5-2019

The Body and Its Signifiers: Bodily Depictions in Niccolò de’ Conti and Odorico da Pordenone

Antonella Dalla Torre

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Italian Literature Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3153

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
The Body And Its Signifiers: Bodily Depictions In Niccolò De’ Conti And Odorico Da Pordenone

By

Antonella Dalla Torre

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2019
The Body And Its Signifiers: Bodily Depictions In Niccolò De’ Conti And Odorico Da Pordenone
By
Antonella Dalla Torre

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

08 February 2019
Eugenia Paulicelli
Chair of Examining Committee

08 February 2019
Giancarlo Lombardi
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Eugenia Paulicelli
Martin Elsky
Monica Calabritto
This dissertation examines textual, bodily depictions in two western European, medieval and
late-medieval travel accounts, describing the eastern travels of the Venetian merchant Niccolò
de’ Conti and those of the Franciscan friar Odorico da Pordenone, in order to show how a
connection between the characterizations of the body and the process of identity definition is
forged and sustained in these texts.

Through a cultural-studies perspective, this work focuses specifically on depictions of the
body in Poggio Bracciolini’s account of the travels of Niccolò de’ Conti and in the text of a
vernacular rendition of Odorico da Pordenone’s *Relatio*, the *Libro delle nuove strane e
meravigliose cose*. These narratives’ bodily depictions constitute a textual nexus that lends itself
to an investigation of the affirmation of a western European Christian identity, both through its
opposition to that of the eastern “others” but also through a process of gendering; textual bodily
depictions become a lens for the interpretation of the text, bearing witness to the instability of the very concept of identity itself. A close reading of both narratives is informed by a theoretical approach that stems from recent contributions in the field of cultural studies and postcolonial studies, such as those of Geraldine Heng, Kathleen Biddick, Carmen Nocentelli and Stanley F. Kruger.

While the introduction provides the necessary historical background for an analysis of the encounter between Bracciolini and Niccolò de’ Conti, Chapter I analyzes the function of de’ Conti’s travel narrative as “cultural intermediary” (a term borrowed from Natalie Rothman’s *Brokering Empire: Trans Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul*). In addition, the chapter situates Bracciolini’s appropriation of de’ Conti’s account in the context of past, as well as recent, scholarship on humanism. The shifting relationship between oral witnesses and classical authorities continues to be investigated in Chapter II, where the influence of de’ Conti’s narrative on contemporary cartography is briefly analyzed. Chapter III introduces a close reading of de’ Conti’s narrative in light of the erotic vein displayed by Bracciolini’s writing. It also presents the analysis of the body as a locus where the emergence of issues of race and identity can best be located. Chapter IV continues to focus on sexualized descriptions of the body, within a reading of the *Libro delle nuove strane e meravigliose cose*, a mid XIVth-century vernacular rendition of the Odorico da Pordenone’s *Relatio*. The additional material present in the vernacular rendition proves significant for the analysis of bodily depictions, which emerge, once again, as textual focal points; this material allows for a juxtaposition of the *Libro* with de’ Conti’s narrative, despite the difference in periodization.

The focus on medieval travel narratives as texts that expose the bodily quality of self-
definition delineates a direction of analysis for future endeavors. The present research represents an initial step towards the shaping of an alternative taxonomy within the composite genre of medieval European travel writings, one that is built around instances of embodiment as privileged sites of differentiation.
Acknowledgements

This work is the result of a long and not always linear journey, which has brought me from Italy to Oregon, New York City and, eventually, back to Italy again. My deepest gratitude goes to the many people that have influenced and helped me along the way, beginning with the faculty of the Philosophy Department at the Università statale di Milano, to my professors at the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon, to the Comparative Literature faculty at Cuny Graduate Center. Among them, I would especially like to thank the director of the Italian Specialization, Professor Monica Calabritto, for enabling me to return to academic research, after a protracted period of absence and for accepting, more recently, to become part of my Dissertation Committee. Thank you also for your insightful comments about my work during the Dissertation Defense, a time when I was most in need of an intellectual exchange.

I am indebted also to my dissertation advisor, Professor Eugenia Paulicelli for her unwavering support throughout these years, from the Orals to the last stages of writing and research. I am also particularly grateful to Professor Martin Elsky for his willingness to be involved with a field and a period that are not his own and, most importantly, for ushering me into the culinary world of New York City during my early years at the Graduate Center.
My gratitude goes also to my family who never ceased to believe in my ability to bring this work to a conclusion. Thank you also to my husband, my “biggest fan”, who never lost faith, and to my kids whose lives had been, at times, encumbered by research. Finally, to my friends in Italy and the US, for accompanying me in various steps of the way and to New York, Virginia and Oregon for having given me a haven and a home.
Table of Contents

Introduction…………………………………………………………………………………………1

Chapter I: Shaping Boundaries: Niccolò de’ Conti’s Travel Narrative as Cultural Intermediary……………………………………………………………………………………………………27

Chapter II: The Impact of Niccolò de’ Conti’s Narrative on Fra Mauro’s mappamundi……….56

Chapter III: Manufacturing Desire: Eroticism in Niccolò de’ Conti’s India recognita ……86

Chapter IV: Corporeal Identities: the Libro delle nuove strane e meravigliose cose (a Vernacular Rendition of Odorico da Pordenone’s Relatio).................................................................130

Conclusion: ……………………………………………………………………………………………165

Bibliography: ………………………………………………………………………………………174
Introduction

This dissertation begins with a focus on Niccolò de’ Conti’s fifteenth century travel account, originally rendered in Latin by the Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini, who incorporated de’Conti’s oral account in his treatise on the vagaries of fortune, the Historia de varietate fortunae. Investigating the role of this narrative as cultural intermediary, in this introduction I focus on the relationship between the humanist Bracciolini and the merchant de’ Conti. I examine early textual scholarship of de’ Conti’s narrative, juxtaposing the initial scholarly attention to questions of intentionality and authorship to contemporary issues of gender and race, applied to the textual body of medieval western European travel narratives. Within the purview of the non-linear development of the genre of travel accounts, I review de’ Conti’s narrative’s impact on contemporary cartography, through its influence on Fra Mauro’s map, which becomes the focus of Chapter II of this dissertation. I also detail the text’s transmission, evaluating its reception among the laity, particularly after its autonomous publication in 1492.

Chapter 1 analyzes specifically the text’s intermediary function, investigating the ways in

---

1 Completed during the course of several years, and ultimately dedicated in 1448 to pope Niccolò V, the treatise is comprised of four books, the first and latter of which were composed independently from the rest of the work. Bracciolini’s letters suggest that the composition of the fourth book had been independent and preceding that of the treatise (M. Guéret-Laferté. De l’Inde 60), and testify to the completion of the treatise in 1448 (Harth, E.(ed.) Poggio Bracciolini.Lettere, vol. III 71). See also Chapter I of this dissertation.

2 Within the Florentine humanists’ circle Bracciolini was a scholar with a strong attachment to his home city (he also composed a Historia Fiorentina); David Rundle points out in Humanism in Fifteenth-century Europe that Bracciolini spent some years in England as secretary to the English royal cleric Henry of Beaufort and that he strove to ensure that his work circulated not only in England, but also in Hungary, Castile and Portugal where he actively sought patronage (375). Bracciolini is credited with many manuscript discoveries (Quintilian, Cicero, Lucretius). His collection of humorous tales, the Facetiae also gained “enduring and international popularity”(376).
which its relatively wide transmission contributes to the articulation of claims about East and West. In this context, the work of Natalie Rothman on the role of intermediary figures in the definition of boundaries between Venice and the East has been instrumental in nudging my research in the direction of what she calls a “bottom-up” analysis.\(^3\)

In particular, Rothman’s notion of “semiotic labor” has proven useful for an examination of the kind of work that a narrative like de’Conti’s travelogue operates in relation to the construction of cultural categories. Rothman’s usage of the concept of “semiotic labor” points to the shifting nature of the articulation of these terms over time; for example through a textual analysis that traces the emergence of the category of “Levantine” in early modern Venice, the progressive consolidation of a category of alterity becomes evident, as the term moves from denoting a specific meaning relative to a clearly circumscribed group, to a broader, more general significance.\(^4\) It is on account of this constituting process, actualized through instances of textual mediation that, for Rothman, the ongoing dialectic between state-institutions and transimperial subjects comes clearly to the fore (Brokering Empire 247). In fact, Rothman’s study underlines not only the process by which the consciousness and formation of alterity is affected and constituted by intermediaries’ role in elaborating and eventually naturalizing cultural categories, but also by the various technologies at play in a given context, which regulate such alterity (13).\(^5\)

In light of Rothman’s analysis, Bracciolini’s appropriation of de’Conti’s narrative

\(^3\) In Rothman’s case a “bottom-up analysis” translates into a focus on the “interstitial figures” that acted as go-betweens among political powers; in mine, it translates instead in a consideration of the popular transmission of the two travel narratives I analyze.

\(^4\) The evolution of the term “Levantine” begins with its referring first specifically to Ottoman Jews, then to all diasporic Ottoman and Safavid merchants, encompassing eventually all those “of the Levant” to finally extend to all Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean (Brokering Empire 215).

\(^5\) The technological intervention in the constitution of alterity is well illustrated by Biddick’s analysis of the effacement of the Jews through the technologies of temporality such as the astrolabius and the printing press in “The ABC of Ptolemy: Mapping the World with the Alphabet.” Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the Middle Ages. Tomash, S. and Sealy, G. eds. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998
becomes instrumental in the definition of a category of difference by producing a notion of
otherness that is centered on the depiction of the body of the natives, particularly in regard to the
description of instances of embodiment, centered on the ritual of genital piercing.⁶

Textual representations of the body in de’ Conti’s narrative therefore become a vector for
the examination of the emergence of medieval racialized identities through a brief investigation
of the shaping and evolution of late-medieval cartography in Chapter II, with particular regard to
the relationship between de’ Conti’s narrative as a textual repository of information and the map
of Fra Mauro.⁷ Afterwords, in Chapter III, I focus on de’ Conti’s narrative’s structural
characteristics, following Geraldine Heng’s proposed taxonomy for travel narratives, which is
developed around a pivotal, governing principle, that Heng describes as a “modulated admission
of otherness” (Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy 255).
As Heng notes in regard to Mandeville’s account, the pleasure-inducing mechanism of the texts
is premised on its ability to balance alterity and familiarity “so that an oscillation is
accomplished in the pattern of narrative rhythm, a particular pulse frequently discovered in
successful travelogues”(251). Furthermore, I consider specific textual passages in Bracciolini’s
rendition of de’ Conti’s narrative in relation of what could be defined as Bracciolini’s ‘erotic
vein’, interrogating its stylistic function and broader significance. In so doing, I highlight the
essential function of fictionality in the shaping of the narrative, together with the text’s ability to
transcend social barriers, as evidenced by its popular transmission.

The emergence of the coupling of eroticism and exoticism in de’ Conti’s text however
brings into sharper focus the intertwining of race and identity constitution. Carmen Nocentelli’s

⁶ For an in depth analysis of the genital piercing ritual in de’ Conti’s narration see Chapter III.
⁷ Aware of the vastity of this field of investigation, in this analysis I have merely indicated the direction for
further studies.
work on sixteenth century European sexual mores and Geraldine Heng’s focus on tracing the emergence of a discourse of difference in the pre-modern period have been inspirational for this analysis, as they draw attention to the shifting and co-dependent nature of identity and race.\(^8\)

Furthermore, Heng’s interpretation of medieval travel narratives as a “vital and important, if sometimes neglected, species of romance, highlights the importance of the constitution of “desire” as a powerful element within romance and travel narratives alike (Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy 4 and 5). In particular Heng’s analysis of the skillful ways in which a travel narrative can “manufacture desire” for its readership has been helpful in delineating how western European concepts of identity (as well as later projects of colonialism) have been informed by ideology and fantasy alike: “my story also describes the pleasures afforded by romances of different kinds [...]not as innocent, but as pleasures intimately folding into and imbricated with, historical projects and agendas from which they are, at times, virtually inseparable”(5).

In Chapter IV, I then turn to the tradition of Odorico da Pordenone’s Relatio’s vernacular renditions. Specifically, I focus on the Libro delle nuove strane e meravigliose cose, a mid XIVth c. Italian rendition of Odorico’s travel account that circulated in Tuscany and also, more broadly, in north eastern Italy between the XIVth and XVth century.\(^9\) The text’s transmission allows a comparison with that of de’ Conti, within the composite genre of western European travel accounts; since the Libro presents some textual additions to Odorico’s original Relatio (in form


of an appendix to the text), in which bodily depictions emerge, once again, as significant textual focal points, I devote the chapter to a close reading of this narrative. Indeed in this account medieval gender differentiation appears neither static nor clearly defined. Therefore, the text becomes a starting point for a reflection on medieval uncertainty around gender boundaries and sexuality. Ultimately, the shaping of a racialized body and a religious “other,” two concepts that develop in parallel and that are mutually reinforcing, highlights their interdependence but also the necessity of examining the political forces that have determined the genesis of the text itself. The humanist appropriation of de’ Conti’s narrative (through the hand of Bracciolini’s incorporation in his treatise) has the powerful effect of sustaining the alterity of the natives encountered by de’ Conti, possibly amplifying it through its connection with an erotic mode of signification. To that effect an initial examination of these narratives’ function as intermediaries within a complex political power-play, gives way to questions about the way in which these accounts shaped the Western perception of the East, as “active” participant in the imperial pursuit of the Venetian republic (as in the case of de’ Conti’s narrative) or as tools for the evangelical and political aims of the Franciscan order (as in Odorico da Pordenone’s account).

Even when it is impossible to surmise the influence of these texts on their contemporary readers, the success (both in print and in manuscript form) that these narratives encountered redirects attention to the specificity of their various, autonomous permutations (particularly in vernacular renditions), and the issues that relate to their transmission history. As a result, the existence of a lay readership of travel accounts, takes prominence over their influence on “those with power to act” (Rogers 91).

Early in this research, I began with a focus on tracing the emergence of a scientific mindset in the narrative of Niccolò de’ Conti, which on account of its chronological position
within the Italian Quattrocento ("à la charnière de deux époques," in the words of Michèle Guéret-Laferté), seemed well suited to investigate the development of a “shift” in perspective (De L’Inde 25). It became soon clear however, that the assumption of a linear development in the “evolution” of travel narratives (constituted by a gradual substitution of “fables” with “truth” in geographical matters) was inconsistent with the results of historical analysis.

Instead, tracing the development of a literary “economy of desire,” suggested and sustained by the narratives I have analyzed, became a more prominent concern of my research. I do not wish to imply that the examination of two texts, representing a small part of what constitutes a vast repertory of Western medieval travel accounts, suffices to build a taxonomy. I believe however that their analysis constitutes an initial step; a broader research encompassing a greater number of medieval (and late-medieval) travel narratives, with the aim of delineating a new taxonomy centered around bodily depictions as privileged interpretative textual loci, is in order.

Carmen Nocentelli’s work on bodily signs of confessional belonging in Empire of Love as well as Steven F. Kruger’s reflections on the formation of a medieval sense of identity, actualized through a self differentiation from ‘otherness,’ converge in demonstrating how the body is a powerful site of differentiation or belonging.¹⁰ My analysis wishes to contribute to a larger attempt to investigate medieval travel narratives as texts that expose the bodily quality of self-definition.

A meaningful encounter: Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò de’ Conti.

The account of the travels of Niccolò de’ Conti belongs to the vast body of late medieval

western European travel narratives which describe several, lengthy journeys to the East. De’ Conti, a Venetian merchant, narrated his observations on the customs, economies and geographical traits of the distant lands he visited during his 25 years of travels, to the pontifical secretary Poggio Bracciolini, during several conversations, some of which occurred directly at Bracciolini’s home, while others took place “in circuli di uornini doctissimi,” “among learned men,” (my trans).12

A notable Florentine humanist, Bracciolini spent his professional life almost entirely in the Roman curia, under the authority of various, successive popes, ranging from Boniface IX to Eugenius IV.13 During the pontificate of Eugenius IV, toward the end of the fifteenth century, Bracciolini worked as papal secretary. It was in this capacity that he collected the reportage on de’ Conti’s travels to the far East, eventually incorporating it into one of his later treatises on the vicissitudes of fortune, known as Historia de varietate fortunae (to which I will refer throughout this work as De varietate fortunae).14 Riccardo Fubini and Stephen Greenblatt paint the humanist

11 Medieval geographers had a more expansive definition of India than the contemporary one. Scott Westrem notes in this regard that “the best modern English translation of the term (despite the Eurocentric perspective that underlies it) is probably “Far East” (Broader Horizons 19n41).

12 Fubini, R. Poggio Bracciolini: Opera Omnia (628). The duration of de’ Conti’s permanence in the East as presented by Bracciolini’s text (24 years) differs from what has been recorded by Pero Tafur, a late medieval Spanish traveler whose route partially overlapped with de’ Conti’s. According to Tafur’s account, the travels of de’ Conti lasted at least 35 years, as he suggests a departure date of 1405 and de’ Conti returned to Italy not earlier than 1441 (Rubíes, Travel and Ethnology 88). However, Rubiés notes that in his rendition of de’Conti’s account Braccioli was not extremely concerned with the biographical details of the travels as he “devotes most attention to obtaining a clear image of Indian society” (88n7).


as a skeptical historian; Fubini points to the underlying ideological stance in the *Historia de varietate fortunae*, which is Bracciolini’s vision of history as “deprived of any recognizable sign of rationality or providence” (*Italia quattrocentesca* 34, my trans.).

As it is known, a great majority of medieval western European travel documents, which range from missionary/diplomatic reports to pilgrimage accounts and travel correspondences, have not been written by the same authors of the journeys (though there are exceptions).¹⁵ De’ Conti’s travelogue had been collected by Poggio Bracciolini at a later date, upon de’ Conti’s return. Like Marco Polo’s *Devisement du monde*, to which de’ Conti’s text was often juxtaposed possibly on account of the texts’ shared Eastern destination, the travel narrative has been shaped by a professional writer’s hand.¹⁶ Polo’s account soon became the most authoritative (and widely disseminated) Western source of information regarding India (a broadly conceived territory, according to its late medieval definition); de’ Conti’s enlarges the boundaries of the known world, extending it to the far East, delivering a wealth of information on the geographical area that we now regard as Southeast Asia.¹⁷

The interplay between the various institutional authorities that effectively determined the

---

¹⁵ Among the exceptions, see for example Johannes de Witte de Hese’s *Itinerarius*, a late-medieval travel account, written by a northern European author, who claims to be the same author of the travels. Even in this case, however, three heavily revised versions by the hands of scribes and printers (and not, as Scott Westrem points out, by the author) originated a tradition of greatly varied texts (*Broader Horizons*, xii).

¹⁶ The writing skills of the two authors varied considerably, as Rustichello da Pisa (author of Marco Polo’s narration), a mediocre writer of romance is a lesser writer than Bracciolini, whose rhetorical skills are amply witnessed by his prolific opus. Among the vast bibliography on Bracciolini’s work, the following volumes have been particularly relevant for the present study: Fubini, R. *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione: da Petrarcha a Valla*. and Fubini, R. and Caroti, S. (eds.) *Poggio Bracciolini 1380-1980. Poggio Bracciolini nel 6 centenario dalla nascita*. Sansoni 1982.

¹⁷ De’ Conti’s travels took him from Damascus to Java. However, as Kim Phillips notes, it is now largely established that, “western Europeans travelled to Asian regions beyond the Islamic East from around 1245 onwards” (“Oriental Sexualities in European Representations 53).
existence of the text (first and foremost, the church’s interest in the reunification with Eastern Christians and, more generally, the imperial pursuits of the Serenissima) assigns an important role of intermediary between East and West to de’ Conti’s travelogue. Such role constitutes a broad focus of this dissertation (as delineated in Chapter I), while in the foreground, a structural analysis of the travel narrative highlights its significance within Bracciolini’s own oeuvre.

In this introduction a brief examination of the circumstances that allowed the encounter between a merchant and an intellectual to occur, during the Council of Florence (“the last great attempt to reunite Eastern and Western Christians,” in the words of Joseph Gill), in the first half of the fifteenth century (1441-1449), follows the indispensable historical notes on both de’ Conti and Bracciolini.

Between 1415 and 1439 Niccolo’ de’ Conti, a Venetian merchant from the coastal town of Chioggia in the Venice lagoon, traveled East by sea and by land visiting the remote territories of India and China (Cathay), reaching as far as Borneo (Java, Sandai and Bandam) and eventually returning home some 25 years later. Born in the Venetian province of Chioggia

---

19 The literary value of travelogue is often undermined by scholars, generally preferring to highlight their influence on major, contemporary or subsequent literary works (see for example the literature on incorporation of the description of Prester John’s kingdom in the Orlando Furioso). Notably, Antonio Da Bollate, author of a dedicatory epistola preceding the rare 1492 printed edition of Bracciolini’s travel reportage, renders the literary value of the text apparent. Introducing the text to Piero Cara he praises Bracciolini’s attention to detail, instrumental in giving “the illusion that we are moving while we are in fact standing still and that we are there where in fact we are not; further, that when you are residing in Turin you are being welcomed into India and that at the same time an Italian is dwelling in India and an Indian in Italy” (quoted in Hammond. Travelers in disguise 5).
21 Numerous questions surround the exact duration of de’ Conti’s travels. Mario Longhena, for example, in Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava: Niccolò de’ Conti, Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo da Santo Stefano. (Milano: Alpes, 1929) examines the discrepancies highlighted by the account of Piero Tafur’s encounter with de’ conti, where the length of de’ Conti’s travels is said to have numbered 40 years (by admission of de’ Conti himself, as reported by Tafur) (Piero Tafur, Andancas etc.). Jean Paul Rubiés, in Travel and Ethnography, accounts for the discrepancies by pointing out the different origins and purposes of the two narratives, which “could both be accurate or not according
around 1395, de’ Conti belonged to an esteemed local family and received various municipal assignments during his life there. From Carlo Bullo’s examination of de’ Conti’s testament useful information on the social standing of the de’ Conti’s family can be gathered. Despite the fact that little is known about de’ Conti’s youth, we learn that during his long mercantile venture, de’ Conti had wedded an Indian woman, with whom he had four children. Two of them died with their mother on account of a plague epidemic.

In his testament, de’ Conti plainly advises his son Daniele not to embark on the same travels that he himself had previously undertaken, on account of “the great perils encountered” (“pericholi infiniti”) and of the uncertainty of return; in customary fashion, he also remarks that a safe ending of his “crazy enterprise” (“mata imprexa”) had been ultimately made possible exclusively by “God’s mercy” (“la misercordia de Dio”) rather than by his own abilities or strength.

---


23 I rely in this chapter on Carlo Bullo’s La vera patria di Niccolò de’ Conti (1880) for its archival material on the historical figure of Niccolò de’ Conti. Donald Lach’s Asia in the The making of Europe also contains useful information on the Venetian merchant, though the work has a broader scope which renders it less specific. Boies Penrose’s Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance relies on Mario Longhena’s studies on de’ Conti (see bibliography) for a recollection of his travels, which stresses their liminal nature as he terms de’ Conti (together with other “free-lance travelers of the Renaissance”) a “living link” between the medieval description of Asia and “the Renaissance voyages of the Portuguese” (20).

Regarding de’ Conti’s importance for the historiography of travel writings, Bullo leans on the authority of Marco Livio Sanudo’s Geografia (1586): “Taccerò di Scipione Querini, di Ambrogio Contarini, Di Luigi Cadamosto, Di Marin Sanuto e di altri molti [...] ma verrò a Nicolò de’ Conti il quale quasi a egual bilancia con Marco Polo si può paragonare” (quoted in Carlo Bullo. La vera patria XII).

24 “Uno arecordo a mio fio Daniel overo altri fioli [...] chomo i voria che mai non impensa ne arecorda de voler far quello chio fato mi de dire e andaro in india e faro e diero che in verita de cento nandera uno ara briga a tornar cum gran innimisi e pericholi infiniti i qual sareba longo a dir. Io ne son testimonio e a mi crede se mi ne so andando e torna non e sta per mio seno ne forteza ni ilustria niente da mi proceso salvo che di e note pregava Dio me retornase a casa mia e per la misericordia de Dio gracia me dono e ave misericordia dela mia mata imprexa e gratia de tornar [...]” (La vera patria di Nicolò de’ Conti e di Giovanni Caboto: studi e documenti. Chioggia: Tipografia di L. Duse, 1880, XIV). “I remind my son Daniel and my other sons [...] how I would like that they never think of doing what I had done, going to India, because, truthfully, among those hundreds who go one returns, among many enemies and infinite dangers that would take long to describe. I am a witness to that and believe me
The archival documentation examined by Bullo in regard to de’ Conti’s family’s connections in Venice and the East produces the portrait of a well-connected merchant of comfortable means, who actively participated in the trading network and its privileges enjoyed by the ruling merchant class.\(^{25}\) In addition, de’ Conti’s family had already established a long standing relationship with the East, a fact that helps to clarify the context of de’ Conti’s mercantile interests as well as the purpose of his travels.\(^{26}\)

The encounter with Bracciolini occurred during the years following de’ Conti’s return from his travels, while the papal secretary was occupied by the Council of Florence, which had moved its sessions to Florence from Ferrara. Somewhere between 1439 and 1443, upon his return to Italy, de’ Conti promptly soughted to be readmitted into the Catholic church, whose faith he had relinquished during his travels within Muslim territories.\(^{27}\) With this aim, an audience

---

\(^{25}\) Penrose Boies in *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance* also identifies him as a “Venetian merchant of noble family” (21) and Rubies describes him as “an experienced merchant of patrician origins” (*Travel and Ethnology* 88).

In the final years of his life, upon his return, de’ Conti was eventually to settle as a magistrate and to become an ambassador for his native city. (Bullo, C. *La vera patria di Niccolo’ de’ Conti e Giovanni Caboto: Studi e documenti*. Chioggia:1880) Bullo also mentions that upon returning from his many years abroad, de’ Conti was given a slave, “Marina”, by his own brother. Marina is mentioned in utterly unfavorable terms in the testament, a fact that prompts Bullo to wonder about the “emotional turmoils that might have caused such contempt” and that offers yet another clue in regard to de’ Conti’s social status, doubtlessly obtained, at least in part, by the outcome of the lucrative expeditions to the East. On the trading limitations, privileges and exclusions governing Venetian overseas commercial practices see also Apellániz Francisco. “Venetian trading networks in the medieval Mediterranean.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, pp. 157–179.

De’ Conti’s travels begin in Damascus, where a flourishing Venetian community was already established: *Is adolescens ab Damasco Syriae, ubi mercatur gratia erat, perceptra prius Arabum lingua, in coetu mercatorum […] quam uulgo caroanam dicunt, cum suis mercimoniiis per Arabiae Petrae deserta loca, inde per Caldeam ad Eufratem peruenit* (Guéret-Laferté *De L’Inde* 31-34) “[Niccolò de’ Conti], still an adolescent, finding himself in Damascus, Syria, where he was on account of the market, and having learned Arabic, joined with his goods a caravan of merchants and through the desert lands of Arabia Petrea, and therefore through Caldea, arrived at the Eufrates” my trans.)

\(^{27}\) This type of conversion represents a customary, mercantile practice of the time. It was often necessary for merchants to pose as Muslims (acquiring characteristic garments and, most often, as in the case of de’ Conti, the local idiom as well) in order to guarantee a safe passage among Muslim territories. This type of expediency sheds light on the complex relationship existing between the Muslim merchant community and Christianity in the Middle
with pope Eugenius IV was secured. At the time however, the Roman Catholic Church was in the midst of a severe institutional crisis (as it clearly transpires from Bracciolini’s own epistolary). The Council of Florence of 1439, in the attempt to pose remedy to such difficulties, endeavoured one of many successive reunification efforts with the Eastern Christian churches, and in this context Poggio Bracciolini collected and transcribed de’ Conti’s oral account. Here is how Bracciolini details the circumstances of the encounter:

_Nicolaus quidam Venetus, qui ad ultima Indiae penetrauit, ad Eugenium pontificem (is tum secundo Florentiae erat) accessit, ueniae impetrandae gratia, quoniam, cum ad Indis rediens ad Aegypti fines mari Rubro peruenisset, fidem abnegare, neque suo tantum, quantum uxoribus liberorumque, quos secum aduexerat, mortis metu, coactus est._

_Hunc ego audiendi cupidus (multa [f.58v.] enim ab eo iam dicta praesenseram cognitione digna), et in doctissimorum uirorum coetu, et domi meae percunctatus sum_

East. In addition to mastering Persian and Arabic, de’ Conti also partook in an oath of faithfulness to his Muslim business partners. As the inclusion in this entourage served to guarantee both protection and profit, the Muslim mercantile community in the Middle East was also a renowned “carrier of cosmopolitan culture in the western region of medieval India” thus facilitating de’ Conti’s commercial interest in the East (Ross Dunn, _The Adventures of Ibn Battuta_ 117). See also Rotman, Natalie. _Brokering Empire: Trans Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul_, Ithaca, 2012) and Ruíbés, J. P. _Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India Through European Eyes, 1250–1625_. Cambridge UP, 2000.


“TThe peculiarity of the Florentine context, a Republic dominated by merchant-bankers and, in particular in this period by Cosimo de Medici, can hardly be overestimated in the European perspective, because the lay culture of the humanists and their direct encounter with Eastern philosophy and religion grew outside the traditional frame of royal or even aristocratic politics” (Ruíbés. _Travel and Ethnology_ 87).

29 While a main object of the council was the Greeks’ acceptance of papal authority (following the nascent Greek’s scholars’ admiration for humanism), in the second phase of the council, at the time of de’ Conti’s encounter with Bracciolini, Eugenius IV had already reached agreement with representatives from the Armenian (1439), Coptic (1443) and Nestorian (1444) churches (Ruíbés, _Travel and Ethnography in the Renaissance_ 87). Though the separation between the Latin and the Greek world occurred in 1054 (Francis M. Rogers, _The Quest for Eastern Christians_ (33). Rogers situates the council of Florence within a line of subsequent negotiations for East-West union that moved from the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 onward (34). Historians inform us that such efforts never came to fruition. While progress continued to be made in the ensuing centuries, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 halted the efforts of reunification, at least for the time being. It is generally agreed that the council re-established the pope’s supremacy, which had been put into question by the previous Council of Basil.
diligenter plurima, quae operae pretium usum est, ut memoriae et litteris traderentur.

(Guéret Laferté, ed. De L’Inde 11-20)³⁰

De’ Conti’s renunciation of faith constitutes the official reason for his presence in Rome; while religious conversion of this kind were customarily practiced by travelers who crossed Muslim territories, Bracciolini rather emphasizes de’ Conti’s ethical, selfless stance that seems to have originated his disavowal of faith. Bracciolini’s endorsement conveys authority to de’ Conti’s report, as he informs the reader of having already heard some of the information reported by the traveller and furthermore having considered them trustworthy, useful and, above all, “fit to be preserved” (“ut memoriae et litteris traderentur”).³¹ The humanist’s judgment proved essential not only in establishing the authority of the text, but also in defining its genesis; it is indeed through an expertly-led conversation (possibly conducted through a series of pointed questions) that Bracciolini constructs his narrative of de’ Conti’s long journey to the East.³²

Questions of intentionality (and authorship) connected with Bracciolini’s collection and incorporation of de’ Conti’s travelogue have historically emerged from an examination of the circumstances that originated the text, despite the difficulties of their resolution. Issues of

---

³⁰ “Niccolò the Venetian, who had traveled to the most remote parts of India, came to Pope Eugenius IV, who was in Florence for the second time, imploring him for forgiveness, as on his way back from India, when arriving at the borders of Egypt through the Red sea, he was forced to abjure his faith, for fear not so much of his own life but of that of his wife and children who were travelling with him. I, who had been yearning to listen to him (in fact I had already judged many things he said worthy of knowledge), among circles of learned men and also at my home, carefully questioned him, about many things that I judged worthy of being committed to memory and to writing” (my trans.).

³¹ De Gubernatis. 120. The passage is considered a possible reference to the Andalusian traveler Piero Tafur, who met de’ Conti in Egypt also incorporated part of his account in his Andancas et viajes etc (Longhena 1929.)

³² See for example Rubiés, J. P. Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance, 88. Despite Bracciolini’s authoritative endorsement of de’ Conti’s account however, the narrative’s widest diffusion is is to be traced among its various forms of popular transmission, whether in form of “juicy” material to be assembled with other bits of travel narrations in cheap pamphlets describing the “wonders” of the East (see Chapter 1) or, alternatively, as a source of inspiration for romance (for example: Guerrino il Meschino) and cartographical descriptions (Fra Mauro’s Map).
authorship in particular have been the object of early scholarly attention to de’ Conti’s narrative from the end of the nineteenth century onward. At the beginning of the twentieth century the works of Antonio De Gubernatis (Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali) and those of Mario Longhena (who combines an analysis of de’Conti’s text with those of Girolamo Adorno and Girolamo da Santo Stefano) have contributed to widen critical interest on the narrative in Italy.

33 This initial scholarship however focuses on highlighting the discrepancy between “the merchant” and “the intellectual,” as well as shifting through the text for clues of authorial attribution. More recently, Alessandro Grossato Navigatori e viaggiatori veneti sulla rota per l’India: da Marco Polo a Angelo Legrenzi (published in 1994) continues to represent an example of this type of historiography. For example, as Grossato attempts to demarcate Bracciolini’s own material from what had been possibly volunteered by de’ Conti himself, he notes that the description of India as a “tripartite region” is attributable by necessity to “the learned humanist,” because it is “clearly of classical derivation” (my trans.) (49).

35 Though the examination of the cultural-historical circumstances in which the text was composed remains helpful in shedding light on the tangle of forces that informed its genesis, in recent scholarship on medieval travel writing the focus on authorial intentions and content demarcation has been


35 “Indiam omnem in tres diuisam partes: unam a Persis ad Indum flumen; ab eo ad Gangem alteram; tertiam ulteriorum, quae reliquis est opibus, humanitate, lauitia longe praestantior, uita et ciuiti consuetudine nobis aequalis” (Historia de varietate fortunae, Liber III, 417-420). This opinion is corroborated by Michele Guéret-Laferté, who in her critical edition of Book IV in its autonomous publication as India recognita notes that the distinction “intra” et “extra Gangem” is Ptolemaic while the other distinction (between India Major and Minor, introduced by the IVth C.), is taken up by Poggio in two instances in the De varietate fortunae (Guéret-Laferté, De L’Inde, 134n134).
more recently superseded by ethnological concerns.\textsuperscript{36} Issues of authorial intention however still loom large, as Bracciolini’s inclusion of de’ Conti’s travel account in his treatise has puzzled many scholars, prompting a discussion on the significance of Bracciolini’s gesture of appropriation.\textsuperscript{37}

The linguistic distance between narrator and author also constitutes an important structural element in the genesis of the text, as de’ Conti must have spoken with Bracciolini in his native Venetian dialect, while Bracciolini’s narrative had been composed later in the humanist’s refined Latin. In addition, there is also a temporal distance that should not be undervalued: the encounter between Bracciolini and de’ Conti took place several years after a consistent part of the actual travels occurred, subjecting de’ Conti’s recollection to the inevitable inaccuracies of memory.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, it would be disingenuous to assume that Bracciolini’s political agenda would not have encroached on the composition of the reportage.

Riccardo Fubini’s rich scholarship on the Italian \textit{Quattrocento} offers a different critical perspective, as he draws attention to the specific traits of Bracciolini’s signature humanism. Above all concerned with issues pertaining the writing of history, that is to say preoccupied,\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} See, for example Joan-Paul Rubiés. \textit{Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance South India Through European Eyes, 1250–1625} Cambridge University Press: 2000.

\textsuperscript{37} Merisalo, Outi for example highlights, in her critical edition of the \textit{De varietate fortunae} (published in 1993) the “subversiveness” of Poggio’s vision of history, as rendered by the treatise. She notes how de’ Conti’s narrative (where the description of the East is “neutral” if not “clearly sympathetic”, especially in its juxtaposition to the “turbulences of Book II and III”) serves to corroborate Bracciolini’s conviction that “not virtus nor sapientia can save an honest man from the world’s ruin”(and that includes divine providence)(Outi, Merisalo, ed. \textit{Poggio Bracciolini. De varietate fortunae} 11). In addition, she also observes that, seemingly as a result of the subversive nature of the treatise, its “most innocuous parts” were rather privileged in the \textit{Quattrocento}” (22). The “subversiveness” of Bracciolini’s notion of history is counteracted by Rubiés’s analysis. Rubiés highlights Bracciolini’s “positivists, historical attitude rather than philosophical” (which is especially apparent for Rubiés, in juxtaposition to Lorenzo Valla); “I remain unconvinced” writes Rubiés regarding Outi’s point of view, “because the idea that Popes can be hit by Fortune too, on account of their incompetence (in humanist idiom their lack of proper virtue) does really depend on a coherent idealization of pagan kings, which, in reality, we would be pushed hard to find (\textit{Travel and Ethnology} 89n8).

\textsuperscript{38} Bullo points out that immediately after its composition in Latin, a vernacular version “in Italian mixed with Venetian dialect terms began to circulate” (Bullo, XI).
according to Fubini, with selecting what would be deemed suitable for posterity, or, alternatively, with establishing a method to distinguish truth from fiction, Bracciolini never relinquishes these concerns in his works, even when they are apparently devoted to a miscellanea of heterogeneous topics. His treatise *Historia de varietate fortunae* would then fall into this latter category, and Bracciolini’s interest in de’ Conti’s travel narrative would become yet another example of the Italian humanist’s deep awareness of “how easy it was in human affairs to exchange in turn illusion and reality” (*Umanism and secularization* 116).

One must concede however that the perceived usefulness of the newly-accessible, first hand information, deriving from eyewitness accounts, possibly constituted enough of a motivation for Bracciolini to record de’ Conti’s travelogue, as existing, prior relations from India were being increasingly questioned, as they were seemingly “closer to fables than truth,” as Bracciolini himself notes. Nevertheless Bracciolini seems to ignore most widely-circulated accounts of Indian expeditions, referring to the established Latin authorities of Pliny, Solinus or Pomponius Mela, while neglecting references to Polo or Odorico da Pordenone’s account. As Rubiés points out “the coincidence within the same humanist circles between the arrival of the best classical accounts of India and a new fresh description of the East does not [...] mean the existence of an immediate and direct collation, as much as a prevalence of an interest for the subject [...]” (*Travel and Ethnology* 98). Rubiés also further observes that It was through the Greek works of Diodorus, Strabo and Arrian that the account of Megasthenes reached the Florentine humanists. He concludes that the translation of the writings of the Greek historians

---

39 “*Multa tum a veteribus scriptoribus, tum communi fama de Indis feruntur, quorum certa cognitio ad nos perlata arguit quaedam ex eis fabulis quam vero esse similiora*” (*De L’Inde* 8-10). “Many things are said about India by the ancient writers and by common tradition, but the knowledge that we have is more similar to fables than truth” (my translation)
was paramount within the humanist circle of Bracciolini and, given that their availability coincided with de’ Conti’s deposition, the humanist’s preference undoubtedly gravitated towards the former (98n29).

