasion, he is unpleasantly surprised later on, when Coiac's brother refuses to send the books and vestments along with him to the orda (i.e., mobile encampment) of Batu: "You brought these to Sartach, now you want to take them to Batu. . . . Don't talk so much and be off with you!" Disappointed, William recalls: "I had one consolation and that was when I was aware of their covetousness I removed from among the books the Bible and the Sentences and the other books I was particuly fond of. Her Majesty the Queen's psalter I did not dare to take, as it had attracted too much notice on account of the gold illuminations in it."96

The standoff between William and the servants of Sartach is a clash between two competing regimes of value. When Coiac looks at the tokens of benediction that William intends to give to Sartach, he sees groceries. To Coiac, the glittering manuscripts and liturgical instruments are a more fitting tribute to his master. William, meanwhile, is scandalized by this suggestion. The Franciscan attempts to reframe his presentation of the "bread, wine, and fruit" by clarifying what he means to communicate in giving them to the Mongol baron. The trick is to get Coiac to view these common household items through an unfamiliar interpretive framework, so that they are no longer deemed insulting trifles. Moreover, William tries to bring his interlocutor around to the view that, even though his books and ritual instruments look like the kind of rich, exotic gifts normally given to

Mongol rulers by foreign guests, they are actually a special class of object whose economic exchange is categorically prohibited everywhere in the world. That this prohibition extends even to touching the objects suggests that the panic experienced by William on this occasion is rooted in the most particular and least negotiable of cultural phenomena: taboo.

Within a given cultural field, sacred objects are distinguished from the generality of things by the norms that restrict the manner in which they can be accessed, displayed, and transferred from one party to another.97 As a priest (sacerdos), William of Rubruck represents a class of social actors charged with policing the boundary between sacred objects and ordinary commodities. (By contrast, Marco Polo, like merchants in many other historical societies, represents the impulse to set an ever-greater number of objects into economic circulation, including forbidden ones.)98 In sorting his effects into two different carts, William literalizes the distinction between the nonsacred and the sacred (sacrate). As etymology would suggest, things that are sacrate are, by force of interdict, "set apart" as untouchable and/or unappropriatable.99

The objects that comprise what William calls his capella—which include the chalice, paten, and possibly a portable altar—are the ones he is most anxious to shield from grasping hands. Before they could be used in the consecration of the host, such instruments themselves had to be sanctified through the ritual of consecration.100 In theory, consecration removes objects from the commercial and gift economies in which they are normally manufactured and exchanged—and in which objects that look just like them continue to be produced and traded on a routine basis. The taboo that forbade the laity's access to consecrated objects was an extension of the prohibition against their commodification. Aquinas conveys something of the force of this prohibition when, citing the Council of Nicea, he writes that "the beams of a dedicated church" ought to be burned, rather than reused, once they are replaced with new ones. He adds:

On no account are [the old beams] to be discarded for the works of the laity. We read there, too, that "the altar covering, chair, candlessticks, and veil are to be burned when worn out; and their ashes are to be placed in the baptismy, or in the walls, or else beneath the flag-stones, so as not to be defiled by the feet of those that enter."101

Due to their physical proximity to the altar where the flesh and blood of Christ are consumed, liturgical vessels, the cloths that they touch, and
sometimes even the timber that shields them all from the elements mark the boundary between the divine and the human, the priesthood and the laity, the sacred and the profane. For William of Rubruck, to surrender the capella up to the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge is to approach the undoing of his world—and even his fundamental sense of self.

The gilded manuscripts, vestments, and capella are the first of several metallurgical artifacts that occasion anxious ruminations on the part of the Itinerarium. Such episodes highlight the structural tension between the avidity, eclecticism, and aestheticism of the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge on the one hand and—on the other—the missionary’s insistence on the exclusive truth of his teachings. Though popular imagination reductively associates the Mongol Empire with conquest, plunder, and smashing stuff, its rulers were enthusiastic patrons of the arts. Mongol elites displayed a particular fondness for skilled metalwork, and—in the thirteenth century—began relocating artisans from conquered territories to Caracorum. The Itinerarium speaks at length about William’s interactions with one such figure, the Parisian-born goldsmith Guillaume Boucher, who enjoyed a favorable position at the court of Möngke. The Mongol mania for metallurgy impressed itself on William the closer he came to the court of the Great Khan, as did his sense of the pointlessness of his attempts to capitalize on that enthusiasm as a missionary.

During his stay in Caracorum, William of Rubruck gains access to members of the imperial family by latching on to the more established Nestorian and Armenian clerics who routinely visit them. The influence of the eastern Christians is bolstered by their possession of a miracle-working silver cross, brought to Caracorum from the distant, sacred center of Jerusalem. The Itinerarium’s circumspect description of the object reflects the uneasy character of William’s alliance with these members of competing Christian sects. As described by William, the design of the cross embodies heterodox eastern beliefs about the Incarnation:

This cross had been brought by a certain Armenian who had come with the monk, so he said, from Jerusalem and it was of silver weighing some four marks, and had four precious stones in the angles and one in the middle but it had no figure of the Savior, for the Armenians and Nestorians are ashamed to see Christ nailed to the cross.

William is further scandalized by the arrogance of a particular Nestorian monk, who exploits the mystique of the silver cross to cement his status as a favorite at court. William accompanies the suspect monk on a visit to Möngke’s second wife, Cota, who has been stricken with a life-threatening disease. The Nestorian monk has vowed to heal her with the help of the miraculous cross:

The monk made her get up from the couch and adore the cross, kneeling down three times and touching her forehead to the ground, and he stood with the cross on the west side of the dwelling and she was on the east. This done they changed places and the monk went with the cross to the east side, she to the west; then, although she was so weak she could hardly stand on her feet, he insolently ordered her to prostrate again and adore the cross three times toward the east according to the Christian custom, and she did so.

When Cota’s illness worsens, the Great Khan threatens the monk with decafitation. William, sensing an opportunity, offers to assist the harried Nestorian. Upon entering Cota’s chamber a second time, however, William is horrified to discover metal objects arrayed about the room in ways that suggest necromancy. The Itinerarium places the blame for this shocking spectacle on his Nestorian and Armenian counterparts, who—in their pursuit of influence and financial gain—have never instructed [Cota] in the faith nor advised her to be baptized. I, for my part, sat there speechless, unable to say a word, though she did go on teaching me the language. Nor do the priests rebuke [the Mongols] for any kind of sorcery, for there I saw four swords drawn halfway out of their sheaths, one at the head of the lady’s couch, and another at the foot, and the other two on each side of the doorway. I also saw a silver chalice such as we use, which had perhaps been taken or stolen from a church in Hungary, and it was hung up on the wall full of ashes and on top of the ashes was a black stone, and the priests never teach them that such things are evil.

Although William and Cota cannot understand each other, the Franciscan nevertheless consents to read the Latin account of the crucifixion from the gospel of John over the sickbed of the ailing woman. And there William finds himself: intoning unintelligible words about the death of Christ—an event deliberately not represented on the Nestorian cross—just one more medicine man among so many other brandishers of magic swords, purloined chalices, and exotic nostrums.
Such weary realizations suffuse the Itinerarium. William is palpably disappointed by his participation in a public disputatio, in which he and the Nestorians enter into debate with Muslims and Buddhists. The event—staged as a courtly entertainment—proves frustratingly inconclusive. More disturbing still are the legions of long-distance flatterers who flock annually from all corners of the world to pay ceremonial homage to the Great Khan's drinking chalice, during celebrations of his birthday and the New Year. While studying such festivities, William realizes that—from the perspective of Mönge—a Franciscan visitor is interchangeable with any of the other farfetched figures who travel from afar to pay tribute to the ruler.

On that day [i.e., the Latin Christian Feast of the Epiphany], [Mönge] Khan had made a great feast; and it is his custom to hold court on such days as his soothsayers tell him are feast days or that the Nestorian priests say are for some reason sacred. Christian priests come first with their paraphernalia, and they pray for him and bless his cup; when they retire the Saracen priests come and do likewise; they are followed by pagan priests who do the same. [One] monk told me that the Khan only believes in the Christians, however, he wishes them all to come and pray for him. But he was lying, for he does not believe in any of them as you will hear later; yet they all follow his court like flies honey, and he gives to them all and they all think they enjoy his special favor and they all prophesy good fortune for him.

The "I" that anchors William's narrative is one that speaks from a position of defiant marginality vis-à-vis the marvel-loving Mongol court, one that registers a resistance to the exoticizing appropriation of his person, his religion, and the travail of his travels. The Itinerarium's call to crusade is founded on the conviction that the efforts of the missionary will inevitably be co-opted by the political and epicurean orientation of the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge. Readers of Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa's Divisament dou monde would, meanwhile, search in vain for anything resembling the pearl-clutching polemic of the Itinerarium. Whereas William of Rubruck monitors the exchange of commodities and ideas in order to assess their doctrinal orthodoxy, Polo and Rustichello shrug off such concerns and celebrate the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge as an object of wonder in its own right.

THE WONDER OF IMPERIAL WONDER

The Divisament dou monde of Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa dates from around 1298, and was probably first composed in a dialect of French known as Franco-Italian. Polo and Rustichello—an author otherwise known for his Arthurian prose epics—collaborated on the Divisament while both were being held as prisoners of war in Genoa. The Divisament claims that its observations about the realm of Khubilai Khan [ruled 1260–94] originate in the firsthand experience of Polo and his two traveling companions: Marco's father, Nicolo, and his uncle Maffeo. In the 1260s, the elder Polos traveled eastward from Crimea to the court of Khubilai, in order to trade in precious stones. They returned to the Great Khan's lands in the early 1270s, this time with young Marco in tow. Traveling via Jerusalem—where, at the request of Khubilai, they obtained oil from the lamps that lit the Holy Sepulcher—the Polo family reached the Great Khan's vacation capital of Shangdu in 1274. The Venetian merchants lived in East Asia for approximately seventeen years. According to the Divisament, the Polos were a regular fixture at Khubilai's court, with young Marco becoming the ruler's most trusted foreign ambassador, and purportedly—though less likely—a provincial governor. The Polo family undertook the return voyage to Venice in the early 1290s, arriving around 1295.

The Divisament achieved instant popularity among courtly, clerical, and bourgeois readers and became one of the most widely read works of travel writing in the Middle Ages. It survives in approximately 135 manuscripts. Within a couple of decades of its publication, the work was translated into Venetian, Tuscan, Continental French, and Latin. Many translators and copyists made radical revisions to the text. In Italian, the work circulated under the title Il milione, and in French it was known by names such as The Book of the Great Khan and The Romance of the Great Khan. If the number of extant copies is any indication, the most popular medieval version of the work was a Latin translation rendered from the Venetian by Dominican friar Francesco Pipino. It was Pipino's moralizing version of Polo's travels that Christopher Columbus studied in preparation for his westward journey to Asia; the conquistador's personally annotated copy of the printed text is held in the library of Seville's Institución Colombina.

By any measure, the Divisament was a novel work for its time. Its descriptions of East Asia and the reign of Khubilai Khan were, in themselves, marvelous and unprecedented. Moreover, the Divisament sought a socially mixed, geographically wide-ranging reading public, which it addressed in
the vernacular. Circa 1300, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew were still the preferred languages for travel and geographical writing throughout Latin Christian Europe, a fact that reflects the predominantly scholarly and clerical audiences for which such works were destined. Even geographies and travel accounts designed for lay readers—such as Al-Idrisi’s Kitab Rujjar (Roger’s book), Gervase of Tilbury’s Oitia imperialia, and William of Rubрук’s Itinerarium—were far more likely to be written in Latin (or even Arabic) than in the vernacular. A work like Brunetto Latini’s thirteenth-century Livres dou Trésor translated geographical knowledge and other learned topics for the benefit of a Francophone public, but did so in a way that foregrounded its basis in Latinate learning. Occasional references to biblical history and the romances of Alexander the Great aside, the Divisament strikes a conspicuous distance from classical texts and anything resembling scholarly or theological authority.

This circumvention of Latinity is consistent with its authors’ efforts to extend the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge beyond its customary enclaves. This gambit relied on two unconventional propositions: the popularization of long-distance knowledge in the form of a vernacular travel book and the maximal transferability of the prestige of the long-distance specialist, achieved through the technology of the manuscript codex. This agenda is hinted at in the famous opening of the Divisament, which repurposed turns of phrase from Rustichello’s Arthurian fiction:

Lord emperors and kings, dukes and marquises, counts, knights, and burgesses, and all people who want to know about the diverse races (genserions) of men and the diverse wonders (devarsities) of diverse regions of the world, take this book and have it read. And here you will find all of the greatest marvels and the great wonders of Great Armenia and of Persia and of the Tartars and of India, and many other regions, as recounted by Master Marco Polo, wise and noble citizen of Venice. 72

In order to succeed in their project, Polo and Rustichello had to educate—and thereby constitute—their readership in the act of addressing it.

The indoctrination of the Divisament’s audience was effected through the very rhetorical and stylistic tendencies that many modern readers of the work have found off-putting. Collectively, the work’s inconsistent use of pronouns, its repetition of oral-formulaic refrains, and its privileging of impersonal description over experientially centered narrative work to displace the figure of Marco Polo as the cynosure of the travel account. Polo is, in fact, doubly decentered in the text that preserves the memory of his jour-

ney: eclipsed both by his literary collaborator and—most important—by his Mongol patron.

The authority—and perhaps even the cultural intelligibility—of the Divisament hinges on its treatment of Kublai Khan. Presiding over the richest, most sprawling empire the world had ever known, Kublai is also an unrivaled connoisseur of exotic expertise. In choosing Marco Polo as his preferred long-distance specialist, the figure of the Great Khan underwrites the prestige value of Polo and Rustichello’s book. At the same time, the Mongol ruler serves an important didactic function, as a normative model for the Divisament’s ideal readership, which had to be taught how to take pleasure in travel writing, in a manner befitting a king.

It is clear that, in contrast to William’s Itinerarium, the Divisament happily conflates political and cultural authority in the figure of the Mongol emperor. Kublai is presented as an unrivaled connoisseur of the exotic, whose discerning tastes are, moreover, the consequence of his unrivaled wealth and power. If one line sums up the Divisament’s view on this issue, it is: “There never was, nor do I think there is, any man capable of taking such great pleasure [si grant seulas] nor such great delight [si grant delit] in all of the world as this man does, nor any who has the power to do it.” 73 The imperial household in Khanbalig bears out this point. A treasure-house of exotica, Kublai’s palace gathers into itself a kaleidoscopic collection of fish, birds, and beasts. It even boasts a man-made mountain covered in lapis lazuli, a structure that is used to display the most grandiose—and most nakedly symbolic—of the Great Khan’s collections:

And I tell you that the great lord, whenever anyone tells him about the existence of a beautiful tree, has it taken with all of its roots and much of earth and he has it carried to that mountain by elephants . . . no matter how large the tree is . . . and in this manner he obtains the most beautiful trees in the world. 74

Once deeply rooted in Kublai’s subject territories, the trees in his garden form a microcosm of his dominion and testify to the triumph of imperial will over geographical distance. By underscoring the incalculable wealth and labor-power that underpins Kublai’s acquisition of these and other wonders, the Divisament presents Marco’s ability to satiate imperial appetite for the exotic as a marvel in itself.