In order to establish de’ Conti’s credibility however, it became paramount that the merchant’s recollections be endowed with seriousness (“scite”) and knowledge (“grauiterque”):

Nam de itinere ad tam remotas gentes, de Indorum situ ac moribus, uariis praeterea animantibus atque arboribus, tum de aromatibus, quo in loco quaque nascentur, scite grauiterque disseruit, ut non fingere, sed uera referre appareret (Guéret-Laferté, M., De L’Inde 20-24).

The suspicion surrounding travel accounts becomes a key factor in tracing the reception history of the multifaceted genre, as it seems to slowly erode the influence of an enduring set of medieval tropes and images, while substituting over time new tropes and interpretations, which are then endowed with greater significance. It is important to underline however that these changes did by no means follow a linear, evolutionary path. As Leonardo Olschki famously observes in Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche, the dissemination of travel accounts had been inversely proportional to their “exactitude” and the rendering of their experience subject to

---

40 Manuel and John Chrysolora had been both instrumental in translating Greek texts and bringing Greek back to the Italian peninsula. As John Monfasani observes: “Emigre scholars demonstrably exercised an important influence as teachers of Greek [...] and as translators of classic and patristic texts[...] the emigres shaped Renaissance culture in ways that we are only now beginning adequately to grasp” (“The Greeks and Renaissance Humanism” 35). See the collected essays by Monfasani, J. in Greek and Latins in Fifteenth Century Italy: Renaissance Philosophy and Humanism (Aldershot: 2004). See also Chapter II of this dissertation for a discussion of the impact of Ptolemy’s Latin translation on cartography.

41 “In fact, he spoke seriously and with knowledge about the travel he conducted among such remote peoples, about the placement of the region inhabited by the Indians and about their customs, followed by the different animals and trees and spices, and from which location each came from, so that he seemed to speak the truth and not to fabricate it” (my trans.). De’ Conti’s narration (possibly in response to a series of pointed questions) is convincing enough to displace the suspicion that what he reported was not simply imagined or fabricated, but rather witnessed and experienced first-hand.
the boundaries imposed by their expression: “and while each traveller aimed for objectivity, the language he/she had at their disposal constituted the entire horizon of their experience” (201). Michèle Guéret-Laferté notes that comparing the extant manuscripts of de’ Conti’s travel account with the version recorded by Ramusio in his Navigazioni e viaggi (Ramusio declares to have used the Portuguese translation instead of the Latin version, on account of his inability to locate it in Venice nor elsewhere in Italy) allows us to measure the progress accomplished within half a century on the knowledge of India and Southeast Asia, since the corrections introduced are often of geographical nature (De L’Inde 70). Nevertheless, the history of cartography reveals a history of of intermittent recourses to classical authorities, punctuated only by occasional incorporations of newly derived material that originated from recent travel accounts.43

Many scholars have observed that Bracciolini’s declaration that de’ Conti had visited places not before described by the authoritative ancient geographers and historians is incongruous with his position and inconsistent with his status as papal secretary: “Eo usque autem profectus est, quo ne apud priscos quidem unum aliquem adisse legimus” (“He went to those places where we have not read anyone among the ancients had been” my trans. 25-26)44

---

42 Paul Zumthor and Catherine Peebles also point out in “The medieval travel narrative” that when travel accounts began to be strongly informed by a drive to communicate useful information at the expenses of a symbolic representation, they inevitably fell into oblivion: “imperfect though it be, the narrative element of these texts constitutes their very substance: can we not say, in fact, from a very general point of view that what distinguishes the ‘voyage’, among all imaginable human displacements, is the fact that it culminates, for the traveller, in narration?” (813).

43 See Chapter II.

44 Alessandro De Gubernatis, for example, is among the first to underlines Bracciolini’s singular lack of information and observes that if the extensively circulated travel narratives had not been known by a man of Bracciolini’s literary stature, who by virtue of his position in the papal court certainly had access to copious information about recent and past discoveries, then the works of Giovanni Marignolli and other minor explorers would have been completely unknown; a fact all the more puzzling, continues De Gubernatis, considering the proliferation of fourteenth century codices of such authors (De Gubernatis. Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava di Niccolò de’ Conti, Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo da Santo Stefano. Milano: Alpes, 1929 note 1 p. 121).

Alessandro Grossato also detects the peculiarity of Bracciolini’s lack of reference to any of the known, preceding travel accounts to India, widely available at the time and continues to be surprised by it. “Curiosamente il
As mentioned above, not only Bracciolini does also not include any reference to previously-composed, and at the time widely-circulated, travel narratives to the East, whether classical or contemporary, but also professed a lack of familiarity with the expeditions of Marco Polo and John of Pian del Carpine’s *Historia mongalorum* (1240) or with the widely circulated travels Odorico da Pordenone in the first half of the fourteenth century, whose narratives were easily accessible.\(^{45}\) However, the fact that, despite the availability of more recent information from ocular witnesses such as de’ Conti, Bracciolini’s authority of choice in geographical matters continues to be that of the ancient historians, represents in its own right a testament to the strength of Florentine humanism’s bond with classicity.\(^{46}\)

In *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes: 1250-1625* Rubiés observes that while the authority held by the ancient historians constitutes a lens through which humanists like Bracciolini (or Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) would read medieval geographical accounts, “by the middle of the fifteenth century [...]”they were prepared to correct the ancients on the strength of modern testimonies which they could control, such as that provided by Nicolò Conti (sic.)” (91).\(^{47}\) It seems therefore that, while a first-hand narrative’s

\(^{45}\) For example Rubies, whose critical stance is discussed in the following lines. For Odorico da Pordenone’s travels see Chapter IV.

\(^{46}\) Bracciolini however, does not neglect to highlight the validity of eyewitness, as he explicitly introduces a hierarchy between facts “*quae oculis cernuntur*” and those “*quae audit auris*” investing first hand testimony of greater truth value: “nescio enim quomodo existimentur ampliora, quae audit auris, quam quae oculis cernuntur: credo quia fama persaepe mentitur, oculus judicat ex vero” (*Opera Omnia* II 579). For more on this topic, see also Fubini *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione* as well as Chapter II of this dissertation.

authority was not guaranteed tout court, but rather granted in each case, on the basis of a careful
comparison with ancient sources, the humanists’ punctual intermediation was to be achieved
through skillful shaping of the narrative itself, which in turn defined and established the
boundaries of what could be accepted as “truth”.

While the non-linearity of the reception history of late medieval travel narratives parallels
the history of the intermittent disbelief that revolved around them, it is noteworthy that the
diffusion of the accounts of Eastern travels challenges the boundaries of historical periodization.
Editions of one of the most read travel narratives of the fourteenth century, *The Travels of Sir
John Mandeville*, for example, continued to be published well into the 1600’s, long after a
scientific, mathematical mindset attempting to introduce tools of distinction and separation of
facts from fiction, has informed the production of such narratives.

Bracciolini’s lack of references to previous thirteenth and fourteenth century accounts of
Indian travels highlights the existence of a certain suspicion surrounding available western
European travel accounts to the East, but it also coexists with the awareness of the reading
public’s fascination with the lore of the East. The possibility of collecting informations directly,
or rather through an expertly-led interlocution, presented itself as new and tapped into an
established desire to amend and correct misinformation.

It is noteworthy that the meeting between humanist practices and mercantile relations, to
which Bracciolini and de’Conti bear witness, exemplifies the influence that early humanists had
on the shaping of travel accounts; as Rubiés points out, humanistic concepts and practices
exerted a subtle influence regardless of the education level of the traveller so much so that “even
‘popular’ writers [...] were often subtly influenced by the concepts and strategies formulated by
the cultural élites” (“Travel writing and humanistic culture” 141). For Rubiés many essential elements of the humanistic intellectual enterprise invested the genesis of travel accounts themselves, rather than simply constituting a hindrance to the understanding of “the other,” (as in Rousseau’s contention that the European explorer only, ever saw himself). Thus, for example, the influence of humanist philological attention allowed G. B. Ramusio to experiment in his collection of travel accounts with the shaping of a method of verification that would later give way to the scientific spirit of the seventeenth century. The preexisting desire to amend classical geographical knowledge created a fertile ground for the incorporation of newly available information within the employment of high philological standards. On the other hand, the opposite is also true: travel narratives themselves carried on their influence on humanism: “We need to take account of the full influence of travel writing upon humanistic culture in order to understand how the Renaissance eventually led to the Enlightenment,” Rubiés notes (“Travel Writing and Humanistic Culture” 1). In fact, humanists not only actualized the existence of many travel accounts (in their roles as writers, like Bracciolini, or editors, like Ramusio or Hakluyt, for example) but also effectively “operated as a think tank for geographical lore,” while furthering various ideological agendas. If we accept Rubiés claim that continuity in classical rhetorical education might define humanism more that its ideological discontinuities, we must

---

48 Rubiés goes on to observe that because of this cross-fertilization among writers and oral witnesses “there is never a purely ‘popular’ discourse; many of the writers who were also observers, and quite a few who acted as editors or compilers, men like Columbus, Vespucci, Varthema, Pigaletta and Cortés, for example, [...] in fact operated at the crossroads between popular and elite discourses” (141).

49 Rubiés refers specifically in this example to Ramusio’s w... work in collaboration with Giacomo Gastaldi to amend cartographic representation of the world through a supersession of Ptolemaic geography.

50 Thus Rubiés points out that Hakluyt’s collection made sense within a “national program of mobilization for empire” (“Travel writing and humanistic culture” 142), while the publication of Ramusio’s collection had not been necessitated above all by Venetian interests alone, which would have not provided a sufficient reason for publication, but rather by his belief that “travel accounts deserved to be read systematically by an Italian-centered but ultimately cosmopolitan republic of letters committed to ‘modern’ learning and practical knowledge” (142n24).
also accept that it was by virtue of such deep connection with classicity that Ramusio was able to interpret Polo’s *Devisement* as the work of an “accurate observer” (137n12).

In light of these observations, the issues surrounding Bracciolini’s incorporation of de’ Conti’s account in his treatise on the vicissitudes of fortune acquire a broader significance when contextualized within a period of great “ethnographic impulse.” Unlike de’ Conti, Bracciolini possessed not only the ability to write but also “access to cultural codes” from which de’ Conti was excluded (“Travel writing and humanistic culture”153). He possessed methodological rigour and -given his interest for history- also the ability to produce historical criticism while contributing to the establishment of a “powerful cultural logic” in the interpretation (and collection) of texts. This methodology, later propagated through the influence of Ramusio’s collection, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, employed high standards of textual transmission (163).

The use of philological techniques coupled with the utmost respect for the sources, provided by the travellers themselves, come to define the methodology of humanists editorial operations.

As it is generally agreed that these editorial operations express religious, philosophical and historical concerns, I contend that the accounts I have analyzed (but the research could extend to a greater number of narratives) also betray concerns over sexuality and its relationship to the constitution of identity, as chapters III and IV further detail. Rubiés convincingly makes the case for the existence in early modern Europe of “an intricate cross-fertilization of themes,

---

51 “The ethnographic impulse of early modern Europe is historically unique. Obviously few people read as much travel literature as Ramusio, or shared his wide-ranging vision, but it increasingly mattered that some of the most creative late humanist thinkers were able to do so” (“Travel writing and humanistic culture”138).

52 As Rubiés observes “all the northern collections relied on Ramusio as a model” (“Travel writing and humanistic culture”163).

53 As Rubiés notes “they also played a crucial role in the transmission and elaboration of primary accounts of exotic encounters as historians, cosmographers, and (often within those genres) philosophical commentators” (ibidem).
often leading to a subtle intellectual challenge to European assumptions about religion, history and politics” (“Travel writing and ethnology”168); I would add that the process of edition and translation of late-medieval travel accounts also carried an important stimulus for a philosophical reflection on the definition of identity; as Rubies points out “writers increasingly appealed to the experience of the traveller as a source of authority for the truthfulness of particular observations concerning human diversity” (Travel and Ethnology xiii). While mediated by the humanist relationship with antiquity, Bracciolini’s appropriation of de’ Conti’s account was facilitated and amplified by the empirical perspective provided by de’ Conti’s narrative.

Contemporary scholarship on western medieval travel writing has shifted its focus from issues of attribution to investigating the connection between imperialism and cultural fantasy, as well as on the issues emerging from attempts to apply post-colonialists readings to a period that precedes its classical definition.⁵⁴

Kathleen Biddick’s detailing of the “typological imaginary” of medieval texts in The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History, and S. F. Kruger’s analysis of the body as a site of exclusion and marginalization in The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe, have contributed to inform this research, among other works.⁵⁵ In particular, Biddick’s focus on early modern technologies of exclusion, especially in relation to cartography and humanist philology, has spurred my investigation of Bracciolini’s incorporation of de’ Conti’s narrative. Biddick’s article “The ABC of Ptolemy” indirectly

---

⁵⁵ This list only references two relatively recent scholarly studies that exerted a great influence on my own research. It would not be fair however to omit Mary B. Campbell’s foundational writings on travel narratives (The Witness and the Other World and Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe) as well as Scott Westrem’s research on medieval travel narratives, that first inspired me to undertake this research.
challenges Rubiés ethnological interpretation of the humanistic enterprise; while specifically centered around the “detemporalization of Jews” and their subsequent erasure from Ptolemaic maps, it offers yet another perspective on the effects of “rationalization,” calling attention to “the violence that can lurk between time and space in medieval mapping practices” (288).

On the other hand, Steven F. Kruger’s analysis in *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, has been instrumental in deepening the focus on bodily depictions in the travel narratives I have investigated. Kruger’s analysis of the haunting and liminal presence of Judaism, as both Christianity’s ancestor and its competitor, highlights its function as “a spectre” that is both “disavowed” and “inescapable” (11). It also unearths a dynamic of fantasy and simultaneous denial that is at the root of Christianity’s sense of (Jewish) otherness. As a consequence, medieval constructions of gender, sexuality and race, as tightly woven and interdependent categories, which are intertwined with religious identity, also appear governed by a dynamic of desire and repudiation (22). In my research the body remains an essential focus of textual analysis, emerging as a site of mediation of the encounter between the individual and the social.

Taking up these perspectives, my own research has shifted from an initial focus on tracing the emergence of a “scientific” mindset in the elaboration of early modern travel accounts, to issues pertaining the definition of a shifting construction of racial otherness, as well as to the establishment of identity through specific textual practices. Hence, this research proposes a reading of two medieval and late medieval travel narratives, which is centered around the focal point of the bodily construction of identity and its dependence from larger cultural

---

56 This issue is addressed more in depth in Chapter II of this dissertation.
forces at work.
Chapter I

Shaping Boundaries: Niccolò de’ Conti’s Travel Narrative as Cultural Intermediary

The relationship between East and West in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean represents a multifaceted historiographical problem as its nature has been oscillating and shifting.\(^5\) It is now generally accepted that such relations were more complex than what had been previously supposed, particularly since the focus of analysis has shifted away from privileging those individuals acting in official capacities (such as ambassadors, diplomats, intellectuals and political figures) to include other, liminal figures whose contribution in shaping the definition of East and West has been no less substantial. Within this field of inquiry the history of Venetian commercial interest in the Levant is particularly rich, exemplary as it is of the intense network of relation (not only commercial, but also cultural, artistic and architectonic) established among Venice, the Venetian empire overseas and the East. \(^6\)

Within this purview recent works by Natalie Rothman, Eric Dursteler and others, point to the essential (yet previously neglected) role of intermediaries, figures who, while not acting in an official capacity of mediation, were operating in the multicultural space of the early modern Mediterranean to shape and construe political relations. In Rothman’s *Brokering Empire: Transimperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*, they are further defined as those

\(^5\) Maria Pia Pedani notes for example in regard to one powerful representation of the East, the Ottoman empire and its relationship with the European west, how the interest and knowledge of the Ottomans accelerated exponentially in Italy only after the Fall of Constantinople in 1543; prior to that time there had been only a “vague and scarce knowledge” (“L’Italia, Venezia e la Porta: Diplomazia e letteratura fra Umanesimo e Rinascimento” 3).

\(^6\) Within the vast bibliography on Venetian art see, in particular: E. Concina. *Fondaci: architettura, arte e mercatura tra Levante, Venezia e Alemagna*, Marsilio, Venezia, 1997.
individuals who “straddled linguistic, religious and political boundaries and, in the process, helped calibrate distinct categories of difference,” resulting in linguistic, religious or political and geographical boundaries (11). Undoubtedly the study of intermediaries advocated and realized by these historians contributes in important ways to a broader and more nuanced understanding of the means by which political configurations (in addition to linguistic and confessional boundaries) were being shaped. In so doing, this analysis forces a new examinations of distinctions (such as that of East and West) that have become, as Rothman points out “so natural over time that their very historicity is sometimes forgotten”(15). The focus on less studies historical agents and their specific practices within the institutional settings in which they operated, brings to light the essential role of marginalized ethnic communities within the context of the early modern Venetian empire such as foreign-born commercial brokers, laborers, women etc.; in turn, the focus on these various subjects unearths their crucial role in shaping early modern “networks of belonging,” which prove to be more diffuse and porous than they might initially appear (30).

Additionally, the circulation of texts has also been instrumental to the definition of categories of inclusion and exclusion, as well as to the shaping of networks and communities,

---

60 Specifically, the figures of intermediaries or “interstitial actors” mentioned by Rothman are very heterogeneous. Among them there are for example: “diplomatic interpreters, Jewish financiers, women of the imperial palaces, captives acting as go-betweens, renegades, but also converts and merchants etc. (“Afterword: Intermediaries, Mediation and Cross Confessional Diplomacy in the Early Modern Mediterranean” 247 and Brokering empire, 3).


62 In this regard, Apellaniz work on the galley sistem network in the Mediterranean, mentioned above, (“Venetian Trading Networks in the Medieval Mediterranean”) provides an example of the ways in which entrance an participation in a community of kinship proves essential for the acquisition of representation via citizenship.
within which the various agents involved in official and unofficial capacities operated. De’Conti’s travel account is thus worthy of specific attention within a study of the ways in which travel narratives’ wide dissemination impacted the shaping of categories of identity and difference and, ultimately, also the shaping of political relations.

Furthermore, as Rothman notes, feminist criticism of examinations of the inadequacy of the notion of separation of household from public spheres of engagement (that is to say the porousness of public and private spaces) in rendering their historical complexity, provides an analogue to the inadequacy of applying fixed paradigms of identity (sexual or ethnic) to an examination of the body as it emerges from this (and other) travel narratives. Delving more specifically into this topic, Chapter III shows how the body, as it is presented in de’Conti’s narrative, is interpreted as a site of recursive reproduction and construction of identity.

Given its large diffusion, de’ Conti’s narrative was poised to become an important actor of mediation, particularly after its autonomous publication in 1492. Rothman’s emphasis on “semiotic labor” (the type of influence-either physical or textual- exerted by the intermediary figures she studies) constitutes a productive line of inquiry (Brokering Empire 15). The focus on de’ Conti’s transmission history allows to put the text’s influence into clearer focus. With the appropriate distinction, and given the historical difference in geopolitical asset of the Mediterranean between Rothman’s period of analysis (late XVIth and early XVIIth century) and the time of Bracciolini’s written rendition of de’ Conti’s oral narrative, de’ Conti’s account finds a rightful place among the agents/perpetrators of the kind of “semiotic labor” that Rothman underlines. In fact, it clearly contributed to articulate claims about East and West particularly

---

63 Rothman 17.
64 “My focus on the period 1570-1670 is also warranted by the survival of consistently comprehensive documentation from a range of institutional archives” (22).
through its wide popular diffusion. Hence, the notion of “semiotic labor” becomes crucial in capturing the narrative’s role in the articulation of differences and simultaneous creation of boundaries, as one can surmise from the account’s textual history that De’ Conti’s narrative exerted its influence chiefly by ways of textual dissemination. Nevertheless, one speculates that the influence of de’Conti’s mercantile activities must also have substantially contributed to the establishment of actual circles of kinship.⁶⁵

As a disclaimer, I’d like to add that while it is true that Rothman’s research is devoted to those “forms of non-ambassadorial mediation,” during the period comprised between 1570 and 1670 (and therefore at a later time than that of the composition of de’Conti’s narrative), Rothman’s definition of mediation is broad enough to encompass textual “players” as well as actual agents, such as the better studied diplomatic figures and interpreters. Rothman defines mediation as “something that actually happens between actors using various techniques, rather than just something that certain people in certain positions do,” fruitfully investing this concept of a deeper meaning and therefore widening the definition of its actors to include traders and merchants (Brokering Empire 248). It seems therefore entirely possible to apply such consideration to de’Conti’s narrative, regardless of the boundaries of periodization (or those imposed by a more traditional definition of intermediaries).

As mentioned above, one important corollary of Rothman’s analysis is its powerful remainder of the “historicity of boundaries,” such as those defining East and West (249). A

---

⁶⁵ Regarding the very physical ways in which merchants impacted the formation of early modern communities of trade, see Francisco Apellániz’s work on the Venetian trading community overseas between 1418 and 1420. Apellániz shows how attempts to obtain direct participation in the “galley system” (“a regular system of government-run convoys, taken on lease in public auctions by noble-owned companies”) emerges as a first step in the attainment of citizenship for many lower-class players in the Venetian trading network overseas. Apellániz points out how this route to citizenship appears to have constituted a very concrete way to navigate the citizenship restrictions imposed by Venice on its overseas subjects. Apellániz, F. “Venetian Trading Networks in the Medieval Mediterranean” The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Autumn 2013), pp. 157-179.
punctual investigation of the many non-official actors that have contributed to the constitution of such boundaries, contributes to underline instead their fluidity. Therefore, her work paves the way for a deeper consideration of the role of western European travel narratives in shaping such partitions, counteracting binary oppositional (and fixed) ideologies that would instead juxtapose Christianity and the East as monolithic blocs.66

In addition, Rothman’s study of Venetian/Ottoman diplomatic practices also builds on the ideological stance of Subrahmanyam’s notion of “commensurability;” S.Subrahmanyam defines it a the presupposition of features of social order, which are first deciphered and then translated by mediators. What’s more, “commensurability” it is not considered an “a priori,” but it is rather continuously produced and affirmed by the labor of the intermediaries, who are actively working to sustain it: “[...]similarly to context, commensurability must be treated [...] as an ideological stance that needed to be repeatedly substantiated and sustained through the labor of specific kinds of intermediaries”(251). As a result of attending to these practices of mediation, the “autonomous histories” of East and West (“untouched by the efforts of those who so ardently sought to operate across and between them”), dissipate to highlight instead specific occurrences of articulation of their relation resulting in a historical approach that shies away from broad generalizations.

Bracciolini’s references to classical sources at the expenses of more recent, available information, have long puzzled scholars of his work. Specific remarks in his account of de’ Conti’s travels have been traced back to similar observations on Odorico da Pordenone and other

66 See Dursteler’s presentation and critique of Huntington’s “clash of civilization” theory in Venetians in Constantinople: “Conveniently ignoring centuries of coexistence and the relatively tolerant attitude of the Ottoman state toward its minority populations [...] modern political and religious antagonism” became “teleologically imprinted onto the past”(7).
late medieval travellers to India. While it is widely accepted that this shared material belongs to a conventional body of travel narratives tropes (and also, alternatively and additionally, of literary borrowings from the matter of romance and classical travel narratives’ sources), it also betrays a kind of humanistic reverence for antiquity. Braccioli’s direct reference to the growing suspicion surrounding the available Western medieval travel accounts to the East is rooted in a foundational relationship with antiquity, and it results from the openly professed desire to separate truth from fables in the opening lines of the fourth book of the Historia de varietate fortunae: “Various information have been reported about the inhabitants of India from antiques writers as well as from the common tradition, but the knowledge that has come to us is closer to fables than truth (Guéret-Laferté, M., ed. De l’Inde 8-10, my trans.).

Historically, the humanist’s interest in travel accounts has been retroactively interpreted as a step within a linear, evolutionary path of the “genre” of travel narrative, ultimately culminating in the establishment of reliable means of distinction between truth and fiction. It has become however evident that the criteria by which humanist cultural arbiters defined the

67 Among them, the references to the location of St. Thomas’s tomb in the surroundings of Madras, the description of the Indian rhinoceros (also mentioned by Polo), or the ritual of suttee.
68 For a more in-depth analysis of the use of rhetorical tropes in de’ Conti’s account, see Chapter III of this dissertation. Leonardo Olschki punctually uncovers such shared repertoire in his Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche: studi e ricerche. While my research often underlines points of contact with previously-composed western European literary accounts of travels to India, its aim is to offer an interpretation of specific textual occurrences depicting embodiment. A punctual comparative analysis of common tropes in de’ Conti’s account can be found in Merisalo Outi’s commentary to the critical edition of Book IV of the De varietate fortunae. Merisalo Outi, ed. Poggio Bracciolini. De varietate fortunae. Helsinki, 1993 and in Leonardo Olschki’s Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche. Olschki, 1999.
69 “Multa tum ad ueteribus scriptoribus, tum communi fama de Indis feruntur, quorum certa cognitio ad nos perlata arguit quaedam ex eis, fabulis quam vero esse similiora” (Guéret-Laferté, M. ed. De l’Inde 8-10).
standards of what had to be considered credible and trustworthy had little to do with the establishment of a reliable mean of distinction between fact and fiction.\footnote{71}{See for example Johnson, Christine. “Buying Stories: Ancient tales, Renaissance Travelers and the Market for the Marvelous.” Johnson highlights a variety of alternative criteria for the truth-vs.-fables distinction. Johnson stresses early modern authors’ insistence on history as a moral guide as constituting a reason for reading travel descriptions (415). Similarly, Valerie Flint challenges the usefulness of the fact versus fiction categorization to highlight instead the inspirational value of the ancient authoritative sources (which ensured their credibility despite the availability of recent eyewitness testimony) (“Travel fact and travel fiction” 103). Notably, this variety of alternatives calls into question the inherent reliability of eyewitness testimonies, which -particularly in the case of travel account-do not result from a “objective” apprehension of reality.}

While Joan Pau Rubiés’s observations on early modern ethnography locate in the encounter between the merchant de’ Conti and the intellectual Bracciolini the “seed of a new model of organization of cultural spaces in which encyclopedic accumulations in a theological framework gave way to a critical discrimination of sources of knowledge,” a closer look at the history of the impact that de’ Conti’s travel narrative had, for example on contemporary cartography, shows that this “evolutionary” transition had been neither linear nor seamless \footnote{72}{Rubies also observes that the distance between Bracciolini and Rustichello was greater than that between de’Conti and Polo and that “it is this distance that mattered in the long term” (96).} (96).\footnote{73}{See Chapter II of this dissertation.} As Chapter II details, while a “revolution in cartographical style” (Westrem, \textit{Trade, Travel and explorations}, 15) can be traced in late XVth century cartography, intermittent recourses to classical authorities continue in fact to occur in spite of the circulation an greater availability of recent eyewitness’ reports.\footnote{73}{See Chapter II of this dissertation.} If, on one hand, by the fifteenth century works like Polo’s \textit{Devisement du monde} (aptly also known as \textit{Livre des voyages} or, alternatively, as \textit{Livre des merveilles}) begin to be regarded as examples of romantic fiction rather than of factual descriptions, on the other hand, travel narratives like Mandeville’s \textit{Travels} continue to remain
invested of quasi “scientific” authority, as it is attested by their enduring popularity and influence.74

In de’ Conti’s travelogue specifically, suspicion surrounding the credibility of travel narratives, coupled with the desire for first-hand information that motivated Bracciolini to collect the merchant’s account, coexist with a symbolic depiction of the world, reflected by the endurance in the text of imaginative and wondrous visions of the monstrous and grotesque inhabitants of the East. However, the fact that the seduction these images continue to operate on their readership (as well as their authors), emerges from a tangle of forces governing both western European production and apprehension of such narratives.

Taking cues from Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe, Mary B. Campbell’s well known study of the rising scientific imagination of early modern Europe, I propose that in Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s travels, the tension between a cognitive mindset and a fictional one also shape the narrative. Campbell’s analysis of the intersections between “the techniques of ethnography and realistic fiction” in seventeenth-century travel literature, sheds light on the coexistence of different modes of signification in western European travel accounts (17). Without neglecting to highlight the historical specificity of Campbell’s analysis, I am interested in probing the ways in which various cognitive stances are both manifested and overlap in de’ Conti’s work. As this chapter illustrates, within de’ Conti’s narrative vestiges of the book’s connection with the “wonder books” that preceded it can easily be unearthed, though they are joined by a continuous (pragmatic) attention to mercantile

---

74 In addition, we know that Columbus, for example, was deeply influenced by Mandeville’s book, which-as Paul Zumthor and Catherine Peebles suggest in “The Medieval Travel Narrative,” had a foundational role in shaping his geographical imagination (and was also possibly used as a source of factual information such as distances between lands). See Zumthor, Paul and Peebles, Catherine. “The Medieval Travel Narrative” New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation vol.25, no 4, 1994, pp. 809-824.
opportunities, illustrated through pervasive attempts to convey the specific geographical features of the lands described. The copious medieval tradition of marvel-descriptions and fantastic Levantine discoveries that preceded de’ Conti’ travelogue possibly represented a source of inspiration for Bracciolini’s collection of de’ Conti’s account. In addition, the sexual-geographical lore of Eastern travels constituted a guarantee of public interest on the subject, a fact that did not escape fifteenth century publishers and that accounted, at least in part, for the literary fortune of the work.

While all these motives must be pursued in investigating Bracciolini’s authorial intentions, a closer look at the role that Bracciolini held within the intellectual circle of Italian humanist provides an insight into the cultural climate from which the text arose. Bracciolini’s incorporation of de’ Conti’s travels in his treatise on the vicissitudes of fortune (Historia de varietate fortunae) has puzzled many scholars, seeming incongruous with the general economy of the work. As mentioned above, the narrative occupies almost entirely the fourth book of the Historia de varietate fortunae, one of Bracciolini’s less prominent treatises, composed in Latin, and assembled during the course of several years. The treatise is loosely organized around the topos of the alterations of fortune, befalling several historical characters in different epochs and places. Hence, the first book is concerned with the juxtaposition between the former glory of Rome and the city’s state at Bracciolini’s time, which offers him the occasion to produce an

---

75 The so called “matter of the East,” the letter of Prester John or the search for the tomb of Saint Thomas, to name a few, constitute some of the widely circulated tropes. See J. B. Friedman The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought. Harvard UP, 1981.

76 In Chapter III I intend to explore this point in relation to Bracciolini’s erotic writings (such as the Facetiae). I will explore the significance of eroticism as a mode of discourse and probe its valence in opposition to a burgeoning “scientific” mindset.

archeological catalogue of extant Roman ruins; it then concludes with an example of contemporary reversal of fortune (namely that of Bayaceto/Tamerlan). The second book follows with the description of several vicissitudes of fortune occurring during the historical period spanning between 1377-1431; the third is then dedicated to the accomplishments of the pontificate of Eugenius IV, with particular emphasis to the attempts at reunification with the Orthodox church, effectively culminating in the assembly of the council of Florence. Finally, the fourth and final book is (surprisingly) dedicated to de’ Conti’s travel account itself and it also includes a conversation with an envoy from the Nestorian patriarch to the pope (with whom—it should be noted—Poggio did not communicate directly but through a mediator, an Armenian interpreter who knew Turkish and Latin) and a brief conversation with the delegation of Ethiopian Christians present at the council. Bracciolini’s epistolary explicitly mentions the humanist’s intent to describe the “vicissitudes of fortune” (varietate fortunae) about ten years prior to the treatise’s actual composition. In Umanesimo e secolarizzazione, Riccardo Fubini highlights Bracciolini’s commitment to probing the challenges inherent in the process of drafting historical notes. Fubini points out that Bracciolini’s intent to compose a treatise on the variety of fortune emerges from a context of political instability (and possibly personal, as Greenblatt observes): “[...] “The church’s little ship, which throughout history had weathered every storm, was yet deprived from its traditional political support, two great princes (the emperor, of course, and the king of France) conspired against it” (my trans.).

---

78 This book also would later enjoy a circulation as a separate self contained unit, severed from the rest of the treatise Fubini, R. “Prefazione.” Poggio Bracciolini: Opera Omnia.
79 “[...]la navicella della Chiesa che nella storia aveva superato ogni tempesta, era ormai priva dei tradizionali sostegni politici, due grandi principi (evidentemente l’imperatore e il re di Francia) cospiravano ai suoi danni” (Umanesimo e secolarizzazione 258-259).
It is also in the context of the intrinsic issues associated with the recording of historical events that Bracciolini, in a letter to Cardinal Cesarini, explicitly mentions his intention to record fortune’s variety, precisely in order to escape the liability of memory: “Scias tamen me tanquam in commentaria coniecisse usque ad hec tempora fortune varietatem, ne que conceperam laberentur e memoria” (Lettere II 116, 40-42).80

However, it is with a notable (and seemingly inexplicable) change of compositional direction, that in the fourth and final book Bracciolini introduces the narration of de’ Conti’s travels.81 Fubini considers Bracciolini’s interest for the exotic and the legendary as “unusual in his intellectual circle” (Humanism and Secularization 116). The transition however, is simply ushered in by a declaration that the topic change is meant to provide the reader with the needed “solace” after the description of many, dire vicissitudes of fortune:

_Haud ab re futurum esse arbitror, si ab instituto scribendi cursu paulum diuertens, eum libro huic finem imposuoero, qui sit a fortunae acerbitate ad mitiorem quamdam sortem, iocundamque rerum varietatem, legentium animos traducturus. Quanuis et in hoc quoque uim fortunae haud paruam licet conspicere, quae hominem ab extremis orbis finibus per tot maria ac terras quinque et uiginti annis iactatum, sospitem in Italiam reducem fecerit._

I believe that it won’t be without interest if, digressing a little from the path of writing I have adopted so far, I will give this book the goal to turn the readers from the asperity of

---

80 “as if I were gathering together into memoirs for these tomes the vicissitudes of fortune, so that what I am thinking does not slip from my memory” (Fubini, Opera Omnia 259). Fubini notes that another mention of Bracciolini’s intention of composing the treatise (at least in its core, that is to say Books II and III) is o be found in the Letter to Pietro del Monte of Sept. 14, 1443: “Composui duos libros de varietate fortunae, sed nondum edidi, expectabo enim adventum tuum” (Harth 427). He notes that the composition date of the Historia de varietate fortunae is to be traced in three different moments: 1442, 1143 and 1448 (Umanesimo e secolarizzazione 257).

81 By translating Diodorus Siculus’ Historiae priscae, “a fantastic archeology of ancient people” Bracciolini, notes Fubini, sought to expose “how easy it was […] to exchange in turn illusion and reality, the singular and the common, the history and the lies” (Humanism and Secularization 116).
fortune to a gentler fate and to the pleasant variety of events. Undoubtedly one can see
the great power of fortune, since it allowed a man scattered for twenty five years between
lands and seas to come back to Italy from the extreme boundaries of the world (De L’Inde
1-7, my trans.)

While Fubini underlines humanism’s connection with Petrarch’s work in order to emphasize
continuity within humanist tradition, he simultaneously stresses the essential function that
humanism’s ongoing dialogue with antiquity reveals. Bracciolini’s relationship with the classical
is for Fubini “generative and fecund,” not static but rather an active and transformative
experience, a “propelling force” whose impact reverberated also on the perception of travel
accounts. This relationship with the classics is at the core of the humanist movement, not only
because many classical manuscripts were indeed revealed by the researches conducted by the
likes of Bracciolini among others, but also because, notes Fubini, it informed a common
sensibility, one that was forged and shared among humanists’ intellectual circles.

Fubini’s work further promotes a nuanced portrait of the humanist Bracciolini, moving
away from the opposition between Christianity and a secular reinterpretation of antiquity while
focusing instead on the humanist’s revision of what constituted authority. For Fubini it is
impossible to imagine humanism outside of the authority of Christianity but rather always in
constant dialogue with it: “The truest predicament lied not in the opposition between an abstract,
antique paradigm and a Christian one, but in one’s positioning in relation to authority”
(Umanesimo e secolarizzazione IX, my trans.

Along these lines, Stephen Greenblatt’s study The Swerve: How the World Became
Modern, while contributing to popularize Bracciolini’s figure in recent years, elaborates on the
circumstances surrounding the humanist’s discovery of a manuscript of Lucretius De rerum
natura. Greenblatt skillfully fashions the figure of the Italian humanist with the aim of highlighting what he considers Bracciolini’s awareness of “subtle, critical mutations in the zeitgeist of the time” (…). Greenblatt describes the enterprise of manuscript discovery “as part of a broader aim, that [Bracciolini] only obscurely perceives” (115). Similarly, while highlighting Poggio’s famous perfecting of his own characteristic handwriting, a calligraphy which he employed in copying the newly-found Latin manuscripts, as well as in translating classical Greek texts, Greenblatt further elaborates on Bracciolini’s awareness: “Poggio seemed to have grasped that the call for a new cursive writing was only a small piece of a much larger project, a project that linked the creation of something new with the search of something ancient” (116). Greenblatt is pointing at a cultural shift “at the origins of modern life and thought” (which he equates with Bracciolini’s celebrated discovery of the De rerum natura) (11). In doing so, he locates in Bracciolini’s work a specific turn, a “swerve”, as it were. The book, he writes, is “a story of how the world swerved in a new direction”(12). Needless to say, these remarks have sparked much controversy among historians of both the modern and premodern periods, as the summary equation of modernity with the early modern period (to the exclusion of the entire middle ages) is untenable.83

82 Stephen Greenblatt’s The Swerve: How the World Became Modern became a NY Times bestseller in the US shortly after its publication in 2011. Despite receiving prestigious awards (the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction among them), its critical reception has been quite negative, mainly on account of what is largely considered a historically inconsistent, Enlightenment-era interpretation of the Early modern period and the Middle Ages (Hinch 2015). At the beginning of the XXth C. Mario Longhena’s studies on de’ Conti are also well representative of such critical current, one that sees Bracciolini as harbinger of a new epoch (Longena 1925 and 1929).

83 Greenblatt’s positing of a moment of “epochal change” becomes the object of dissent among historians and the source of several critiques of this book. See for example John Monfasani’s critique of the Swerve and Jim Hinch’s article on La Book Review https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/why-stephen-greenblatt-is-wrong-and-why-it-matters/. Incidentally, as Monfasani notes in his review of the book, the swerve itself (“the physical phenomenon excogitated by Epicurus to explain why atoms act randomly and differently from each other”) has little bearing on the story told. https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1283
As I have suggested in the preceding paragraphs, if a closer look at Bracciolini’s incorporation of de’ Conti’s narrative does reveal the emergence of a change in focus, such change can be perhaps located in the loss of the encyclopedic and expansive mode of narration that characterized some of most widely read western European travel accounts to the East that preceded it. Greenblatt’s study contains only sporadic mentions of De varietae fortunae (in relation to Bracciolini’s later production) but the analysis of Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s travels is indicative of such change in perception. Whatever the authorial intentions (which remain to elusive for discernment), the timeliness of de’ Conti’s account is rendered manifest by the ample dissemination of the narrative (and its subsequent autonomous circulation after its publication in 1492). 84

In agreement with Fubini’s views, Italian scholarship on Bracciolini has further remarked that the book’s insistence on mankind’s power to influence destiny through one’s own abilities, aligns itself with a classic literary topos. 85 Within this perspective de’ Conti’s travels could easily fall in line with the chief concern of the treatise, as the narrative is seen as focusing on the merchant’s ability to tame and conquer the “blind goddess” that is fortune, through his own resilience. While such connection is offered by Bracciolini himself in his introduction to de’Conti’s travels, other interpretations deserve equal attention. Merisalo Outi, for example, in

---

84 In a seminal study of de’ Conti’s travel narrative Mario Longhena catalogues 31 extant manuscripts, some of which are exclusively dedicated to the fourth book of the Historia de varietae fortunae. Longhena, Mario. “I manoscritti del IV libro del De Varietate Fortunae di Poggio bracciolini contenenti il racconto dei viaggi di Niccolò de’ Conti.” Roma, Bollettino della società’ geografica italiana, 1925.

85 Mario Longhena for example, in an article dedicated to the history of de’ Conti’s manuscripts observes in regard to the numerous Latin dialogues of the IVth C. written by humanists, that the notion that mankind is not tied to the “gifts of fortune” but rather to the destiny that everyone can fashion for oneself, surfaces in these texts: “man is not a offspring of the nobility of origin, but of the fate that he himself can build with his own tenacity, moral strength and his own abilities” (my trans.) (“non della nobiltà d’origine e’ figlio l’uomo ma di quella sorte che egli stesso sa fabbricare con la sua tenacia, con la sua forza d’animo, con le sue abilità.” (“I manoscritti del IV libro del De varietate fortunae di Poggio Bracciolini contenenti il racconto dei viaggi di Niccolò de’ Conti” 193).
her critical edition of *Historia de varietate fortunae* proposes instead that Bracciolini’s underlying message had been “subversive” (23). Like Fubini, Outi bases her observation on Bracciolini’s definition of the classic categories of fate and fortune in the *De varietae fortunae*, reading the treatise as an eminently historical work, albeit framed by an impending sense of downfall considered pivotal in Bracciolini’s philosophical thought. Outi points out that no power figure (neither the princes, nor the popes) appearing in the treatise is ultimately seen favorably. Therefore Poggio’s message appears defeatist: regardless of one’s virtues, all will eventually fall and even the incompetents will (at least for a while) flourish. Outi hypothesizes that Bracciolini, aware of the subversiveness of his message, might have mitigated it through the use of skillful compositional techniques: the exotic references contained in Book IV, being one of them, together with use of the dialogue format and the catalogue of Book I (23). The homogeneous structure of the treatise is preserved even in this interpretation, as the four books appear unified by the common thread of Bracciolini’s critique of modernity, articulated through a look at antiquity in the first book, one at the Christian reigns and their Muslim opponents in the second and third, and finally through a mostly benign description of the East and Ethiopia. Outi’s critical stance offers a resolution of the perceived discrepancy between the content of the first three books of the treatise and the insertion of de’ Conti’s travelogue in the fourth that had long puzzled the *Historia de varietate fortunae*’s first commentators from De Gubernatis to Longhena. The textual history of the *De varietae fortunae* testifies to a different reception for each of the four books of the treatise. There is convincing evidence that the composition of Book IV preceded the divulgation of the treatise as a whole, as Outi points out with the

---

dissemination of Book IV remaining the largest. In addition, the incorporation of the entire Book IV (or parts of it) in various popular formats, often combined with other material destined to appeal a popular readership, adds another layer of complexity to the history of the book’s dissemination.

It is in the history of this dissemination that de’ Conti’s narrative finds its characteristic placing among late medieval travel narratives of travels to the Far East. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Natalie Rothman examines the active role that the figures of go-betweens and intermediaries (such as interpreters, translators, merchants, diplomats etc.) played in defining such relations. She advocates further examination of the impact that other kinds of intermediaries had on construing cultural categorizations of alterity. While her analysis is focused on notions of foreignness and citizenship in the early modern Venetian empire) it invites a deeper consideration not only of “how trans-imperial subjects tapped into the proto-ethnographic curiosity,” but also of how they “concurred to shape its contours”(249). This direction of analysis does indeed constitute an important step in understanding how a broadly-conceived category of intermediaries was functional in shaping the categories of East and West.

87 In a letter to Richard Petworth of the 12th of July 1448 Poggio mentions a “liber de rebus Indie a me editus” (Hart 2.2.15, Luglio 1448, quoted in Outi 15). It is therefore possible, Outi points out, that the book’s composition might have preceded the divulgation of the Historia de varietate fortunae in its complete form (Outi 15). Shortly after its composition the entire treatise was translated in Tuscan vernacular (around 1460-70), though it wasn’t until the Portuguese translation of 1502 (by Valentin Fernandez Alemam in Lisbona) that its dissemination began. The Portuguese translation was followed by 3 subsequent Spanish editions” (Outi 22). Famously, Gian Battista Ramusio–not having found the Latin text in italian libraries–later translated it from Portuguese (1550) and that translation served as basis for the Netherlandish translation of 1664. From the Spanish translation at the end of the sixteenth century an English translation was then made (John Frampton 1578) (Outi 23).

88 In The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery, Francis M. Rogers skillfully unravels the history of such dissemination, while tracing the relationship between early Latin chapbooks and the Church’s efforts of reunification with the Christians of the Indies.

89 “Further, it would be useful to explore the applicability of the concept trans-imperial subject to other kinds of intermediaries and intermediary practices in the Venetian-ottoman borderlands, as well as to other periods and regions” (Brokering Empire, 251).
It is in responding to this invitation, that, a preliminary examination of the history of the texts’ dissemination, within contemporary and subsequent readerships alike, becomes significant.\(^{90}\)

The work of Francis M. Rogers on early modern chapbooks constitutes an indispensable starting point for an analysis of the narrative’s popular diffusion.\(^{91}\) These texts were equally instrumental in preserving a dream of “trans-Islamic Christian unity undisturbed by remainders of incidental difficulties” (84) and also consumed as an early modern pop culture phenomenon. Rogers provides a useful definition of this literature:

A chapbook is a small pamphlet of popular tales, ballads and tracts hawked by chapmen. It is a \textit{cheap} book. the Latin pamphlets which I term chapbooks vary in length from eight to twenty-two leaves. Their height and width are approximately those of our modern “pocket books”. They occasionally boast crude woodcuts as illustrations (73).\(^{92}\)

The evolution of Book IV of the \textit{Historia de varietate fortunae} can be traced within this corpus, as excerpts from the material provided by de’ Conti were popularized by the writings of Jacopo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, author of a \textit{Latin Supplement to the Chronicles}, which Rogers inform us was “published in Venice in 1483 and arranged chronologically in fifteenth

\(^{90}\) In \textit{Forms and Meaning} Roger Chartier offers several cautionary admonitions, that apply to the study of popular culture in broader terms, while examining the literature of French \textit{colportage} in Eighteenth C. France,. He counsels the reader not to succumb to the temptation of inferring from the study of popular culture one single, unified \textit{Weltanschauung}: “One must challenge [...] any approach claiming that the repertoire of the literature of \textit{colportage} expressed the mentalité or the "world view" of popular readers” (92). Among the reasons for this caution, he cites the “gap” that “separates what is proposed by the text and what is made of it by the reader” (92). This last observation, especially the focus on the variations of the text as it is transformed by various mechanisms of representations, will be taken up in its greater implications for a definition of popular culture and its relationship to chapbooks in the following chapter.

\(^{91}\) Within the tradition of chapbooks, or early modern printed books that were “literally consumed by their readers”, Francis M. Rogers examines in \textit{The Quest for Eastern Christians} a series of works that “known to please the masses,” catered to “prurient interest” and constituted a “lucrative enterprise for their publishers” (73). On the motivational value of economics on early modern printers see Pettegree, A. \textit{The Book in the Renaissance}, Yale UP 2010.

The history of the composition of Foresti’s chapbooks is worth following, as references to de’ Conti’s account are abundant. Rogers points out how Foresti’s work underwent several editions, in which Foresti only intermittently credits his sources. Foresti became acquainted with the humanist’s writings while preparing the second edition of Piccolomini’s *Supplementi* (1485). In it, Foresti directly mentions Bracciolini’s “book on the location of India” and incorporates a new document, the *Treatise on the Pontificate of Prester John*, which includes literal quotations from Bracciolini and specifically mentions de’ Conti as their author. In a subsequent edition of the *Supplementi* however, “Foresti or his publisher made three minor revisions in the *Treatise of the pontificate of Prester John*, which include the erasure of de’ Conti’s name (76). Only a few years after Foresti’s second edition, Antonio da Bollate sponsored the 1492 printing of Bracciolini’s Book IV, which originated a series of further publications in various European languages.

In light of these findings, Rogers hypothesizes that Bollate had been familiar with Foresti da Bergamo and that the editor “had determined to pursue Niccolò further and publish his full account” because of his own interest in the first-hand information related by de’ Conti (76). Proof of such determination lies for Rogers in Bollati’s explicit regard for Bracciolini’s writing, as it transpires from the dedicatory epistle, in which Bollati writes: “the splendor of the Indians and also their power and, indeed that whole distant world of theirs, have been made known to us once again, [...] all because of the *carefully evaluated testimony* of a Venetian man” (Rogers 77 italics mine). For Bollate, it is precisely Bracciolini’s attentive examination of de’ Conti’s oral

---

93 For example, in the first edition of the *Latin Supplements* the inescapable allure of the marvels of the East is joined with several references to the *Historia de varietate fortunae*, which are not credited by Foresti (but he does however mention several of Bracciolini’s other works).
material that guarantees its unquestioned authority.\textsuperscript{94}

The virtually guaranteed profitability of Eastern travel accounts prompted European printing presses to collect travel material that could be assembled in various combinations. In particular Rogers identifies ten different text that constituted the matter of the early Latin chapbooks he examines (78).\textsuperscript{95} These popular collections were based on a shared material that underwent four separate stages of development. Rogers’ study traces and locates their relationship with de’ Conti’s travel narrative, among others.

His work points out that both religious and literary forces alike were widely implicated in the reasons for the popularity of the chapbooks examined, as these texts gave expression to the Roman church’s desire of unification with the Christians of the East, a concern that, Rogers establishes, was shared by the population at large and by no means exclusively cultivated by those in power.\textsuperscript{96}

One notable example of such texts is \textit{The Letter of Prester John}, a widely circulated medieval staple of travel lore.\textsuperscript{97} The letter prominently figures in the Latin chapbook tradition. It was first published in Venice in 1478, in vernacular, and was shortly followed by a Latin edition in 1480. Notably, the \textit{Letter} was then incorporated in a chapbook titled \textit{De Ritu et Moribus}

\textsuperscript{94} Rogers also postulates that Bollate would have juxtaposed the “errors” of the ancient to the “modern” information newly revealed by the Bracciolini/de’ Conti collaboration, in order to underscore the modernity of the editor (ibidem).

\textsuperscript{95} These are: the \textit{Letter of Prester John}, a \textit{Treatise on the pontificate of Prester John}, the \textit{Itinerary} of Johannes de Witte de Hese, a report concerning St. Thomas and other materials including a series of letters by Aeneas Silvius Plccolomini (Pope Pius II ). Notably, Rogers points out that publishing material authored by the latter resulted in guaranteed readership, for early modern printers.

\textsuperscript{96} Similarly, Rogers writes \textit{a propos} of the Portuguese expeditions of Diaz, De Gama and Cabral that the explorers “admittedly driven by economic and social forces, [...] responded equally to religious and literary forces” (104).

Indorum, a title that, Rogers notes, represents a recognizably condensed version of the opening sentence of the 1492 printed edition of India Recognita: “on the rites and on the customs of the Indians he thus replied to his questioner” (80). The connection between the Letter and de’ Conti’s narrative is certainly indicative of the extent to which de’ Conti’s travels contributed to nourish and sustain early modern popular imagination. It also highlights the narrative’s role as cultural intermediary, while continuing to function, by opposition, as a shadow of Western political and religious fragmentation. Furthermore, the dissemination of these variously combined material is accompanied by the popularity of Giuliano Dati’s two poems, Two songs of East Indies, whose connection with de’ Conti’s material has been highlighted by Rogers and Olschki alike.98

Before turning to examples of the influence exerted by de’ Conti’s narrative on popular literature I consider the significance of the long lasting fascination exerted by a transcription error which occurred in the Portuguese translation of 1502. In Rodrigo de Santaella’s translation, Bracciolini’s insight on the usefulness of de’ Conti’s eyewitness information on the East is attributed to pope Eugenius IV, who “ordered” the merchant to narrate the particulars of his travels to his secretary as a condition for his own absolution (and subsequent re-admittance into the Catholic faith). Carlo Bullo vividly renders the merchant’s dramatic arrival at the papal court:

[De’ Conti] was forced to abdicate his faith and become a Muslim, in order to save his life and that of his loved ones; however, tormented by remorse, before going

---

98 Giuliano Dati (1445-1524) was a Calabrese bishop, author of copious literary material (including a rhymed version of Columbus’s voyages) who was, according to Rogers, absorbingly interested “in the popular literature of the day” (94). See also Olschki, Leonardo.”Il cantari dell’India di Giuliano Dati.” La bibliofilia XL, 1938, pp. 289-306. In addition, Olschki also points to a relatively unexplored connection between de’ Conti’s travel account and Andrea da Barberino’s Guerrino il Meschino, printed in 1473 and widely diffused in manuscript form prior to that date, which I will briefly consider in Chapter III.
back to his homeland he hastened to throw himself at Pope Eugenius IV th’s feet, [...] imploring forgiveness for his own sins [...] and before readmitting him into the church
[the pope] imposed, as condition of his full absolution, to dictate to his own secretary a faithful account of his own travels, the products and customs of the lands he visited, believing that geography and commerce would benefit from that knowledge (La vera patria di Niccolò de’ Conti XI my trans.)

According to this tradition, de’ Conti’s travel account directly results from the papal injunction.
Demanding the narration in exchange for the merchant’s absolution, the pope displays an insight on the usefulness of de’ Conti’s account for both geography and commerce.100 This widely-disseminated historical misinformation held sway over de’ Conti’s scholarship well into the twentieth century.101 In Mario Longhena’s Viaggi in Persia, India e giava di Nicolo’ de’ Conti Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo da Santo Stefano, published in 1929, Bracciolini’s text is proposed without interpolations: “Il Bracciolini dice che il racconto il Conti lo fece allorquando venne ad impetrare dal pontefice Eugenio IV [...] il perdono per aver rinnegato, costretto, la fede ed a chiedere di essere riammesso nella comunità dei fedeli” (23). Here Longhena does not mention a papal injunction. The declaration that de’ Conti’s loss of faith had been forced upon him, by the

99 [De’ Conti] fu costretto per aver salva la propria vita e quella dei suoi cari a rinnegare la fede e a farsi mussulmano; ma tormentato dai rimorsi prima ancora di di recarsi in patria corse a gettarsi ai piedi di Eugenio IV [...] implorando perdono delle sue colpe [...] e prima di riammetterlo nel grembo della chiesa [il papa] gli impose per condizione della completa assoluzione l’obbligo di dettare al suo segretario un fedele racconto de’ suoi viaggi, de’ prodotti e dei costumi dei luoghi da luo visitati, pensando che da tali cognizioni la geografia e i commerci se ne sarebbero avvantaggiati (XI, emphasis mine).

100 Bracciolini instead prefers to attribute such insights to himself, in his introduction to Book IV of De varietate fortunae, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

101 In 1875 Angelo De Gubernatis writes in his Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali that de’ Conti abdicated his Christian faith during his travels through Muslim territories, in order to safely conduct his business ("al fine di provvedere piu’ sicuramente ai suoi negozi") (9), adding that, as a consequence, the pope ordered de’ Conti to narrate his travels to the learned Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini, papal secretary at the time (Longhena, Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava 23). Penrose Boies’s Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, published in 1952, also perpetuates the Portuguese tradition.
necessity to save the life of his family (and, secondarily, his own) is further confirmed by Bracciolini’s Latin version:

\begin{quote}
Nicolaus quidam Venetus, qui ad intima Indiae penetravit, ad Eugenium Pontificem (is tum secundo Florentiae erat) accessit, veniae impetrandae gratia, quoniam, cum ad Indis reidiens ad Aegyptis fines mari rubro pervenisset, fidem abnegare, neque suo tantum, quantum uxoris liberorumque, quos secum advexerat, mortis metu, coactus est.
\end{quote}

A Venetian named Niccolò, who entered the most remote parts of India, came to Pope Eugenius (who was in Florence for the second time), asking forgiveness, because on his way back from India, when he arrived through the Red Sea to the frontier with Aegypt, he had been forced to relinquish his faith for fear of death, not his own but that of his wife and children, whom he had conducted with him.

(Guérét-Laferté, De L’Inde 11-16, my trans.).

Noticeably, the absence of a connection between de’ Conti’s deposition and a papal order highlights Bracciolini’s agency and authorship. It is Bracciolini himself (”Hunc ego audiendi cupidus”) who decides to collect the newly available information about the distant lands visited by de’ Conti, on account of the traveler’s “already established credibility,” and of his own perception of their value and usefulness (as previously discussed).

Longhena however cannot resist highlighting the shared geographical origin of both traveller and pope, “anche veneziano” (also Venetian) thus evoking and implicating the long-standing myth of the Serenissima as point of origin of a shared enterprise, physically.

\footnote{Italics mine. I am quoting from Poggio Bracciolini. Opera Omnia, which reproduces the first and only edition of the entire De varietate fortunae originally published in Paris in 1723 by Dominicus Georgius (Fubini, 500).}
executed by a Venetian merchant, but honored and necessitated by the discernment of a Venetian pope. Longhena’s perspective is also particularly effective in aligning *tout court* Italian humanist with a new “wave of classicism and paganism,” one with which, he notes, the church had a difficult time contending, effectively erasing the nuances that characterize humanists’ thought:

The men of the church at this time, while wanting to repel the wave of classicism and paganism that invades everything, cannot front it and are often swept away by it. They often do not participate in the humanistic movement, they are hostile to it, but since it represents the life that is being lived, they are forced to receive it [...] to accept its men and let them be involved in various offices and duties (39, my trans.).

These last lines, unequivocally directed at Bracciolini (and his fellow humanists), illustrate for Longhena the ambiguity of Bracciolini himself, herald on one hand of a pagan sensibility, yet also simultaneously embedded in the papal court and subject to its political aims, “[...] mentre egli vive ed impingua in quella corte papale da cui questi religiosi dipendono” “as he lives and prospers in that papal court from which these religious figures depend” (39, my trans.).

Scholarship on late medieval travel narratives has dismantled the authenticity of the long-held belief that a papal injunction lied at the origin of Bracciolini’s reportage on de’ Conti’s travels (undoubtedly prompted by the aforementioned discrepancy among textual traditions); the origin of the connection between the alleged dictation of the travel narrative as penance has been attributed to the widely-disseminated Portuguese translation commissioned by King Manuel of

---

103 E gli uomini della chiesa in questo tempo mentre vorrebbero respingere l’onda di classicismo e paganesimo che tutto invade, non sanno fronteggiarla e sono da essa travolti. Spesso non partecipano al movimento umanistico, anzi ne sono ostili, ma poiché’ esso e’ la vita stessa che allora si vive, così sono costretti a subirlo [...] ad accogliere i suoi uomini ad a far loro parte negli uffici e nelle cariche (39).
Portugal and printed in 1502.\textsuperscript{104} Romanian scholar Anca Crivat points out in Los libros de viajes de la edad media española that the interpretation of de’ Conti’s travelogue as penitential act is not mentioned by Bracciolini nor by other available, contemporary sources (such as Pero Tafur’s Travels and Adventures:1435-1439).\textsuperscript{105} Indeed she locates the origin of this notion in the Portuguese translation (from Latin) printed in 1502 by Valentin Fernandes. It is there that such mention first appears.

As mentioned above, the Portuguese translation is of central importance in the history of the text’s diffusion becoming the official source for the inclusion of de’ Conti’s narrative in Giuseppe Ramusio’s Delle navigazioni et viaggi, a widely distributed collection of travels in three volumes (published respectively in 1550-59-56).\textsuperscript{106} Mario Longhena observes that the Portuguese copy is so different from the Latin text to resemble an entirely new narration, but does not mention the discrepancy of information, and simply declaring not to have seen the original himself: “non ci è stato possibile giungere ad avere copia del troppo lungo testo portoghese” (Longhena 77).\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Francis M. Rogers in The Quest for Eastern Christians (1964) declares it “an erroneous tradition, Introduced by Poggio’s Portuguese translator” (96), Valentin Fernandes who in 1502 printed the first translation from Latin to Portuguese. Romanian scholar Anca Crivat in Los libros de viajes de la edad media española (Bucarest: Editura Universitatii, 2003) further notes that the idea that the relation of the travels had been prescribed by the pope as as penance for abjuring the Catholic faith is not mentioned by Poggio nor by Pero Tafur’s Travels and Adventures:1435-1439, another frequently studied, historical source of de’ Conti’s travels. \url{http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/filologie/AncaCrivat/excurso.htm}

\textsuperscript{105} Pero Tafur. Travels and Adventures:1435-1439. Edited by Malcolm Letts, Harper and Brothers, 1926. Since Tafur shared part of his journey with de’ Conti, his subsequent travel narrative has been often compared to Bracciolini’s account in order to shed light on various discrepancies.

\textsuperscript{106} Milanesi, M. ed. G. B. Ramusio. Navigazioni e viaggi. Torino: 1978-88 (6 vols.) Rubies writes that “Despite the Latin edition of 1492, in the first half of the sixteenth century the circulation of de’ Conti’s original account seems to have been based on the Portuguese version of 1502 and on at least three editions of a Castilian translation by Rodrigo de Santaella (1502, 1518 and 1529) who, thinking the Venetian dialect to have been the original, translated from a manuscript in that language” (93n25).

\textsuperscript{107} Even with the awareness that a thorough examination of the 30 recovered manuscripts of the Historia de varietate fortunae, the various translations and editions that followed would be helpful in order to shed light on this issue, for the purpose of the present work I chose to move away from the examination of the authorial intentions behind the text, in favor of a study of the text’s reception.
With that in mind, it is worth noting a connection between de’ Conti’s travelogue and the narrative of *Guerino il meschino*, which was also reportedly written as a penance, on account of Eugenius II’s injunction (Olschki, “Asiatic exoticim in Italian art of the early Renaissance” 95). Leonardo Olschki underlines the narrative’s popularity declaring it “the most popular volume of fictional geography” and highlighting its generative influence; he considers it the inspiration behind “the most successful popular poems devoted to the marvels of the East,” namely *I cantari dell’India* by Giuliano Dati (96). It is in the 1473 Paduan print of *Guerino il meschino* that, much like in the Portuguese translation of de’ Conti’s travels, one finds the assertion that the protagonist’s pilgrimage (to Santiago de Compostela, in this case) occurred as a result of a papal penitential order.  

De’ Conti’s travelogue (in its Portuguese translation) and the narrative of Andrea da Barberino alike exhibit a posited connection between narration and penance. The narratives shared provenance deserves in my view further analysis. It is possible that topoi of conversion narratives, like available blueprints, might have influenced the shaping of the narratives somewhere along the line of successive transmissions of the text. An exploration of the social practices from which these texts emerged, (rather than a reading focused primarily on conversion as an individual, spiritual choice) could shed light on the circumstances that might have influenced the translator in his rendition of the travel account.  

108 Olschki, L. “Asiatic Exoticim in Italian Art of the Early Renaissance” *The Art Bulletin* 1944. Interestingly Olschki points out that even Leonardo, who “drew from life the portrait of three of those Armenians who were a common sight in the Venice of its time” ends up rendering the geographical landscape in their background with the “vague exotic geography of poetry and romance” stressing thereby the lack of exactitude of the available accounts (97)  

109 Francis M. Rogers points out the connection in *The Quest for Eastern Christians*, (96). He also posits the date of composition of the story, narrated by Andrea da Barberino, as 1409 (97).  

110 Pursuing this connection would engage a larger research field that seeks to challenge the notion of conversion narrative as a fixed genre. Simon Ditchfield, Peter Mazur, et al. authored an investigative project (*Conversion narratives in Early Modern Europe: 1550-1700: a Cross-Confessional and Comparative Study*) which
The examination of the texts mentioned above also complements the notion that high and low readership were essentially implicated by a shared material. They underline the fact that de’ Conti’s narrative, initially through Bracciolini’s appropriation, and later through its autonomous, vernacular transmission, was disseminated and enjoyed at once by those in power as well as by a larger reading public. Its inclusion in Ramusio’s ambitious collection further propagates its influence and stresses its importance in the tracing of European intellectual history. As Rubies points out in *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance*: “the importance of the travel literature which grew during the first half of the fifteenth century is not simply that it gave Europe many informed descriptions of non-European lands and peoples, but also that it structured the genre on the basis of the practical interest of merchants, soldiers and crown officials” (2).

Much has been written on the cultural changes brought forth by the apparition of the printed book in Renaissance Europe. Roger Chartier, for example, has clearly underlined the necessity of recognizing the coexistence of such shared reading practices, while highlighting the importance of a social history of the different popular uses of the same material. In *Forms and Meaning: Text, Performances and Audiences from Codex to Computer*, Chartier builds on De Certeau’s definition of two different, oppositional modes of appropriation of literary material, that he denominates “tactics” and “strategies.” The opposition is created to avoid both the perils of a definitions of popular culture as autonomous or conversely dependent from the culture of the dominant group. Hence “strategies,” which are “generated by places and institutions”,

---

seeks to “uncover neglected resources, including letters, pictures, and interrogations, to shed light on the stories people told about their religious lives, and ask what religious change meant to communities and individuals, and how members of different faiths negotiated their encounters with one another”

http://europeanconversionnarratives.wordpress.com/about/

“accumulate and capitalize” and produce norms. On the other end “tactics”, defined as “a way of doing” that creates meaning,” best describe popular reading practices. Chartier’s analysis shifts critical attention from a reification of the idea of popular culture, defined as an autonomous object of analysis, in favor of a closer look at the various modes of appropriation that define literature’s “popular” diffusion. Thus, as he writes, “When the "same" text is apprehended through very different mechanisms of representation, it is no longer the same“ (2).

The wide diffusion of de’ Conti’s travel account, in its dissemination among the elites ("those with power to act," to borrow Rogers terminology) and also as a popular “chapbook”, highlights the narrative’s role as a cultural intermediary, contributing to determine and shape the already shifting relations between East and West, while simultaneously challenging their respective boundaries. The economic landscape of Venetian trade interest in the East will soon give way to a gradual substitution of investments in maritime insurances rather than direct trade, as Eric Dursteler details in *Venetians in Constantinople*; as “direct participation in trade is translated to factors and agents,” “the romanticized patrician merchant world traveler of medieval Venice” slowly dies off (43). The following chapter further analyzes how de’ Conti’s narrative also carried on its influence on fifteenth-century cartography, particularly in relation to Fra Mauro’s mappamundi, an ambitious project of global depiction of the world.

---

112 These observations are echoed by Scott Westrem’s warning not to consider a text in exclusive relation to the authorial intention at the expenses of its reception history as “different versions may promote different readings” (*Broader Horizons*, 227).
Chapter II

The Impact of Niccolò de’ Conti’s Narrative on Fra Mauro’s mappamundi

“Eye-witness testimony, for all its vaunted importance, sits as a very small edifice on top of an enormous mountain of hearsay, rumour, convention and endlessly recycled fable”
Stephen Greenblatt.
“Foreword” to Frank Lestringant. Mapping the Renaissance World (1994)

This epigraph, emphasizing the lack of proportion between first-hand testimony and the cultural baggage informing the traveler’s experience, directly frames the boundaries of a travel narrative’s impact, regardless of its chronological origin. The asymmetry highlighted by Greenblatt is particularly fitting as a description of well known Western medieval travel narratives, like Marco Polo’s Devisement du monde or Mandeville’s Travels, in which the tension between the encyclopedic travel lore of the Western Christian tradition and the different intentionalities of the travelers lies at the core of the composition. Yet, at a closer reading, subtle
differences in tone, structure and intentionality come to the surface in individually examined narratives.

In one divulgative essay on medieval culture titled “Il Milione: descrivere l’ignoto,” Umberto Eco for example, points out in regard to Marco Polo, that Polo’s narrative eschews the moralizing preoccupations of its predecessors, possibly on account of the author’s commercial interests; nevertheless, despite what might have been Polo’s immediate intentions, the lure of the medieval tradition of marvels and monsters populating the East inevitably shaped his rendition and influenced his readers alike. As an example, Eco notes the enduring yet curious presence of the tradition of the monstrous races in the miniaturized manuscripts of Polo’s *Devisement du monde*; while the monster tradition is not present in the text itself, it is as if, observes Eco, the miniaturists knew that those monsters and marvels must have been in the text, regardless of their mention. Hence, being an oral witness, Eco humorously observes, was a less simple job than one might suppose.113

Confronted with a late medieval narrative, such as de’ Conti’s narration of his 25 years of Eastern travels, one might choose to examine the narrative’s structural characteristics in order to underline the nuances of its composition and highlight its connection with the medieval travel lore of Western civilization, while simultaneously locating its departures from that tradition. In this chapter I pursue such an examination with a focus on the intersection between text and cartography in Italy, during the second half of the fifteenth century.

In particular, I examine the impact that de’ Conti’s eyewitness testimony had on a greatly influential Venetian map of the time, the *mappamundi* of Fra Mauro with the aim of addressing-

---

even if tangentially-the broader issue of the relationship between increasingly available eyewitness testimonies and the evolution of cartography during the transitional fifteenth century. I also connect this analysis to the history of the reception of Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, as the relationship between eyewitness testimony and geographical tradition hinges upon the resilience of the authority of Ptolemaic geographical work. While this is a potentially broad inquiry, I chose to focus here on de’ Conti’s documented influence of Fra Mauro’s map in order to highlight the gradual changes investing cartographical representations in the Italian Quattrocento.\(^{114}\)

In *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* Geraldine Heng devotes an entire chapter to a reading of Mandeville’s *Travels* that, through an examination of the foundational scholarship on the famous travel narrative, investigates and highlights the reasons of its immense popularity during the centuries that surround its genesis. In the broader context of an analysis of medieval romance and the literary strategies it employs, Heng sees Mandeville’s narrative as an example of the long range implications that a “timely placed romance” can have not only on the culture and history from which it arises, but also on the centuries to follow.\(^{115}\)

One defining feature of Heng’s study is the underlining of the travel narrative’s fictionality as one of its most essential and influential characteristics. Mandeville’s *Travels*, Heng points out, is an example of medieval romance, “a prime representative of that hybrid genre of inextricably conjoined, seamlessly indistinguishable fact and fantasy” (240). The text is

---

\(^{114}\) De’ Conti’s influence on Fra Mauro has been also discussed by Angelo Cattaneo in his *Fra Mauro’s Mappa Mundi and Fifteenth Century Venice*, to which I am indebted for part of this analysis.

\(^{115}\) “Mandeville’s *Travels* is a prime representative, an excellent model, of the impact and range of effects that timely, well- positioned travel romances can have on culture and history” (240).
characterized by a pervasive fragmentation, as episodes of different nature and content are interspersed with various digressions and observations, thus appearing both “fragmentary and fragmenting” (241). In addition, it is chronologically positioned at the beginning of a different “long cycle of cultural accumulations,” namely the early modern period, while arising from the coalescence of “sedimented strata of collective interests and accumulated knowledge” (240). Heng is specifically interested in unearthing the way in which the book catalyzes attention (specifically, to the East) and inspires action (she makes the case for an inescapable connection between knowledge, commerce and current or future projects of domination). Furthermore, Heng deems romance and empire as equally invested in the enterprise of building the connection between “power-knowledge-commerce-settlement,” that she describes as characterizing the Renaissance.116 However, Heng’s notion of the timeliness of a travel account nods to the historical continuity that links the medieval age of pilgrimages with the early modern age of explorations.117

While some important differences in time, composition and style distinguish Mandeville’s Travels from de’ Conti’s account, both share various characteristics of the genre of romance, as defined by Heng’s writing.118 Both narratives emerge historically from a time of great transitions and both exerted a great power of influence over their readers from the time of their composition onward. Having enjoyed a large diffusion, both narratives contributed to “new disciplines,

---

116 The “coextensive impulses” of romance and empire hence become the underlying focus of her study and they ultimately inform her interpretation of Mandeville’s text.
118 For a more detailed analysis of de’ Conti’s account stylistic characteristics see also Chapter III of this dissertation.
knowledges and techniques for a future world,” while exercising a deep influence in the cultural apprehension of newly explored and re-discovered lands (242). 119

Two main directions of inquiry emerge from Heng’s study on romance that are of interest for the present study. First, the examination of how a travel narrative brings forth a distinct mode of apprehension of the world (a “re-orientation: of Empire” in Heng’s terminology) and secondly, an expose’ of the ways in which a travel narrative functions as a “pleasure-inducing” narrative form, a theme that is further developed in Chapter III of this dissertation (258). Both inquiries underline the essential function of the text as a vehicle of change. Mandeville’s scholarship in particular (but the same can be said of Polo’s studies) is a case in point, as the text shows how the narrative functioned as a means of conveying hard information, but also as “a goad for propelling ideas and actions forward” (240).

Much in the same way, de’ Conti’s text operated simultaneously as both a source of information (according to its romance-like characteristics) and as a means of changing the apprehension of the world, particularly of the less-familiar far East. Its fictionality is the medium par excellence through which all kinds of information (geographical, scientific, ethnographic) will continue to be disseminated throughout the early modern period as well, exposing its strong link with the epoque of hybrid narratives that preceded it.

David Woodward in “Cartography and the Renaissance: continuity and change,” points out that the Medieval mappa mundi could indiscriminately refer to both a narrative description of the world and/or to a cartographic one. Significantly, he observes that “when Ptolemy’s Geographia was translated in Latin by Jacopo Angeli in 1409 the maps were not included” (8).

119 Despite the fact that their transmission history vary widely (the history of the de’ Conti’s text’s dissemination has been detailed in the previous chapter), both texts share a deeply influential effect on the culture and history of the Renaissance.
Possibly this happened because humanists “were just as interested in cartographic texts, such as those by Strabo and Pomponius Mela, that had few cartographic components but more literary style” (8). Hence, the separation of text from image, that cartography will eventually sanction, rests firmly upon the establishment of an essential connection between maps and travels, whereby the former are perceived and used as tools for exploration; during the medieval period however, such function was for the most part a prerogative of portolans and nautical charts, but not necessarily of maps, whose ubiquity and pervasiveness came about slowly and much later.120

The predilection for text over image is one of the many elements that should caution against the hastily-drawn observation that early modern maps differed substantially from medieval ones, particularly on account of their increased accuracy and generally more “scientific” outlook. Denys Hay in his 1957 “Introduction” to the New Cambridge Modern History clearly debunks this position, by dismantling the belief that the maps of the period had been influenced by a “new” thought, often understood as an increasingly “scientific” mindset” (19).121 As proof he cites the long-lasting influence of Marco Polo’s travel narrative which proves how its significance paralleled that of Ptolemy’s work, often pinpointed as characterizing the period.122

If fourteenth century maps reflect the increased value of the textual over the figurative, it follows that any useful definition of cartography itself must be expansive enough to

---

121 Many scholars have challenged the opposition between allegedly didactic medieval map and supposedly more rational Ptolemaic representations. Among them, the work of Kathleen Biddick shows how the separation of cartography from temporality allowed other form of violence (particularly against the Jews) to insinuate themselves in cartographic representations. Kathleen Biddick, “The ABC of Ptolemy” Text and Territory: The Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages, edited by Sylvia Tomash, U of Pennsylvania P, 1988
122 If there was a “new idiom” to speak of during the Quattrocento, a new sensibility that might have emerged during this period, it is for Woodward “the idiom of objects,” that is to say the importance acquired by a new book as a collector’s item, as an object to be displayed, rather than a record of what has been said (12).
accommodate for such ratio. In *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* Geraldine Heng operates for example within the larger boundaries of significance of a “narrative cartography,” in order to allow the examination of more than just iconographic maps, and to include also literature and poetry. Such definition has proven useful to approach the subject at hand, in that it underlines the broader effects of a variety of texts: maps and travel narratives, marine charts and diplomatic reports, “fabled” accounts and eye-witness testimonies. As she points out with regard to Mandeville’s *Travels*:

> The success of this travel story in mobilizing ideas, technology and people, where other travel stories (even Marco Polo’s celebrated narrative) lacked comparable momentum, argues that a document need not formally be an informational treatise, curricular text or navigational map—that is to say a self-advertised player in matters of information and accuracy—in order to function as any, or all, of these, and more (241).\(^\text{123}\)

While this definition effectively blurs the boundaries between narration and cartography, it must be noted that such boundaries are effectively superimposed a posteriori as they had not necessarily been already drawn. Particularly in the medieval period, and throughout the fifteenth century as well, maps were not yet “self-advertised player[s] in matters of information and accuracy,” at least not in the sense in which we think of them today (ibidem).

Notably, one prominent Italian scholar of fifteenth century maps, Marica Milanesi, describes the century as a time of utmost “confusion” for Western cartography, in a work where she examines the gradual “substitution” of established geographical authority (that is to say mainly Ptolemy’s *Geographia*) with a corpus of knowledge that was increasingly derived from

---

experience. “Confusion” however is a term that acquires significance only from a contemporary standpoint, as it presupposes a clear, almost essentializing definition of cartography. In opposite fashion, while detailing the various phases of Ptolemy’s Geographia’s reception history, Gautier-Dalché shows how Ptolemy’s work was initially considered exclusively in its textual components, whereas the map that accompanied the text did not receive the same attention until later (and by altogether different intellectual circles than those that originally disseminated the work, namely the Florentine humanists). Clearly this analysis unearths the fluctuating and historically-contingent nature of cartography, dismantling the alleged reality of any fixed definition.

In Milanesi’s study the shaping of a collective consciousness, slowly digesting and simultaneously voraciously consuming new narrative pleasures in the form of travel accounts, is depicted as a process that develops incrementally and not without periodically returning to the “safer” authority of the past. This incremental process of substitution seems to fall in line with a positivistic vision of progress, whereby fifteenth-century maps are seen as increasingly becoming more reflective of “true” information as related by eyewitnesses and less dependent on the outdated geographical descriptions of the ancients. However, other scholars are more cautious in tracing a linear progression. Palmira Brummett for example, observes in Visions of the Mediterranean that maps “as the early modern era progressed, evolved in their technologies of measurement, but there was no simple progression towards the scientifically “accurate” (23).