Indeed, the superlative nature of traveler and emperor reflect and reinforce each other, serving as twin bases for the Divisament’s bid for credibility and cultural capital. This seems, in any event, to be the point that the
opening chapters of the *Divisament* set out to prove. These chapters, which provide the work's most sustained account of the Polo family’s experiences, culminate in the courtly, sentimental tale of Marco’s coming-of-age. Having left the familiar realities of Venice behind, young Marco applies himself to the study of Asian languages while helping his elders with the family business. One day Kubilai Khan summons the Venetian youth to his court and entrusts him with a diplomatic errand. Like an enterprising merchant, Marco embarks on this assignment having already identified an unmet demand. As it turns out, Kubilai is bored to tears by the postembassy debriefings delivered by his most experienced ambassadors:

They were not able to describe to him (*pou li savoir dir*) the wonders (*noveles*) of the countries where they had been, and Kubilai called them *fools* and *unlearned* (*fous et non saichan[ç]*) and added that he would rather have heard about the wonders and customs and the usages of that strange land than to hear a report about the matter for which he had sent them. And whenever he went on a messenger's errand abroad, Marco, who knew this well, would always fix his concentration (*met[t]oit son entent*) on all of the wonders (*mavetés*) and all of the strange things he would see in order to recount them to the Great Khan.\(^77\)

Marco thus makes certain to return from his first assignment with an abundant stock of thrilling anecdotes. The *Divisament* trumpets his success as a rite of passage: “After this journey, the youth was referred to as Master Marco Polo, and so this book will refer to him from now on.” As a result of his skill as a long-distance specialist, Polo is sent on numerous other diplomatic errands, and thereby comes to visit “more of those strange zones than any other man ever born.”\(^78\)

The account of Polo’s rise to prominence at the Mongol court signals the *Divisament*’s unique conceptions of travel and long-distance specialization. While the accounts of exotic travel writers such as John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, and Odoric of Pordenone tend to equate heroism in travel with overcoming physical travails, the *Divisament* depicts travel as an art involving intellectual self-discipline. There is an oblique suggestion of somatic self-regulation in the discussion of Polo’s diplomatic errands; this implied bodily discipline serves the needs of the intellectual labor that distinguishes Marco from his competitors. Only by regulating the tempo and quotidian habits of his journeys can Marco investigate and commit to memory the exotic marvels with which he will later delight his master.

The phrase used to talk about the mental effort that Polo exerts during his marvel-hunting campaigns—*met[t]oit son entent*—may originate in the mnemonic theory of the language arts classroom, and suggests the *Divisament*’s possible debt to clerical traditions of travel writing on the Holy Land (see chapter 3).

Equally striking, unlike the works of most Franciscan travelers, the *Divisament* does not justify long-distance specialization in terms of its practical applications. When the chronically underwhelmed Kubilai Khan derides his ambassadorial corps for their dry, business-oriented accounts, he champions the same vision of nonutilitarian exoticism advanced by Polo and Rustichello’s book. Kubilai’s role as defender of this position is the primary reason why the *Divisament* treats him as “both the subject and the object of wonder”—to borrow Sharon Kinoshita’s turn of phrase.\(^79\) If, as the object of readers’ wonder, Kubilai is the foundation of the work’s claims to authority, as the subject of wonder, he serves as a model for aspirational readers. Polo and Rustichello encourage their audience to view their engagement with the *Divisament* as an opportunity to emulate the delight that the Great Khan once took in the singular talents of his preferred long-distance specialist.

The deliberate decentralizing of the Polo family’s perspectives on Asia facilitates readily identification with Kubilai. In a rather flamboyant fashion, the *Divisament*’s account of Niccolò and Maffeo’s first journey alludes to the fact that they witnessed many astonishing things, only to then defer the task of describing them: “They discovered great marvels and wonders (*diverces coses*) that we will not tell you about here, because Master Marco, the son of Master Niccolò, also saw these things and he will tell you all about them later on in this book.”\(^80\) This deferral is immediately followed by an account of the elder Polos’ first contact with the Great Khan. This arrival scene extends over two chapters. One is struck by the deliberateness with which the episode reserves the experience of wonder for the figure of Kubilai Khan:

VI. How the Two Brothers Came to the Great Khan
And when Masters Niccolò and Maffeo were come to the great lord, he received them honorably and met them with great joy and great celebration (*grant joie et grant feste*): he took great pleasure in their coming. He asks them about many things: first, about emperors, especially how they administered justice in their realms and their territories, and about how they went to battle, and about all of their deeds. And after he asked about kings and princes and the other barons.
VII. How the Great Khan Inquired of the Two Brothers about the
Condition of the Christians

And then he asked about the Pope [messe l’apostolille] and about the condi-
tion of the Roman Church and about the customs of the Latin Chris-
tian peoples. And Masters Nicolò and Maffeo told him the truth about
each topic, so well and orderly and wisely (ordremanet et sajemanet), like
wise men, for they knew very well the Tartar tongue, which is called
“Tartaresce.”[x]

The impressions of the brothers Polo—which one imagines were no less
wonder-struck—are decidedly passed over in these chapters. Instead, the
emphasis of this narrative is on how the merchants awed Kubilai with
their rhetorically light-footed deeds of long-distance specialization.

The same thing happens in the Divisament’s subsequent account of the
Polos’ second journey. Here, the narrative seems disinterested even in young
Marco’s first impressions of the dazzlingly unfamiliar world of the Mongol
Empire. In fact, readers gain no insight into how this momentous journey
might have affected the young Venetian; instead, they are promised that the
wonders witnessed by Marco Polo will be catalogued “later on in our book.”[x]

When the Divisament finally makes good on this promise, it embeds its
descriptions of distant wonders within a series of abstract itineraries, and
only rarely does it localize the marvels of Asia through Marco’s perspective.
As a result of these decisions, Kubilai emerges as the figure that most fre-
quently shares the experience of wonder with the audience of the Divisa-
ment. It is the Mongol emperor—rather than the European traveler—who
serves as the most consistent point of identification for readers of the work.

The Divisament’s centering of Kubilai’s perspective at the expense of
Polo’s also allows it to disregard the very dimensions of courtly exoticism
that unsettled William of Rubruck. This rhetorical advantage is particu-
larly apparent in two episodes, which both involve the Great Khan’s efforts to
acquire sacred relics. According to the Divisament, in 1284, a group of Mus-
lim pilgrims returning from the remote island kingdom of Seilan (Sri Lanka)
informed Kubilai about a mysterious mountain-top shrine located on top of
the “Peak of Adam” (Sri Pada). The pilgrims climbed this mountain in or-
der to venerate a footprint miraculously pressed into a slab of marble, one of
many relics supposedly left there by Adam following his exile from Eden.[x]

Intrigued by these reports, Kubilai dispatches an embassy to the king of
Seilan, to request some of the shrine’s relics.

At this point, the story breaks off, giving way to a discussion of compet-
ing claims about the significance of the mountain shrine that has captured

Khubilai’s imagination. According to the Divisament, “idolaters” also go
on pilgrimage to the mountain, to honor not Adam but rather “Sagamoni
Barcan”—a prince who once renounced royal luxury in favor of a life of soli-
tude and meditation. The account of this prince-tuned-ascetic is a garbled
version of the life of Siddhārtha Gautama, who was, in Polo’s day, already
revered as a Christian saint thanks to the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat.[x]

At first, the Divisament seems to contradict the Muslims’ account, since—
according to “Christian” doctrine—Adam was not laid to rest in Seilan but
rather in “another part of the world.”[x] However, Polo and Rustichello do
not actually refute the Muslim position; they simply “do not maintain”
that it is true. The waters are muddied further by Kubilai’s apparent en-
derorsement of the Muslim traditions surrounding the shrine. The emperor
wants to obtain the shrine’s relics because he believes they belong to “the
world’s first man.”[x] Returning to its account of embassy to Seilan, the Divis-
ament drops the unresolved question of the origins of the relics, in a way
that suggests the ultimate insignificance of the controversy.

The anecdote of the embassy resumes with the king of Seilan declining
Khubilai’s request for the relics. The ambassadors of the Great Khan
eventually succeed in overcoming the monarch’s initial resistance with the
promise of a massive financial payment. When news of this success reaches
Khubilai in Khanbalig, he mandates that members of all religious-ethnic
groups participate in the ceremonial reception of the relics. And they do:

Then the Great Khan commands all of the people / confessional groups
[jens]—clerics and the laity—to go out and greet these relics, for they
were given to understand that they once belonged to Adam. And why
make a long tale of it? Know that all of the people / confessional groups
of Khanbalig go out to meet these relics; and the clergy received them
and carried them to the Great Khan, who received them with great joy
and great festivity and great reverence (con grant joie e con grant feste e
con grant reverenc).[

In the end, Kubilai Khan “resolves”—or, rather, dissolves—the theological
disagreement surrounding the relics in an aestheticized display of sovereign
power.

Many readers have judged the Divisament’s use of stock phrases such as
“with great joy and great festivity and great reverence” as a stylistic vice.
Translators—medieval and modern—have often purged these upwellings
of chivalric exuberance from their renderings of the work.[x] However, here,
and it other instances throughout the text, the authors allow themselves to
enjoy the self-indulgent rhetoric of Marco Polo’s imaginings.
formulaic machinery performs a sophisticated ideological function. In his Arthurian works, Rustichello uses the tag line “con grant joie e con grant feste” when recounting the reception of knights-errant into the homes of royal or noble hosts. The Divisament deploys this same formula in the scenes in which the Great Khan extends his welcome to the Polos; its recurrence suggests a set of xenophoric structures of feeling so organic that they express themselves in the manner of a physiological reflex. By introducing this same stock phrase into its account of the disputed relics of Seilan, the Divisament scuttles the potentially troubling specter of interconfessional dispute, displacing the mutually exclusive claims of theology with a chivalric or courtly relativism that not only overcomes, but even relishes, religious division.

In another narrative sequence that would surely set William of Rubruck’s teeth on edge, the Divisament extends this relativistic logic to a relic associated with Christ. When the elder Polos take leave of Kubilai at the end of their initial journey, the ruler asks them to return with a phial of the miraculous, self-igniting oil used to illuminate the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem. Upon reappearance, the Polos—this time accompanied by Marco—present the Great Khan with the desired object: “Then, they give him the holy oil, about which he feels great joy and which he holds very dear (il fist grant joie et le tient molt chier).” One can easily imagine the uneasy question that William would ask if he had read these pages from the Divisament: has this gift swayed the Mongol emperor toward accepting the truth claims of Christianity, or does he view the relic as just another curio in his self-aggrandizing collection? Polo and Rustichello never raise this question, in fact, they seem to foreclose it deliberately. The chivalric literary formula ensures that the emphasis of the entire episode is on the courtly spirit in which the ruler receives the farfetched token from his foreign visitors rather than the motives that prompted him to request it in the first place. This is typical of the way that the Divisament sidesteps thorny theological thickets by foregrounding elite, secular expressions of cosmopolitanism.

As has often been noted, many early translations of the Divisament—especially those executed within ecclesiastical and bourgeois circles—downplayed the work’s orientation toward courtly culture. The degree of ideological coherence that the Divisament gains through its chivalric “trappings” is evidenced by the fact that translators who eradicated them had to find alternative ways to construct the authority of Marco Polo and his book. In 1330, Dominican friar Francesco Pipino translated a Venetian-language version of the Divisament into Latin. Pipino reduced the Venetian text’s already attenuated descriptions of the Mongol court, downplayed the relationship between Polo and Kubilai, and eliminated any mention of Rustichello. In the absence of the acquis provided by Kubilai Khan, Pipino is moved to acknowledge that some of his readers might doubt Polo’s claims because they contain “many things that are, to us, unheard of and unusual.” Such uncertainties can nevertheless be laid aside, he argues, because Polo has a sterling reputation among his fellow Venetians. Pipino adds that Marco’s claims were verified by the deathbed confession of his uncle, also a man of repute in Venice. These authenticating gambits draw on legal-bureaucratic standards of proof used in the travel accounts of Franciscans John of Plano Carpini and Odoric of Pordenone (see chapter 2). In Pipino’s translation, they serve as a substitute for the Divisament’s original bid for credibility, which was founded on its depiction of the cultural and political authority of Kubilai Khan.

“TAKE THIS BOOK”: REIMAGINING LONG-DISTANCE SPECIALISM

Polo and Rustichello discerned in the medium of the book new possibilities for producing and disseminating the knowledge—and the prestige—of the long-distance specialist. Take this book and have it read. There is a popularizing, even evangelizing, tenor to this opening address. However, as the Divisament’s hierarchically ordered catalogue of ideal readers suggests, there was no room for lese majeste in this democratizing agenda. Indeed, emperors and kings are accorded pride of place within the audience imagined by Polo and Rustichello, as the agency that confers value on the commodities that circulate within the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge—including the Divisament. Once validated by the embrace of imperial and royal power, the Divisament can then be copied and exchanged within less exalted circles, by those who—in circulating the book—appropriate to themselves a share of the mystique that surrounds Kubilai Khan and the long-distance specialist who once served him with distinction.

Through the medium of the book, Rustichello also carved out a novel niche for himself within the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge. If Polo’s mystique as a long-distance specialist derives from his intimacy with the Mongol ruler, Rustichello forges yet another link in this chain of borrowed glamour. In a passage that recalls the description of the historically unprecedented wealth and power of Kubilai Khan, Rustichello extols Polo as the greatest traveler ever to have lived:
I would have you know that, from the time that our Lord God fashioned
with his hands Adam, our first father, until this point in time there has
been neither Christian nor pagan nor Tartar nor Indian nor any man of
any race that has known or explored so many of diverse parts of the
world and its great marvels as has this Master Marco.  

The conviction that Marco Polo has learned more about the world’s diversity
than any other human being allows Rustichello to construe the com-
position of the *Divisament* as an ethical imperative:

[Marco] told himself that it would be a great harm if he did not have all
of the great marvels he had seen put into writing...so that other people
who had not seen or did not know about them could hear of them and
know of them through this book. 

These claims about the scale and significance of the *Divisament’s* contribu-
tion to posterity elevate Rustichello far above the humble station of scribe
and imbue his labors with the force of a moral imperative. It was, after
all, Rustichello’s literary know-how that would preserve the long-distance
knowledge gathered during the travels of Marco Polo and transform it so
that it would be intelligible to a heterogeneous reading public.

Rustichello’s insistence on the importance of his efforts is reinforced
by the *Divisament’s* inconsistent use of the first-person voice. Much of the
time, this “I” refers to Rustichello and at other junctures to Polo. Occa-
sionally, the referent of the “I” is indeterminate. Likewise, “we” and “our”
sometimes refer to Marco and Rustichello, and in other contexts, to the
Polo family. Michel Zink has observed that the consistent, fully psycholog-
zied use of the narrative “I” was not a common feature of Old French
prose prior to Jean de Joinville’s *Life of Saint Louis* (ca. 1305). It is not
particularly remarkable, then, that the first-person voice of the *Divisament*
emerges sporadically, and that, when it does, its referent varies from case
to case. However, what we might be tempted to classify as an “inchoate”
or “naive” use of the first-person voice might just as well be characterized as
“tactical,” insofar as it is consistently leveraged to Rustichello’s benefit.

The protean quality of the *Divisament’s* first-person voice disarms
value-laden distinctions between the travel of the traveler and the literate
labors of his collaborator. Many of the same sequences that foreground
Khubilai Khan as the subject/object of wonder also call attention to the part that
Rustichello played in shaping the *Divisament*. In such passages, Rustichello
insists that the pain and effort involved in “their travels” is just one of the
ingredients that gave rise to “our book.” A similarly self-interested
manipulation of narrative voice is evident in one of the *Divisament’s* rare mo-
mants of suspense. The anecdote recounts Polo’s narrow escape from a band
of murderous nomads, who diisordent wayfarers by using sorcery to darken
the sun. At the climax of this perilous adventure, Rustichello chimes in to
reassert his function as mediator between Polo’s experience and the book’s
Audience:

And now I have told you of this plain and this race of people that conjure
darkness in order to rob. And I tell you that the same Master Marco was
nearly taken by those people in that darkness, but he escaped to a castle
called Caralami, and his companions were captured and were sold and
some were killed. Now I will tell you about other things. 

The jarring transition between the indeterminate “I” of the first sentence
and the “I” of Rustichello in the second effectively displaces the traveler
from the scene of his travels, and—by extension—from his privileged posi-
tion within the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge.