---

124 “Nel xv secolo […] la cartografia conosce il suo momento di maggior confusione” “In the XV c. […] cartography is governed by utmost confusion” (Toleomeo sostituito 23, my trans.)

125 Milanesi seems to fall in line with a Burkhardian vision when when she writes that “the process of substituting Ptolemy’s Geography had been the process of construing a new geographical knowledge” “il processo di sostituzione della Geografia di Tolomeo e’ stato un processo di costruzione di un nuovo sapere geografico”(24) and that this was increasingly contributing to establish the forming of a collective consciousness of a changed world” “il formarsi di una coscienza collettiva di un mondo cambiato” (24, my trans.).
While the refinement of mathematical techniques of projection allowed for more accuracy in representation, it is useful to consider the different uses of the maps produced in the fifteenth century, among which collectionism and decorations superseded practical purposes. In fact, it seems that the “old” nautical charts were still considered perfectly apt to furnish the necessary information, as Woodward notes in *The History of Cartography*.  

The relationship between cartography and its sources during the early modern period can thus be aptly described as characterized by a series of intermittents recourses to the authority of the classics: Ptolemy first and foremost (recently “re-discovered” through the Latin translation of Jacopo Angelis) but also Solinus, Pliny, Strabo and Pomponius Mela; in addition, first-hand travel accounts, often chosen and evaluated by the mapmaker, for a specific purpose, were selectively incorporated.  

By the end of the century the impact of the newly available information about the East is however still circumscribed. Mapmakers slowly incorporated recently available travel accounts and, at times, such information did not necessarily supersede the authority still ascribed to ancient geographers and medieval romances alike. In some cases, the first-hand witness of the travellers is rejected when and if it happens to be in disagreement with classical authorities.

---

126 Classical and medieval written land itineraries continue to be used as tools for wayfinding and are not supplanted by graphical maps (even maps and charts were not used in sailing directions as much as written sailing directions): “Likewise, the classical and medieval written land itineraries continued to be a robust tool for wayfinding, and these were by no means replaced by their graphic equivalents” (“Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change” 8).

127 This was for example the case of Fra Mauro, the camaldolese monk, author of an influential fifteenth-century *mappamundi*, who selected and summarized both the accounts of Marco Polo and de’ Conti, who constituted his main direct sources. Angelo Cattaneo, through and in-depth study of Fra Mauro’s *mappamundi* details the influence of Marco Polo’s narrative together with that of de’ Conti, by revealing the presence of their texts which were often transcribed *verbatim* in the map’s legends. Furthermore, he also points out that “a greater quantity of source text is taken from de’ Conti than Polo” possibly, Cattaneo speculates, because de’ Conti’s narrative completed Polo’s account by offering what was missing, that is to say more information on Southeast Asia, a geographical area for which de’ Conti’s account was a respected source. For a comparison of the presence of Marco Polo and de’ Conti’s texts in fra Mauro’s *mappamundi*, see Angelo Cattaneo. *Fra Mauro’s Mappa Mundi and Fifteenth Century Venice*. Brepols, 2011.
Sebastiano Gentile, in “Umanesimo e cartografia: Tolomeo nel secolo XV” gives us a famous example. He points to an episode recorded by Biondo Flavio in his Decades, as an example of discordance between Ptolemy’s authoritative text, the Geografia, and the testimony of eight Ethiopian monks, who attended the Council of Florence of 1441. During the Council a committee of three cardinals was instituted by the Holy See in order to question the visitors about their religion, as well as their country. However, when the information related by the travellers seemed to contradict that which had been related by Ptolemy, it was quickly rejected and deemed altogether untrustworthy (“furono giudicate menzognere”) (15).

Even as late as the sixteenth century there is still evidence of the perduring oscillation between the acceptance and incorporation of new data and their rejection. As an example Corradino Astengo, author of “The Renaissance chart tradition in the Mediterranean,” an in-depth examination of the historical evolution of nautical charts in the various ports of the Mediterranean, cites the work of the Genoese Vesconte Maggiolo. He describes him in no uncertain terms as “undoubtedly the best informed of all sixteenth century cartographers” but finds that his work was only occasionally updated with more recent information rendered available by recent explorations (236). His work, observes Astengo, had periods of “rapid updating” followed by others characterized instead by stagnation or regression (236). The cartographer’s intermittent recourse to established geographical authorities despite more updated information could certainly have been caused by “occasional lapses in information,” but a conceptual barrier might also have been present, despite the greater accessibility of contemporary sources of information; as Astengo observes, “one gets the impression that the cartographer’s access to information on the newest discoveries was occasional and fortuitous”
The work of Vesconte Maggiolo, a Genoese cartographer, constitutes yet another example of the implausibility of an artificially imposed historical fracture between ages.

Against this scholarly temptation J.R. Phillips has famously underlined the many continuities that link medieval expansion with the “Age of Discoveries”. In *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* he points out that rather than constituting a “fresh start,” the discoveries that took place at the end of the fifteenth century depended in many ways by the earlier period of explorations occurred in the preceding centuries, and hence constituted simply a “new phase” in a long history of discoveries. Thus the new knowledge imparted by European travellers to Asia (comprising also the now distinct continents of Africa and North America) was slowly “absorbed into the picture of the world presented in the works of scholarship and literature” (228).128 Even though “there is [...] evidence that the fifteenth-century voyages undertaken by the Portuguese did owe something at least to contemporary scholarship” (232), Phillips points out that by 1500, Juan de La Cosa’s world map, for example, continues to incorporate “references to Gog and Magog and the Blemmyae of Asia” in the face of recent explorations and their reports (256); this is perhaps hardly surprising given the cultural lenses of early modern viewers, but it contributes to erode the plausibility of cartography’s supposed, linear progression towards a “scientific” ideal of exactitude and verifiable precision.129

It is worth bearing in mind however that, while the medieval period of exploration served to establish both a cultural and technological foundation for the so called “Age of

---

128 A thought shared by Denys Hay who equates the importance of printing with the discovery of America because of their “slow” reception and the fact that “it took many generations to affect men in any material way (“Introduction” 4).
129 See John R. S. Phillips. *The Medieval Expansion of Europe*. Oxford UP, 1988. To be exact, the medieval expansionist push rests, in turn, on a process that began even before the eleventh century, which is the starting point of Phillips analysis.
Discoveries,” the interest in the newly available information brought forth by travel accounts also predictably grew manifold alongside the expansion of the printed book. The growth of publications contributed not only to the widening of the circulation of first-hand travel accounts (as detailed in the first chapter in reference to the popularity of travel chapbooks), but also to the circulation of classical sources of reference for geographical works, enormously aided and amplified by the impact of print on cartography.\(^{130}\)

Form these observation it becomes increasingly evident that the relationship that the mapmakers of the Quattrocento entertained with their classical sources vis-a-vis the first-hand narratives that were already widely available, and with those that were beginning to circulate at the time (such as de’ Conti’s), was by no means a linear one. Rather, it can best be characterized as a series of intermittent inclusions and omissions of available data, in favor of an already established cartographical tradition, often held as a long-standing authority.

As an example of such intermittent relationship a look at the influence of de’ Conti’s travel memoir and at one of the most influential maps of the Quattrocento, Fra Mauro’s mappamundi, proves illuminating.\(^{131}\)

One may observe that the transitional nature of the fifteenth century is reflected by the extensive development of cartography during that time. The usefulness of the ancient geographers’ theories of representation of the earth (Ptolemy’s above all), seemed to have been

---

\(^{130}\) Regarding the early modern dissemination of printed documents, Denis E. Cosgrove observes, for example, that “the seventy-five mss copies or Ptolemy’s Geography, probably circulating by 1475 compares with an estimated one thousand printed copies in existence by 1500” (Harley-Woodward. The History of Cartography. Vol.3, Part 1,66).

\(^{131}\) A word of caution must be added against generalizations, as the number of artifacts that have been recovered constitutes a small example of the maps that were produced during the fourteenth century. See the observations of J.B. Harley’s in “The map and the development of the history of cartography” in Harley J. B. and Woodward, D. editors, The History of Cartography, vol. 1. U of Chicago P, 1987.
gradually but increasingly diminished by their growing perception as historical documents, as suggested by J. B. Harley, in the historiographical essay “The map and the development of the history of cartography”:

The Ptolemaic maps were initially valued as authoritative maps of the world and its regions, and it was only gradually, though accelerated by the application of printing to cartography, that they were replaced by the ‘tabulae moderne’, leaving the classical maps as primarily historical objects”(7).

The quote aptly summarizes the history of Ptolemy’s reception in Italy during the early modern period, though, as mentioned before, the incorporation of newly available information was somewhat halted by the authority of classical sources. It was not however until the end of the sixteenth century that a critical perception of classical geographical texts became fully developed, even if earlier instances can be found throughout the fifteenth century as well.132

The juxtaposition of cartography and travel documents raises many issues, from purpose to composition, especially considering that, as Geraldine Heng persuasively argues, much like romance writers fifteenth century Western European cartographers often operated in a synthetic fashion, sifting through a wide variety of sources and relying on the authority of Greek and Roman geographers with various degrees of deference. An examination of the history of the relationship between map making and its sources is therefore necessary in contextualizing the

---

132 The Strasbourg Ptolemy of 1513 was the first to separate modern from ancient maps in a discrete section, reflecting the growth of a general critical sense among mapmakers and readers. This practice was confirmed in 1578 when Mercator reissued the Ptolemaic maps alone, without any modern supplements, as a facsimile of a classical atlas, thereby underlining their purely historical interest” (Harvey, 7).
issue. Fra Mauro’s *mappamundi* constitutes a useful point of departure, as it exerted enormous influence on cartographers and travelers alike.

The work of Angelo Cattaneo, author of a recent critical study on Fra Mauro’s *mappa mundi*, reveals that Venetian interest in Ptolemy’s *Geography* was quite developed, even before its composition and circulation. The study of at least two anonymous manuscripts (both composed in the third decade of the Quattrocento, when Andrea Bianco’s *Planisfero* and Piero Tomasi’s translation of Ptolemy’s *Geografia* were also produced) revealed that a conspicuous reflection on the geographical work of Ptolemy was taking place not only in a well known editorial hub like Florence, but in Venice as well. Furthermore, Cattaneo argues, the history of Ptolemy’s impact in Venice exhibits very different connotations than in Florence, a difference that, he suggests, would be well worth investigating, particularly from a philological perspective, and to examine its connection with the Latin science of the time (58). Cattaneo observes a certain “heterodoxy” in the Venetian translations of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* of the first half of the fifteenth-c. (between 1430-1460), noting that at the time of Fra Mauro others also elaborated personal readings of Ptolemy’s geographical *opus*. Specifically, Cattaneo considers Andrea Bianco’s *Planisfero* (“author of the first Venetian Ptolemaic map we know of”), and the work of two anonymous cartographers from Veneto, who authored “letture, traduzioni e revisioni della

---


135 These manuscript are Codex Harley 3686 (now at the British Library) and the Ms. It . Cl. VI, 24=(6111) at the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. Cattaneo credits Marica Milanesi for her seminal work on Codex Harley 3686 (the first of the two anonymous manuscripts mentioned in the article) and follows with his own in-depth analysis of the anonymous manuscript of the Biblioteca Marciana (Ms. It. Cl. VI,24=(6111). See Milanesi, Marica: “A Forgotten Ptolemy: Harley Codex 3686 in the British Library” *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996) 43-64.
*Geografia* profondamente diverse sia rispetto al modello fiorentino sia rispetto ai codici greci e alla vasta tradizione dei codici della *Geografia* in Latino (“readings, translations and revisions of *Geography* profoundly different from the Florentine model but also from the Greek codices and the large tradition of the Latin codices of the *Geography*” (my trans.)).\(^{136}\) Fra Mauro remains however for Cattaneo the most representative of Venetian ‘exceptionalism,’ the author of possibly “the most complex cosmographical representations of the Quattrocento” (42).\(^{137}\)

From Cattaneo’s studies emerges the portrait of a tradition that was deeply engaged in a critical examination of Ptolemy’s work. The process of mapmaking highlights a dialogical reading of Ptolemy’s work (particularly his *Geographia*) that is both instrumental and simultaneously challenging of its theoretical premises. It is this characteristic that for Cattaneo sets the Venetian maps apart from those produced by the Florentine school.\(^{138}\) What’s more, Cattaneo demonstrates how the dialogue with ancient authorities was carried on not only by the more learned segments of the population, but it radiated also through other cultural circles, such as the less-learned guilds of technicians like Andrea Bianco, or the anonymous authors of the two manuscripts identified in the article, whose trade as cartographers was not necessarily premised on a humanist education.

---

\(^{136}\) Andrea Bianco’s map was composed in 1436 (Ms. Fondo Ant. It. Z76. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana). The two anonymous manuscripts here mentioned are: the Codice MS. It. Cl. VI, 24 (6111) in the Biblioteca Marciana of Venice, composed at mid-century and the Harley 3686 of the British Library, dated between 1430 and 1450.

\(^{137}\) His *mappamundi* was composed between 1443 and 1450. The surviving copy at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana di Venezia is of 1459 (42).

\(^{138}\) See in particular Cattaneo’s interpretation of of the anonymous manuscript of the Biblioteca Marciana (pp. 48-50) where he credits the anonymous author with the first vernacular critical revision of *Geographia*’s theoretical books (“libri teoretici”(49). He further points out that in the manuscript’s 60 illustrations the author applies Ptolemy’s theory of projections beyond the know world of the ancients (*oekumene*) to include the broader geography of the moderns.
Examining the distinct and copious cartographic production of Renaissance Venice in “State, cartography and territory in Renaissance Veneto and Lombardy,” Emanuela Casti is another scholar who, like Cattaneo, highlights Venetian engagement with map production from early on, an interest that she links with various exigencies of the Serenissima’s political strategies, including the later expansion of its empire from sea to land. While “Venetian inventories record the display of wall maps in the houses of merchants, patricians and antiquarians,” thus highlighting a widespread predilection for maps as ornamental objects in civic palaces (of which Venice’s Palazzo Ducale constitutes a well known example), she points out that maps served the fundamental function of “displaying the dominion of their commissioning patrons” (876).

Casti is interested in highlighting the variety of functions that maps served within Venice’s political landscape, while stressing the city’s power to generally attract “new information and technical innovation from all part of the globe” (877). Venice’s interdependence from other states, together with its cultural positioning were certainly responsible for its reliance on cartography for more than one purpose, ranging from administrative responsibilities to mercantile interests. If a productive dialogue with classical authorities is indeed a trademark of the period, spurred as it was by the resurgence of Greek sources in their Latin translations, at the same time, it was impossible to ignore the impact of increasingly circulated oral accounts of travel, particularly those that were coming from areas about which there was little available information.

---

139 It was as early as the fourteenth century that Venice’s authorities began envisioning painted mural maps as administrative aids. A notable example of this tendency is Doge Francesco Dandolo (Doge of Venice from 1329 to 1339), who commissioned large maps for his audience chamber testifying to an early interest in map making which preceded—even if slightly—other Italian city states, such Mantua and Milan (Francesca Fiorani. “Cycles of painted maps in the Renaissance”, 808, note 20). In 1459 Antonio Leonardi produced two new maps of Italy to decorate a room of the Palazzo Ducale, having been commissioned by the Council of Ten. As it is known, the maps were destroyed during the fire of 1483 but Leonardi received a new commission to paint a new map of Italy, whereas a new map of the Venetian dominion was commissioned only in 1578 (809).
Within this framework, Fra Mauro’s compositional method is reflective of the tension that characterizes this period of transition in the history of Western cartography; it consisted in “summarizing, paraphrasing and annotating his sources,” according to their perceived utility or lack thereof (880). Possibly, Fra Mauro might have had an interest in displaying information that could have aided commerce and navigation alike, in view of Venice’s commercial expansion, which in turn could account for his own interest in the travels of Niccolò de’ Conti.\(^\text{140}\)

However in the *mappa mundi*, fra Mauro also employs a singular compositional technique. Literal borrowing from the most widely known travel accounts to the East, those of Marco Polo and of Niccolò de’ Conti, are abundantly scattered throughout the map, with a particular emphasis in the map’s legends. Additionally, fra Mauro’s interpretive remarks also complement and integrate the borrowings. However, literal reproductions of Polo’s and de’ Conti’s text are proposed throughout the map without disguise or transformation. Lengthy borrowings that are present in certain areas of the map, particularly those dedicated to South East Asia and the Indian Ocean, areas about which less information had been previously available. Cattaneo speculates that their presence could have been prompted by the abundance of writing space on the map itself: “because the two areas have only a sparse sprinkling of toponyms and drawings in contrast to continental Asia, Fra Mauro had more space at his disposition for the elaboration of legends” (*Fra Mauro’s Mappa Mundi* 203).\(^\text{141}\) He adds that the necessity of

---

\(^{140}\) Cattaneo maintains that both the *Historia de varietate fortunae* (where concerning de’Conti’s geographical annotations) and Marco Polo’s text were read as “handbooks for merchants and ship pilot guides” (*Fra Mauro’s Mappamundi* 205). Notably, Cattaneo derives Fra Mauro’s rejection from a study of Polo’s illuminated manuscripts for the “traditions of marvels and monsters” that constituted one of the lenses through which medieval readers and illuminators traditionally understood Polo’s text (222).

\(^{141}\) Cattaneo’s hypothesis: since the areas of Southeastern Asia described by de’ Conti translated visually into a less crowded area of the map (with less toponyms and less drawings), Fra Mauro “had more space at his disposal for the elaboration of legends,” thus privileging the insertion of lengthier passages (203).
providing “a vast amount of detailed information” about lesser known areas of the world might have been a primary concern of Fra Mauro, and that would “help account for his greater inclusion of Niccolò de’ Conti’s text compared to Polo’s and other sources” (209).142

Cattaneo also explores the possibility that Fra Mauro had benefited from direct contact with de’ Conti himself. In his study on the composition of Fra Mauro’s mapamundi he identifies and distinguishes the various types of sources consulted by the Camaldolese monk, pinpointing the possibility of collecting oral testimony, in addition to written material. Cattaneo moves from the hypothesis that Fra Mauro had potentially derived his textual borrowings from a direct knowledge of Bracciolini’s Latin text; this is supported by a direct comparison “between several passages taken from Bracciolini’s recounting of the voyage of de’ Conti and the cartouches of the mappa mundi” (200). In addition, Cattaneo also points to the possibility that Fra Mauro might have actually met de’ Conti in person, on account of his usage of certain toponyms (those regarding the names of cities on the Indian Ocean in particular), which present a different spelling than the one introduced by Bracciolini’s latinization of de’ Conti’s narrative (Cattaneo, 198). This observation has contributed to fuel the hypothesis of Fra Mauro’s reference to a “direct and personal conversation” with the merchant, rather than from de’ Conti’s account exclusively (201).143

142 Much of de’ Conti’s text can be traced in Fra Mauro’s map through a toponomastics analysis, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, Cattaneo points out that what may seem like an obvious borrowing, can at times yield surprising results: his case in point is the mention in the map of the “durian” a fruit not referenced in any other text prior to de’ Conti’s account and therefore seemingly derived from the Historia de varietate fortunae. Cattaneo’s careful analysis shows that such mention derives instead not from a single source but from a compilation of texts and oral sources (204).

143 This possibility is explored following documentation attesting the existence of a substantial loan of manuscripts between the Camaldolese monastery of San Michele in Murano-where Fra Mauro operated- and the neighboring monastery of San Mattia, which possessed a large manuscript collection.
Fra Mauro’s compositional technique, in relation to de’ Conti’s travel information exemplifies the complicated interplay between established authorities and emergent authoritative new voices. The set of knowledge introduced by eye-witness testimonies begins to be deemed complementary to that of the classics, but not without the occasional suspicion. Fra Mauro’s case however, shows an openness to incorporate newly available information and, simultaneously, the development of a critical stance toward Ptolemaic assumptions (260).

However, the complementary nature of sources exemplified by Fra Mauro remains, for Cattaneo, a trademark not only of Fra Mauro’s work, but also of Venice’s cultural milieux. His research on Fra Mauro’s compositional technique reflects a harmonious integration of the more systematic writings of classical authors, such as Ptolemy, with the experiential information provided by merchants, missionaries, diplomats and, in general, oral witnesses. Such harmony had not been achieved by perceiving a lack of discrepancies between the works of the antiques and contemporary eye-witness accounts (on the contrary Cattaneo insists that Fra Mauro was acutely aware of the usefulness of comparing the Geographia, for example, with the practical experience of the contemporary travellers), but rather by means of a programmatic integration of sources. Indeed a great distance exists between Fra Mauro’s methodology and the not so distant rejection of the testimony of an Ethiopian witness, at the Council of Florence, which was deemed unreliable, because it contrasted with the authorities of antiquity.145

144 In so doing Cattaneo juxtaposes his work to that of Pietro Falchetta, who interprets Fra Mauro’s work as the sign of an “epistemological revolution in modern cosmography” (Cattaneo 262).

145 The episode, mentioned earlier in this chapter and cited by many scholars, is detailed in Bartolomeo Nogara, ed., Scritti inediti e rari di Biondo Flavio. Edited by Bartolomeo Nogara, Rome: Poliglotta Vaticana, 1927, pp. 19–27. It should be noted however that the questioning of the four original Ethiopian travelers by the bishops appointed by Eugene IV was conducted by what Gautier Dalché calls: “rather inexpert” translators; the possibility therefore exists that another layer of interpretation in their interaction could possibly have muddled the Ethiopians’ words and significantly affected their responses (“The Reception of Ptolemy’s Geography,” vol. 3, part 1, 310).
Fra Mauro’s compositional technique creates however what Cattaneo describes as a kind of “intertextuality,” as Fra Mauro cited many direct sources while depending heavily on other, even more influential texts, that are not necessarily cited in the map. This is the case of de’ Conti’s narrative, since (together with Polo’s travelogue), Book IV of the *Historia de varietate fortunae* prominently figures as a major source of Fra Mauro’s work, without being necessarily acknowledged on the map.  

Whether fra Mauro’s interest for DeConti had been also motivated to a great extent by the perceived commercial utility of such information is entirely possible. However, as David Woodward points out in “Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change”, the permutations of cartography between the the medieval period and the Age of Discoveries do not follow a linear progression. While a “practical” focus might have helped steer, for example, textual selections in a specific direction (and thus perhaps facilitate the exclusion of the medieval “marvel tradition” in favor of detailed lists of commercial items), it is important to consider that the supremacy of text over image, mentioned earlier in this chapter, lasted long into the Renaissance, regardless of the specialized aims of single mapmakers. Woodward notes in this regard how ”classical and medieval written land itineraries continue to be used as tools for wayfinding and are not supplanted by graphical maps” (in navigation, for example, maps and charts were not used as much as written sailing directions).

---

146 In this regard, it is worth mentioning Cattaneo’s proposed interpretations for the lack of a direct, textual reference of Fra Mauro’s sources; on the one hand, he hypothesizes that, being his sources widely known texts, they would have been “immediately recognizable” to the readers, thus rendering the citation unnecessary. On the other hand, a hierarchy of sources could have existed, whereby the authority of direct witnesses (like the travellers Polo and de’ Conti) would have been already subordinated to that of the classical authors and therefore would not have necessitated direct mentioning in the text (236).
On the other hand, one of the reasons why first-hand accounts were precious to map makers, and increasingly seen as reliable, could be identified in their perceived capability to provide the cartographer with “narrative description of renewed trading possibilities” (20). If that were the case, cartography would be connected much closely with a narrative, fictional enterprise and the imagination it affords (which by extension would also include commerce) than with science.

Woodward’s position is strengthened by Denys Hay’s observations regarding the scientific aspects of the early modern period in his “Introduction” to *The New Cambridge Modern History*. Hay notes that if the Renaissance ushered in the modern world, we should find in it the roots of that most characteristic feature of the modern world—a preoccupation with physical science. Yet it can be shown that humanism “neglected science; advances in this field in the fifteenth century are confined to a handful of old fashioned nominalists in Paris and Averroists in Padua (2). Hay’s critical stance debunks any surface assumption about the unique specificity of early modern scientific advances. But, as he notes, his criticism does not intend to “dispose of the Renaissance” altogether, even when it traces substantial continuities with the preceding centuries (4). The velocity with which Italy exported its artistic, technical and scientific innovations to the North of Europe “suggests that forces were at work outside Italy” and that a common milieu was rapidly taking shape (5). The importance of such shared cultural formations is crucial in allowing the spreading of innovation. And as for the Renaissance connection and continuity with its medieval past, a word of caution is also appropriate as “it is not sufficient to find in other periods evidence for behaviour or institutions generally regarded as peculiar to a later age: one must also determine the degree to which particular attitudes flourished at any given
moment” (4). Hence we can recover the depth of the historical moment, without needing to overlook the deep pockets of innovation that emerge from the study of the preceding centuries.

Hay’s perspective on the relationship between narration and mapping is further complemented and strengthened by Eugenio Garin’s observations in *La cultura del Rinascimento*. While positing that from the fifteenth and all throughout the sixteenth century a scientist was first and foremost a “humanist,” a man of letters, Garin also underlines the (new) reading of the classics (juxtaposed to the “old” forms that were no longer found to convey any truth) that was at the root of a scientist formation. While a Renaissance scientist, observes Garin, might have perceived himself as free from the authority of theology and the church, what shaped and transformed him was, above all, the reading of classical, scientific thought. By underlining the essentiality of the early modern connection with the classics the threshold between philology and science is greatly blurred, as it was precisely through philology that the deepening of the study of the ancient Greeks’ scientific thought was made possible. In addition, the return to the classics had been permeated by modernity in contemporary perception: “Il ritorno delle memorie del passato, se anche si valeva delle tecniche dell’erudizione, se era anche filologia, si presentava con una forte carica di attualità, come un ideale vivo e operante nel mondo contemporaneo” “The return of the memories of the past, even if it employed the techniques of erudition and philology, appeared endowed with a strong sense of modernity, as an active force in the contemporary world” (Garin 27, my trans).

When considering specifically the shaping of cartography, as a possible example of a growing interest in what might be termed “scientific cartography,” a closer look at the humanists reception of Ptolemy proves illuminating, since this particular work was destined to become,
above all others, the highest authority for any cartographic enterprise during the fourteenth century and beyond.

Examining closely the various “milieus” in which Ptolemy’s *Geographia* was interpreted and disseminated, as Patrick Gautier-Dalché does with great attentiveness in *The Reception of Ptolemy’s Geography*, a view of history that eschews linear progression clearly emerges (287). Gautier-Dalché emphasizes how Ptolemy’s geographical (that is to say, astronomical) work had not necessarily been a modern discovery since Ptolemy’s *oeuvre* “had been mentioned uninterruptedly from the sixth c. onward” in Western Europe (287); it is established however that the *Geographia* in particular became the object of a renewed interest during the Renaissance, while undergoing a variegated reception, after Manuel Chrysoloras (and Jacopus Angelus’s) translation from Greek into Latin, which began “sometime before 1400” and was then completed between 1406 and 1409 (with the first printed edition appearing in Venice in 1475) (287).147

Gautier-Dalché thus distinguishes between a first period of Ptolemy’s reception, roughly identifiable with the first third of the fifteenth century and dominated almost exclusively by philological interest, and a later development, where other humanists would explore the “scientific” merit of the work. It is remarkable that, as he points out, the more empirical, “scientific” aspects of Ptolemy’s work were not the focus of the particular milieu that spearheaded Ptolemy’s influence on the geographical imagination of the Renaissance. Among the Florentine circle of Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini, who first introduced and disseminated Ptolemy’s geographical writings, the interest for Ptolemy’s work was essentially

---

147 The history of *Geography*’s translation is in itself extremely significative of the changes in reception that the text incurred during the early modern period. Gautier Dalché offers a detailed analysis of such process, beginning with Manuel Chrysoloras first translation through Jacopo Angeli’s revision and to Johannes Regiomontanus systematic critique in 1470 (292).
and primarily philological and documentarian in nature (309). Such observation reinforces for Gautier-Dalché the importance of a close examination of the specific cultural settings where Ptolemy’s work was being studied and promulgated, as the temptation to collate different and successive moments of elaboration would otherwise result in a deeply distorted historical perspective.

It is important to note that initially the interest of the Florentine humanists circle gravitated around Ptolemy’s text essentially on account of its perceived usefulness to better understand ancient, classical cultures. They found Ptolemy a useful tool to aid them in their effort to better comprehend the past, hence their interest in toponomastics studies (which translated, more specifically, in the identification of ancient toponyms).

Initially, Ptolemy’s Geografia was translated only in part, as the text itself was still privileged over the maps that it included (this might explain, at least in part, why the areas of the work that included cartographic projections and coordinates did not gain much attention until later). Even accounting for regional differences (the Florentine circle and the Venetian one had distinctive identities, as Cattaneo points out), the early humanists, explains Gautier-Dalché, did not seem to be interested in “questions relating to ‘projection’,” that is to say, “how a sphere might be depicted on a plane surface,” as “marine charts and circular mappaemundi were still considered perfectly viable representational methods” (312). It is generally accepted that marine

---

148 Famedly, in his funerary oration for Niccoli’s death, notes Woodward in “The Reception of Ptolemy’s Geography,” Poggio Bracciolini declared that “whatever the geographical region discussed, Niccoli could talk about it better than someone who had lived there” (293). Moreover, in De infelicitate principum Poggio described Niccoli in his library, examining a copy of the Geographia in the company of Cosimo de’ Medici and Carlo Marsuppini” (ibidem).

149 Ptolemy’s Geographia possibly comprised an introductory chapter followed by a planisphere, 10 maps of Europe, 4 of Africa and 12 maps of Asia. (27 maps are present in most editions of the Geographia), see U of Minnesota’s dedicated site: “Ptolemy’s World” http://gallery.lib.umn.edu/exhibits/show/ptolemy-s-world/tour-of-maps, retrieved on 02/19/2016.
charts and *portolani* were considered much more accurate cartographic depictions of the known world than maps, particularly because, as mentioned earlier, maps were already beginning to be considered for their value as ornamental objects.\(^{150}\)

P. D.A. Harvey’s explanation for this state of affairs is particularly insightful; he locates Ptolemy’s function in the history and development of maps in its providing a “secure, permanent framework” for the work of mapmakers. Whether or not Ptolemy’s projections were accurate seems to be less important than their function in consolidating a methodology that could be applied universally (“Maps” 370).

From Gautier-Dalché’s analysis one learns that a wide variety of approaches immediately emerged from the encounter between the Italian humanists and Ptolemy’s work, one that he characterizes in terms of either “openness” or “closeness” of mind. Some humanist circles left open the possibility of amendments to Ptolemy’s representation of the earth following the reports of first hand witnesses, others instead continued to hold Ptolemy’s authority indisputable, preferring to reject or challenge the discrepancies that arose from oral testimonies.\(^ {151}\) Nevertheless, these two currents of thought did have one thing in common: questions relating to “projection,” to how a sphere might be depicted on a plane surface, lay

\(^{150}\) The ornamental value of maps extended also to unadorned nautical charts, as Astengo demonstrates in his “The Renaissance Chart Tradition in the Mediterranean,” where he notes a “sharp upturn in number of people buying ornamental charts” (177). Astengo is however generally cautious in drawing broader conclusions from the number of surviving charts, observing that The discrepancy in the nr. of extant mss, for medieval charts versus renaissance ones could also have been influenced by the usura of used charts and the habit of recycling of them for book binding among other factors (ibidem). He further notes: “Although, as the annotations to these charts make clear, their purchasers were often those who worked the sea, it seems highly unlikely that these decorative charts could have been used for actual navigation; not a single extant chart of this kind bears traces of such use, and the large water stains on some of the surviving charts are not necessarily proof that they were kept on board ship for a long time (ibidem).

\(^{151}\) It should be noted that the reliability of eye-testimony was not absolute, as the same constraints that applied to literary sources (the possibility of interferences and manipulations during the many phases of their transcriptions, the fallacies of post-facto memories) are indeed of concern. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that the “errors” in Ptolemaic measurements and projections proved to be a hindrance to the development of modern cartography (“The Reception of Ptolemy’s *Geography*” 285)
outside their range of interests, as they did for most humanists, leaving an essential part of the *Geographia* yet to find a use” (312).

When considering most of the extant manuscripts of the *Geographia*, Gautier-Dalché also surmises that they “do not reproduce the maps and contain only the text of books 2 to 7, with no explanations of cartographic projection, no coordinates, and no maps” (298). Since those were the “working manuscripts” that would have had a different wider circulation than the prestigious books of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* (destined instead to adorn the *studioli* of notable European princes or noblemen), one derives that the popular reception of the work aligns itself with the interests of the Florentine humanist circles and even further undermines the “scientific” implications of the work itself.152

A consideration of the popular impact of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* must also comprise an analysis of Andrea da Barberino’s *Guerrin Meschino*, a popular romance that appears to be incorporating many references to the Ptolemaic text. Based on Gloria Allaire’s authoritative scholarship on this work, Gautier-Dalché hypothesizes a direct influence of the *Geographia* on Barberino’s text. He locates the author’s interest for the Ptolemy’s geographical work in his desire to give his writing “a luster of truth and realism” (“The Reception of Ptolemy’s *Geography*” 298).153 To this effect Barberino juxtaposed the naming of remote and unfamiliar localities in the East with Ptolemaic place names that might have been more

---

152 Though it must be noted that French humanists carried out a second phase of development in the history of the reception of the work (mentioned above), a phase that specifically consisted in the development of a scientific interest in Ptolemy’s *Geographia*.

immediately recognizable by his audience. Should that be the case, it follows that popular audiences were familiar with Ptolemy’s work, or his reputation enough to grant “three important conclusions with regard to the reception of Ptolemy’s work” (298): One would be the aforementioned, broader recognition of Ptolemy’s work “not solely by a restricted group of humanists” (ibidem); another, the fact that “for this public—as for the humanists—Ptolemaic cartography and geography ultimately comprised a stock of place-names” (ibidem). Finally, it is possible that Barberino clearly acknowledged the complementary nature of Ptolemaic place-names in relation to contemporary geography (ibidem).

As the history of the reception of Ptolemy shows, the work’s enormous impact on fifteenth century cartography had to do primarily with the imaginative possibilities that its text afforded; only during a second phase did its methods for calculating projections become of interest and, above all, their implementation was slowly taken up by cartographers displaying various degrees of deference to Ptolemy’s text. The questions surrounding the influence of de’ Conti’s travel narrative on contemporary cartography are intimately tied with the reception of Ptolemy’s geographical writings, as the Geographia became, through its humanist discovery and appraisal, an eminently authoritative text, the background against which all new information becoming available had to be measured. De’ Conti’s narration, often juxtaposed to Marco Polo’s on account of their shared destination in editorial practises of the time, became of interest as a source of information on South-East Asia, about which little was known. The work of Fra Mauro, here analyzed as a case in point, shows the extent to which such narratives were incorporated in his cutting-edge cartographical work, and also underlines the power of the

---

154 The question of Barberino’s sources has not been settled, as he could have been used portulans and nautic charts as well. Gautier-Dalchê adds that “It would seem, however, that the names were taken from the text rather than from the maps (names that occur together in the text occur together in the poems)” (135).
written word in conveying available geographical information but also, and perhaps more importantly, in expanding and affording the imagination.

In *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* Geraldine Heng poses an important question about the genre of travel narrative, a subset on her view of the broader category of romance, having to do with the specific effect that a travel narrative had, effects that no other forms of writing were able to achieve. She underlines how “pushing against the frontiers of scientific knowledge, [a travel narrative] ends up innovating new disciplines, knowledges and techniques for a future world” (242). Such innovation is carried out particularly in the romance’s long-term effects (prompting action, allowing further discoveries) and de’ Conti’s travelogue represents a case in point, functioning simultaneously as a tool to re-ignite the imagination and as a means to enrich contemporary cartographical production.

In his “Mediterraneo e Oceano Indiano. Atti del VI colloquio internazionale di storia marittima,” Jacques Le Goff establishes an opposition between the importance of the medieval marvel tradition and its loss of significance during the “time of the merchants.” For Le Goff the imagination of India encompasses a medieval “collective sensibility,” given that its representation has been broadly diffused in all strata of society, through visual arts and literature alike. He argues that its medieval perception based on the enclosure of the Indian ocean had been necessary in order to maintain and fuel the exoticism of the East.⁵⁵ Le Goff’s interpretation helps to account for the marked ignorance of the openness of the Indian ocean displayed by fifteenth century *mappae mundi* (including Fra Mauro’s), despite the availability throughout western

---

⁵⁵ See chapter III, p.4.
Christianity of first-hand accounts by missionaries and merchants alike, by anchoring it in an ideological presupposition.\textsuperscript{156}

Le Goff’s argument suggests that the power of fictionality in serving an important need of its readership (a need that would be explicated at various levels, as the following chapter more specifically details), goes hand in hand with the very real desire to amend and correct misinformation. However, just as cartographical maps slowly acquire their function as practical tools, long retaining their initial communicative function, so travel narratives like de’ Conti’s continued to cling to the power of storytelling. It has been my contention therefore that the influence of de’ Conti’s narrative in contemporary cartography represents yet another testimony to the enduring significance of the power of fiction, which Bracciolini skillfully contributed to augment.

The stylistic and structural elements that characterize de’ Conti’s narration (many of which constitute a shared patrimony among preceding and contemporary travel accounts) will be investigated in the following chapter (Chapter III), where the combination of exoticism and eroticism emerges within the text and in relation to Bracciolini’s own writing as well. The focus on the coupling of erotic suggestions with exotic depictions of indigenous rituals ushers in the bodily depictions as textual moments of great significance. Chapter III considers specific instances of embodiment in de’ Conti’s narration and situates them within a larger discourse of identity definition, one in which consumption and appropriation of the text by its readers also play a foundational role.

\textsuperscript{156} The fifteenth-century maps mentioned by Le Goff include the fifteenth century Catalan Atlas of the Biblioteca Estense in Modena, Italy and the 1492 Behaim’s globe. Le Goff also locates in 1488, the date of Diaz’s return to Lisbon, the historical moment when cartography begun to reflect the new geographic knowledge of the Indian coast (258).
Chapter III

Manufacturing Desire: Eroticism in Niccoló de’ Conti’s *India recognita*

As medieval and early modern Western European travel narratives enjoyed a great diffusion throughout Europe, both before and after the advent of printing, their popularity has been alternatively ascribed to the widespread and growing interest for the subject matter on the one hand, as well as to the narratives’ ability to exploit common tropes of fiction, on the other. These tropes are combined in intricate and skillful ways in many such narratives.