The way that Rustichello imagined himself as a middleman in the busi-
ness of long-distance specialization depended not only on the growth of ver-
nacular reading publics but also on new attitudes toward book ownership
among royal and aristocratic readers. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth
centuries, the patronage and presentation of illuminated manuscripts was
an increasingly common feature of elite gift giving, especially in French-
speaking courts. The first surviving example of a French-language manu-
script with a presentation miniature was given to King Philip III of France
in 1374. Some presentation miniatures depict the author or translator pre-
senting a copy of his or her work to the manuscript’s intended recipient;
others depict a scene in which the party who commissioned the manuscript
presents the book as a gift. The scenes rendered in presentation miniatures
did not necessarily commemorate the gift exchange “as it happened,” but
rather in an idealized form meant to flatter the manuscript’s recipient. 
In fact, copies of manuscripts originally given to royal patrons often repro-
duced not just the text of the exemplar but also its presentation mini-
ture, even when the new copy was destined for an entirely different patron.
Joyce Coleman has observed that through such visual genealogies of the
manuscript-object, “prestige would pass on to later exemplars...and to
those copies’ owners.”

It is within this context that we should consider the fact that, in 1307,
Marco supposedly gave “the first copy” of the *Divisament* to Char-

Chepoix, the vicar-general of Charles de Valois, the son of Philip III. Three court French manuscripts of the *Divisament* include colophons that state that they have been copied from the very manuscript that Polo gave to Thibaud. It would seem that, for some early readers of the *Divisament*, a given copy of the work was more valuable the closer it could be linked to Polo and/or an illustrious patronage context. It was through inserting himself into such imagined chains of transmission that Rustichello attempted to lay claim to his share of the long-distance specialist’s prestige. While obviously not exclusive to travel writing, the practice of linking a manuscript copy to a prestigious “original” was one of many conventions of courtly book production that proved amenable to the *Divisament*’s efforts to leverage the authority of courtly culture in order to expand the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge beyond royal and clerical milieus.

The success of this gambit is proved by the fact that the *Divisament* found an even wider and more diverse audience than its creators had anticipated (including clerics, a group not mentioned in the work’s opening address). Rustichello was the most obvious victim of this success. Several of the *Divisament*’s medieval translators found its shifting first-person voice gratuitous or puzzling. The court French translation regularized the work’s use of pronouns. The earliest Venetian version overwrote Rustichello’s expository interventions. Here, for instance, is how it renders the tale of Marco’s escape from the nomad-sorcerers:

Now I have told you about that plain and that race of people that make darkness come in order to rob. . . . And I tell you that I, Marco, once found myself in great danger of being captured by that people in that darkness, but I fled to a nearby castle that was called Chalosebini, but things went worse for my companions, who were captured. And some died and others were sold into slavery.

As mentioned above, Pipino’s popular Latin version completely effaced Rustichello. Such departures from the Franco-Italian *Divisament* are representative of the work’s complex, open-ended reception, about which it is difficult to make totaling statements.

This caveat issued, it must also be said that the conception of travel and long-distance specialization advanced by Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa exerted a considerable influence in court circles. The *Divisament* rendered the travel book intelligible as a commodity that could be exchanged in much the same spirit as an exotic animal, luxury textile, or mechanical wonder. In so doing, the work pioneered subject positions that proved indispensable to subsequent long-distance middlemen and to travel writers of various stripes, including pilgrims to Rome and the Holy Land.

**THE TRAVEL BOOK AS EXOTIC COMMODITY**

The royal court furnished travel writers like Polo and Rustichello with a layman’s alternative to the authorizing stamp of Latinity. In return, the travel book offered sovereigns and their imitators—eager to equate cultural patronage with political authority—a unique new way to appropriate the travail of the long-distance specialist. This symbiotic relationship helped travel writing become a known commodity within the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge and the broader literary landscape of the later Middle Ages.

To illustrate how this worked in practice, let us consider the example of King Charles V of France (ruled 1364–80), whose bibliopilia earned him the nickname “the Wise.” During Charles’s reign, the presentation miniatures of courtly manuscripts assumed a more markedly political character—probably in reaction to the English dynastic claims that sparked the Hundred Years’ War. The library of Charles V boasted five copies of the *Divisament*, the earliest extant version of *The Book of John Mandeville*, and a luxury map now identified as the Catalan Atlas [see figs. 8 and 9, in chapter 6] which drew on both of these works of travel writing.

The *Catalan Atlas* dates from around 1375 and is attributed to the Malloccan workshop of Jewish cartographers Abraham and Jehuda Cresques. Although it is not known who commissioned the work, the *Atlas* may owe its existence to a series of reciprocal gift exchanges between the crowns of France and Aragon. The *Atlas* was first inventoried in the library of Charles V in 1380. That same year, Charles received a letter from his niece’s husband, the future King Joan I of Aragon. It read, in part:

*Most dear uncle, it pleases us very much to read in French as in our own language, which is why we ask you to send us three books written in the French tongue, namely: the Chronicles of France, Titus Livius, and Mandeville.*

In another letter dispatched in 1380, Joan requested copies of Mandeville and Machaut from his mother-in-law, the Duchess of Bar, sister to the French King. The deaths of Charles V and Joan I did not end the exchange
of gifts of long-distance knowledge between the royal houses. Charles VI asked for an up-to-date world map from Joan’s eventual successor, Pedro IV of Aragon, in 1381.107 The hybrid form and content of the Catalan Atlas suggest why the monarchs of France and Aragon found luxury maps and travel books congenial to their political and cultural self-presentation. The Atlas crystallizes [and makes available for appropriation] the travail and long-distance knowledge of a dazzling cross section of medieval society. The work draws on scholarly, devotional, chivalric, and mercantile approaches to mapping the world. The Atlas reproduces the rhumb lines and detailed coastal contours of the portolan chart, a genre of map based on the painstaking observations of Mediterranean merchants and mariners, who crafted and kept such charts aboard their ships as navigational aids as early as the twelfth century.108 Some of the Atlas’s other formal elements—its copious drawings of exotic figures, its explanatory glosses, and its Jerusalem-centered conception of the world—harken back to far older clerical efforts at cartography. As mentioned above, the chivalric travel accounts of Polo and Mandeville furnished a third source of information.109 The Atlas also features several depictions of merchants traveling along the trade routes that supplied late medieval sovereigns with the exotic luxuries that they prized so highly, allowing the royal owner of the map collection to relish the expenditures of labor that brought such products into his own surroundings. As Jerry Brotton has observed, the Atlas even represents the efforts involved in extracting and transporting the very raw materials—such as gold and precious stones—used to manufacture the costly pigments that adorn its surfaces.110 In sum, as the owner of this jewel-like object, Charles held in his hands the labor, pain, and knowledge of countless travelers.

The royal interest in luxury maps and travel books furnished more humble social actors with opportunities to work the prestige economy of long-distance knowledge to their own advantage. Baldassare degli Ubriachi—a Florentine merchant who traded in diamonds and ivory—wrote to his trading partner in Mallorca in 1399, asking him to commission Atlas-style maps from the Cresques workshop. Baldassare planned to present the maps as gifts to the rulers of the kingdoms where he sold his wares, in the hope that his liberality would secure him a tax exemption or two.111 The earliest surviving manuscript of The Book of John Mandeville, produced in 1371, was commissioned as a gift for King Charles V by his royal physician Gervais Chrétien.112 The previous year, Charles had founded a medical college at the University of Paris, which would eventually be named after Gervais.

The French version of the Divisament found in the sumptuous Livre de merveilles (Paris: BNFr. 2810) suggests the influence that the work of Polo and Rustichello had on raising the profile of the travel book as an exotic commodity. The Livre des merveilles was produced, at least in part, by the workshop of the Bouiccaut Master (active 1400–1430) for John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy. John initially intended to keep the luxe manuscript for himself; however, in 1413, he ended up presenting the volume to his estranged uncle, the famous bibliophile [and brother of Charles V] John, Duke de Berry.113 The Divisament is the first item in this manuscript, which also includes The Book of John Mandeville and French renditions of the works of Odoric of Pordenone, Hetoum of Armenia, William of Boldensele, and Riccoldo of Montecroce. Most of the translated works were rendered from Latin into French in the previous century [around 1351] by Benedictine monk John le Long [Jan le Lange] of Saint-Bertin at Saint-Omer, near Calais.114 The Livre de merveilles brings together types of travel writing that, prior to the fourteenth century, tended to be treated as discrete subgenres. It includes works that speak at length about pilgrimage to the Holy Land [Riccoldo, Boldensele, and Mandeville] with exoticizing accounts of the East and South Asia [Polo, Odoric, Hetoum, and—once again—Mandeville]. Translations of works originally written in Latin by clerics [Riccoldo, Boldensele, Odoric, Hetoum] are included alongside French works written by laymen [Mandeville and Polo]. The politically resonant iconography of the Livre’s frontispieces lends a sense of unity to these disparate texts. The frontispieces alternate between two archetypal scenes: one in which the traveler is paring home with the blessing of a king or pope [Odoric, Mandeville, Polo, Riccoldo] or one in which the travel writer is presenting his finished travel book to a powerful patron [Boldensele, Hetoum].

The cultural authority of the court—whether secular or ecclesiastical—is so essential to the way that the illuminators of the Livre view travel and travel writing that many of the scenarios depicted in the frontispieces have no basis in the texts themselves.115 The image that introduces Hetoum of Armenia’s Fleurs des estoires de la terre d’Orient is particularly interesting in this regard (fig. 9). The painting depicts Hetoum genuflecting before John the Fearless and presenting the duke with his account of Mongol civilization. This is, of course, a historical impossibility. Hetoum had returned to his native Armenia before John’s birth and died long before the duke reached adulthood.

Despite the fictive nature of the scene it presents, the Hetoum frontispiece nevertheless conveys an anthropological “truth.” With breathtaking economy, the illuminator captures the cultural logic that underlies the Hetoum story: where and how the legend developed. As in the case of many of the other frontispieces, the Hetoum frontispiece leads the reader’s eye immediately to the “true” origins of the tale—Hetoum and the Near East. The Hetoum frontispiece is the first in the Livre de merveilles to illustrate the actual foreign lands described by the text. Unlike the frontispieces that follow, the Hetoum frontispiece does not depict a historical event or present a traditional scene; rather, it informs the reader that Hetoum’s book has a real and authentic origin in the Near East. The Hetoum frontispiece is in many ways the epitome of a genre that is almost impossible to categorize: that of the medieval travel narrative as a site of indigenous and nonindigenous knowledge.
that contains a miniature version of the Hetoum frontispiece in which they themselves are depicted. This playful mise en abyme exploits the narrative conventions of medieval painting—in which sequential events unfold from left to right within a continuous spatial field—to dramatize the network of political and social relations that sustain, and are sustained by, the circulation of the travel book.

This idealized image of courtly consumption echoes many of the Divisament’s attitudes and propositions. Like the Divisament, it depicts the relationship between the long-distance specialist and his patron as a mutually aggrandizing one. This relationship presumes the existence of a spectating public. Like any other exotic commodity designed for courtly ostentation, ownership of the travel book reafirms the exalted status of its owner, who—in embracing the book—affirms its value as a commodity and its authority as a text. Finally, in inscribing his own labor within this fictive scene, the painter of the Hetoum frontispiece follows the example of Rusticello da Pisa, who presented his role in crafting the Divisament as an indispensable contribution to the production of the long-distance knowledge found in its pages.

John the Fearless’s decision to give this particular manuscript to his uncle as a New Year’s gift also hints at the Divisament’s influence on the courtly practices on which it had wagered its success. Among the Duke de Berry’s inventoried possessions was a cycle of tapestries depicting the majesty of the Great Khan. The inventories of the Duke de Berry suggest that, as Polo and Rusticello intended, courtly readers of the Divisament identified with the figure of Khubilai Khan as consumers of exotic knowledge. The duke’s lavish, Khan-like expenditures on precious gems, exotic animals, and foreign art objects became the topic of mutinous grumbling on the part of his political adversaries. Brigitte Buettner has observed that the occasion in which the Livre des merveilles was offered to the older duke recalls Polo and Rusticello’s description of the massive celebration of New Year’s Day in the Mongol Empire, which culminated in the ceremonial presentation of tributary gifts to Khubilai Khan. The fourteenth-century revival of New Year’s gift giving in French-speaking courts has long been a puzzle to social historians. A convincing argument has been mounted that early humanist interest in ancient Roman customs might account for its sudden reanimation in the late Middle Ages. An equally plausible impetus for this “rediscovery” of New Year’s gift giving is the popularity of the Divisament dou monde in the same French-speaking courts that revived the ritual.

The Divisament influenced the

Figure 2. Hetoum of Armenia presents his book to John the Fearless, with courtiers later examining the same volume by the window. From Le livre des merveilles (ca. 1400–1420) Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2310, f. 326v. (Photograph: BNF, Paris.)
distance specialist in terms of his subjectivation within structures of political power. In a literary culture that associated travel writing with pompous self-importance and mendacity, the patron-servant relationship furnished the would-be travel writer with a humble rhetorical posture while endowing his account with an aura of legitimacy, derived from the political authority of the patron. Intriguingly, this subject position appealed to authors who wrote about journeys far less exotic than Polo’s.

John Capgrave’s *The Solace of Pilgrims* is a decidedly conventional topographical description of Rome, written in the wake of the author’s 1450 pilgrimage to the Eternal City. Capgrave addressed the work to the financial sponsor of his journey, Sir Thomas Tuddenham (1401–62).121 Given the scholarly pretensions of the *Solace*, it is no surprise that Capgrave situates his work within the tradition of learned topographical writing on the Holy Land, especially the “book of seynt jerom which is called de distantciis locorum.”122 But then, the *Solace* proceeds to name less intuitive prece-
dents:

> Also ther was a man of uenys [Venice] which thei called marcus paulus he laboured all the soudaines londe and descriyed on to us ... the stately array of the grete cane houshold. Eke jon maundecylye knyght [knight] of yngland atir his labour made a book ful solacius on to his nacyon. Aftyr all these grete eryeris of many wonderfull things I wyl folow with a smal pyping of swch strague sitis [sights] as I haue seyn and swch strague thingis as I haue herd.123

In casting his “smal pyping” as a minor-key version of the books written by Polo and Mandeville, Capgrave gives his bookish account a glamorous makeover. Similarly, the analogy that the *Solace* makes between its content and the tidings of the town crier lends Capgrave’s account an air of novelty that its contents belie while grounding its authority in the world of secular patronage and public affairs.

Then there is the case of Anselmo Adorno, who dedicated his *Itinerarium*—a humanist travel account based on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land—to King James III of Scotland. In his preface, Adorno situates himself within a learned tradition of Greco-Roman travel, associated with figures such as Plato and Pythagoras. The sole medieval precedent mentioned by Adorno is Marco Polo, who is extolled as the man who “among all travelers merits the highest glory and crown of triumph.”124

The frontispiece of the presentation copy of Bertrand de la Broquiére’s unconventional pilgrimage account (fig. 3) offers yet another example. The painting depicts the adventurous Bertrand in Ottoman garb, gleaning before his patron Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Like the Hetoum frontispiece commissioned by Philip’s father, John the Fearless, this later presentation miniature manipulates history. The image condenses the scene of Bertrand’s homecoming with the subsequent event of the publication of his travel account, a work that he undertook later, and only then at the prompting of Philip the Good. This narrative condensation emphasizes that the book offered up to the duke is the outgrowth of the toil of Bertrand’s perilous overland journey from the Holy Land to Burgundy, via Ottoman territory. The exportation of the *Divisament*’s notion of long-distance specialists to the accounts of pilgrims reflects—and contributes to—the flattening of distinctions between pilgrimage and exotic exploration (a topic explored in chapter 4).
CONCLUSION

When scholars speak about subjectivity and travel writing, they generally refer to a small subset of grammatical and narratological considerations. The political orientation of medieval exoticism encouraged works like the Itinerarium and the Divisament to render the subjectivity of the traveler in relation to the political, social, and economic networks that converged upon the majestic figure of the Great Khan. For this reason, the rhetorical techniques that each work uses to render the subjectivity of the traveler are inflected by its ideological stances toward temporal power, courtly materialism, and religious pluralism and—in the case of the Divisament—by the kind of reader that the text hopes to bring into being.