De’ Conti’s travel account constitutes indeed a case in point, as the availability of new information about little-known territories (such as south-east Asia), coupled with the existing paucity of information about these remote lands, played a significant role in fostering interest in the reading public. In addition, Poggio Bracciolini’s shaping of the narrative lent it certain literary qualities that I intend to highlight and probe in this chapter.

Given the general popularity of travel accounts, one might be compelled to

---

157 Sources of information about South East Asia were particularly rare during the fifteenth century and de’ Conti’s account remains one of the largest sources of information; Pero Tafur, a nobleman from Andalucia also begins a three-years expedition to the Holy Land that overlaps with de’ Conti’s for a brief time during their permanence in Egypt. See Bellini, G. ed. *Pero Tafur: Andanzas e viajes por diversas partes del mundo adivos*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1986.
wonder about their specific rhetorical features, how they managed to become popular readings, and what structural and narrative elements elicited common responses from their readership throughout the development of what some scholars have dubbed a “genre” in its own right.

Some of their shared features, which were immediately and widely decodable by a given community of readers, can indeed be described as common features of western European travel accounts, as they are often present -in various permutations- in many versions of these narratives. De’ Conti’s travel account is no exception as it exploits some of the rhetorical tropes of the genre (such as the wondrous flora and fauna) while downplaying or eliminating others (marvels, biblical elements). It also displays what Paul Freedman dubs a late medieval awareness of the fact that the exotic East was within reach and ultimately profitable:

By the later Middle Ages it was clear that some people were actually making money from these marvels, often unworthy people (seen from a Northern European perspective), such as Muslims and Venetians. The origins, value and supply of aromatics or precious stones were fascinating in a manner that was not quite the same as the interest generated by

---

158 Contemporary audiences responses to the narratives are as varied as the narratives’ different versions; in many cases modern critical editions of the text have not been issued.

159 Though there is disagreement as to whether these narratives should be considered a literary “genre” given their heterogeneous forms, wide dissemination and popular success legitimate their consideration as a group, at least for the purposes of an historical analysis. Scott Westrem for example, a scholar who is extremely attentive to the narratives’ variety, seconds the legitimacy of the term’s usage at the time of Johannes Witte De Hese’s travels (a contemporary to de’ Conti). He writes in *Broader Horizons: Johannes de Witte de Hese’s ‘Itinerarius’ and Medieval Travel Narratives*: “this book [Witte de Hese’s *Itinerarius*] is evidence of the existence, or at least the nascence of travel writing as a literary genre in the later Middle Ages” (16). See also Rubiés’s observations in “Travel Writing as a Genre” in Rubiés, Joan-Pau. *Travellers and Cosmographers: Studies on the History of Early Modern Travel and Ethnology*, Ashgate Variorum, 2007. Among those who stress the lack of conformity of medieval travel writings, see also Kim M. Phillips *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2013.

160 Some have been mapped by travel narratives’ scholars attempting different taxonomies, such as Mary Baine Campbell or Michelle Gueret-Laferte. Among the most prominent, commonly circulating, Western European tropes are the classical tradition of the monstrous races (of Plinian derivation), elements of the Alexander cycle, the scriptural figures of Gog and Magog and the Christian traditions of St. Thomas and Prester John.
unicorns or Gymnosophists” (“Locating the Exotic” 29)\textsuperscript{161}

The narrative’s popularity was significant throughout Europe, particularly after its autonomous publication in 1492 with the title India recognita. Now decontextualized from Bracciolini’s treatise on the instability of human fate, its presence has been documented both in the libraries of princes and humanists such as Henry the Navigator or the Florentine circles of humanists; in addition however, the travelogue became a popular “ingredient” of hodgepodge collections of travel lore (written in Latin), sold by peddlers and known as “chapbooks”.\textsuperscript{162} Notably, after the autonomous publication of Book IV of Historia de varietate fortunae, the narrative gained favor particularly as a popular reading, despite (or perhaps on account of) its initial “learned” placement in Bracciolini’s treatise Historia de varietate fortunae.\textsuperscript{163}

The concern of this chapter is therefore to investigate de’ Conti’s narrative as a cultural signifier, attending to its rhetorical strategies as a means to increase our understanding of the late medieval literary imagination, but also contextually exploring the ways in which the narrative succeeds in “manufacturing desire,” to borrow Geraldine Heng’s apt terminology.\textsuperscript{164} Eroticism is a feature that Bracciolini seems to exploit in this narrative, thus its functions will be analyzed both as a rhetorical mechanism and also contextualized in regard to Bracciolini’s opus. A particular attention is given here to bodily depictions in Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s

---

\textsuperscript{161} Regarding the perceived profitability of the East, Kim M. Phillips argues instead in Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing 1245-1510 that during the late Middle Ages the prospect of colonization of the far East was not yet contemplated by the European imagination: “Subjugation of central, south, east or south-east Asia was not on any European’s mind” (73).


\textsuperscript{163} For more details on the narrative’s textual tradition see Chapter I of this dissertation.

account, pursuing the hypothesis that eroticism might provide an alternative, parallel mode of
signification to a more analytical ("scientific") mode of representation.

In *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* Geraldine
Heng brings questions of rhetoric and style to the fore, as she analyzes the textual strategies at
work in the widely circulated travel account known as Mandeville’s *Travels*; she interrogates
“the circuit of pleasure” that the *Travels* is able to create, probing the ways in which the narrative
further establishes and impacts “imagined relations with otherness” (255). Scott Westrem’s
study on Johannes de Witte de Hese’s *Itinerarius*, a late medieval text that “is evidence that by
1400, the action of travel could drive fiction,” also offers a useful characterization of textual
strategies at play (*Broader Horizons*, 11). There are, for Westrem, specific features that a
medieval travel writer might use in order to establish authority and to “speak of the Other,”
among them the integration of the new by ways of rationalization on the one hand, and
connection with the old on the other.165

While this strategy allows for both a demystification and a neutralization of the new, it
also aids in the creation of an established community of readers who could recognize and
appropriately respond to the rhetorical mechanisms employed in the texts.166 However, as
Westrem points out, since a travel narrative undergoes extensive modifications during the course
of its transmission, resulting each time in a different text, the rhetorical strategies employed each
time might also vary considerably resulting in several, different texts (*Trade, Travel and

---
165 Guéret-Laferté describes in *Sur le routes de l'Empire mongol* a “rhetoric of alterity” consisting of very
specific features, emerging from a shared vision of the world. “These are maneuvers to effectively rationalize the
marvelous, integrating what is novel into the existing body of Christian tradition” (Westrem 15).
166 Westrem, Scott (ed.) *Broader Horizons: Johannes Witte de Hese’s Itinerarius and Medieval Travel Narratives*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America, (15); Guéret-Laferté, M. *Sur le routes de
Explorations 650). Even so, the existence of a bond of faith between the writer and its audience remains paramount as “only when a traveler’s experience is accepted at least tentatively as legitimate can travel lessons—whether meant to be informative or entertaining—be heard” (Broader Horizons 14).

When considering late medieval Western depictions of India, a place that, writes Freedman, “most completely represents the exotic in the medieval imagination,” the pervasiveness of a marvel tradition of classical origins may seem to be in contrast with the strategy of “rationalization” suggested by Westrem (“Locating the Exotic” 1).167

Famously, Jacques Le Goff’s view of the Indian Ocean as “oneiric Orient,” focuses on the East’s alleged irrationality.168 Seemingly in opposition to this perspective, Freedman claims instead that a calculated rationality pervades medieval apprehensions of the East and that “medieval thinkers did not just credulously pile up marvels on the basis of classical or Biblical authority but rather displayed a characteristic passion for order” (25). Incidentally, it is worth remembering that, as recent scholarship on Western European encounters with the Mongols has highlighted, the encounter with the East had also been informed by reciprocity. As Peter Jackson observes representing the travellers exclusively “encumbered by their own cultural baggage simply renders an incomplete picture of the exchange”. [...] Instead, “their mental universe [...] interacted with the information they acquired on the spot, in the form of other people’s “folk knowledge” (338). Thus, to the list of classical marvels and biblical tropes that constituted the


explorers’ interpretive horizon, one must add for instance a “common fund of tales circulating in
the Indian ocean basin,” Chinese and Muslim sources, borrowed in the encounters with other
Eastern traders during the friars’ lengthy permanence in the East. In light of these observations
Le Goff’s oneiric horizon betrays the hegemonic perspective from which it arises, while
simultaneously highlighting the rhetorical effectiveness of the narratives: it is by means of
“storytelling” (and the rhetorical strategies associated with it) that the narratives captivate their
readership, despite and together with their informative and factual validity.

Furthermore, Freedman connects the process of “rationalization” that late medieval travel
narratives increasingly display to a shift in perception occurring during the later middle ages
(beginning with thirteenth century narratives), when the significance of the exotic became
inextricably tied with the reality of economic gains (and consequently also of political
expansion): “In particular the stories about gems and spices had economic implications in the era
of Mandeville or Marco Polo in a way that they did not in the time of Isidore of Seville” (29).

Incidentally, it is important to mention that geography as well underwent a
transformation in scope and ambition, a direct consequence of such realization, even though
there is ample evidence that travellers did not rely exclusively on maps and mappaemundi. In
this regard, Freedman acutely notices that cartography’s lack of precision did not become a
hindrance to geographical exploration, as one might have expected; instead, it provided incentive
and motivation despite the risks inherent in the explorations, by fueling the imagination with its
loyalty to the classical tradition of the wonders of the East. Thus the fascination provided by the

---

170 “There was always a practical understanding of geography apart from the learned tradition” (Freedman 31). The development of medieval cartography is a vast subject, to which Chapter II contributes a circumstantial analysis.
exoticization of the East seems to have been fueled and not displaced by the economic implications of the travels, as “hyperbolic visions of wealth functioned not as vestigial obstacles to the truth but as the necessary motivation for undertaking ambitious sea voyages” (32). Additionally, exoticism and otherness are separate conceptual categories, even if at times, they overlap; as Freedman notes, Marco Polo’s depiction of China offers for example a portrait of a land that is foreign but “unmarvellous” and “unexotic” (Out of the East 32).

Nevertheless, both desire and imagination alike largely continue to fuel Western medieval travellers’ depictions, continuing to allow for, with Supriya Chaudhuri’s words, a “limitless extension of desire into space” (277). For Chaudhuri “the fifteenth century encounter between a merchant and a humanist leaves little by way of a ‘humanist’ legacy” but had much more formidable consequences in terms of the development of trade and conquest (278). Strategically, because India “was not classifiable under any one set of rules,” the early humanists tried to “organize this space in the imagination by linking it to the accounts of the ancients” (264). The India that is thus created for the European imagination is both “strange to sense and accessible to reason, both marvellous and knowable, both distant and reachable” (265).

With a focus on literariness and desire Geraldine Heng’s taxonomy of the structural components of travel writing as a genre is useful to help decode the structure of de’ Conti’s narrative as well. In relation to Mandeville’s Travels, Heng describes the “rhythmic structure” of the text as exhibiting “a functional mechanism of scaling” that seems to constitute its preferred way of incorporating difference (Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy 251). The “studied alternation of familiarity and difference” originates a rhythm that allows the reader to pleasurably partake of the creation of otherness without being threatened by it, while at the same time reaffirming her own cultural centrality. Such practice,
points out Heng, is “carried on with a regularity that assimilates it to a scientific method. The practice of punctual, reliable reference back to the known and familiar is so habitual that it is entirely unobtrusive” (255).

These stylistic mechanisms can be easily located in Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s journey as well. The sea in the Persian Gulf for example, is described as agitated, much like the more familiar Mediterranean, “by its waves’ flux and reflux” (my trans.), “[...] ubi fluit mare ac refluit more Oceani nostri” (Guéret-Laferté, De L’Inde 51-52) and only then followed by the first mention of suttee, the Indian widows’ ritual suicide. Elsewhere in the narration the much coveted ginger plant is described through various, un-familiar indigenous appellations, but also through a straightforward comparison with the more familiar enula campana, a well-known plant at the time; in another passage the navigation to the Andaman islands (which are conflated by de’ Conti into one island: “Andamania”) is punctuated by the familiar indication of its perimeter, only to be followed by the mention of its inhabitants’ cannibalism. This descriptive rhythm, alternating the familiar with the foreign, is only sporadically interrupted to make room for lengthy, dedicated descriptions, whenever the alterity of the custom being introduced makes it necessary.

171 “Uxores quoquo comburuntur cum uiris, una aut plures, quo funus celebrius fiat” (De L’Inde 64-65), “the wives are burned with their husbands, one or more in order to render the funeral more well-attended” (my trans.). A more exhaustive presentation of this custom will be taken up by Bracciolini further in the narration when describing “media India” (481-501).
172 “His in regionibus gingiber oritur, quod belledi, gebeli et helli uulgo appellatur. Radices sunt arborum duorum cubitorum altitudine, foliis magnis, instar enulae [...]” (De L’Inde 70-72) “In those regions grows the ginger, also commonly called belledi, gebeli and helli. The roots are two cubits high, with big leaves like the Inula plant [...]” (my trans.).
173 “Relicta a dextris insula Andamania, hoc est Auri Insula, octingentorum milium passuum ambitu, quam incolunt antropofagiae” (De L’Inde 126-128) “Having left the Andaman island to the left, that is to say the Golden Isle, whose circumference is eight hundred miles long, which is inhabited by cannibals” (my trans.).
174 It is the case of the Indian ritual of suttee—the burning of widows together with their dead husbands—which I analyze later in this chapter.
It is commonly agreed that, given the complexity of their authorial histories and the intricacies of their editorial tradition, late medieval and early modern travel narratives must be regarded first and foremost with an eye to their nature as essentially mediated works, equally shaped not only by the concurring agencies of the travellers who journeyed afar and the writers who-at times- collected their testimonies, but also by those who listened to such accounts, (whether as witnesses of a performative street act or simply as private readers).\textsuperscript{175} Simon Gaunt, writing about the intertextuality of Polo’s *Devisement du monde*, observes in this regard that the linguistic contamination of the medieval text also fundamentally shapes it at the narrative level.

As Shureka Davis notes, the text is also subservient, to a certain extent, to its intended readership’s interest.\textsuperscript{176} With this awareness, Gaunt reveals such connection quite clearly in his analysis of Polo’s *Devisement*’s textual tradition: “Although most scholarship has focused on the early vernacular versions of the *Devisement*, by far the most widely disseminated version was the Latin translation by the Dominican Fra Pipino, which survives in more than seventy manuscripts, as well as being the source of several, later vernacular translations” (*Marco Polo* 19). When comparing Pipino’s Latin version with other manuscript redactions, many substantial changes emerge, among which Gaunt notes a pervasive “anti-Islamic and pro Christian tone,” missing-or being more limited- in other redactions of Polo’s travel narrative (19).\textsuperscript{177} Pipino’s Latin version was “clearly destined for a clerical, learned audience” and it possibly circulated “among orders

\textsuperscript{175} To render the list complete many other agents should of course be added, from the copyists to the illuminators for the manuscripts’ tradition, to the translators, editors and publishers that were involved in the passage from manuscript to book.

\textsuperscript{176} “What was to be included in a text had to be selected, and the material was articulated in a particular way in a finite space, within the conventions of the genre, and with an eye to the work’s intended audience” (“The Wondrous East in the Renaissance Geographical Imagination” 216). \textsuperscript{177} Particularly in the Franco-Italian, generally thought to be the oldest copy of the progenitor of the text’s early manuscript tradition (19).
that had missions in Asia” (20). While Gaunt’s study draws attention to the weight that audience’s expectation have in shaping and informing the text’s composition, it simultaneously points to the instability and shifting nature of the medieval body of travel compositions.\textsuperscript{178}

In the case of de’ Conti’s travel narrative, it is highly implausible that the broader papal agenda of reunification with the Christians communities of the East would not have weighed on Bracciolini’s authorship.\textsuperscript{179} However, in addition to the Church’s interest, the extensive fortune of the travel narrative as popular literature also helped account for some of its most notable features.

Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s travels does not stray substantially from the conventions borrowed from the classical and medieval marvel tradition; however, it does have a matter-of-fact approach to the description of customs and people, conveying detailed measurements and plenty of botanical observations. The monstrous races are almost entirely absent (rather the emphasis lies on strange animals and unusual tribal customs), and so is the description of the fabled palace of Prester John; we learn instead of the Indian location of the tomb of Saint Thomas and its richly decorated basilica, the cannibalistic customs of the inhabitants of Sumatra (“Taprobana”), the Indian ritual of widow-burning (suttee) and the plentiful spices, jewels and gold, as well as the exotic flora and fauna of each newly visited land.

Even if scholars have often underlined Bracciolini’s restraint in incorporating mirabilia in

\textsuperscript{178} The matter is further complicated by the fact that, as Neal Harris points out, soon after the emergence of the printing press, a conflation between manuscripts and printed books occurred; hand-copying still constituted the preferred method of maintaining text availability in absence of direct ownership: “Studi recenti hanno rivelato molto sulla intercambiabilità fra manoscritto e stampa nei primi anni dell’esistenza della nuova \textit{ars artificialiter scribendi}, mentre gli esempi riconosciuti di manoscritti tratti da antigrafi a stampa ormai sono numerosi” (94n10). Harris, N. “Sopravvivenze e scomparse delle testimonianze del \textit{Morgante} di Luigi Pulce” in \textit{Paladini di carta: il modello cavalleresco fiorentino}. Roma: Bulzoni, 2006.

\textsuperscript{179} This view is clearly laid out by Francis M. Rogers in his \textit{The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumors in the age of Discovery}. U of Minnesota P, 1962.
the *Historia de varietate fortunae*, particularly when considering its relationship with the rest of the treatise, his literary awareness clearly emerges in the retention and exploitation of the exotic depiction of the marvels of the Orient, whether it is the allure of its geography or the abundance of spices and plants considered profitable for commerce.\(^{180}\)

Exoticism emerges as a defined characteristic of de’ Conti’s narrative; it manifests itself overtly at times (as in the passages that describe the customs of the indigenous inhabitants of India analyzed later in this chapter), while at other times it surfaces in more subtle and less conspicuous ways.\(^{181}\) These common features were among those that granted the text its appeal as literature of entertainment, as it is testified not only by its reappropriation and inclusion in popular Latin chapbooks disseminated by peddlers, but also by the fact that the narrative has likely served as inspirational content for other, “loftier” genres, such as, for example, fifteenth century Italian chivalric literature.

One notable connection with Italian chivalric literature can be found in *Guerrino il Meschino*, Andrea da Barberino’s chivalric romance, a work destined to exert considerable influence on Italian chivalric literature of the following two centuries. The narrative, composed in early fifteenth century Florence by a learned author who was also a professional street

\(^{180}\) Merisalo Outi however, considering Book IV of the *Historia de varietate fortunae* mainly in light of its function within the entire treatise, maintains that the book is “less exotic that one would think” (19). Outi views the description of the East as “neutral” or “clearly sympathetic” and stresses its juxtaposition to the European turbulences described in book 2 and 3 of *Historia de varietate fortunae*. In this light Book IV functions more as a commentary on fifteenth century Europe, to be achieved through a generally positive presentation of the Far East and India; Outi’s perspective downplays the exotic elements of the travel narrative, which have instead been highlighted by the book’s diffusion as popular material for chapbooks (see the textual history of Book IV, after its publication as *India recognita*, in Chapter II of this dissertation).

\(^{181}\) One could make the case that even the depiction of monsters is not only a trope of the genre but also an example of exoticism in it of itself. Surekha Davies’s notion of “temporal Orientalism,” suggests for example that considering monsters imaginary “constructs the identity of modernity through a particular notion of ‘objective’ science”. “Why won’t we look images properly? The Visual History of Monsters and its Discontents” *Futures of the Past 2017: February 17*. GW MEMSI, 1 Feb 2017. www.gwmemsi.com/2016/12/futures-of-past-2017-february-17.html.
performer (storyteller), is imbued with contemporary geographical knowledge (239-240). Its transmission has been amply documented by both Marco Villoresi and, more recently, Gloria Allaire. Their work attest the extensive circulation of Barberino’s epics and romances during the 14th century and beyond. In fact, Allaire points specifically to the great popularity of his opus in the context of an analysis of the narrative’s critical reception, declaring in “Andrea da Barberino: prospettive vecchie, nuove e lontane”: “pensando alla longevità’ e alla vasta circolazione delle opere del maestro Andrea, credo sia lecito parlare dei Reali di Francia, ma specialmente di Guerrino il Meschino come i best seller del primo Rinascimento” (36).

Furthermore, Allaire also highlights the presence in Guerrino of a pervasive desire to describe exotic places and peoples, a shared characteristic of medieval travel literature at large, and one that Andrea da Barberino’s writing also displays. Among the various sources from which Andrea da Barberino’s chivalric work derives its inspiration, many common loci of western medieval travel narratives are to be found in Guerrino; from classical mythology to the Letter of Prester John, from the Alexander Romance to the “wonders of the East”, the work incorporates both learned and popular material. Allaire states that the concern with geography in Guerrino is so pervasive that at times the text’s tone resembles that of “an actual relazione di viaggio”.

Notably, Allaire points out the probability that Andrea da Barberino might have listened directly to “the accounts of Florentine pilgrims returning from foreign lands” as “the

---

183 Regarding the popularity of Guerrino, see especially: Allaire. G. Andrea da Barberino and the Language of Chivalry (123).
185 “Andrea’s cartographical erudition reaches its apex in Guerrino, certain episodes of which reveal the tone of an actual relazione di viaggio” (17). Gautier-Dulché also underlines in “The Reception of Ptolemy’s Geography” the precision of Guerrino’s geography (298).
high frequency of geographical references in his text are from written sources like Ptolemy but also reflect the lively contemporary interest in travel for commercial or religious purposes” (9).

While I have not found a scholarly analysis that is specifically dedicated to the examination of de’ Conti’s travelogue’s direct influence on the Italian chivalric romance, the possibility that Bracciolini’s text might have served as a source (directly or indirectly) for the purposes of establishing “geographical exactitude” (a “proven” concern of Guerrino’s author), is worth investigating.

As Gautier-Dalché observes in “The reception of Ptolemy’s Geography”, Andrea da Barberino’s usage of “name-places,” borrowed from Ptolemy, was part of a compositional strategy aimed at mixing authoritative, Ptolemy-derived, geographical notations with names that his audience could have easily recognized. Resorting to Ptolemy’s Geographia, Gautier-Dalché hypothesizes that such inclusions might have been motivated by:

- a desire to give a luster of truth and realism to these adventures of fictional characters set in an indeterminate historical period, supplying ancient names—above all, in Asia and Africa, remote worlds in which relatively few contemporary place-names were known—that are used in conjunction with names more familiar to the poet’s audience (298).

Andrea da Barberino’s literary ambitions, as shown in Guerrino, informed the creation of a work that displayed at once the characteristics of verisimilitude as well as maintaining the story-telling appeal of fiction.¹⁸⁶ Notably, Franco Cardini’s reading offers a different perspective, as he points

¹⁸⁶ Scholars attentive to the geographical sources of Andrea da Barberino have historically been split into two groups: those considering the sources by and large imaginary and those that, by tracing the influence of contemporary sources (such as portolani) in da Barberino’s work, make an argument for geographical authenticity, despite the inevitable and obvious difficulties in identifying medieval place-names amidst copying errors and changes in their contemporary usage. For a more extensive bibliography on this topic, see Allaire, G. Andrea da Barberino and the Language of Chivalry.
specifically to the persistence of a “long, uninterrupted medieval tradition that would still be
nourished by ancient, classical myths (the Alexander tradition, Gog and Magog, the earthly
paradise)”, alongside the geographical culture that the re-discovery of Ptolemy brought to light
(194). In this perspective, even when the textual references are to name-places that are cross-
referenced by contemporary travel accounts (such as the island of Taprobane (now Sumatra), for
example), their mention would simply be necessitated by a widely shared, general and broad
circulation of ideas and information, rather than by the author’s specific knowledge of first-hand
information (201). Cardini acknowledges the possibility of a didactic intent in Guerrino
(which would have prompted its author to incorporate Ptolemy’s name-places for a purpose of
exactitude and education), but his emphasis remains on the “fabulous dimension” of travels. The
experience of travel—whether mythical or geographical—becomes therefore secondary to its role
as an overarching structure on which the entire romance rests, so much so that Ptolemy’s
*Geographia* becomes, in this perspective, nothing more than a source among many others, a
frequently mined “quarry” of toponymic material”.  

Furthermore, the interaction between travel narratives and chivalric literature constitutes
yet another example of a broader connection between humanism and travel writing at large. The
case of de’ Conti’s oral deposition to Bracciolini is not unique, as other late medieval travelers’
journeys, as Joan-Pao Rubiés observes in “Travel writing and humanistic culture: a blunted
impact?,” have been framed by a learned, writing, intellectual elite. Within a complex network of
humanist agendas, the practices that characterized humanistic connection with the classical past

---

188 Cardini traces Da Barberino’s textual debt to Domenico Silvestri’s *De Insulis et earum proprietatibus*, but considers its symbolic meaning a token of a “fantastic imaginary” (200)
189 “Una cava di materiale toponomastico di riporto da saccheggiare” (205).
inevitably shaped their approach to first-hand testimonies of explorations. Thus, philological research, as well as attention to detail and faithful reproduction, merged into the shaping of a critical methodology that will later inform Gianbattista Ramusio’s *Navigationi et viaggi*, one of the most extensively circulated early modern collection of travel accounts. This has some notable implications for the study of popular transmission of travel narratives during the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento; on the one hand, humanists’ concerns (and a certain amount of straightforward curiosity for the newly available material, as in Bracciolini’s case) shaped their renditions of oral accounts and of previously available geographical narratives, on the other hand, “concepts and strategies formulated by popular elites” inevitably had direct influence on popular writers (141).¹⁹⁰

*Guerrino il Meschino* and Book IV of the *Historia de varietate fortunae* are both examples of popular literature, differing in format, but sharing a keen geographical interest. While the first enlists “new” geographical material in order to revive travel’s “mythical import”, the second exhibits the stylistic characteristic of Bracciolini’s prose.¹⁹¹ In the description of the exotic places visited by de’ Conti, the erotic vein that at times characterizes Bracciolini’s writing seems to capitalize on the frequent coupling of exoticism and eroticism.

The combination deserves a deeper analysis, particularly in light of its significance as a building block of the narrative’s function as a cultural mediator. The characterization of the East as a land of unrestrained pleasures constitutes a tried-and-true feature of medieval (and classical) Western depictions of the East. However, erotic depictions are also not uncommon in

---

¹⁹⁰ See the transformation of Polo’s *Devisement* in Ramusio’s edition as detailed by Scott Westrem in *Trade, Travel and Exploration* and Simon B Gaunt in “La contaminazione originale del testo medievale: l’esempio del *Devisement du Monde*.” *Critica del testo* vol.3, no 17, 2014, pp.9-23.

¹⁹¹ Early scholarship on de’ Conti’s travel narrative was particularly concerned with locating specific textual instances where Bracciolini’s interpretation emerges. See Introduction.
Bracciolini’s own opus. In Bracciolini’s rendering of de’ Conti’s travels erotic depictions are present in the representation of foreign sexual customs (the bells of Burma) or in that of noteworthy marital practices (suttee).

While historically Bracciolini’s eroticism had often been a cause of editorial concern, at times effectively culminating in censorship, the erotic tone of Book IV of Historia de varietate fortunae has been read more recently as a trademark of the humanist’s literary style. Michèle Guéret-Laferté observed for example that Poggio’s ‘tone” can be identified precisely in his taste “pour les anecdotes licencieuses”: “C’est son épicurisme, voire son goût pour les anecdotes licencieuses, qui l’amène à s’attarder longuement sur la coutume ses sonnailles chez les habitants d’Ava ou a mentionner de manière réitérée les propensiones libidineuses des habitants de l’Inde afin d’expliquer la pratique répandue de la polygamie” (De L’Inde 42). More scholarly attention has been devoted to Bracciolini’s Liber facetiarum (also known in his vernacular version as Facezie).

The structural function of eroticism in the Liber has been examined, both in connection with the medieval tradition of exempla and also with Cicero’s writings on language (especially in De Oratore). Francesco Tateo for example locates the generative principle of the Liber facetiarum in Bracciolini’s general interest for the comical aspects of language. Tateo maintains that in seeking an active connection with Cicero’s prose, Bracciolini manifests his interest in Latin as a living language (“lingua viva”). What’s more, the choice of rendering the comical tradition of Medieval anecdotes (partially also integrated with the sermon tradition) in Latin, reflects Bracciolini’s belief that the classical language’s expressivity would have not been lost to

192 Most representative is his popular collection of jocose tales or anecdotes, known as Liber facetiarum, together with his “Letter from Baden to Niccolò Niccoli”, depicting the baths in Baden and focuses on the customs of those attending) Garin, E., ed. Prosatori latini del Quattrocento, Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1952 (226-229).
a popular audience. Nevertheless, this resulted for Tateo in a failed experiment as popular favor shifted rapidly towards the *Liber facetiarum*’s vernacular version (*Facezie*).\(^{193}\)

In the Veneto/Friuli area of Italy Book IV of *Historia de varietate fortunae* reached a certain popularity, as the manuscript tradition, with at least eight extant examples, well attests.\(^{194}\) Among them, the manuscript once owned by Guarnerio D’Artegna (Bibl. Guarneriana 121 ff2-51v.), a cleric and humanist credited with the foundation of the Biblioteca Guarneriana of San Daniele del Friuli.\(^{195}\) It is one of three extant manuscripts presenting de’ Conti’s travel narrative in combination with Bracciolini’s *Facetiae*.\(^{196}\) The juxtaposition of the two texts is indeed representative of at least one of the many ways in which the travel narrative was read by its contemporaries, making the case for its literary qualities, highlighted by Bracciolini’s skillful rhetorical choices, and underlined by the juxtaposition of the text to Bracciolini’s collection of “*anecdotes licentieuses*”.

Among the “*anecdotes licentieuses*” of Book IV of *Historia de varietate fortunae* one in particular never failed to elicit strong reactions in its readership; it is the passage dedicated to the depiction of the ritual of genital bells insertion, which de’Conti attributes to the inhabitants of the Indian city of Ava:

---


\(^{194}\) Cattaneo, A. *Fra Mauro’s mappamundi etc.* (200).

\(^{195}\) Guarnerio D’Artegna might have been present at the Council of Florence at the time of Bracciolini/de’ Conti’s encounter; it is known that from 1436 onward he had been granted the title of “litterarum apostolicarum abbreviator” a testimony of his connections with Roman curia under Eugenius IV. Scalon, C. *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Vol. 60 (2003) [www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/guarnerio-d-artegna_(Dizionario-Biografico)](www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/guarnerio-d-artegna_(Dizionario-Biografico))

\(^{196}\) This is in addition to a translation of Lucianus’s work (along with several of his works in Latin). Guéret-Laferté also identifies another manuscript, Vat.Lat. 1785, copied for Cardinal Pietro Barbo, which also includes the *Facetiae* in addition to Book IV of the *Historia de varietate fortunae*. See Guéret-Laferté, M., ed. *De L’Inde*, 63.
Hac sola in ciuitate plurimas tabernas, rei quam ioci gratia scripsi, ridicule lasciuæque esse afirmat. Vendi in his a solis feminis ea, que nos sonalia a sono, ut puto, dicta appellamus aurea, argentea aereaque in modum paruææ auellaneæ. Ad has uirum, antequam uxorem capiat (aliter enim reicitur a coniugio) proficisci. Execta atque elevata paulum membris uirili cute, trudi inter pellem et carnem ex hiis sonaliis usque at duodecim, et amplius, prout libuit, uaris circum circa locis; inde consuta cute intra paucos sanari dies. Hoc ad explendam mulierum libidinem faciunt.

His enim tanquam internodiis membriq ue tumore feminas summa voluptate affici.

Multorum dum ambulant membra tibiis repercussa resonant ita ut audiantur. Ad hoc Nicolaus saepius a mulieribus, que eum a paruitate priapi deridebant, inuitatus, noluit dolorem suum aliis voluptati esse. (De L’Inde 178-191)

The traveler says that in this city only there are several shops of ridiculous and lascivious things, I mentioned them for the scope of entertainment. In those shops only women sell objects that we would call bells, which are made of gold, silver or bronze and are shaped like small hazelnuts, called this way, I guess, because of the sounds they make. Before taking a wife, men visit these stores (otherwise they would be rejected). After having cut the skin of their members in places, as many as twelve bells or more are inserted, between the skin and the flesh, each as big as a small nut. Once the skin has been sewn back, it heals in a few days. The men do this in order to satisfy their wives’ desire: in fact, thanks to this knots, so to speak, and the swelling of their members, women feel the greatest pleasure. Several are the men whose members, hitting their legs when they walk, produce a well perceivable sound. Niccolò himself was invited by the women, who derided him on account if his member’s small size, to participate in this custom, but he
refused to give pleasure to others through his own suffering. (my trans.)

Michèle Guéret-Laferté emphasizes Bracciolini’s insistence on the practice of genital bells and on the libidinous inclinations of the Indians as a way to make sense of the custom of polygamy (178-191). Offering further proof of the passage popularity, many copies of the 33-manuscript tradition she has examined (the “quasi-totaliti”) bear marginal notations next to it, which-she notes- has the function of providing an aid for “easy retrieval” of the description; it is easy to interpret the interest as a sign of the passage’s effectiveness in captivating its readership, thus underlining the significance of Bracciolini’s choice of inclusion of a passage certainly not meant to go unnoticed by readers and critics alike (Guéret-Laferté 42n100).

From a structural point of view erotic depictions function as effective literary mechanisms that respond to the narrative’s readership’s interests and expectations. They seem to align themselves very easily with a classical discourse that so often equates the East with endless abundance of marvels and with mirabilia. In this regard, Merisalo Outi observes in her critical edition of the Historia de varietate fortunae that Bracciolini’s authorship manifests itself precisely in his lack of insistence in the marvellous, a contributing factor in establishing the originality of Book IV of Historia de varietate fortunae in relation to the rest of the treatise and the preceding tradition as well.

---

197 De’ Conti is not the only traveler to take note of the custom of genital piercing, even if the attribution to different populations varies. Guéret-Laferté lists Giovanni da Empoli, Girolamo da Santo Stefano e Barbosa; Carmen Nocentelli, examining a body of XVIth century works, adds to the list Tome Pire’s Summa Oriental (1512-1515) and Antonio Pigafetta’s Relazione.

198 The literature on this is copious. Representative works that have influenced my research are: Jones, Timothy S. and Sprunger, David A. Marvels, Monsters and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination. Kalamazoo, Michigan, Medieval Institute Publications, 2002 and Friedman, J. B. The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought, Harvard UP, 1981.

199 “La verifica puntuale del rapporto di Niccolò de’ Conti ci permette di affermare categoricamente l’originalità, nei confronti dei geografi antichi e medievali del testo riprodotto da Poggio” (Outi 24). Others have emphasized Bracciolini’s distinctive voice, as manifested in his own interpretation of the classical topos of “fortune”, underlying in particular his secular, humanistic vision (see Fubini’s “Il teatro del mondo” and Guéret-
Indeed travel literature relies on the conflation of eroticism and alterity and what it does really fabricate is, with the words of Mary B. Campbell, “the primitive as a body of pleasure” (Wonder and Science 26).\textsuperscript{200} Campbell suggestively employs a psychoanalytic framework to better understand the function of the fabrication of this fictional body of pleasure. In a classic Freudian interpretation the fictionality that permeates “the European imagination of an extra-European actuality” (34) would be premised directly on the renewal of satisfaction of the pleasure principle, constantly made possible by travel writings.

While Campbell’s focus is on a body of narratives that post-dates de’ Conti’s time, her underscoring the “anaesthetic function” that such writings might have performed, represents a fruitful methodology of analysis. In a historical moment when Western Europe was ravaged by religious wars, travel writings (and by extension the cosmography that they helped create) provided a welcome escape from the “real” suffering affecting Europe: “This aesthetic function of cosmography (which produces, not a mere “body of pleasure”, but a world of pleasure) could be seen (hyperbolically, perhaps) as one aspect of a comprehensive phenomenon: the Age of Discovery, composed as the psychotic transformation of the Age of Religious Wars” (29).

For Campbell fictionality can thus be seen as means to escape the suffering of a historical contingency; as the work of fiction is to create a juxtaposition to the real, it is essential to its fabrication that the pleasure principle (in a Freudian sense) must be observed and satisfied. The fictional, pleasure-giving features of travel narratives become, in a Freudian psychoanalytic

\textsuperscript{200} Not surprisingly, the fictional element of de’ Conti’s travel narrative clearly emerges from its ability to entice and satisfy its composite readership, which ranged from the literate princes and navigators that possessed a copy of the work, to the general populace that encountered the text either in form of chapbook or, possibly, as public play. Ultimately, the narrative became also material for the text of Fra Mauro’s wall map legends, as seen in Chapter II of this dissertation.
reading, direct and imaginative responses to the traumas of suffering. Incidentally, this perspective helps to explain why the travel relations of medieval travellers, unquestionably relying on the seemingly unchallenged realities of monstrous being and lascivious natives alike, were not met with blunt skepticism but rather welcomed, even if with varying degrees of acceptance of their “fabulous” content.201

Joa Paul Rubiés argues however that, the marvellous and the exotic associated with depictions of the East slowly subsided during the late middle ages to make way for the emergence of different type of discourse, one that pre-dates, in his view, the modern concept of ethnography.202 Rubiés reads the metamorphoses of the genre in view of the slow establishment of a “modern,” scientific gaze. In opposite fashion, Campbell’s perspective in Wonder and Science privileges instead the close, original relationship of early modern forms of natural philosophy (including cosmography and anthropology) and fiction, and thus appears less concerned with establishing clear boundaries among world views: “It makes sense” she writes “according to psychoanalytic and especially Lacanian models of subjectivity that this capacity of written language for the production of an apparently coherent (if secretly patchworked and stolen) subject of narrative would emerge in a period of shocking contact with strangers” (50).

The distinction between “scientific” modes of apprehension of the world (i.e. anthropology) and fictional ones (romance, poetry) seems therefore to be less evident at certain historical junctures, such as the transitional fifteenth century might have been. Travel narratives

---

201 In his Adancas et viajes, Pero Tafur directly interrogates de’ Conti about the existence of marvelous creatures encountered in the far East, but reports that de’ Conti did not see them and went on to describe a list of wondrous plants instead.

202 Joan-Pau Rubiés. “New Worlds and Renaissance Ethnology.” History and Anthropology vol.6, no 2-3, 1993, pp.157-97. Campbell’s Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe also examines the emergence of ethnography all the while stressing the original connection between science and fiction, which she characterizes as “etymological brethren, both children of facere, to make or fabricate” (6).
are particularly well suited to function as inspirational material for other, more researched early modern genres (chivalric romances, epic poems) but possess themselves literary characteristics, particularly in light of the intertwining of humanist agendas (as Rubiés himself underlines).