The success of the Divisament illustrates another point that deserves to be underscored: the evolution of medieval travel writing was influenced by many nonliterary developments in the history of literacy. While scholars are accustomed to asking how the rise of vernacular literature or the generic conventions of chivalric fiction inflect works like the Divisament, it is far less common to pose the same question with regard to the material practices of book production. As the following chapter shows, the advent of travel writing about East Asia was sustained by the legal and bureaucratic forms of writing that were becoming an increasingly important part of public life across late medieval Europe. This development provided travel writers with the rhetorical resources they needed to convert travel into a source of moral and intellectual authority in an unpredictable and potentially contentious cultural environment.

TRAVAIL AND AUTHORITY IN THE FORGOTTEN AGE OF DISCOVERY

In the fields of European travel writing and geographical exploration, the year 1492 is widely identified as the starting point of "modernity." The first voyage of Columbus is said not only to have discovered an unknown continent but also to have inaugurated an epistemological revolution. In theory, this epochal rupture enabled the values of empiricism and curiosity to supplant the episteme of the Middle Ages, defined by its putative obedience to classical and theological authority. Anthony Grafton typifies this position when he writes, "In 1500, European thinkers saw their world as a narrow, orderly place ... in which few surprises could await the explorer of the past or the present." In Grafton's account, the placid attitude that supposedly prevailed prior to Columbus was founded on the unquestioning acceptance of the claims of ancient and medieval auctores. Grafton maintains that the eventual realization that Columbus had discovered an uncharted landmass about which the ancients knew nothing led to the gradual increase in the value accorded to empirical observation in matters of geography (and to the trait of novelty in knowledge production, more generally). Grafton develops a nuanced analysis of the debates and contradictions that shaped early modern geographical writing, yet positions this illuminating tableau—gratuitously—against the backdrop of a Middle Ages that never actually existed.

For the authors and readers of late medieval travel writing, the world was anything but a place where "few surprises could await the explorer." When travelers began writing accounts of their voyages to the Mongol Empire in the 1240s, they made astonishing claims that surpassed anything found in ancient texts. These travel writers addressed broad readerships of clerics and laypeople, some of whom were unfamiliar with, or indifferent
NOTES TO PAGES 12–17

H. Champion, 1994, which—in contrast to Richard—develops a rationale for considering apparently heterogenous texts as a single corpus. Antonio García Espada, “Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone, the Crusades, and the Role of the Vernacular in the First Descriptions of the Indies,” Viator 40, 1 (2009): 201–22, argues that, when treated with subtlety, manuscript contexts and other evidence of medieval reader response provide a fruitful way to classify medieval travel writing (a category that García Espada himself admits circumspect about). My book draws on many of these scholars’ heuristic conceptions of genre without subscribing to any of them exclusively.


INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE


—Donne, vedete colui che va ne l’Inferno e torna quando gli piace, e una su reca no velle di coloro che li gio secco—. All’altra di lui l’altre rispose scrupolosamente—In verità tu de dir vero: non vedi su come egli ha la barba crespa e il cobr bruno per colo che e la giosto .—Le quali parole udendo egli dir dette a sé, e comicando che di pura credenza delle done venivano, piacenteggi, e quasi contento che esse in totale opinione fossero, sorridendo allungandosi, passò avanti.

2. Ignorant of basic literary concepts such as title, genre, diviso, and allegory, the women misconstrue Dante’s fictive, allegorical pilgrimage as a recurring deed of real-life heroism. As Boccaccio would later argue in his Expositions on the Comedy, Dante christened his poem with its seemingly incongruous generic title precisely in order to underscore the moral-allegorical significance of the upwarp trajectory of his journey from hell to paradise. See Giovanni Boccaccio, Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s “Comedy,” trans. Michael Pajo (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 41–43.

CHAPTER ONE


3. Particularly influential on this current study are Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 139; and James Clifford, “The Methodology of„”
Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
5. Ibid., 132.
9. Ibid., 1–19.
16. MA, 220, SF, 331.
18. SF, 171: “Visum fuit mihi recte quod ingresseret quodam alius seculum.”
21. In a famous discussion of commodity fetishism, Karl Marx (Capital, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowke [London: Penguin Classics, 1998]) observes: “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. The products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” [165]. One could distinguish medieval and modern exoticism along similar lines, since the commodity fetish functions by means of logical reversals analogous to the ones outlined in Huggan, Postcolonial Erotic. “Although the word ‘exotic’ currently has widespread application, it continues—possibly because of this—to be commonly misunderstood. For the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent quality to be found in certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places, exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic perception—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them” [13].

27. Mengke, the first khan of the Trolud line, had recently ascended to the throne with the help of his mother, Sarghanghan Bi (d. 1252), at the expense of Baru and kept a wary eye on him and other rivals. For more on the dynastic politics of the Mongol Empire, see Thomas Allen, "The Rise of the Mongolian Empire and Mongol Rule in North China," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 6, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis C. Twitchett [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 321-41.

28. Passages in the *Iluminatio* suggest that news of Friar Andrew of Longium's journey had prompted William of Rubruck to minister to Christians who had been subjugated during the Mongol conquests of Hungary and Armenia [MA, 131-36; SF, 289-90].

29. MA, 64.

30. MA, 202; SF, 306.

31. MA, 106, SF, 88: "Bene cavi quod nunquam dixi me esse nuncium vestrum. Tunc quiesverunt quid esset in biga, utrum esset argentum vel argentum vel vestem preciosae quae deferrebat Sarattch."


33. MA, 107, SF, 88: "Et omnia quae videlicet super famulos nostros: cultellus, cirothecas, basias, corrigias, omnia admirantes et volentes habere... Tunc diebant quod esset haratarum."

34. MA, 205; SF 310: "Ipsi autem tenebant tres vestes sive tunicas et dixerunt nobis: 'Vos non vultis recipere aurum vel argentum et stercoris hic dixi orantes pro ipso Chano, ipse rogat ut ad minus recipiat unusquisque vestrum similem vossum, ne vacui recordatis ibi on. ' Tunc oporuit nos recipere cas ob reverentiam ipsius, quia multum habent pro malo quando contemplantur munera eorum. Pius fereatur fece currit inquiri a quid nobis videntur, et semper respondamus idem, in tantum quod ipsa Christiana insinuabat ipsis idola tris, qui nichil aliud querent nisi munera."

35. MA, 133, SF, 131: "In principio despiciebat nos multum ducor noster et fastidiebat cum ducere tam riles homines."

36. MA, 133, SF, 196: "Si arripiebat eos appetitus purgandi ventrem, non elangubant se a nobis quantum possit faba factur, mico ista nos colligentus mox faciebant im munditas suas, et multa alia faciebant quod supra modum tedious."

37. MA, 139, SF, 116: "Et aliquando habuit socius meus tantum famem, quod diebant mih quasi lacrimando: 'Idietur micho quod nunquam comederim.'"

38. MA, 161; SF, 557: Venimus ad domum nostram frigide et vacuum. Lecticinaria provident et coopertoria, afferente etiam nobis materiam ignis et dabant carmen unius arietis parvi et mulcens tribus nobis, eibum pro sex diebus. ... Iste erat cibus noster, et bene salutis esse nobis qui semper ida niser domus eum, ingebant se super nos.
55. MA, 118, SF, 301-3:

56. MA, 130, SF, 303-4:
Unum erat michi solarium, quod quando presens cupiditatem eorum, ego subtraxis de libris bibliae et sententiae et alios libros quos magis diligebam. Psalterium domine Regnem non vidi aussubstrahere, quae illud fuerat nimirum notaturn proprius aureas picturas quae erant in eo.


60. On the prohibition against anyone other than consecrated priests teaching consecrated liturgical vessels, see Gratian, Decretum, "De consecratione," Dist I, cap. 41-42.


63. Ibid., 198.

64. Leonardo Olschki, Guillaume Boucher, a French Artist at the Court of the Kans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), 28-44.

65. MA, 166, SF, 264:
Hanc crucem atque alteram Hermenus qui venerat cum monacho, ut dicebat de Jerusalem, et erat argentea appendens forte quatuor marchas et habeat viiii gemmas in angulis et unam in medio, ymaginem Salvatoris non habebat quia erubescit cum Ermioni et nosterion ut appararet Christus affixus cruce.

66. MA, 165, SF, 263:
Tunc monachus faciet eam surgere de lecto et facit eam adorare crucem, ter genua flectendo et frontem dando ad terram, ipso stante cum cruce ad latus occidentale domus et illa ad orientale. Hoc facto muraverunt loca, et monachus ivit cum cruce ad orientem et illa ad occidentem, et ipse precepit audaciter ei, quamvis esset ita debita quod vir posset stare super pedes, ut item se proterneret ter adorando crucem ad orientem mora christianorum, quod et fecit. Et dicit eam facere signum cruces ante faciem suam.

67. MA, 169, SF, 267:
Et miseris illi sacerdotes nunquam docuerunt eam fidem, nec monuserunt ut baptizare retur. Ego autem nobilibus ibi misit nos valens aliquam dictio, sed ipsa docet me adhuc uobis. Nec reprehendi sacerdotes in aliquo sortilegio, ibi enim vidi quattuor gladium a vagina extractos usque ad medietatem, unum ad caput lectuli domini, alium ad pedes et alios duo ad utrumque latum hostium unum. Vidi et ibi unum calicem argentum de calicibus oviaris, qui forte fuerat captus vel rapitus in aliqua ecclesia Hungarie, et erat suspensus ad parietem plenus cineribus, et super cinerem illum erat unus niger lapis, et de calibus nunquam docerunt eos sacerdotes quod mala sint.

68. Supple discussions of this episode are waged in Khammamidi, In Light, 79-82; and Jackson, "William of Rubruck."

69. MA, 160, SF, 256:
Ipsi enim dic fecerat convivium Mangachan; et nos eius es quod talibus diebus, quibus divinis suis dicunt ei festos vel sacerdotes nosterini aliquando sacros, quod ipse tunc curiam. Et talibus diebus primo sumant sacerdotes christiani cum suo apparato et caritate pro eo et benevolentium cibus suum; ipsis recedebimus, veniunt sacerdotes sacerdos sui et faciat simulacrum, post hos veniunt sacerdotes indite idem facientes. Et dicebat michi monachus quod solum credit christians, tumenes vult ut omnes orent pro eo. Et dicebat tibi quia nullis creditis sicut postea audiebatis, tumenes sequeris curiam suam sicut me mel, et omnis dat, et omnes creduntit se esse familiares eius et omnes prophanet eis prospera.

70. This section will focus primarily on what is thought to be the earliest version of the work, the Franco-Italian version commonly known as the "F." The text of the F version comes from Marco Polo, Milione = Le descrittione du monde: Il milione nelle tradizioni Toscana e Franco-Italiane, ed. Gabriella Ronchi con Cesare Segre [Milan: Mondadori, 1982].

71. Just about every detail of this timeline—from dates to assertions of fact—has been the subject of controversy. The most notorious example is Frances Wood, Did Marco Polo Go to China? (Boulder, CO: Westvire, 1996). Wood’s controversial and largely dis-credited answer: no. For rebuttals, see Igor de Rachewiltz, "Marco Polo Went to China," Zentralasiatische Studien 27 (1997): 34-92; Larner, Marco Polo, 58-63; and Peter Jackson, "Marco Polo and His ‘Travels,’” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 61 (1998): 83-101. These discussions also include acknowledgments of the contradictions in the timeline suggested by the Divisament.


74. Polo, *Divisament*, 305: Seignors emperaor et rois, dux et marquis, cœurs, chevaliers et châtelains, et toutes gens que voles savoir les diverses genrations des hommes et les diverses des diverses region dou monde, si prennes cesuit livre et le feites lire. Et qui trouverez toutes les grandisses merveilles et les grant diversité de la grande Harminie et de Perse et des Tartars et de l’Indie, et de maintes autres provinces, si vous ceusui livre contera par ordre apertement, si comme mester Marc Pol, sail et nobile citoyen de Venexe, raconta.

75. Polo, *Divisament*, 434: “Et sachés que unques ne fu, ne cre le soit, nulz homez que si grant seuls ne si grant delit poist <avoir> in estre monde comme ceustui feit, ne si en aist le poistoir de fer.”

76. Polo, *Divisament*, 418-19: “Et voiz cz que le grant sire, que launques l’en li content que fust un biau arbre, il le faisant prendre con toutes les racies et les <comme moute> moute. Le et le faisant porter a cel mont con le leofant. Et fust l’affre grant quant il voz si... et en cest maniere li avoit le plus biaus arbes dou monde.”

77. Polo, *Divisament*, 318: Quant il aissentient a lui et li diserent l’inhabe per com il estoit aliés et ne li savoire dir autre novelles de les contres ou il estoient aliés, il disant ez qu’il estoient foiz et non saisien[e] et desdez[e]s que maus amerent ouz les novelles et les costumes et les usages de celle estra-nes contrées qu’il ne faisant ciel, par iil il avoit marne, et Marc, le bien savoire tout ce, quant il ala en cest mesajerie, toutes les novelles et toutes les estranges couzes qu’il avoit, mes[t]oit son esent per com il est suiendent au grant kaan.

78. Polo, *Divisament*, 319: Et il acheuoi mont bien la beisoune et li savoire dir mauens-ties novelles et maintes estranges couzes. Et le grant kaan il plaissit son Polu de mester Marc que il le voizant grant bien et li faisant si grant oner et le tennent si pres de soi que les autres baroens en avant grant enoui. Or ço fu la raison par coi mester Marc sec plus de celles couzes de celle contrée que nulz autres home, qu’il avoit eu plus de celles estranges parties le nulz omez ke unques nasquist.


80. Polo, *Divisament*, 309: “Et trovez grant merveilles et diverses custes les quels ne vrit aussi, le voiez contera en cest livre apertement.”


82. Polo, *Divisament*, 316: “Et ce que il trovent en la voie ne voizsot mencion [er], per com le voiez conteren en notre livre apertement.”


85. Polo, *Divisament*, 376: “en autre partie dou monde.” This is an apparent reference to the belief that his skull was buried on Mount Calvary, beneath the site of Christ’s crucifixion.

86. Though the *Divisament* treats the disagreement about the relics as one that pits “Muslims” against “idolaters,” *Sri Pusha* was a pilgrimage destination for medieval Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists perhaps as early as the eleventh century. Buddhists associated the peak with the Buddha, Hindus with the deity Shiva. Moreover, the claim that Adam terminated on the mountain after his exile from Eden was not exclusively a “Muslim” belief, but also one held by some Christians. In the fourteenth century, both Ibn Battuta and Franciscan missionary John Marignolli completed the Sri Pusha pilgrimage. Marignolli humorously knelt down beside a Muslim pilgrim from Spain to measure the footprint attributed to Adam. See Markus Akaslant, *The Sacred Footprint: A Cultural History of Adam’s Peak* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001).

87. Polo, *Divisament*, 376: Le grant kaan alon commande que toutes les gens, com regulers et autres, aflent conter celles reliques, que lor estent fair entendant que fauert de Adam. E porcoi vostz, e les regulers les recevrent e les aportent au grant kaan que molt les recevrent.
115. Mandeville says nothing about the circumstances surrounding his departure from England, yet he is shown taking leave of its king. The Livre depicts Odoric of Pordenone departing for his journey from the papal curia, an episode that is not narrated in the text.


118. Ibid.


120. Ibid., 600.


123. Ibid.


CHAPTER TWO


7. Quoted in Power, Roger Bacon, 231.


13. Ibid.

14. MA, 80.

15. SF, 211; MA, 215: “(d) mihi mensibus pestes circumdari, et non est verum quod dicis: Ysidoris quod sit sinu exiens ab occaso. Nusquam enim tangit oceanum, sed unique circumdatur terra.”

16. SF, 269; MA, 170: “Quaesivi de monstris sive de monstruosis hominibus de quibus narrat Ysidoris et Soliris. Ipsius dehanc mihi quod nunciamus viderant talia, de quo multum miramur si verum sit.”


20. Benedetto, Milione, cxxiv.


24. Ibid., 227: “Und ku etliche stücke lihe vogelöplich sitt so don ich fröhend meistere von naturen zō zugünstige zō latine geschreiben die man wol mag lesen der sō biren wil die die meistere pfaffen von naturen wol versson sullen.”


28. Domenico Silvestri, “Los islares de la época del humanismo: El De insula de...