Nevertheless, taboos and the exotic lustfulness of the women purportedly encountered by de’Conti in Asia, together with the colonialist phantasy of a distant world permeated by Christianity, are all elements through which the narrative cleverly and effectively attends to its intended audience’s expectations and desires. Such effective techniques create (and consolidate) a specific image of the “other” and mark and establish clear socio-cultural boundaries. Both the emphasis placed on similarities between observer and observed and the underscoring of their differences are equally effective strategies to refuse the existence of a human substance truly different than oneself.

Focusing more specifically on the characteristic rhetorical strategies employed by Bracciolini, a rhythmic alternation of similarities and differences, similar to what Geraldine Heng describes as a strategy of “modulated admission of otherness and participation in otherness” seems to prevail above other narrative strategies; de’ Conti’s travelogue also suspends the reader between familiarity and alterity in a skillful alternation. Initially, the technique

203 In this respect it is useful to recall Linda Lomperis’s observations in “Medieval travel writing and the question of race” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, vol. 31, no.1, 2001. She points out that the widely held, Western conviction that the world was ruled by Christianity “runs counter to world history,” representing more of an aspiration than a factual description, since the Middle Ages were facing the widespread domination of Islam (161). This is even more true at the time of the Council of Florence, when the encounter between de’ Conti and Bracciolini occurred. Lomperis’s observations are echoed also by Heng (Empire of Magic), who notes in regard to Mandeville’s Travels, that the Travels “historically exceed the number of Christian presence and activity found in distant lands” (274).


205 Notably, notes Heng, there is an exception to Mandeville’s modulation of the encounter with alterity and that is “the narrative’s harsh treatment of the Jews” (Empire of Magic 257). On the exclusion of the Jewish people from Mandeville’s inclusivity see also the works of Kathleen Biddick, Benjamin Braude and Ian Higgins listed in the bibliography.
allows the reader to familiarize herself with foreign customs, first by stressing alleged similarities (for example in regard to religious customs); eventually however, it reaffirms an established Western European male identity by underlying the incommensurable differences that separate the reader from the indigenous populations described by the narrative. Hence, after having described at length the techniques involved in the capture of wild elephants, de’ Conti details the religious customs of the locals: “Colunt idola omnes. Surgentes autem e lecto, ad orientem uersi, orant iunctis manibus: Deus trinus et lex eius eadem nos tuere” (De L’Inde 226-8) “They all worship the idols. Upon rising, they pray, facing East with their hands together, saying: may the holy Trinity and its Law protect us” (my trans.). It is oddly apparent that despite being idolatrous, their manner of worship is rather similar to the one employed by Western Christians. Thus the juxtaposition of idolatry and familiarity works well to reconnect foreignness and domesticity, easing the reader in a more comfortable universe.

The interest that de’ Conti shows for the Indian custom of genital piercing (which immediately precedes the description of the elephants’ capture, while being disconnected from it both in subject and tone) can be read as an expedient to expand the misogynistic tones of his travel narrative (more on this later), but it is also indicative of the necessity to re-inforce de’ Conti’s Christian masculinity in order to dissipate any suspicion of heresy.

In regard to the instrumental, practical function of de’ Conti’s observations, the work of Carmen Nocentelli in Empires of Love is particularly helpful in contextualizing the breadth of the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{206}}\text{This technique seems to be shared by many Western travel accounts preceding de’ Conti’s; in his most recent work on Marco Polo’s Devisement du monde, Simon Gaunt notes for example the oscillation between similarity and difference as one of the compositional strategies of its author. Gaunt, S. Marco Polo ‘Le Devisement du Monde’: Narrative Voice, Language and Diversity. Brewer: 2013.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{207}}\text{Though Guéret-Laferté’s edition of Book IV, quotes Yule’s Narrative of the mission (p.208) who points to the belief in the trinity of Buddha, the Law and the Clergy, as a possible explanation of an otherwise unexpected and striking similarity to the Christian rite (Guéret-Laferté 107n69).}\]
dominant gaze held by the European observer through the examination of several narratives of discovery (most chronologically posterior to de’ Conti’s). Her research follows various types of native implantations (namely the use of genital bells described by de’ Conti and the ritual of genital piercing, also known as Palang piercing) in several Western European narratives of exploration. Nocentelli’s analysis shows that the conflation of sex and racial identity constitutes a historically specific conjunction, developed over time, which can be located and traced in specific texts.

Nocentelli’s study reveals that the ritual of genital piercing has “alternatively been ascribed to various populations throughout South-East Asia, ranging from Burma to Laos, from Siam to Birmania” (15). Its significance thus becomes that of an “ethnographic commonplace”, spread through the diffusion of Pigafetta’s *Relazione* of Magellan’s circumnavigation, which is included in Ramusio’s collection of travel narratives. What’s more, the practice creates a connection between a physiological marker of alterity (genital piercing) with a religious identity (non-Christian, Muslim in de’ Conti’s case), thus underscoring the significance of what Nocentelli terms “a transnational discourse that joined evolving constructions of racial difference to emerging constructions of sexual identity” (18).

Furthermore, Nocentelli highlights the

---

208 Among the works mentioned, two sixteenth-century works are of particularly interest, as Bracciolini’s narrative might have indirectly influenced their compilation; they are: Antonio Pigafetta’s *Relazione* and Tomé Pires *Summa Oriental* (1512-1515). In Pires the description of penile piercing is delivered with matter-of-fact simplicity, without any direct involvement of the narrator (unlike in de’ Conti’s case) and displaying a taxonomy of materials: “Tutti gli gentiluomini di Pegu, e altre genti in tutto il paese, portano sonagli acconci sopra il membro: li signori ne portano fino a nove, d’oro, fatti con tale artificio che hanno un bel suono, cioè di soprano, basso e tenore e sono della grandezza di piccioli susini bianchi del nostro paese. Quelli che non possono farli d’oro li portano di piombo e di fuslara o d’argento secondo la possibilità: nondimeno quelli che li hanno d’oro e d’argento sono in maggior numero che non son quelli di piombo o fuslara” (Ramusio, vol.2 769).

209 Nocentelli 28 and Merisalo Outi 233 n135-146. Bracciolini’s narrative attributes the practice to the inhabitants of the Indian city of Ava, while Pigafetta and Pires to those living in Siam and Pegu (Nocentelli 28). It is possible, cautions Nocentelli, that the latter “might well have drawn from direct experience” or simply read de’ Conti’s travelogue. Notably, later on ( during the sixteenth and seventeenth century) the penis bell “enjoyed a veritable vogue […] both as ethnographic topos and collector’s item, drawing Europe into an already flourishing trade
interconnection between sexuality and ethnicity in several, disparate narratives, ultimately suggesting the pervasiveness of a shared discourse.\(^{210}\)

It is important to stress that the connection between a physical marker and a religious identity represents a step in a long process that bear witness to the fracturing of a racial system and the emergence of another. Jean Feerick points out in her review of Nocentelli’s work that since, arguably, the penis bells and the piercing are reversible processes, they therefore rather point to the evolving, mobile status of “early modern discourses of difference”. Indeed sexuality, is a “structure of identity that overlaps with race”, but race is in itself a variable category, one that undergoes during the early modern period a series of notable and radical transformations (1007).\(^{211}\)

When examining Bracciolini’s text, its fascination with male genital alterations that characterizes many Western European travel accounts takes its shape through the voyeurism and enjoyment of the narrator; the passage is not exclusively meant to convey repulsion, but rather it is constructed to simultaneously amuse and entertain the reader. Bracciolini’s description conjures up foreignness and familiarity at the same time and, as Nocentelli also notes, the text is clearly construed as a temptation scene that could well resonate with Bracciolini’s readership: “at in erotic paraphernalia;” the interest further emphasizes Western European, enduring fascination with the practice and also highlights the cultural significance of its long-lasting interest (30).

\(^{210}\) For Nocentelli the coagulation of race as a category of identity runs parallel with the crystallization of “domestic sexuality.” Portugal’s expansionist strategies are for Nocentelly intimately tied with its “profound investment in reproductive sex” (35). In Foucauldian fashion, for Nocentelli this constitutes an “epistemological shift” to be traced traces throughout mid-sixteenth-century Europe. It has been argued however, that early modern discourses of difference were more mobile and less fixed than Nocentelli’s argument might seem to suggest. Jean E. Feerick points out in her review of Empires of Love that “While Nocentelli encourages us to view these practices as attaching moral valences to phenotypic qualities in ways that align with racial thinking” (27), one might also argue that since genital mutilation is, in theory, a reversible practice, it expresses the lability of early modern discourses of difference.” (1007).\(^{211}\)

\(^{211}\) Feerick analyzes such transformations in Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance. While the book focuses specifically on English plays she argues that the early modern “colonial transplantations” were instrumental in allowing a “redrawing of social boundaries” thereby ushering in a series of cultural transformations that undid the system of race-as-blood that preceded them (8).
least for a moment the European traveler hovers on the threshold of a different world where new pleasures, intensities, and attachments might become possible” (Empires of Love 29). The use of genital bells represents indeed “the threshold” of a strangely inviting world, one that will ultimately be refused, but not without conceding, even if just momentarily, to its enticement. As necessitated by de’ Conti’s personal vicissitudes with regard to Catholicism, the description of this fleeting struggle becomes ultimately instrumental -via Bracciolini-to the establishment of de’Conti’s permanent (and unbroken) Christian identity.

Geraldine Heng’s observations on the “complicity of consumption” and the “sedentary appropriations” that characterize readers of early modern travel narratives at large are fitting: “the narrators stage the taboos in literary creations, the spectators re-enact them in sedentary acts of reading, listening, imagining, all of which account for the popularity of travel narratives as perfect vehicles for sedentary appropriations” (243). These notions highlight the interpretive and creative mechanism here at play and it is not without reason that Antonio da Bollate, authoring a preface to the 1492 edition of India recognita, should write in his dedicatory letter to Pietro Cara, that the book would allow its readers to travel without leaving the room.212

For Heng however the narrative pleasure of “witnessing” forbidden but otherwise desirable acts, allows the reader to partake in a kind of “domination,” (albeit from a “distance”), thus underscoring the imperialistic aim that ultimately surfaces from Mandeville’s narrative (and which constitutes the object of her discussion). A similar stance also applies to Bracciolini’s observations about “the specialty shops with lascivious things” that de’ Conti visits in the city of Ava, mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Michel Foucault’s insights about the relationship between what he terms “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure,” as articulated in his History of Sexuality, are useful in elucidating the dynamic of de’ Conti’s encounter with Ava’s inhabitants.²¹³ Foucault institutes a semantic connection among the reciprocally-reinforcing concepts of “power” and “pleasure” and then defines it as a constitutive, essential characteristic of the discourse on sexuality. He speaks of a “power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting” (45). To be exact, one must note that the interplay between these two essentially imbricated forms of pleasure (a game that for Foucault is mostly evident in the dynamics governing the relationship between parents and children, doctors and patients and so on) is a modern phenomenon in Foucault’s analysis.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, in de’ Conti’s narrative the paradigm that emerges from such dynamic relations is mirrored quite closely by the relationship between the observer (de’ Conti) and the natives (Ava’s inhabitants). In order for de’ Conti to subject himself to the temptation of Ava’s unfamiliar rituals, the existence of a “threshold of morality” needed first to be established and to then be set firmly in place. Such threshold is represented by the custom of genital piercing itself, perceived at once as a signifier of a different cultural belonging, but also as an erotic act that is—perhaps surprisingly— alluring. De’ Conti the observer, who deems this custom “ridiculous” and “lascivious” (he reports it “for the fun of it”) is experiencing the enjoyment afforded by his own dominant gaze. As Foucault points out, the power that highlights it is intimately connected with

²¹³ As clarifying examples of such mutually reinforcing dynamic, Foucault cites the relation among parents and their children, which he characterizes as being governed by “the mutually sustaining pleasures of interrogating and subtracting oneself to the interrogation”(43).
²¹⁴ “[...]parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysterics and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century” (45). Foucault. M. History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, Pantheon Books (1978).
the pleasure derived from the necessity to escape it or perhaps to give in to its lure. The two are connected in a spiral of elusivity and reinforcement; it is in this reciprocally-instituting relation of allowance and prohibition that the conditions for Bracciolini’s interest for the sexual customs of the inhabitants of Ava can best be located.\textsuperscript{215}

Furthermore, the process of consolidating a Western European male identity for de’ Conti by means of contrast with the depiction of the East, is not complete without recurring to the topoi of female lust and or that of female abnegation.\textsuperscript{216} The first is well exemplified by the description of the genital bells insertion, (“This they do to satisfy the lasciviousness of women”), while the second shapes the description of the Indian custom of widow burning (suttee), which I’ll discuss later in this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, the circumstances of de’ Conti’s encounter with Bracciolini within the framework of the Council of Florence demanded a lack of ambiguity regarding the merchant’s uninterrupted allegiance to the Catholic church.\textsuperscript{217} Therefore, the mentioning of the genital bells ritual also had another essential function, that of corroborating de’ Conti’s moral integrity by way of underlying the constitutive, unwavering continuity of his Christianity, despite doubts possibly cast upon it by the traveler’s history of faith renunciation. Nocentelli’s analysis

\textsuperscript{215} Foucault highlights a node between the birth of a scientific apparatus and the establishment of a notion of sexuality that was based on a person’s engagement in a particular sex act; historians however disagree as to whether or not early modern people did at all identify others based on their sexual practices; Katharine Crawford in \textit{European Sexualities:1400-1800} explains this interpretive division by grouping historians in two opposite factions, regarding their position on the definition of identity through sexual practices (the “essentialists”on the one hand and the “social constructionists” on the other). Introducing what she calls a “contextual, material and circumstantial definition of sexuality” (4) she maintains that before 1800 sexual identity was primarily denoted “as a factor in one’s relationship to marriage” (3), but concedes that “early modern people did at times identify people by their sexual practices” (8).

\textsuperscript{216} Notably, Nocentelli identifies in the episode an instance of the increasing separation between East and West, one that is founded precisely on sexual deviancy (the mutilation of the body associated with the inordinate sexuality of Eastern women).

\textsuperscript{217} See Chapter I and 2.
does not fail to recognize the expedient dimension of Bracciolini’s narration of the description of the genital bells custom; his characterization of de’ Conti’s encounter with the inhabitants of Ava, she writes, “easily takes pride of place for its unusual candor” (28). The passage is clearly instrumental to the attainment of de’ Conti’s re-admittance into the Catholic church. After all, the occasion of de’ Conti’s encounter with Bracciolini had been provided by the merchant’s plea for absolution necessitated by his former conversion to Islam.\textsuperscript{218}

By describing a process of re-affirmation of religious integrity in terms of a brief temptation ultimately followed by virtuous resistance (i.e. de’ Conti’s refusal to give pleasure to others through his own pain) however, de’ Conti re-affirms first and foremost his own “moral vigour”, while simultaneously also re-asserting his own Christian, male identity: “by conjuring and dispelling the spectre of genital cutting [the bells of Burma] allow both Bracciolini and de’ Conti to pass under silence the circumcision that would have likely marked the latter’s entry into the Islamic fold- a genital modification that called into question his identity as a Christian” (29). His refusal thus negates any association with a powerful bodily signifier of identity, such as the circumcision. On the contrary, the presence of this corporal mark would have indeed represented a compromising “bodily truth” destined inevitably to put into question the continuity of his status as a Christian, on which in turn, hinged de’ Conti’s claim of expediency regarding his instrumental and contingent ties with the Islamic faith.\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{218} See Chapter I.

\textsuperscript{219} After all Pope Eugenius IV at the Council of Florence expressed in unambiguous terms the Catholic church’s position regarding circumcision: “Therefore it strictly orders all who glory in the name of Christian, not to practise circumcision either before or after baptism, since whether or not they place their hope in it, it cannot possibly be observed without loss of eternal salvation”. Ecumenical Council of Florence (1438-1445) \url{http://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/FLORENCE.HTM#5} retrieved on 01/12/2017.
Seen in this light, Bracciolini’s narration moves away from early ethnographic preoccupations, to capitalize once again upon its own literary qualities. Bracciolini’s compositional and rhetorical skills are clearly employed here to establish and consolidate the perception of de’ Conti’s conversion to Islam as an eminently instrumental and expedient measure, possibly necessitated exclusively by safety concerns and in no way affecting the merchant’s essentialized status as a Christian.

It is worth mentioning here Nocentelli’s poignant observations about the conflation of bodily signifiers of identity with other established markers, such as religious beliefs, language, and other cultural practices (clothing and food) that transpire from the narrative. Such signifiers underline the simultaneous presence of different codes: “various systems of signification remained simultaneously at play, often in mutually sustaining relations, but occasionally complicating and even undercutting one another” (30).

The shifting nature of such complex web of discourses is of particular interest for the present research, as I contend that the eroticism that sporadically emerges from de’ Conti’s account (and that can be traced in Bracciolini’s opus at large) is one of such systems of signification that overlap in the narrative with the ethnographic and commercial intents of the text, possibly interfering and certainly complicating its message. Thus, articulating the significance of the intersections of knowledge with eroticism and identity is an important task undertaken by this analysis.

As suggested above, Nocentelli’s research in Empires of Love rests on the assumption that eroticism is a cultural signifier that results from a process of identity-definition. The connection underlined by Nocentelli is well represented in Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s travels to India. The strategic choice of incorporating the passage of the ritual of genital bells
insertion is ultimately made intelligible by the fact that the excerpt reveals “a truth that lodges identity in the alleged peculiarities of native eroticism, not only -or not exclusively-in the body’s markings (or lack thereof) that are revealed by circumcision” (29).  

“Native eroticism” therefore becomes a site of identity formation, joining the ranks of signifiers that approximate the modern notion of racial definition. There is a shift in signification from exclusive attention to body markings (such as circumcision) to sexual practices as signifiers that could testify to “the truth of one’s racial belonging” (9).

Ultimately, Nocentelli points out, an overlapping of sexuality and race will eventually occur, as a result of the ever-shifting process of identity formation. Such process is however not fixed, but, as Feerick has pointed out, it is rather characterized by a certain liability, as testified by the fact that these temporarily undifferentiated identity markers, will be separated again by the end of the seventeenth century when “eros and ethnos[...] were parting ways: race no longer served as a measure of sexual orthodoxy” (13).

Nocentelli’s observations are also aligned with Thomas Hahn’s research on identity-formation mechanisms in the European middle ages. Hahn underlines the fact that the key markers of difference in medieval texts are not necessarily represented by a superimposition of race and ethnicity, but on the contrary by many other factors, such as sexual customs (but also climate, language, law, different forms of currency or government). However, the categories

---

220 Nocentelli notes that although circumcision had been “sometimes linked to sexual desire,” the practice “seems to have been envisioned quite consistently as a remedy against lust”, taking on a rather different significance (174n42).

of “race” and “ethnicity” have evolved historically in connection with one another and the conflation of race and ethnicity is the result of a non-linear process. As Ania Loomba’s work on Shakespearean texts further illustrates, the distinction between “cultural” and “biological” has never been fixed, as these categories were deeply enmeshed; it is therefore important to analyze the specific discourses from which such categories emerge: “Race” proves in the end to be a malleable category that has historically been used to reinforce existing social hierarchies.222

Within the numerous characterizations of difference proposed by de’ Conti’s travel narrative, the ritual of widow-burning (or *suttee*) that de’ Conti ascribes to the inhabitants of the Indian city of Ava deserves a attention for it is revealing of its potential to serve as another critical/satirical reflection on Bracciolini’s time (to be achieved by taking a description of what is foreign as a way to also speak about what is familiar). More immediately, the description is also representative of another common trope of Western early modern travel accounts, the focus on the female body as a culturally revealing site of early modern sexual anxieties.223

In his largely circulated, XVIth.-century collection of travel accounts, *Navigazioni et viaggi*, Gian Battista Ramusio prefaces the narration of de’ Conti’s travels with two mentions of the Indian ritual of widow-burning (known as *suttee* or *sati*), both borrowed from antiquity. In the first, Ramusio mentions a classical poem by Propertius followed by Strabo’s opinion that the ritual had been specifically instituted in order to avoid the matricides (by poisoning) that would...

________________________


223 Similarly, Kim Hall observes in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Politics of Gender in Early Modern England*, how gender is always embedded in any rigorous examination of race (2). In her examination of Renaissance portraits of black servants she points out how concerns over color (fair)/gender (female) association projects onto the bodies of white women the anxiety over an evolving monarchial nation state in which women are the repositories of the symbolic boundaries of the nation (9).
occur, after the wives had (sometimes) cast aside their husbands in favor of younger lovers:

Strabone, che fu nel tempo di Tiberio, nel libro suo XV della cosmographia parlando dell’India dice Qui e’ una legge che le mogli si abbrucino vive coi mariti morti, per questa cagione, che innamoratesi alle fiate di qualche bel giovene, lassavan li mariti, overo gli avelelenavano, per levare adunque quella tale scelleraggine, fu fatta questa legge, la quale a me non par troppo ragionevole. (Ramusio 338, emphasis mine).224

Ramusio tries to make sense of shifting modes of signification in his heterogeneous body of travel narratives by surrounding the collected travel narratives with his own Discorsi, often a way to connect the old geographical knowledge with that provided by contemporary witnesses.225

Pompa Banerjee, author of a study devoted to the characterization of suttee in European travel narratives from 1500 to 1700, unearths in these body of narratives a shared practice of inventorying the descriptions of the ritual; she notes how descriptions of suttee are often inserted by the narrator in lists of objects of trade, without differentiation from such objects.226 This ultimately serves the purpose of highlighting the narratives’ exploitative aims, as the similarities between the Indian custom and the European phenomenon of witch-burning are strong and seemingly “hard to miss”; similarities notwithstanding, even when the narratives indirectly address their common elements (for example by exhibiting “linguistic traces” of witch-burning

---

224 Notably, Ramusio proposes here an abridged version of de’ Conti’s account, which he collected for his compilation of travel narratives, from the 1502 Portuguese translation by Valentim Fernandez, discussed in Chapter II, and not from the 1492 printed edition of India recognita.

225 See Christine Johnson observations on Ramusio’s methodology in “Ancient Tales, Renaissance Travellers: the Market for the Marvelous” (420n52).

226 Banerjee writes specifically in regard to Hamilton’s New Account of the East Indies and of the anonymous Portuguese compiler of Cabral’s Chronicles that, being their eyes fixed on the lucrative opportunities for trade, their descriptive practices of creating inventories of items encompass the witnessing of sati as “an insignificant item, listed among other commodities” (552).
descriptions), Banerjee points out, they do not draw attention to the characteristic these rituals share: “[...]while there is no direct evidence of conscious intent on the part of the travel writer to suppress the nexus between these two forms of burning, their failure to draw attention to this correspondence invites scrutiny (531). Such homogeneous disavowal (in spite of the heterogeneity of Banerjee’s sources) seems to be indicative of a shared ideological stance, which she interprets as an overarching desire to exoticise India. The absence of explicit connections between the descriptions of sattee’s and European witch-burning episodes, is witness to the underlying intent to construe and actively maintain the notion of alterity of Indian culture.

Thus the Indian ritual of sattee becomes yet another “cultural form for European consumption”, which contributes, in turn, to the consolidation of a uniform European self-identity.

In Ramusio’s version of Bracciolini’s description of sattee, the widows are initially said to be “honored” to die at the stake with their husbands and to “happily and voluntarily” meet their destiny. However, a darker picture soon emerges from a closer scrutiny of the text, one in which the victim needs both comfort and persuasion: “persuadendole che non si spaventi della morte, anziché ella voglia disprezzar la vita presente, la quale è breve e vana e le promette che dopo la morte ella acquisterà col marito molti piaceri e infinite ricchezze e vestimenti preziosi [...]” (343A). Even though death by fire is presented as a voluntary choice (“ella istessa si lancia

227 Banerjee’s analysis is framed by the Foucauldian observation that the presence of witnesses to a sacrificial ritual is essential for the efficacy of a public form of punishments. Yet another instance in which a parallel between sattee and witch burning can be effectively drawn.

228 The assumption that the European witch-burning and sattee share indeed many essential similarities has been challenged by those who focus on the historical and cultural differences that characterize these rituals. Andrea Major, for example, has criticized the assumption that the correlations among these two historical phenomena would be evident, as the similarities that did exist could have been counterbalanced by equally powerful differences in meaning. Major, A. “Sovereignty and Social Reform in India: British Colonialism and the Campaign Against Sati, 1830–1860.” Victorian Studies, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 525-526.

229 “e quello infra di loro e ’reputato per un grande honore” (fol. 342 F) and “cantando anche lei con un aspetto allegro” (ibidem).

230 “un di quei sacerdoti detti Bacani” (343A).
nel fuoco”) it is evident that there isn’t, at that point, any more room for negotiation; despite the attempts to avoid death, the external spectators also become accomplices in the ritual as they force the prospective victim to burn on the pyre despite her will:

\[E \text{ se alcuna si spaventa di far questo, come suol talora accadere, che vedendo l’altrè che sono nel fuoco, far atti strani, e dolersi, e che par che vorrían uscirne fuori, e per quella paura orribile a volte tramortiscono, gli astanti che son ivi vicini la aiutano a gittarsi nel fuoco, ovvero la buttano al suo dispetto, e per forza’}(343A, emphasis mine)\]

Similar descriptions of suttee can be found in many other medieval and early modern Western descriptions of India. Almost a century after de’ Conti, Cesare Federici, a Venetian merchant visiting India between 1563 and 1581 includes a detailed description of suttee in his Viaggio di Cesare Federici nell’India orientale et oltra l’India, (also included in Ramusio’s collection); Federici displays ouvert criticism of the ritual (“oltra queste vi sono altre infinite bestialità qual io non mi curo di scrivere” (1032) and provides a much greater abundance of details.\(^{231}\)

However, the fluctuation between voluntary desire to self-immolate and what appears to be a forced execution disappears from de’ Federici’s account, while a stronger emphasis is placed on the historical origins of the ritual:

\[Volsci intendere perché cosí si facessero queste donne morire e mi fu detto che fu fatta anticamente questa legge per provedere alli molti omicidii che le donne de’ lor mariti favevano, percióche’ per ogni poco di dispiacere che esse avessero da’ mariti, li attossicavano per pigliarne un altro; onde con questa legge le rendettero a’ mariti piú fedele e fecero che le vite dei mariti al par delle sue avessero care, poiché con la lor\]

\(^{231}\) De’ Federici details the victim’s actions preceding the burning, the colors of her vestment, the behavior of the relatives etc.
While the shift in interpretation could be attributed to an increased interest in causation, the narrative maintains the misogynistic tones that are so commonly found in the ritual’s descriptions. As Banerjee observes, the self-immolating wife constitutes an almost logical conclusion of Western assumptions about wifely devotion (as described-she points out- by European books of conduct), while at the same time suttee well exemplifies the primitive savagery of the Indians. The topos of misogyny endures in western European travel narratives and with it follows the engendering of the ritual. The body as a cultural signifier once more takes central stage as early modern sexual anxieties find their expression in the characterization of female bodies. As Banerjee notes, in the European accounts of witchcraft, the accusation shifts from being employed to both genders, to becoming -by 1500- used exclusively to identify women.

In the literary construct of Bracciolini’s narrative, Indian women are either determined to satisfy their “excessive” sexual appetites, or they are simply ever-willing to please their suitors. His observations about China, the part of India that de’ Conti regards as “most civilized” because of its perceived commonalities with the West (“uita et ciuili consuetudine nobis aequalis”) are a case in point (De L’Inde 419). In addition to the affordances that are available to the wealthy Venetians at home (sumptuous residences, silver dishes for meals etc.) India also provides an

---

232 It also indicates a similar pattern of ambivalence regarding the Indian construct; de’ Federici’s narrative also mentions the amok in regard to the Indian port city of Cochin (a violent outburst that results in the death of both victim and perpetrator, mentioned by de’ Conti in his description of “the islands” (sic) of Java)(1038).  
233 On this point, Banerjee’s comparison of early modern visual depictions of witch-burning and satī is particularly illuminating (544-545).  
234 Incidentally, Supriya Chaudhuri in “India recognita: the Travels of Niccolò de’ Conti” advances the hypothesis that “Conti’s high regard for China is the product of some contact with Chinese merchants and explorers in these very same seas during the fifteenth century” (273); she suggests that the merchant himself “probably never reached China” (273).
easily accessible abundance of pleasure:

/Publicae mulieres ubique volentibus praesto sunt, per ciuitatem propriis habitaculis dispersae, quae odoribus, unguentis, blandiciis, forma atque aetate viros (proni enim sunt ad libidinem Indi omnes) allicunt, eoque marium usus apud Indos ignotus.

It is easy to find public women everywhere, as they are spread throughout the city in their own houses, and they attract men with perfumes, lotions and flatteries and because of their beauty and age (all the inhabitants of India are in fact prone to lust) and for this reason pedophilia is unknown among the Indians. (my trans.)

As a consequence of such abundance, the moral hierarchy of sins, which puts sodomy at the top of the list, can be easily preserved “eoque marium usus apud Indos ignotus (ibidem).235

One might wonder if Bracciolini’s erotic nuances shouldn’t be read as part of a shared discourse, one that was perhaps, echoing Mary Campbell, “less firmly exclusionary and dichotomized than the dominant modern discourse class” (Wonder and Science 19).236 Much critical attention regarding late medieval and early modern western European travel narratives (with the notable exception of Nocentelli’s study) neglects to explore the traces of such discourse and to elucidate its significance, preferring to focus instead on the category of wonder, intended

235 For the statute of sodomy within the Roman Catholic hierarchy of sin during the middle ages see Westrem, Scott. “Medieval Western European Views of Sexuality Reflected in the Narratives of Travelers to the Orient” Acta, vol.14, 1990, pp. 141-56, and Brundage, James: Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe (U Of Chicago 1988). Notably, Caroline Bynum in her review of Brundage points out that from his study emerges that “the increased role of secular courts in sexual and marital matters coincided both with a new harshness towards what was seen as sexual deviance and a with new support of the prostitution industry” (402). Not surprisingly this is here reflected in de’ Conti’s exoticising of India.

236 The literature of eros has among its representatives other notable literary works of fiction (Boccaccio’s Decameron first and foremost, but also Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata) together with other works in the tradition of Italian prose (the novelle of Sacchetti or Sercambi, for example). See, in this regard, the essays collected in Glenisson, Francoise et al., Au pays d’Eros: literature d’érotisme en Italie de la Renaissance à l’âge baroque, 2 vols. Publication de centre universitaire de recherche sur la Renaissance italienne, 14. Paris: Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1986-1988).
as the principal modality of apprehension of the newly explored territories. Hence, Pramod K. Nayar’s *Colonial Voices: the Discourses of Empire*, juxtaposes “wonder” as a type of cognitive response to the “scientific” mindset exemplified by Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (1620). By the seventeenth century, what Christine Johnson terms “the wings of experience and experiment” would have cast “a blinding light on the deficiencies of the ancients” (“Buying stories” 197); but in Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s travels, the emphasis seems instead to be directed on finding an effective language to represent the difference that is being encountered. My research probes the possibility that eroticism might therefore constitute the trace of another mode of signification, one that arises from an enduring literary tradition and that conveys a complementary discourse.

The apparition of a band of silent, nocturnal riders, whom they initially “mistake” for Arab predators, to learn later (from other witnesses) that they were in fact vagrant demons. The permutations of eroticism parallel those of “wonder” in late-medieval, western European travel writings; in various narratives of explorations eroticism presents itself as a shifting category undergoing a series of modifications. Caroline Bynum’s *Metamorphosis and Identity* analyzes a corpus of medieval “literature of entertainment” in which, she notes, the “marvelous is derived from an ancient and ever-enduring marvel tradition that continues to permeate travel literature as a genre in the centuries to follow (53). However, Bynum underlines the fact that in the middle ages, “such marvel-inducing strangeness always had “a significance, a secret reason” behind it (71); “wonder” is therefore interpreted first and foremost as “a response to something novel and bizarre that seemed to both exceed explanation and to indicate that there might be reason [...] behind it” (73). In Bracciolini’s narrative wonder takes on a different characterization, as it seems to encompass, as P. K. Nayar as observed, both “the object perceived and described and
the emotional response to it.”

With that in mind, let’s consider, for example de’ Conti’s vision of the Arab “demons” in the desert. De’ Conti has just left Damascus and joined a caravan of “600 merchants” to cross the desert, when they witness the arrival of the Arab thieves:

_In exitu deserti, qui medius interiacet, rem mirandam dicit contingisse. Nam cum circiter medium noctem quiescentes, magno murmure strepituque audito, suspicarentur omnes, Arabes predones ad se spoliandos uenire erectis singulis ad futuri metum, uiderunt plurimas equituum turmas transeuntium more tacitas tabernaculis eorum adequitare, absque cuiusquam noxa. Plures qui idem antea uiderant, daemonas esse per desertum uagantes asseruere._

He says that, on his way out of the desert, which lies in the middle of the province, something amazing happened to him. Around midnight, as they were sleeping, they heard a strong noise and clamor, and thought that Arabs thieves had come to predate on them. As they woke suspecting danger, they saw a silent multitude of riders passing by their tents without causing any damage. Many others, who had seen them before, said that they were demons rambling through the desert. (De L’Inde 35-41 my trans)

Here Bracciolini’s description is terse and matter-of-fact; while the vision is said to be “extraordinary” and “worthy of contemplation” (rem mirandam), there is no sense of it concealing a deeper significance; on the other hand, its poetic rendition and suffused imagery prompted at least one commentator, Eugenio Garin, to view the passage as a reminder of Bracciolini’s melancholic walk with Antonio Loschi through the ruins of Rome at the beginning of the 16th century.

---

of Book 1 of the *Historia de varietate fortunae*.\(^{238}\)

While vestiges of a medieval significance of the marvellous endure in Bracciolini’s narrative, other competing interpretations are indicative of a possible occurrence of a change in perspective. In Merisalo Outi’s reading of de’ Conti’s travel account for example, the “neutral” and “sympathetic” view of the Far East and of Ethiopia, displayed by Book IV of *Historia de varietate fortunae*, is above all instrumental to delivering a subtle, critical commentary on contemporary times.\(^{239}\) It seems that if medieval wonder, in the sense highlighted by Bynum, is still present in Bracciolini’s rendition, it must be buried under the satirical intent of the treatise as a whole.

Alternatively, Bynum’s “wonder” can perhaps be more easily found in the catalogues of commercially useful informations (on abundance of spices and the places where they grow, on distance measurements between locations etc.). De’ Conti’s account, consistently with other mercantile narratives of exploration that preceded it) does not fail to provide them. In one of such occurrences “wonder” resurfaces as an interpretive category in the attempt to make sense of the difference that the encounter with foreign populations brings; that is the passage describing the inhabitants of Java, with their “inhumanity” and extreme “cruelty”, which is rendered in terms that are precariously balanced between a keen sense of alterity and the attempt to convey amazement:


\(^{239}\) This observation also constitutes the basis of Merisalo Outi’s contention that Book IV of *Historia de varietate fortunae* does not necessarily constitute a change in perspective in Bracciolini’s treatise since the work as a whole is intended primarily as a commentary on modernity.
Has omines in humanissimi omnium crudelissimique inhabitant, mures, canes, gatos et spurciora quaelibet animalia edentes. Crudelitate, exuperant omnes mortales, himinem occidere pro ludo est, nullique supplicio datur.

The inhabitants of these islands are the most inhuman and cruel; they eat rats, dogs, cats, and other impure animals. They surpass in cruelty all other mortals: killing a man as a joke, without suffering any consequence. (De L’Inde 283-286 my trans.)

However, regarding the interpretation of “wonder” as bewilderment or astonishment, terms that are so often employed to characterize a shared response to travel narratives, the work of Christine Johnson, *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the strange and the marvelous*, offers yet another perspective. Albeit speaking about a very specific context, the German reception of narratives of discovery in the Renaissance, Johnson stresses a nuanced and varied response: “German commentators on the Iberian expansion were variously horrified, titillated, edified and amazed. They were not surprised. The new, the strange and the marvelous were not new in the Renaissance as both the medieval and the classical tradition had preserved, clarified and manipulated a rich legacy of wonders, oddities and novelties” (45). What’s more, she also posits that their “emphasis on familiarity and similarity” between the old and the new world was desirable on account of “a series of political, commercial, intellectual and moral concerns” (7), not least of which was the need to strengthen “the claims of expertise and practical usefulness that fueled the production of maps”, which might have been undermined by declarations of the fundamental different nature of the newly discovered lands (7). Thus emphasizing difference would have resulted in more of a hindrance than in anything else.

Similarly, eroticism might have represented for travel writers an attempt to carve a proper language with which to deal with the “new,” however different or derivative; as such, it is a
discourse inscribed at the margins of a more straightforward mercantilist approach, dominated in turn by the commercial interest in the spice trade. After all, ancient authorities on geographical matters survived despite the spread of eye-witness accounts because, as Johnson writes “ancient testimony […] was regarded as reliable and necessary, especially given the limitations of more recent accounts” (410). Hence, the necessity to forge a language capable of dealing with the “shock of discovery” became a pressing reality, that in Bracciolini took shape in the marginal, erotic nuances of his rendition of de’ Conti’s testimony.

Chapter IV

Corporeal Identities: the *Libro delle nuove strane e meravigliose cose* (a Vernacular Rendition of Odorico da Pordenone’s *Relatio*)

Sharing with Bracciolini the desire to communicate information about the little known territories of Southeast Asia, Odorico da Pordenone’s account of eastern travels precedes de’ Conti’s account of almost a century. Its text has been divulged in many, widely differing versions and its textual history is accordingly complex. Its beginnings can be traced within the context of the missionary evangelization of the East, in the convent of Saint Anthony of Padua (in May 1330, as the text declares), where Guglielmo da Solagna, a Franciscan himself, collected and transcribed the friar’s travelogue (Monaco 31). A second version is also known, which the Salesian friar Henry of Glatz produced in Avignon, after first transcribing Odorico’s account and subsequently re-elaborating it in Prague, in 1340 (Chiesa 316). Of the Latin versions,

---


242 As E. Menestò observes in *Lo spazio letterario del medioevo*, the importance of the plea for Odorico’s canonization which frames the translation of the text to Avignon, is not to be undermined. Some scholars believe
Guglielmo’s was the most widely circulated, even though the one composed in Avignone by Henry of Glatz has long been considered the closest to Odorico’s original dictation (Monaco 32). In addition, among the hundred manuscripts still extant, versions of the Latin text were elaborated in German, French, Italian, Welsh and Castilian. Scholars have remarked that the narrative’s popularity has been comparable to that of Polo’s account, its diffusion beginning rapidly after its composition. With the addition of further material, Odorico’s narrative, known alternatively as Relatio or Itinerarium, was also included, as a revisited version of Guglielmo da Solagna’s translation, in Richard Hakluyt’s Principal Navigations (1508). Later, and in two

that such intention substantially informed the shaping of narration (Marchisio, 50). See also E. Menestò. “Relazioni di viaggi e ambasciatori.” Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo. Vol.1.-2, pp. 523-571. Others, like Paolo Chiesa, are more cautious: “It remains difficult to establish the incidence of such expediency on the texts’ composition” (“Per un riordino etc” 315). Monaco reports that while it had been Odorico’s original intention to plead in Avignone for reinforcements for the missions in China (the Relatio explicitly declares Odorico’s intention to return to China in its final lines), the apparition of St. Francis in a dream warned Odorico not to depart and to return home instead: “sed surge et revertere ad niduum tuum et ibi morieris” (Monaco 28), to which Odorico promptly complied. This is the opinion of Yule: “[it] probably comes [...] nearest to Odorico’s actual dictation, or would do so if we had really good manuscript of it”(Monaco, Memoriale 32). Others stress the chronological priority of Guglielmo’s version (though the two versions are roughly contemporary, as Monaco points out (33). This is still a contentious issue among philologists. See also F. Reichert’s Incontri con la Cina for a synthesis of the redaction and transmission of Odorico’s text (181-6) and P. Chiesa “Per un riordino della tradizione manoscritta della Relatio di Odorico da Pordenone” Filologia mediolatina 1999-2000 (6-7). As Marchisio rightly points out in Odorico da Pordenone: Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium tatarorum, the reconstruction of an “original,” archetypal text is an arduous enterprise, as an “original” text never existed, since at its inception the narration consisted in an oral deposition (97). Marchisio also reports that Galvano Fiamma’s Cronaca bianchiniana, a universal history of the world from its beginning to the IXc. b.c., bears indirect witness to the archetypal function of the text since there, Odorico is amply regarded as auctoritas. For instance, in relation to the habitability of the Southern hemisphere, the Cronaca derives its information on South-east Asia from the Relatio itself (see Marchisio 5n9).


“In una classifica dei libri più’ letti del medioevo, essi occuperebbero un’ottima posizione” (189). Reichert arrives at this conclusion on the basis of his own direct appraisal of the extant manuscripts which amends G.C. Testa’s previously-compiled inventory. Reichert, F.E. Incontri con la Cina. Milano: Biblioteca Francescana 1997.

Lacking a consistent title, the work is known within the Latin manuscripts tradition in various forms, such as de mirabilibus orientalium Tartarorum (often called simply Relatio) and Itinerarium fratri Odorici (or: Itinerarium). See Chiesa “Per un riordino etc.” (31n1). Notably, Reichert suggest also that the first lines of the Venetian ms. 2408:“novitates, quas notavit frater Odoricus in peregrinatione sua” may be the most appropriate title for the travelogue (Incontri con la Cina 181). Odorico himself is also, as Westrem observes, “has the distinction of
different formats, one longer and one abbreviated, it also became part of G. B. Ramusio’s *Navigazioni e viaggi*, thus subsequently enjoying a wider diffusion in printed form.\(^{247}\)

In Italy the popularity of Odorico’s account was quite conspicuous. In particular, its vernacular tradition is witnessed by 18 extant manuscripts transmitting versions of Odorico’s journey often differing substantially from one another.\(^{248}\) Some of the vernacular manuscripts (8, according to Andreose) are amended and expanded by the addition of further material, in form of a *Appendice* (Appendix) consisting of “16 expansions and additions of the Latin text”;\(^{249}\) one compiler introduces them as “*alguni altri belli chapituli*” – “other new, beautiful chapters” (my trans.).\(^{250}\) Their presence is indeed a testament to a particular shaping of the popular versions of a travel narrative, whose distribution might have been quite broad and which spread predominantly within secular circles.\(^{251}\)

Among the Italian vernacular versions, the *Libro delle nuove strane e meravigliose cose* (henceforth referred to as *Libro*) is a Tuscan rendition of Odorico da Pordenone’s *Relatio*, a mid

\(^{247}\) Marica Milanesi (seconded by Chiesa, Monaco, Andreose and also Reichert) writes in her preface to G. B. Ramusio’s *Navigazioni e viaggi* (vol.IV) that the extant manuscripts and printed version of the *Relatio* number at least one hundred (267). Marchisio echoes: “*I testimoni conservati* – *la maggior parte dei quali databili ai secoli XIV e XV* - *sono oltre cento, a documentazione del grande successo della Relatio già pochi anni dopo la sua composizione*” (42).

\(^{248}\) Andreose, “La fortuna romanza etc., 91. Andreose completes the list with the addition of the lost manuscript Palatine E. 5.9.67 (which still available through Henry Yule’s transcription) and the one (also lost) included in the archive of Conti Agostini Venerosi della Seta of Pisa (see Andreose 91n7).

\(^{249}\) Marchisio, 7. Among the Italian vernacular manuscripts Andreose lists 8 presenting a version of the *Libro* and 4 of a later re-elaboration known as *Memoriale Toscano*. Andreose, “La fortuna romanza della Relatio”, 91. He cautions that the lost Palatine-mentioned above-and a XIXth C. *descriptus* must also be added to the count (Andreose, *La fortuna romanza etc.* 91n11); Monaco suggests a different count (including other, printed versions). (Monaco 71n62).

\(^{250}\) The denomination appears in *ms. it. Cl. XI n. 32* (6672) Venezia Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. (Andreose, “La fortuna romanza etc.” 92n10) but the material is exemplified in two of the 8 manuscripts.

\(^{251}\) “*Degli otto testimoni superstiti, due soltanto sono stati esemplati in ambito ecclesiastico, mentre gli altri sei rimandano ad ambienti laici, notarili o mercantili*” – “of the eight extant witnesses, only two had been produced within a clerical milieu, whereas the other 6 connect to secular circles, whether notarial or mercantile” (Andreose, “La fortuna romanza etc.” 92).
fourteenth-century account of a Franciscan friar’s journey to Asia. Based on Odorico’s Latin version of the journey, the Libro offers a large amount of information on the geography, economy and customs of the Mongol court of Timur Kahn and, more generally, on the then-little-known lands of India and China. While Odorico’s narration has long been read as a reliable representation of the work of Franciscan missions in the Great Empire of the Yüan dynasty, its structural and stylistic characteristics deserve further investigation, as a close analysis brings to the fore the many layers of meaning comprising the text.

Odorico’s travel account has a rich textual history. An analysis of the Relatio’s textual tradition, quickly reveals its complexity, as the numerous extant witnesses of the original Latin and its vernacular renditions, often differ quite substantially from each other (Marchisio 42). In his research on the Relatio’s dissemination, Andreose states that the text constitutes the most widely circulated Western medieval travel narrative after Polo’s. Andreose underscores “the great instability of the disseminated text” (89, my trans.); to which both the Latin tradition of

252 From his account one can surmise the stages of his journey, which follows the southern route (so called “via meridionale”) to the East: from Venice to the Black Sea, proceeding on a land route through Persia to the Persian Gulf, then along the coasts of India and Indochina to China (Marchisio, A., Odorico da Pordenone. Relatio 4). Marchisio also points out that very little information about Odorico’s return route is available, as his own narration lacks specific references to his return to Italy.

253 Andreose: “L’opera di Odorico offre un quadro sufficientemente ampio dello stato delle missioni francescane nel grande impero della dinastia Yüan” (“La fortuna romanza” 21)(“Odorico’s work offers a sufficiently wide description of the Franciscan missions’ status during the Yüan dynasty” (my trans.). The surviving manuscripts, transmitting Odorico’s journey, whether in Latin or in translation, are according to Alvise Andreose, 110 (“La fortuna romanza della Relatio” 89). Additionally, several printed editions from the XVI th c. onward are also still extant (Marchisio, 6).

254 To illustrate such variety Marchisio lists Jean de Long’s French translation, Mandeville’s Travels, the Libro Ultramarino, and several Italian vernacular versions (i.e. Libro and Memoriale Toscano)(Marchisio 45).

the *Relatio’s* manuscripts and the numerous vernacular renditions are a testament.\(^{256}\)

In this chapter I argue that the *Libro’s* added material highlights both medieval characterizations of difference, as well as strategies of identity-definition. Particularly, in the *Libro*, corporeal emphasis allows the body to become a privileged locus of representation. In fact the narrative appears characterized, by a “bodily quality” (terms that are borrowed from Caroline Walker Bynum’s reading of medieval female spirituality) that I trace and analyze in this chapter.\(^{257}\)

Scholarship on Odorico’s Latin text and its vernacular transmission is rather abundant.\(^{258}\) Nevertheless, while several studies have examined the narrative from a philological perspective, few have produced an analysis, informed by a cultural-studies approach, of the text’s representation and construction of the body. Thus, building on the existing scholarship, my reading aims at developing a critical analysis of specific passages of the *Libro*, connecting them with a larger discourse about the status and function of travel narratives within the late medieval imaginary.\(^{259}\) In particular, taking cues from Ginzburg’s perspective in historical paradigms I

\(^{256}\) Chiesa notes that the *Relatio’s* tradition has been characterized by “innovation and changes” since its inception, possibly favored by the “modest literary level of the original text” (“favorita in questo dal modesto livello letterario del testo originario”) (Chiesa, “Per un riordino” 315).

\(^{257}\) The reference is to Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. In this work Bynum stresses the centrality of the body for a better understanding of medieval forms of apprehension of humanity: “Compared to other periods of Christian history and other world religions, medieval spirituality—especially female spirituality—was peculiarly bodily; this was so not only because medieval assumptions associated female with flesh but also because theology and natural philosophy saw persons as-in some real sense-body as well as soul” (183).


\(^{259}\) I am guided in this analysis—at least in part—by Kathleen Biddick’s theoretical approach, as laid out in: Biddick, K. *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2003 and Geraldine Heng’s retrospective investigation on race in the European middle ages (“The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages (I and II)). Carmen Nocentelli’s analysis of imperial
maintain-through an analysis of specific textual occurrences-that the “unguarded moments” of the added text reveal slippages of meaning centered on the body as “the place where the encounter between the subject and the social is most successfully mediated”; secondly, I propose that an “economy of desire” emerges from these texts in more than one place, connecting the narrative to similar textual “moments” in the development of a larger cultural discourse.\footnote{260}

Andreose, author of the critical edition of the Libro also established that, despite a possible Venetian origin (around the middle of fourteenth century) the narrative reached a certain popularity in Tuscany, eventually spreading throughout the Northeastern Italian region of Veneto.\footnote{261} In addition, during the early 15th C., the latter had been further integrated with new material and re-worked into another version, known as Memoriale toscano on account of his likely geographical origin (Andreose, “La fortuna romanza” 91).\footnote{262} However, Monaco suggests the possibility that this later version might have circulated even at an earlier date, given the public’s predilection for mercantile travel adventures, as the wide diffusion of Polo’s Devisement attests.\footnote{263}


\footnote{262} This is the version of the Relatio printed and edited in 1513 by Pontico Virunio and later included by G. B. Ramusio in his *Navigazioni e viaggi* as the shortest version of the two chosen by Ramusio (Minor Ramusian Version, for Yule). Luigi Monaco, editor of a modern edition of the Memoriale, also regards Virunio’s version as based on the Memoriale toscano itself, to which Virunio would have appended several additions and interpolations. (see Andreose 28n55). See also Monaco, L.: “Si può allora usare la denominazione ‘Memoriale toscano’ sia per sottolineare l’area geografica di provenienza dei manoscritti superstiti, che e’ la stessa in cui fu effettuata la traduzione dal latino, sia per conservare il caratteristico termine che, nell’attestazione finale [...] indica l’opera e non ha equivalente nelle stesure latine” (Memoriale 67).

\footnote{263} “I manoscritti superstiti del Memoriale appartengono al XV secolo ma ciò’ non impedisce di supporre una maggiore antichità di questo tipo di versione”(Monaco 67). ‘The extant manuscripts of the Memoriale belong to the Xvth C. but that does not prevent the hypothesis that this version might have been existed earlier’ (my trans.).
Both the Libro and the Memoriale present versions of Odorico’s journey that differ substantially from those transmitted by the Latin manuscripts.\textsuperscript{264} The Memoriale in particular, is the only vernacular version that does not include the long episode of the martyrdom of the Franciscan friars in Tana (SF VIII 1-25), which is of central importance in later attempts to establish Odorico’s sainthood.\textsuperscript{265} As a result, it becomes much less dependent on its “symbolic and providential dymension,” and by virtue of underplaying its hagiographic tenor, expands its reach well outside clerical circles (Monaco 79). The Libro, on the other hand, though rather similar to the Memoriale, has been augmented by the presence of several details (referred to by Andreose as Appendix). The added material is is likely to have been composed by an altogether different author.\textsuperscript{266} In fact the text points explicitly to a different source of information, perhaps a Venetian merchant, besides Odorico: “Tornando io a casa la sera poi ch’avemo cenato co uno mercatante veniziano, ragionando insieme delle meravigliose cose ch’avamo udito da frate Odorigo, mi disse questo venizano […] ‘coming home in the evening, after having had supper with a Venetian merchant, talking about the wondrous things that we had heard from Friar Odorico, this Venetian said to me […]’ (Appendice III, 1). Once again, even with the Libro’s general adherence to Odorico’s Latin version, a desire to divulge the narrative within a predominantly secular milieu emerges from the assembled material, as Andreose points out in his

\textsuperscript{264} The analysis of the numerous variants occurring in these texts has originated several hypotheses regarding their presence. Lucio Monaco for example proposes that “authentic material” from Odorico’s narration, lost in Henry’s and Guglielmo’s versions, might have been saved (perhaps as “marginal glossae”) in a text that was subsequently used as a basis for the Memoriale (Monaco 79, my trans.).

\textsuperscript{265} “Tra tutti i volgarizzamenti della Relatio, solo il Memoriale attua questo notevole taglio” (Monaco 74). Romedio Schmitz-Esser details the establishment of Odorico’s canonization and its meaning in relation to the survival of the Franciscan missions in Asia in: “Odorico da Pordenone e il ruolo del retroterra veneziano.”

\textsuperscript{266} It should be noted that the version of the Libro containing the additions exists only in two of the 8 extant manuscripts: CO (Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi C.7.1170 ex. Santa Maria Nuova (composed in XIV c.) and M Venezia: Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, ms. it. Cl. XI n.32 (6672) prov. Svajer, 1409 (M) (composed betw. XV-XVII c.). (Andreose 75 and 79). Andreose suggests that the new author might have intervened at a later date on a previously circulating text (Andreose 63).
Despite the problem of the authorial attribution, which is difficult to solve, scholarship on Odorico’s narrative has long dismissed the added material in the vernacular versions, as being not particularly significative. Andreose for example sees the purpose of the additions principally as underlying “the centrality of the narrator” within the general architecture of the text (“La fortuna romanza” 93). The fact that part of this material is shared with other travel accounts (such as Polo’s) or present in other compilations of geographical knowledge, (such as, for example, Vincenzo de Beauvais’ Speculum historiale), further corroborates the scarcity of interest. I chose to revisit here some of the added material from the perspective of a cultural analysis of the textual representation of the body, whose depiction is, I believe, functional to the shaping of a Western medieval ideology of alterity and, simultaneously, to the construction of a specific identity.

That Odorico’s travel account is a multidimensional work, is an established tenet within its critical tradition. Scholars have not failed to identify the narrative’s various intentions which range from the desire to impact the papacy’s willingness to support the Franciscan, evangelical mission to the East, to the wish to convey ethno-geographical descriptions to its contemporary audiences. Luigi Monaco highlights above all the organizing presence of a “percorso morale

267 “Nel volgarizzamento la fedeltà all’ auctoritas odoriciano-che ad esempio non ammette tagli o inserzioni tali da snaturare la fisionomia complessiva dell’opera-si unisce alla volontà di rendere il testo maggiormente accessibile ad un pubblico estraneo nella sostanza alla cultura ecclesiastica” (Andreose, Libro 62).

268 Andreose: “Le aggiunte raramente introducono nella relazione novità significative, ma sembrano rispondere alla volontà di ‘connotare’ piu’ esplicitamente segmenti testuali troppo generici o stilisticamente incolori” (“La fortuna romanza” 92).

269 “Si tratta quasi sempre di dettagli di un certo interesse, ma che poco aggiungono a quanto già detto nella relazione” “Almost always [these are] details of some interest, but that don’t add much to what the narrative has already said” (“La fortuna romanza” 93).
che si sovrappone a quello geografico e lo domina’ ‘a moral path that’s superimposed on the geographical one and that dominates it’ (Memorale 62). For Monaco this stance was historically motivated by the delicate position of the Franciscan order at the time and it ultimately governs Odorico’s narrative as a whole (62).

As the work becomes entrenched in the necessity to convey first and foremost an apology of Franciscanism, it also helps to skillfully construct a self-referential hagiography. This intention ultimately works to render the narrative’s style rather “articulated and complex,” leaving, “little room for improvisation” (Monaco 63).

Andreose also observes that Odorico’s narration is “extremely pliable” to being incorporated in various, amended renditions (Libro 18). By attributing the text’s metamorphic and enduring qualities to its “sobriety” and its penchant “to reflect the immediacy of life,” he draws attention to its structural characteristics and narrative style but does not consider its important role in helping define a medieval identity built around racial inclusions and exclusions. Reichert also focuses on the narrative’s characteristic “immediacy,” as well as on its ability to communicate anecdotaly (163). Noting the lack of “literary ambitions” shown by Gugliemo da Solagna’s

---

270 By then Franciscan missionaries had been evangelizing within the Mongol empire for about 30 years and necessitated at the time of further reinforcements (Andreose 17).

271 The Relatio is for Monaco “un racconto [...] che si colloca in una dimensione molto particolare, venendo a costituire una sorta di testo autoagiografico” “a narration that is not only a historical-geographical document and autobiographical narrative but that locates itself in a very particular dimension, becoming a sort of self-hagiography” (24 my trans.).

272 More specifically it displays: “Un disegno progettuale articolato e complesso, in cui poco é lasciato al caso e alla spontaneità narrativa” “an articulated and complex design in which little is left to chance and narrative spontaneity” (Monaco 63).

273 “L’opera, come e’ stato osservato, si presenta sfaccettata e polisemica: proprio in virtù di tale complessità é stata recepita in modo di volta in volta differente, nel passato come nei tempi recenti” (18).

274 “Stile piano e sobrio, tessuto narrativo lineare e non di rado aneddotico, nei suoi toni appassionati e inclini alla meraviglia piuttosto che alla riflessione concettuale, in cui pare riverberarsi l’immediatezza del vissuto” (Andreose 6).”Plain and sober style, linear and often anecdotic narrative implant in its passionate tone, more akin to wonder than conceptual reflection, in which the immediacy of life seems to reverberate ‘(my trans.). F.E. Reichert also remarks on the travel narrative singular characteristics: “ciò che contraddistingue il racconto di viaggio di Odorico dagli altri sono il suo accento molto personale e l’immediatezza del vissuto, che scaturisce dalle memorie del viaggiatore” (164).
Latin transcription, Reichert proposes that the choice might have been intentional in order to allow for easier comprehension on the readers part (163).275 Indeed, the moral message of Odorico’s narrative coupled with its hagiographic frame accounted for its popularity within clerical circles and secular ones; these traits also distinguish the account from Polo’s Devisement, a work to which the Relatio has often been juxtaposed, particularly within the manuscript tradition (Andreose, Libro 18).276 However, one striking feature of Odorico’s narrative is its effectiveness in rendering the Orient in the form of well crafted vignettes with the ability to restitute an extremely vivid rendition of many encounters. Scott Westrem observes in this regard that the, Relatio’s author “fingers each locale as if it were itself a pearl, admiring its curious inexplicability” (Broader Horizons, 37).

Certainly the hagiographic dimension of this narrative has been a major factor in its diffusion. In “Il contributo dei testi agiografici alla conoscenza dell’Oriente nel medioevo latino,” Paolo Chiesa establishes the medieval reliability of hagiographies as trustworthy sources of geographical information. Chiesa notes the enduring popularity of mirabilia from the Alexander cycle’s influence in medieval depictions of the East (particularly during the high middle ages), flanked by a proliferation of hagiographies narrating accounts of men traveling to

275 “Predicta autem ego Fr. Guglielmis de Solagna in scriptis redegi sicut predictus Fr. Odoricus ore proprio exprimebat...Nec curavi de latino difficili et ornato stilo, sed sicut/ille narrabat sic ego scribem ad hoc ut omnes facilius intelligerent que scribuntur vel dicuntur” (Odorico da Pordenone, Relatio (SF 494s), quoted in Reichert 163n78). On Solagna’s “plain” narrative style, his adherence to Odorico’s verbal deposition, and their meaning see also: Schmitz-Esser’s observations in “Odorico da Pordenone e il ruolo del retroterra veneziano.”

276 See also Andreose 18n9. Polo’s narrative came to represent both a “model” for the Relatio and also, at times, an expansion of the Relatio itself (ibidem). Monaco and Andreose both highlight several examples of cross-contamination within the two texts. Monaco examines Polo’s version of the hunt (Milione 93.14-17) side by side with that in the Memoriale (Memoriale 44.3) concluding that “L’originalità dell’esposizione odoriciana sta nei dettagli informativi: per il resto il punto di riferimento è con ogni evidenza il Milione.” (47) The originality of Odorico’s writing is in the informative details: for the remainder, the reference point is with all evidence the Divisament” (my trans.). In addition to Polo, Marchisio underlines the importance of the geographical section of Isidore of Seville’s Ethymologie as a source for the development of the Relatio’s tradition (Marchisio 46).
the East in search of the lost paradise or, alternatively, apostles traveling to convert pagans (12). The narration of the saints’ deeds evangelizing the East reflects a vision of the East that, albeit not identical, warns Chiesa, did not greatly differ from the one reflected by the marvel tradition or by the Alexander romance.277 Hagiographies were regarded by and large with the same kind of scientific interest that surrounded Western, early medieval travel documents to the East.278 There was a sense, Chiesa suggests, that certain hagiographies transmitted credible images of foreign lands by virtue of their inherent authority (28). At times, the geography that the saints lives help construe, resisted any amendment deriving from more recent mercantile or missionary exploration; an example of this can be seen in the enduring quest for the ultimate location of the Earthly Paradise, which was “never found but continuously searched for” and in regard to which “the saints’ geography was unwilling to give way to the more concrete merchants’ geography” (Chiesa 29) (my trans.).279 Hence Paul Meyvaert’s observation that “hagiography became for the middle ages what mythology had been for antiquity” perfectly fits the context of Odorico’s work transmission (91).

In addition, the text’s function as exemplum (the physical itinerarium is also the soul’s spiritual journey) had also been quite evident to its readership, as testified by the narrative styles

---

277 Among the common elements, the magical qualities of the Eastern landscape endure, as does the incommensurable beauty and splendor of Prester John’s palace (the fabled Christian king of the East) together with the savagery and ferocity of many indigenous populations.

278 Particularly, Chiesa locates the insertion of Brendan e Josaphat in the Navigatio Brendani, and sees it as evidence that the hagiography had been considered a trustworthy document, be that real or imaginary, about unknown lands. Chiesa cites especially the XIII th c. “geographical miscellanea,” represented by 2 Cambridge codices where it appears together with Prester John, Rubruck’s Itinerarium and other texts (27), bearing witness to a kind geography that was “un po’ reale un po’ spirituale un po’ apocalittica un po’ agiografica che costituisce una delle basi di conoscenza del mondo del basso medioevo” “a bit real, a bit spiritual, a bit apocalyptic, a bit hagiographic that constituted one of the knowledge basis of the world in the low middle ages” (27 my trans.).

of its vernacular versions; in fact, both the Libro and the Memoriale maintain the ability to work at various and heterogeneous levels of interpretation. Andreose for example notes the presence of specific verbal clues which point to the Relatio’s intended moral dimension. The narrative’s title “Iter” or “Itinerary” (present in many Latin manuscripts), directly points the reader to an allegorical interpretation, in which the travel narrative becomes a moral tale (exemplum) for the edification of its readers (25). Monaco as well, noting the text’s positive depiction of China, finds this posture well representative of a general allegorizing tendency, noting that such hyperbolic depiction is not lost even to the sensibility of a modern reader.

However, while allegorical and hagiographic readings of the Relatio might have been paramount for a medieval sensibility, ethnographic and geographical preoccupations became increasingly more prevalent in later scholarship.

Today different questions, emerging from recent critical attention to issues of embodiment, sexuality, identity constitution and racial politics, have become more urgent. Focusing on the centrality of bodily depictions in the Libro’s “Appendice”, is a way to attend-at least in part-to these issues.

As mentioned earlier, the presence of added material distinguishes the Italian vernacular

---

280 Finally, when the narration shifts from the widely spread, legendary view of India as “garden of delight” to its correspondence to the Earthly Paradise: “the real itinerary from India to China and the moral itinerary from earthly Babel to heavenly happiness proceed hand in hand” (26). (“L’itinerario morale dall’India alla Cina e quello morale dalla Babele terrena alla felicità paradisiaca procedono dunque di pari passo” (Andreose 26). Notably Andreose also suggests that while the choice of rendering Odorico the narrator and protagonist of the travel narrative lends the text a certain unity, the operation of disassembling and recomposing of the text, to which the manuscript tradition bears witness, conversely suggests a fragmented readership (Andreose 27).

281 “Il lettore moderno si accorge di una forzatura ottimistica nella descrizione della realtà cinese” (Monaco, Memoriale). Notably, Reichert points out that Western medieval descriptions of Catai were caught between the suspicion towards their military power (arising from recent history) and the ideal, utopian vision of a wisely governed state (Reichert 243).

282 See for example the recent publication of works like Surekha S. Davies’s Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters (2016).
version here examined from the Latin versions from which the narration has evolved, complementing it but also expanding on it. Certain passages (usually detailing the rituals of the Mongols) are centered around a sexualized description of the body (of the natives). As in de’Conti’s narration (analyzed in Chapter III), these depictions allow the anxieties and fears of a contemporary readership to come to the surface; in particular, they are centered around the role of the male spectator/narrator. Anxieties become particularly evident when attempts are made in the narratives to obtain the narrator’s involvement in customs of sexual nature, and relate specifically to the differentiation between the male and the female body. An example can be found in the Libro’s description of an indigenous ritual:

\[
E\ disse\ che\ fue\ in\ una\ contrada\ e\ paese\ che\ lla\ gente\ v’è\ pessima\ e\ che,\ se\ ll’uomo\ non\ è\ bene\ reo\ tra\ lloro\ di\ fare\ grandi\ mali,\ no\ lli\ fanno\ onore\ e\ non\ vi\ truova\ moglie.\ E\ quanto\ maggiori\ mali\ fae,\ tanto\ li\ fanno\ maggior\ onori\ ed\ ha\ maggior\ e\ più\ onorevile\ moglie.\ Quando\ lo\ giovane\ vuole\ pigliare\ moglie,\ vae\ al\ padre\ di\ quella\ giovane\ che\ vuole\ pigliare\ per\ moglie\ e\ diceli:\ “Io\ vorrei\ che\ tu\ mi\ dessi\ la\ tua\ figliuola\ per\ moglie”.\ Ed\ egli\ risponde:\ “Tu\ non\ hai\ fatto\ quello\ per\ che\ tu\ sie\ degno\ d’avera\ per\ moglie”.\ E\ quelli,\ intendendo\ quello\ che\ vuol\ dire,\ per\ l’usanza\ si\ parte\ e\ va\ fuora\ della\ terra,\ e\ cerca\ d’uno\ giovane\ o\ altro\ qual\ truova\ migliore\ e\ assagliscelo\ e\ uccidelo.\ E\ quando\ l’à\ morto,\ si’\ lli\ taglia\ lo\ membro\ da\ generare\ con\ tutta\ la\ borsa\ e\ lle\ pertegnenze,\ e\ pollo\ su\ uno\ taglieri\ e\ presentallo\ alla\ figliuola\ del\ padre\ la\ quale\ egli\ intende\ d’avere\ per
\]

Andreose provides a classification of the added material included in the appendix by distinguishing two main groups of texts: the first includes a series of clarifications on Odorico’s Latin text, while the second adds “new” material derived predominantly from Polo’s narration and from Simon de Beauvais’s Speculum historiale. The addenda include details on Odorico’s travels from Hormuz to Tana (.II), a description of Polumbo’s funeral rites (IV), a description of Lamen island’s indigenous population (V), a description of the Chinese tradition of deforming female feet and the Mandarins’ habit of growing nails (IX), a description of the remedies against venom used in the island of Talamasin (XIV) and, finally, a description of paper notes circulation within the Great Kahn’s reign.
moglie. Il padre prende questo presente e fallo insalare e acconciare che no si corrompa, e fane una corona alla figliuola e della per moglie a questo giovane che àe fatto questo omicidio. E lla figliuola porta in capo questa corona / per ornamento e onore come le donne portano le corone come usanza (Libro, 182).

He said that he had been in a place where the people were bad and if men are not capable of doing evil they would not be honored and cannot find a wife. And the bigger the evil the more he is honored and the bigger the chances to find a wife. When a youth wants to find a bride he goes to the father of the woman he wants to marry and says to him: “I would like you to give me your daughter as a wife” and he says to him: “You did not do that for which you are worthy of having her as wife.” And he, understanding what that means, according to custom, leaves the land and looks for a youth or another that is better than him and attacks him and kills him. And when he is dead, he cuts off his member with the testicles and puts them on a chopping board and presents them to the girl he wants to marry. The father takes this present and has it put under salt so that it would not spoil and makes a crown for the daughter and gives her as a wife to the youth that has committed this homicide. And the woman wears this crown as ornament and distinction like women customarily wear crowns. (my trans.)

The ritual is centered around the murder of a man and the subsequent severance of his genitalia. The murder of a foreigner is described as a necessary and preliminary condition for being considered as suitable candidate for marriage. Afterward, the severance of the dead man’s genitals immediately follows. The subsequent embalming of the genitals allows for the assemblage of a “crown” (at the hand of the future bride’s father), which will be worn by the bride-to-be as visible witness to her engagement (as her “ornament” and “pride”, as the text
Possibly, the author of the *Appendice* might have collected supplemental material from hearsay, as well as from already circulating written sources. Andreose suggests that the author of the *Libro* intended to extend the *auctoritas* that had already been granted to the added material by its prior inclusion in the *Speculum historiale*, a well-circulated medieval compendium of knowledge, to the entirety of his narration (66). However, its inclusion is also indicative in my view of the existence of a pressing concern with the boundaries that are shaping the formation of cultural identities.

The *addenda* have been read primarily as the expression of aesthetic, stylistic concerns, as examples of two, specific tendencies, which are otherwise not as prominent in the text’s Latin antecedents: on the one hand, the desire to simplify and lighten Odorico’s narrative, and on the other, the attempt to explain it (Andreose, 47). The first objective is to be achieved by means of omissions of elaborated syntactical forms and ritual introductory formulas, while the latter is rather obtained by means of “integrations and explanations of those passages that must have seemed particularly opaque or of difficult comprehension to the compiler” (Andreose 47).

Indeed, these characteristics are in line with the didascalic nature of a popular, widely-read rendition, such as the *Libro*. The added information however also points to the shaping of an ontological discourse of uncertainty that emerges, more broadly, from the fabric of the travel account itself. The passage offers in fact a glimpse into a late medieval attempt to make sense of a rather uncertain world, both in ethnographic terms (the excerpt belong to a description of

---

284 Andreose’s observations about the supposed provenance of each of the 8 extant codices are also of interest, as he proposes a mercantile origin for at least 5 of them, whereas the other 3 are likely of religious provenance, though not attributable directly to Franciscan circles (Andreose, 62n26-27).
distant China), but also in relation to changing categories of sexuality and gender boundaries. The human body as center of humanity is a commonplace of early modern art and humanistic scholarship, thus the centrality of the body in the development of western, medieval narratives, cannot be overlooked. As Joseph Ziegler suggests: “if the human body was the center of humanity, being human meant to be embodied” (491). The body has become an essential marker of identity and such identity is displayed in terms of sexual and gendered difference.

A psychoanalytic reading of the ritual described above would possibly be centered on its apotropaic function, as Andreose notes, thus interpreting it primarily as a way to avert impotence and also a means to simultaneously attract fertility. Seen within the context of the emergence of an ideological discourse of difference, which medieval travel narratives prominently contributed to articulate, the passage seems to reflect a desire to expose and underline the irrational. The goal is achieved without neglecting to highlight its comic aspects, which are here employed as another strategy to reinforce at once the externality and alterity of the indigenous peoples who are practicing it. However, since unflattering descriptions of the beliefs and behaviors of the religious communities (encountered for example during religious pilgrimages to the Holy Land) has long been a common feature of Western medieval travel narratives, the conflation of motives converging in the passage above examined, points to a stratification of meanings that is worth unpacking and investigating further.

---

285 For a review of the many Western medieval attempts to make sense of the encounter with Asia (with a focus on China), See Reichert, *Incontri con la Cina* and Gordon, Stewart. *When Asia was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors and Monks who created the Riches of the East*. Da Capo Press, 2008.

286 Among countless literary and figurative examples in the Western canon, see Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*’ focus on the body.

287 As does Andreose: “*Si tratta di un rituale con funzioni apotropaiche (allontanamento dell’impotenza) e propiziatrici (acquisizione della potenza fecondatrice del morto da parte del possessore del macabro trofeo)*” (Andreose, *Libro* 243n7).
Among the various layers of significance juxtaposed in the narrative, the parodic effect of the passage is certainly evident. It is hard to miss its connection with other, literary examples, also achieved through the employment of the travel-narrative-blueprint. A notable example of the ease with which a travelogue can become a formidable tool in the service of parody or distortion is offered by Boccaccio in *Decameron* VI.10. In this novella the rhetorical prowess of Frate Cipolla constructs a skillfully executed parody of the travel narrative as a genre, to which the allusions are rather explicit (Monaco 70). The imaginary geography of Dec. VI.10 (which has been revealed to reflect a domestic itinerary) becomes for Boccaccio a framework for delivering a not-so-hidden critique of religious rituals, centered in this case (as in many loci of the *Decameron*) around the practice of worshipping relics, and also on the religious orders themselves.  

Jonathan usher’s reading of Dec. VI.10 is particularly effective in illustrating Boccaccio’s method. As Usher points out in “Frate Cipolla’s *ars praedicandi* or a ‘Récit du Discours’ in Boccaccio”, the friar’s imaginary pilgrimage is punctuated by the rhythmic deployment of specific linguistic traces, which inform the already circulating Western medieval pilgrimage accounts. Frate Cipolla’s itinerary emerges from the purposefully ambiguous mention of the names of Florentine streets and neighborhoods, in themselves reminiscent of exotic places, and which, for rhetorical purposes, function as replacements of a trip to the Orient.

288 “[...]*la pungente parodia di un racconto-relazione di viaggio fatta da frate Cipolla conferma la familiarità del pubblico fiorentino con tale genere di scrittura*” (Monaco, Memoriale 69).  
289 “e di qui pervenni in terra di Menzogna, dove molti de’ nostri frati e d’altri religioni trovai assai, li quali tutti il disagio andavan per l’amor di Dio schifando, poco dell’altrui fatiche curandosi dove la loro utilità vedessero seguitare” (Dec. VI.10) See Vittore Branca’s notes to the 1992 Einaudi edition and Jonathan Usher’s, cited below.
The emphasis placed by structuralist readings of *Decameron* VI.10 on the rhetorical strategies employed in the *novella*, is based on the individuation of specific patterns and linguistic structures that are also employed in Western medieval travel accounts at large. In particular, Usher focuses on the usage of the narrative pattern “*deinde*” / “*perveni*” (or “*donde*” and “*venni*” in Tuscan vernacular), used to connect a series of actions, which characterizes almost as recurrent medieval keywords, many pilgrimage accounts.\(^{290}\) As Ushers observes, this is “the commonest narrative format to be found in medieval accounts of pilgrimages” (328).\(^{291}\) Its correspondence with Frate Cipolla’s own narrative architecture, is revelatory of a direct influence of the abundant travel narrative templates on Boccaccio’s rendition. In *Decameron* VI. 10 Frate Cipolla, succeeds in proving a “plausibility which is comically implausible” through a list of places visited and the relics there collected (331). An otherwise unverifiable account (that of his travels) is therefore conveyed merely through a credible succession of place descriptions.\(^{292}\)

Furthermore, in the *Libro* another topos, that of the (gratuitous) violence towards others, surfaces, in the episode quoted earlier, in form of the required killing of a “*giovane [...] qual*”

\(^{290}\) Monaco also notes the employment of “technical” terms as “*cercare*” and “*divisare*” (Monaco 70).

\(^{291}\) Usher, J.“ Frate Cipolla’s *ars predicandi* or a récit du discours in Boccaccio” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 88, no 2, 1993, pp. 321-336 (The analysis of the linguistic pattern is taken from Richard, J.ed. *Récits de voyages et de pèlerinages*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental 30, Brepols, 1981). Demonstrating the many nuances of Boccaccio’s masterly narrative technique, Usher’s study also further underlines the pattern’s connection with a widespread technique of memorization used in homiletics for the recitation of sermons, exposing once again, Boccaccio’s acutely nuanced parodic technique (ibidem, 328).

\(^{292}\) Furthermore, it is worth considering Usher’s claim that the purpose of medieval travel narratives had always been twofold: “to guide and to inform and to guide and to provide occasion for meditation”(328). Usher goes on to say that such double aim creates “an uneasy rivalry between the need to provide an orderly account of travel on the one hand, and the need to provide an acceptably detailed, but potentially digressive, treatment of memorabilia”(328). This applies to Frate Cipolla’s case as he exploits the need for details to his own advantage by creating a list of things destined to be remembered and to distract the audience from the present situation (i.e. the list of memorabilia become a device for forgetting what his original sermon was about). It seems therefore that the need for providing information is destined to become subordinate to that of offering details.
truova migliore” ‘a young man, better than him’. This action is presented as mandatory, seen as a necessary “pre-requisite” to be considered a suitable candidate for marriage. The narrative element emerges in various forms in other Western medieval (and late-medieval) travel narratives to the East, for example in de’ Conti/Bracciolini’s own description of the senseless violence of the inhabitants of Java: “Has homine inhumanissimi omnium crudelissimique inhabitant, mures, canes, gatos et spurciora quaelibet animalia edentes. Crudelitate exuperant omnes mortales, hominem occidere pro ludo est, nullique supplicio datur”(De varietate fortunae 114) 293

The contrast between the violence of the homicide and the ensuing arrangement of the dead man’s genitalia into a crown must have carried a certain symbolic weight for a medieval audience, as it does for a contemporary one, all the while expressing a sexual anxiety around male genitalia that resurfaces in various loci of several early modern travel narratives, as Carmen Nocentelli details in Empires of Love: Europe, Asia and the Making of Modern Identity. 294

Notably, what follows, is the description of an episode (also narrated by Polo in the Devisement, and therefore possibly directly derived by it), in which the narrator himself becomes the focus of the natives’ interest. It is precisely on account of his double characterization as both a clergy men and a foreigner that Odorico’s participation in the ritual is repeatedly solicited:

E disse che fue in una terra popolata di molta gente che usano di fare spulcelare le loro figliuole a uomini forestieri e poi le maritano tra lloro. E quanto più é strano e religioso più lo tolgon volentieri. E quando alcuno forestieri di questi vi capita, é pregato dal


padre che vegna a spulcellare la figliola. E questo frate Odorigo disse che fue pregato da uno di quelli uomini molto strettamente che venisse a spulcellare la figliuola. Ed elli negandoli, dicendo ch’era religioso, dicendo che no lli era licito, che pure l’udire si fatte parole li era grande abominazione, e quelli continuo lo ripregava, dicendo che lla mariterebbe poi meglio e più tosto. E molto si partio’ sconsolato perché no l volse servire di cioé. (Andreose, 183)

Reichert points out that the “offering of women to visiting guests” constitutes indeed a common topos of exoticism in Western medieval travel narratives (131n342). Friedman lists this practice among the many marvels of India, and Marco Polo mentions it as customary in the East. Others have also read it as an attempt to fraternize with strangers, with the refusal to participate in the ritual being perceived as an ineqivocable manifestation of hostility (Reichert 135).

The narrator’s unwillingness to participate in a local custom of sexual nature directly recalls a later travelogue, Poggio Bracciolini’s retelling of de’ Conti’s travels. There, de’Conti’s refusal to participate in an indigenous ritual centered around genital bell implantation, becomes expediently an unequivocal demonstration of religious integrity; similarly in the Libro, Odorico’s refusal to participate in a custom which would involve breaking his own vows of sexual

---

295 See also Friedman, P. The Monstrous Races, 21.
296 Reichert notes that Polo’s inclusion of this particular description might have been instrumental to its juxtaposition with the virtuous habits of Chinese women (in contrast with Tibetan women), which are in turn placed side by side with Venetian customs: “Se da un lato le usanze dei tibetani lo muovevano a sdegno, dall’altro egli decantava il contegno virtuoso delle Cinesi, contegno che confrontava più o meno espressamente con le regole di comportamento cui erano soggette le donne nella sua patria” (Reichert 131). With regard specifically to Polo’s incorporation of it in the Devisement, Reichert also observes that classical, textual authorities were a constant and necessary reference when conveying new observations, following an established pattern of recourses to “credible” images (131).
297 In addition, Reichert provides a list of studies examining the possibility of the practice’s actual, historical occurrence (131n342).
abstinence, serves first and foremost as a reaffirmation of moral probity. The natives’ insistence on Odorico’s involvement (justified on account of the “benefits” that it would have imparted to the future bride at the time of her marriage), despite his repeated attempts to avoid it (fu pregato molto strettamente...ed egli negandoli...e quelli continuo/ he was solicited repeatedly...and he refusing...and they continuing (my trans. ) represents a central element of the passage. Such moment is ultimately reinforced by the observation that the host had been greatly crossed by Odorico’s refusal (e molto si partio sconsolato perché nol volse servire di cioé/ and he left very despondent because he did not partake (my trans.).

As in de’ Conti/ Bracciolini’s narrative, here too, the moral integrity of the narrator constitutes the primary focus of the didascalic intent of the passage; the latent ideological opposition of virtue and sin also clearly emerges as a background enhancing the moral didacticism of the story. It is therefore hardly surprising that the episode became part of the traditional hagiography of the Franciscan friar Odorico, which culminates in Chapter XLIX ("Delle meravigliose cose che sono in una valle posta sopra il fiume chiamato ‘fiume delle delizie’") with the conclusive “demonstration” of Odorico’s sanctity. Odorico’s survival in the “perilous valley” is thus presented as an unequivocal occurrence, a fact that is instrumental to attesting the friar’s status as saint; further proof is added by the “great reverence” displayed by Muslims observers: “E per questa ragione tutti i saracini m’avevano in grande reverenza, dicendo ch’io era battezzato e santo e quelli che erano morti in quella valle erano stati uomini del diaulo d’inferno” (“and for this reason all the Saracens held me in great reverence, saying

298 The chapter narrates Odorico’s ‘miraculous’ escape from the “Perilous Valley”. See Andreose, 176.
that I was baptized and a saint and those who had died in that valley had been men of the devil” (Andrease, 176, emphasis and trans. mine).

If the overcoming of sexual temptation (and-conversely- the failure to resist it) is also a widely employed narrative artifice in hagiographies and, more generally, in moral tales, the emphasis on the body as a generative locus of morality is yet another reminder of its meaningfulness. Jacqueline Murray’s work on Peter Abelard and Hugh of Lincoln helps illustrating the the way in which the text conveys its message and locates the body as a crucial site of meaning formation. In “Mystical Castration: Some Reflections on Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln and Sexual Control,” Murray effectively brings into focus the centrality of the body and its desire in relation to the development of the moral message of Abelard’s story. Her analysis draws attention to the body’s core position (not only as a physical but also a symbolic element) in detailing the development of Abelard’s moral characterization. Murray analyzes Abelard’s gradual embracing of his own initial failure to resist sexual temptation. At first “[..]Abelard characterizes his desire as irrational and irresistible, adopting the ecclesiastical model of reason’s desperate attempts to tame the flesh” (all the while, further observes Murray, allowing himself to assume the posture of self-victimization that often emerges from this oppositional categorization) (79). Later however, Abelard is able to revise the meaning of his desire by linking his castration to that of his “illustrious predecessor Origen,” hence drawing authority directly from Origen’s example (80). In so doing, Murray notes, Abelard effectively shifts allegiance “from a secular ideology of masculinity, which celebrated sexual prowess, to an ideology of celibacy, as propounded by the church” (80).

Odorico’s refusal to partake in sexual encounters with the natives follows a similar trajectory, aiming to display unambiguous signs of moral probity through the negation and
sublimation of a secular ideology focused on the body. In both narrations however, the unchallenged opposition between Murray’s “ideology of masculinity” (with its locus on the body) and a subsequently developed “ideology of celibacy” (with is focus on chastity, in Abelard’s case), falls short of fully interpreting bodily desire.

A different kind of taxonomy, other than the traditionally employed opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, is perhaps in order. As Steven Kruger writes in “Conversion and medieval sexual, religious and racial categories” the opposition between homo- and heterosexual acts is inscribed within a larger polarity, that with the “higher” state of chastity” (165). This observation suggests that an oppositional lens of interpretation such as the one reading medieval sexuality preferably (or exclusively) in terms of a binary juxtaposition, may be essentially reductive.

Similarly the Libro’s Addendum XI underlines Odorico’s liability to temptation, through a numbering of the two main reasons that underline his refusal to take part in the ritual: “dicendo che era religioso, che no lli era lecito, che pure l’udire si fatte parole li era grande abominazione”/ “saying that he was a religious man, that he was not allowed, that even listening to those words was a great abomination” (my trans.). Odorico’s religious status, and the consequent observancy of his order’s prescriptions are the grounds on which he motivates his refusal to participate in the ritual, despite the “benefits” that his acceptance would eventually grant the bride-to-be (“dicendo che lla mariterebbe piu’ meglio e piu’ tosto”/“saying that he would marry her better and sooner” (my trans.).

It is clear from the narrative that it isn’t only Odorico’s religiousness but also his foreignness that make him an especially desirable participant in the ritual: “e quanto più è strano e religioso più lo tolgonon volentieri”/ “the more one is a foreigner and a religious man, the more
they want him”(my trans.). The connection between Odorico’s foreignness and his religiosity is stressed, as the abstinence from carnal pleasures imposed by the Catholic church on its clergy is amplified by the “foreignness” of the visitor. Together, they form an irresistible threshold, and in fact it invites repeated probing (“disse che fu pregato da uno di quegli uomini molto strettamente”/he said that he had been pressed by one of them). Hence a connection between foreignness and religiosity as foundational elements of identity is therefore instituted.

Furthermore, this particular shaping of a foundational determination of identity through the binding of religion and geographical provenance becomes part of the medieval history of the modern concept of “race”, as G. Heng proposes in “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages”. Heng presents a useful characterization of the constitutive elements of a medieval “architecture of race” in religion and law. She underlines the “universalistic ambitions” of Latin Christianity, further characterizing the operational status of the Roman church as that of a “church without borders” that was able to mobilize “affective communities” essentially through a culture of fear (“The Invention of Race” II 275). Furthermore, she also describes the “biopolitical import of religion”, a crucial ingredient in the constitution of medieval, racial formations, defining it as a: “wide-reaching” mechanism of subjection that can “biologize, define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally, and absolutely different in an inter-knotted cluster of ways” (“The Invention of Race” I 11). Among them, the emphasis on Odorico’s foreign status in the Libro appears indeed instrumental in conveying a clearly connotated, racialized vision of the Mongols.

Despite the fact that the offering of one’s wives and/or daughters to a visiting guest (as one element among many in a series of prized “possessions”) constitutes, as mentioned above, an all-too-common narrative trope in the representations of foreign, erotic mores, the custom is
meant to be perceived here as strident. This is particularly true as it involves the subversion of
least one legitimized and accepted Western social behaviour, that is to say the exclusivity of
marital practices. The offering of one’s wives hence functions as a subversion of accepted sexual
roles within the social contract of the marriage institution. As Nocentelli effectively points out in
*Empires of love*, such deviations are “never too far from depictions of savagery or at least
irrationality” (25). These impressions define the reader’s apprehension of the Mongols,
complicated however by a generally favorable description elsewhere in the narrative.

The powerfulness and efficacy of episodes detailing unusual sexual customs in
strengthening the connection between foreignness and irrationality, is further illustrated by early
readers responses. A study on the marginal annotations on a particular copy of the manuscript of
the Modenese tradition of Polo’s *Divisament*, mentioned by F. Reichert in his *Incontri con la
Cina*, sheds light on one of such early reactions (the episode of the offering-of-the-wives is
thought to be deriving from Polo’s travel account). In their marginal annotations, the copyists
judged the offering of wives and daughters as “*maxima abusionem,*” “highly abusive”, making it
easy to equate the description of the episode with the overt intent to denigrate (Reichert 194).

Nevertheless, if strangeness and impropriety are indeed common *topoi* in the characterization of
foreign behavior (sexual behavior, in particular, as both Westrem and Nocentelli demonstrate), a
strategic and political intent also emerges from the travel narrative here examined. If the overt
aim of sexual policies is the shaping and construing of western European sexual mores, as
Nocentelli maintains, it also contributes to the determination of essential categories of identities
(namely race and ethnicity). Exposing and marginalizing foreign sexual habits becomes therefore
a powerful ally in the solidification of cultural boundaries.
It would be disingenuous to ignore that travel narratives’ focus on sexual customs is well suited to further a, sometimes hidden and other time explicit, political agenda. However, as Scott Westrem observes in his “Medieval Western European Views of Sexuality Reflected in the Narratives of Travelers to the Orient,” the information that legitimate (and illegitimate) sexual mores provide about sexual practices in the East also “illuminates prevailing attitudes towards sexuality in the West,” as “the way in which males write about sexual conduct may reveal the anxieties they and their audiences have about sex” (150). Hence in his analysis of the travel narrative of the Franciscan John of Pian Carpini and Wilhelm von Rubruk, Westrem locates a common specificity of intents reflected in their respective narrations; both sought to actively diminish the image of “Mongol power and might”, as their explicit political aim was to favor and advocate a crusade. For Westrem, their political objective is extensively witnessed by their travel narratives and their concern rendered explicit at times by direct declarations (John declares in the prologue that the aim of his narrative is to “put readers on guard”, while William states that he would preach war against them “with all his strength” (151). To this purpose, in both Pian Carpini and Wilhelm von Rubruk, a conflation of interest for the private and public behavior of the Mongols became directly instrumental to a xenophobic agenda, highlighting the ways in which the Mongols “threaten to upset the existing social order of Western Europe” (153).  

---

299 Specifically, Westrem make this observation in regard to the accounts of Wilhelm von Rubruk, Marco Polo, Giovanni of Pian Carpini and Mandeville. In this context, he also points out how the Franciscan’s accounts - particularly Wilhelm von Rubruk’s and Pan Carpini’s- must also be read as reflections of the anxieties related to the “very real” Mongol invasions of their time (151).

300 Westrem stresses the political import of such “anxieties” as he sees them as coagulating historically in more explicit forms of intolerance: “three hundred years later writers no longer wrote with tolerance about the social and sexual behaviors in what really were new worlds (153). Even at the time of the papal envoys to the Mongol court, Carpini’s mission had been openly charged with the task of gathering information on Mongol power, as Peter Jackson points out in The Mongols and the West:1221-1410 (See in particular, ch. 4).
On the other hand, the powerful image of the Mongols that the Franciscans are concerned with debunking, had been widely circulated and long preserved by both Polo’s and Mandeville’s own all-too favorable depictions (and by Franciscan missionaries like Odorico). Odorico’s travel narrative-in the vernacular and Latin traditions- generally promotes a favorable portraits of the Mongols, centered around the description of the opulence and magnificence of the Kahn’s palace with his numerous and wondrous animals, and then culminating in the episode describing the imperial hunt, which is followed by the Kahn’s four, annual festivities. 301 In addition to a certain western “medieval Orientalism” (which spread particularly in the late medieval period, as Jean Richard notes in “La vogue d’Orient”), a widespread ambivalence also informs Western medieval perception of the East, seen alternatively as an utopian site (Prester John, Polo’s Khan etc.), a source of terror motivated by recent history (the Golden Horde, Gog and Magog), or alternatively as a land of unthinkable aberrations.302

The fact that Odorico’s Relatio-and its numerous volgarizzamenti- display a narrative emphasis on corporeality is however noteworthy. Caroline Walker Bynum’s analysis of the female body in Western medieval artistic representation famously underlines the essentiality of a constitutive presence of the flesh for a medieval definition of humanness; simultaneously,

301 In this regard Monaco notes that the inclusion of the passage related to the description of the hunt could have been necessitated by the expectations of the reading public, given the prominence that it has within Polo’s description.”If he deems it important to talk about it, it is not because he heard of the hunts preceding his arrival, but because the topic is one of the central episodes of the Divisament that are within the horizon of expectations of his public. Through the resonance of Polo’s writing the hunt doubled its function as status symbol of the imperial might, that can in this way be effectively represented through models that are well understandable for the European reader […]” “Se ritiene di doverne parlare, non é tanto perché gli era giunta l’eco delle cacce precedenti al suo arrivo, quanto perché l’argomento rientra in quegli episodi centrali del Milione che si collocano nell’orizzonte di attesa del suo pubblico. Attraverso la risonanza del racconto poliano la caccia ha raddoppiato la sua valenza di status symbol della potenza imperiale, che puó così essere efficacemente ben rappresentata anche in modelli ben comprensibili al lettore europeo […]” (Monaco 47).

302 Richard, J. La vogue de l’Orient dans la littérature occidentale du moyen âge, (560s) and Reichert, F. Incontri con la Cina (243).
Bynum also brings into focus the fluidity of medieval gender differentiation: “To medieval women humanity was most basically, not femaleness but physicality, the flesh of the “word made flesh” (Fragmentation and Redemption 179). Gender distinction seems therefore most useful as a means to depict the symbolical organization of life, so much so that even scientific literature, Bynum notes, propagated a vision of men and women as superior and inferior versions of same physiology, rather than as two opposite, separately categorized entities (109). Thomas Laqueur’s examination of cultural constructions of body and gender from classical antiquity to the nineteenth century similarly underlines the persistence of a one-body (“one-flesh”) theory of sexuality and traces its possible origin in the long lasting influence of Galen’s medical writings (which, in turn, built upon classical Aristotelian and Hippocratical sources). Thus, Galen’s description of imaginary inversion of genitalia in men and women testifies for Laqueur to the existence of “a great linguistic cloud that obscured specific genital or reproductive anatomy and left only the outlines of spaces common to both men and women”(27).

It is this “common space” that resurfaces in the Libro through a narrative artifice (here employed as a comical device) that functions as a reminder of the ever-present artificiality of corporeal boundaries:

E sopra quello ch’è scritto nel XX capitolo dell’isola Lamen, aggiunse e disse che,
volendo smontare in terra dalla ditta nave e andare in una città abitata <e> molto
popolata, dubitando di smontare perché avevano inteso che pigliavano gli uomini strani 
che vi capitavano e mangiava li, domandaro fidanza al signore della terra ed elli mandò 
loro suoi ambasciadori, uomini tutti nudi senza nulla cosa indosso. E venendo elli a lloro

---

sulla nave, vedendoli tutti vestiti, ed ellino per vergogna della loro nudità si missero lo
lor membro da generare tra lle cosce si che facevan la fica dietro; di che tutti quelli della
nave cominciaro a ridere. Quelli ambasciatori li fidaro da parte del signore. (Andrease,
180)

And regarding what is written in chapter XX about the Lamen island, he added and said
that, having wanted to get off the said ship and reach the much populated town, but
hesitating to leave because they had heard that they would take the foreign men that
would happen to be there and they would eat them, they asked permission to the landlord
and he sent them their ambassadors, who were all naked men and without a cloth. And
when they came aboard the ship, seeing that everyone was clothed, ashamed of their own
nudity, they put their member among the tights so that they made the vagina [appear] in
the back. All of the shipmen began to laugh at that. These ambassador were trusted. (My
trans.)

The comical effect is generated by the physically ambiguous posture of the native
ambassadors, which blurrers the physiological signifiers of male/female corporeal identity (itself
purportedly a consequence of their alleged embarrassment upon realizing their nakedness). The
gesture is a reminder of the cultural significance of an anatomically distinct threshold of male
and female differentiation, while it simultaneously points at the porousness of such distinction.
The gesture of the natives is indeed powerful enough to grant those naked ambassadors’
immediate trustworthiness, not without providing the entertainment of the crew.

Does the comic element here ultimately arise from the provocative quality of “passing”?
In order to answer this question it is useful to consider how the process of defining textual
occurrences of “passing” in medieval travel narratives might work. Linda Lomperis’s
exploration of the question of race in medieval travel writing (with particular respect to Mandeville’s narrative) sheds light on the issue. Reading Mandeville, she proposes that the type of pleasure provided by medieval travel narratives at large, derives eminently from situations of “passing”, defined as the positing of “a difference that is somehow caught between the deceptiveness of mimicry and the straightforwardness of “coming out,” “without being simply reducible to one or the other” (154). For Lomperis this logic dominates Mandeville’s text at many levels, ranging from the narrative construction of its racial representations, to the definition of the narrator’s own identity (could the Mandeville author be a woman, skillfully disguised by the narration literary prowess, she asks); ultimately, the logic of passing also extends to the text itself, as it bears witness to the historical situation out of which it emerged.

“Passing” indeed represents a useful interpretive lens through which many narratives within the corpus of Western medieval travel writing can be read. In de’ Conti’s narrative for instance, one witnesses the passing of Christian merchants for Muslim traders, a customary practice that supersedes a suspicion-arousing religious conversion; its exigency is motivated by the fact that the conversion could have been unmasked by the visibility of the corporeal, signs of belonging/exclusion (such as male circumcision), as Nocentelli rightly points out. In the Libro as well, another prominent example is the inadvertent passing of men for women in Appendice V (lines 1-3). However, Lomperis’s suggestion that in Mandeville’s Travels “racial identities are repeatedly shown to be (su)stained imitations, performances, which display themselves as such

---

305 Thus, for example, the “wishful” scenario of universal Christianity -as opposed to the “actual” Islamic domination in the Mediterranean- is seen as emblematic of Europe’s still fluid status during the thirteenth century (161). For more details on this historical view see Abu Lughod, Janet. Before European Hegemony. Oxford UP, 1991.
306 For more on de’ Conti, See Nocentelli’s analysis and Chapter III of this dissertation.
and hence encourage our recognition of them as “visible investments in the theatrical-ized modality of passing,” can indeed obscure the relationship between the power of rationality and the making of identity (155).

Mandeville’s Travels is also a text that defies simple categorizations (for example in establishing the difference between non Christian/Christian identity through decidedly foreign rituals that nevertheless pass for topsy-turvy replicas of familiar Christian rites, as Lomperis points out.\(^{307}\) Further noting that Mandeville’s Travels repeatedly show the narrator’s preference for situation of “impermanence and instability” (i.e. situations of passing), serves to strengthen the connection between (racial) identity and gender performativity.

Bodily depictions therefore become a textual lens, through which the instability of gender boundaries can indeed be refracted. However, on the other hand, the importance of enforcing fixed gender boundaries is a primary means to ensure social hierarchies (and social order), as individual self-constitution shows its dependency from political forces at large. Hence we are reminded of the importance of the question posed by Laqueur, about agency “who and by what set of criteria gets to play the part?”(35). As Steven F. Kruger reminds us in his own analysis of medieval sexual and racial categories, the social and the political are always interdependent as ”individual identity formation is implicated in larger social and cultural forces” (“Conversion and medieval, sexual, religious and racial categories” 160).

With regard to the dependency of self-constitution from political forces at large, the corpus of medieval Western European travel narratives offers numerous insights. Kathleen Biddick’s analysis of medieval (and early modern) technologies of power in The Typological

---

\(^{307}\) Lomperis also notes the topsy-turvy relationship between cannibalism and the eucharist.
Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History delineates a helpful direction of inquiry for the analysis of these texts. As Biddick’s research focuses on the development of western European cartography and printing between middle ages and early modernity, (but also, in broader terms, on the changes brought forth by the passage from orality to alphabet), her analysis unearths the essential function of both alphabet and cartography as “tools of effacement,” or means to achieve a targeted erasure of a specific group’s historical presence. Exemplifying Heng’s “biopolitics of knowledge and disciplinary formation,” these technologies are functional to a historical, epistemological process (“typology”) which culminates in a “de-temporalization and dispossession of the Jews” (269).

Furthermore, Biddick effectively traces the way in which dominant “graphic technologies” of the time, provided “media through which fantasies organize the pleasures of the Christian typological imaginary”(18). As a result, the marginalization of Jews becomes representative of a dominant, Western Christian modus operandi that specifically characterizes (among other, emergent graphic technologies) early modern cartography. Hence, within Biddick’s paradigm, the Roman alphabet works as rationalizing grid superimposed onto the “messy” moralistic representation of medieval mappaemundi. Never mind that as a result, the Christian fantasy of an atemporal representation is achieved by ways of a cleansing and excision of Jewishness from historical exegesis.308

308 A notable example is the addition of the alphabetic index to medieval maps. With that “[...]Ptolemaic maps may be understood as agents of amnesia that erased evidence of a troubling history of detemporalizing Jews [...]” (39). See my analysis of Biddick’s argument in Chapter II. Biddick’s interpretative stance on Christian/Jewish relations is however object of scholarly disagreement. See for instance Mark Gregory Pegg’s review of the Typological Imaginary in Speculum, in which he holds Biddick accountable for ignoring “greater networks of complexity in Christian/Jewish relations” (149).
Re-imagining “less-constraining” ways to describe Christian-Jewish relations (“less-deadening historiographical habits of mind”), as Biddick hopes to do, is no easy task. She recognizes that at the core of this attempt there needs to be an analysis of rationality and its political power. By focusing on the that different, available technologies of power Biddick attends to the ways in which rationality re-draws and reorganizes what counts as knowledge (21). The process however is not independent from the pleasure-producing mechanisms displayed by the text, essential as they are in shaping its racial imaginary.

Philological attention to Odorico’s travel account has also shown how the text and its many, varied renditions are caught between the (largely uniform) expectations of their intended audience (knowledge, entertainment) and the demands of their institutional function (apology of Franciscanism, self-hagiography). While the vernacular version here analyzed displays a secular bent that distinguishes it (to a certain degree) from the Latin versions, the “pleasure-inducing mechanism”, to borrow Geraldine Heng’s terminology, that the narrative activates remains crucial in in shaping the text’s composition.

Furthermore, in the text here examined the modalities of power that express sexual difference articulate themselves in relation to the various intentionalities that lie beyond each rewriting operation. In particular, as I have demonstrated here, the bodily emphasis displayed by the Italian volgarizzamenti bears witness to the dominance of desire as a preferred interpretative category. This is not surprising if the body is to be construed as Carlo Ginzburg writes as “the place where the encounter between the subject and the social is most successfully mediated” (“Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” 104). This preeminence occurs in spite of the fact

---

that Christian anxieties about the pagans’ bodies (for example the insistence on the naked body of the indigenous who practice cannibalism in the *Relatio*) are a common denominator in the vernacular rendition known as the *Libro* and the added material it incorporates. My reading of Odorico’s narrative shows how such domination slips through in the “unguarded moments” of the text, in spite of the controlled officiality of the narrative.

**Conclusion**

Bracciolini’s appropriation of Niccolò de’ Conti’s travelogue in his treatise dedicated to the vicissitudes of fortune, *Historia de varietate fortunae*, highlights the classical topos of the reversal of fate, not simply as a rhetorical choice, aiming at connecting the treatise with the classical past (though this connection was dear to the Florentine humanists), but as a means to delve into the world of newly available eyewitness accounts. At first glance, this choice might appear entirely unwarranted. The inclusion of a travel account within a work otherwise concerned with a seemingly extraneous subject matter has puzzled many scholars of Bracciolini’s work. Indeed Bracciolini elaborates in his treatise *de varietate fortunae* a philosophical and melancholic vision of the past; employing an overtly elegiac sentiment he depicts the history of the recent popes (he concentrates on the last hundred years of European history) without shying away from a critique of the papacy. However, the final book of the treatise (comprised of four books altogether) is almost entirely devoted to the account of Venetian merchant Niccolò de’Conti, who traveled to the far East, all the way to Borneo and returned to Italy after twenty five years of absence. Bracciolini’s stated motivation for including
de’ Conti’s account is simply the desire to give the reader “solace” after detailing the vicissitudes of fortune befalling historical figures.

Bracciolini’s reasons for including de’ Conti’s travel narrative in his treatise might have been manifold. Without doubt however, his appropriation of the Venetian merchant’s account endows the narrative of his travels with a greater significance. Bracciolini’s own literary skills shape de’ Conti’s story with an eye to his readerships’ interests and expectations, occasionally including references to the geographical authority of the ancients, while allowing the abundance of newly available information on Southeast Asia—a part of the world that was still very little known to his contemporaries—to emerge from de’ Conti’s narration. As detailed in this introduction, through the travel narrative’s almost immediate translations in many European vernacular languages (Merisalo Outi traced the first translation in Tuscan to ca.1460), the work itself began to circulate widely throughout Europe. Its print edition of 1492 and, in particular, the 1502 Portuguese translation by Valentim Fernandes spurred an entire tradition of subsequent versions including the one included by Ramusio in his collection *Navigazioni e viaggi*.

My research shows how, through Bracciolini’s skilled input, the narrative’s fictionality continues to hold sway on its audience, even when the desire to distinguish “truth” from “fiction” begins to coagulate in the search for a method of classification. Fictionality is indeed a prominent feature in the dissemination of de’Conti’s account, rather than its accuracy or its precision in communicating newly available material about the relatively known lands and peoples of the far East. The narrative’s appeal was partially determined by its being “timely placed” (as Geraldine Heng would observe). Chronologically, de’ Conti’s narrative is positioned at the threshold between the rich medieval tradition of travels to the East (in which prior mercantile ventures, accounts of Franciscan missionaries and diplomats, and armchair travelers’
brilliant inventions highlight the intricate ways in which fiction and observation are intertwined) and that of soon-to-be-written early modern narratives of exploration. Historically situated in the transitional fifteenth century, its genesis also falls within the context of a strife within Western Christendom amidst the Roman Catholic Church’s renewed attempt of reunification with the Eastern Christians that prompted the assembling of the Council of Florence in 1439.

While the paucity of information available to western Europeans about Southeast Asia has been a determinant factor in sustaining interest on de’ Conti’s travel account, early modern publishers’ awareness of the narrative’s fictional appeal determined in great part the editorial fortune of de’Conti’s narration; its slow incorporation within the geographical landscape of fifteenth-century cartography soon followed, as testified by the extensive textual borrowing in the contemporary map of Fra Mauro (ca. 1450), as well as that of a Genoese portulan drafted in 1457. In addition, a number of vernacular renditions, assembled in various combinations together with parts of other previous and contemporary accounts of eastern travels, ended up constituting the material assembled in a series of late medieval chapbooks, as the work of F. M. Rogers illustrates.

Canonical scholarship on de’ Conti has been charged alternatively with issues of authorial attribution and also with identifying the travel narrative’s function in relation to a humanist agenda. The impact that humanism (particularly Florentine humanism) had on the collection and transmission of travel accounts has been widely investigated. The reversal however, that is to say the potential role of the travel account in shaping humanists curiosities, has been less of a scholarly focus. In this dissertation I maintain that de’Conti’s narrative’s function as a cultural intermediary is displayed in more than one fashion: most directly in relation to Bracciolini’s own intellectual pursuit -allowing him to fashion himself as a travel
writer through the shaping and recollection of de’ Conti’s oral witness account-and, on the other hand, as generating a broader influence in the shaping of the relationship between East and West. De’ Conti’s narrative’s role as cultural intermediary is aptly illustrated by Natalie Rothman’s notion of “semiotic labor,” which articulates the definition of cultural boundaries. The narrative’s broad characterization of the East as a land of unrestrained pleasure testifies to the persistence of the assimilation of exoticism and eroticism, a common locus of medieval western European depictions of the East, which finds its amplification through the erotic vein of Bracciolini’s writings. From this recognition, questions of identity, gender and sexuality emerge from the text in unexpected ways.

Textual passages centered on bodily depictions shift the narrative’s focus onto the stylistic mechanisms that govern its rendition. Stylistically, the creation of a rhythm of calibrated alternation of familiarity and difference (a stylistic pattern that characterizes many popular Western medieval travel accounts preceding de’ Conti’s -Polo’s and Mandeville, among others- governs the composition of the text). However, the sustained connection between exoticism and eroticism best capitalizes on the narrative’s entertainment value. This interdependence is also revelatory of certain western European sexual anxieties, emerging from the text in relation to its representation of the unfamiliar rite of genital piercing.

The connection between bodily, sexual markers and identity (such as circumcision or, in the case of de’ Conti’s narrative, the “spectre” of genital piercing) becomes part of a process of racialization of the body (of the natives) and of simultaneous identity definition (for de’Conti). The focus on the body, to which specific passages of the narrative bear witness, is therefore indicative both of the drawing of boundaries and of the constitution of instances of racialized
identity. In this sense de’ Conti’s narrative function as an agent of powerful cultural intermediation is most revealing.

The combination of eroticism and exoticism that characterizes the depiction of the East acquires significance precisely because it results from a codependent process of identity definition. It is particularly in the depiction of the sexual customs of the inhabitants of Ava (the bells of Burma) and in that of the Indian funeral rite known as suttee that the body assumes a centrality of meaning that requires unfolding.

Recent postcolonial approaches to the study of pre-modern texts emphasize the necessity of employing the vocabulary of race as a fruitful tool for the analysis of this material. In a recent article on the “invention” of race in the European middle ages Geraldine Heng, for example, makes the case for a straightforward integration of racial terminology within the study of premodern texts. The argument rests on the greater generality carried by employing alternative nomenclature (“otherness,” “alterity”) as well as on the awareness that avoidance of racial terminology (in the name of boundaries of periodization) mitigates the atrocities of the past. At the time of Bracciolini’s rendition of de’ Conti’s narrative a significant evidence exists that a racialized discourse had been forged and universally sustained through reiterative acts of submission in various western European contexts. The textual occurrences that I have examined bear witness to this process of cultural categorization.

In addition to de’ Conti’s narrative a prior vernacular rendition of Odorico da Pordenone’s Relatio, known as Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose, a mid fourteenth century travel account has also been the object of my analysis. There is evidence that Odorico’s Relatio, as part of several travel narratives rendering Asian travels between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was often read as part of single corpus of Indian travel renditions. In
addition, the choice of investigating this particular travel narrative has been largely determined by the significance that its added textual component (in the *Appendice* to the text) display for an analysis centered on bodily characterizations.

I have read textual bodily depictions in these texts as privileged sites of construction of difference, in which the re-iterative nature of identity constitution and its interdependence with gendered and racialized constructs, become clearly visible. These narratives show how the conflation of eroticism and exoticism that so often informs western European medieval depictions of the East does not only have entertainment (or, alternatively, utopian) valence; arguably, it doesn’t only apply to the representation of a topsy-turvy reality in which liberatory fantasies are projected onto a land of unrestrained pleasure (though this is certainly part of its enduring appeal), but also constitutes a powerful act of determination of a western, Christian and, ultimately, male identity.

Race, identity and gender however are cultural constructs that defy rigidity. Their being in-flux rather than fixed categories is well testified by medieval texts. Carmen Nocentelli’s research on the custom of genital piercing, described by de’ Conti in the city of Ava, has highlighted the cultural currency of this topos, as it is included in several, early modern accounts of Southeast Asian explorations. As described above, the description of this practice establishes a connection between a physical marker of alterity and a religious, gendered identity which is associated with it. Indeed such pairing is indicative of the coextensive determination of racial difference and an emerging constructions of sexual identity. In addition, it is yet another reminder of how different systems of signification could coexist and maintain simultaneous validity.
The co-existence of multiple systems of signification within the same historical moment is evidenced by the shift of significance that the episode of the genital piercing displays. Bracciolini’s description of the ceremony exhibits several layers of signification, tightly packed in a vivid rendition: the conjuring up of the ritual of genital cutting followed by the merchant’s refusal, the unfamiliar practice’s explanation, which rests upon a reiteration of the familiar trope of female lust, the allure of the ritual and the ultimate affirmation of moral probity displayed by de’Conti’s refusal. The latter affirms de’Conti’s identification with Christian moral values, but also diverts attention away from the de’Conti’s own body, redirecting it toward a peculiar native eroticism (that of the inhabitants of Ava). In what Nocentelli calls a “sleight of hand” (29), it is no longer a bodily marker such as circumcision (a powerful and unequivocal identity signifier, which would have betrayed de’Conti’s Islamic identity, even if allegedly only expediently acquired) to be invested with significance. Rather, the natives’ erotic practices expressed by the ritual of genital cutting, become an additional marker of identity whose significance supersedes, for the reader, that of circumcision. Thus, de’Conti’s refusal to participate in it unequivocally reaffirms his Christian identity, causing the significance of bodily markers to slide, momentarily, in the background.

In similar fashion I have shown how the Libro’s description of the foreign, eastern rituals witnessed by Odorico da Pordenone, serves as a means to reiterate the affirmation of the observer’s moral integrity. While the unfamiliar custom is, in this case, represented by the attempt to involve the Franciscan friar in sexual relations with his host’s daughter, the narrator’s unwillingness to participate recalls de’Conti’s refusal to partake in genital piercing. Similar structural mechanisms of establishing identity through one’s exclusion from participating in immoral practices are here at play.
While Odorico’s narrative (unlike de’ Conti’s) is governed by the moral dimension of the exempla tradition, the Venetian/Tuscan vulgarization that constitutes the Libro was meant to appeal to a secular readership. The passages I have chosen to analyze are centered around specific bodily depictions (as in the example mentioned in the previous paragraphs) or display a broader concern with gender boundaries, as in the premarital rite episode described in Appendice, X (Andreose, 182, lines 1-8). The bodily emphasis that both texts display bear witness in my view to the dominance of desire as a preferred interpretative category.

Additionally, the Libro also displays a concern with a animal/human differentiation, as depictions of foreign customs are often decried in the name of these practices’ effectiveness in crossing the threshold of this separation. It is as if the perception of the frailty of the distinction ultimately results in an ontological discourse of uncertainty. The viewing of human meat (“carne di uomini, femine e fanciulli” (Andreose, 180 6-7) sold at the market together with that of the “beasts” “Insieme l’una coll’autra” (181 6)) constitutes an impactful image and a common locus western medieval of travel narratives as well (Appendice V). This popular version of Odorico’s narrative, constitutes a kind of “marginal” text, certainly not in regard to its diffusion, which was considerable, but within the context of canonical western medieval literature. An analogy can be drawn between these types of texts and the minor artistic productions that Michael Camille analyzes in Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art. As those artifacts (churches’ decorations, minor sculptures etc.) challenge the distinction between man and nature, so popular travel narratives such as the Libro (and, to some extent, de’Conti’s, particularly in his cut-and-paste version that resulted in early modern chapbooks) cross and dissolve those boundaries. In so doing they draw attention to “an older strata of nightmare,” as Camille would say, or alternatively, to a reflection on the essential connection of horror and pleasure, as well as a space
to break with conventions. The common places of travel writing (cannibalism, monstrosity, 
female domination and/or subjugation) create a reusable iconography that betrays a common 
anxiety over the uncertainty of boundaries.

A future directions of analysis is therefore suggested, one that would trace the emergence 
of desire in connection with categories of embodiment in a broader number of medieval, as well 
as early modern travel narratives. Adding to the existing taxonomies of travel narratives by Jean 
Richard, Campbell and Guéret-Laferté, this analysis proposes that further investigation would 
add to the possibility of delineating a “taxonomy of desire” to be organized around the axis of 
the intersection of power and pleasure. By examining de’ Conti's text and the vernacular version 
of Odorico’s *Relatio*, known as *Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose*, I have 
endeavored to better understand the significance of the centrality assumed by the body in relation 
to essential questions of identity in the late medieval period.

Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**

Bracciolini, Francesco Poggio. *De varietate fortunae*. Critical edition with introduction and 

Narratives of Eastern Travel by Poggio Bracciolini and Ludovico de Varthema*. Edited by Hammond, 

---. *De varietate fortunae, Book IV*. Italian translation. *Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava di Nicolò de’ 
Conti, Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo da Santo Stefano*. Edited by M. Longhena, Milano: Alpes, 1929.
---. *Historia de varietate fortunae*. Ms. 871. Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze.


Major, R.H. *India in the fifteenth Century being a collection of narratives of voyages to India in the centuries preceding the portuguese Discovery of Cape Good Hope, from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources now first translated into English*. London, Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1857.


**Secondary Sources:**


---. “The Secular Pilgrimage of an Errant Knight: Andrea da Barberino *Guerrino il Meschino*” *Romance Languages Annual* nr.5, Purdue Research Foundation, 1993, pp.148-152.


---.La strada, la Cina, il cielo: Studi sulla 'Relatio' di Odorico da Pordenone e sulla sua fortuna romanza, Soveria Mannelli, 2012.


Bellemo, Vincenzo. La cosmografia e le scoperte geografiche nel secolo XV e i viaggi di Nicolò de’ Conti, Tipografia del Seminario, 1908.

---. I viaggi di Nicolò de’ Conti riscontrati ed illustrati. Con proemio storico, documenti originali e carte geografiche. A. Brigola, 1883.


---. *Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali*. Livorno: Vigo, 1875.


---.“The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass*, vol.8, no 5, 2011, pp. 258-274.


---. “Buying stories: Ancient tales, Renaissance travelers and the market for the marvelous” *Journal of Early Modern History* 1. 6 (2007), pp. 405-446.


