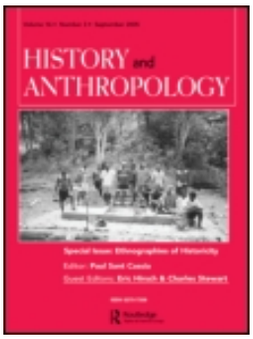

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The Wondrous East in the Renaissance Geographical Imagination: Marco Polo, Fra Mauro and Giovanni Battista Ramusio

Surekha Davies

During the Renaissance, readers of accounts about the Far East faced the problem of assessing sources from a range of periods, often produced by writers who were not eyewitnesses. This article considers the responses of mapmakers and geographers to claims about the East by analysing expressions of belief, surprise, doubt and incredulity on maps and in geographical works. By considering examples from the late medieval period to the seventeenth century, it reveals important continuities to the ways in which the East, and Marco Polo, were perceived before and after sustained European contact with the Far East began. Particular attention is paid to Fra Mauro, maker of the most extensively annotated map before the age of oceanic travel to Asia; and to Giovanni Battista Ramusio, editor of the first multi-volume travel compendium.

Keywords: Fra Mauro; Giovanni Battista Ramusio; Marco Polo; Wonders; Cartography

Readers of travel writing have always faced the methodological problem of how to determine the credibility of their sources. During the long sixteenth century, European readers of accounts about the Far East encountered sources from a range of periods, produced by writers who were not always eyewitnesses even if they claimed that their sources were. These accounts included the works of classical authorities and medieval and sixteenth-century travellers and writers. From classical antiquity to the Enlightenment, the distant East was associated with wondrous beings in the European imagination. For late medieval Latin Christendom, the East was the site of, for

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example, the Great Khan, leader of the Mongol empire and the biblical Gog and Magog, supposedly imprisoned behind a wall by Alexander the Great, and prophesied to break out into the world at the Last Judgment. These tropes circulated via ancient and medieval texts such as Pliny's the Elder's *Historia naturalis* (c. 77–79 CE) and John Mandeville's *Book* of his alleged travels.[1] The distant East—often termed India—was sometimes conflated with a region called Ethiopia which was variously placed in Africa or Asia. What medieval conceptions of India and Ethiopia shared was proximity to the sun (Akbari 2009: 68). From the fifteenth century, European oceanic exploration began to reveal hitherto unknown regions of the globe. Geographers now had the opportunity to compare long-established textual sources against new ones that foregrounded the experience of contemporary travellers.

This article's aims are twofold. First, it traces discourses of wonder in mapmakers' responses to the East, and particularly instances of surprise, doubt and disbelief c. 1450–1620, a period of rapidly changing information about places distant from Europe. Second, it investigates the extent to which the ways in which mapmakers' responses to Marco Polo's *Divisament dou monde* or *Description of the World*, a work that was identified with wondrousness from an early date, changed. In this period, the Venetian Polo's *Divisament* went from being one of the most recent European accounts of the Far East to being one of the oldest. The focus here is on two Venetians, the fifteenth-century mapmaker Fra Mauro and the sixteenth-century geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio, who discussed the wondrousness of the East, and evidently knew the *Divisament* of Polo, their countryman. Finally, by placing their responses in a broader chronological framework, the article highlights the continuities in the discourse of the wondrous East between the medieval period and the early seventeenth century.

It is worth noting at the outset that Polo did not write the *Divisament* himself. He dictated his experience of the Far East to least one amanuensis, a Tuscan romance-writer, Rustichello da Pisa, with whom he shared a prison cell in Genoa (Jackson 1998: 84–85; Larner 1999: 46). Over 100 distinct versions of the manuscript survive, all of which appear to have been derived from a lost copy of the lost original that had been written in a combination of French and Italian.[2] In practice, most information about distant places circulating in Renaissance Europe had been shaped not only by travellers, but also by readers and by those who had heard the testimony of travellers.[3] These agents included scribes, amanuenses, translators, illuminators, editors and, in the age of print, compositors and publishers. Thus, travel accounts were almost always mediated works, the result of interpretative, analytical and editorial processes that had inflected information provided by a traveller. 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.

Fra Mauro's World Map and Wonders in the East

Since at least the eleventh century,[4] mapmakers have sometimes included brief references to the credibility of information and eyewitness sources. They give us brief glimpses into how mapmakers, as readers of travel accounts, evaluated the more

wondrous aspects of Eastern travel writing. They also give us a point of departure for exploring what kinds of material mapmakers considered as being at the bounds of credibility, and the ways in which they participated in circulating such information. The Catalan Atlas of 1375, made by Cresques Abraham, a Majorcan Jewish cartographer, is an example.[5] The map is the earliest surviving example to include large amounts of information derived from Marco Polo's *Divisament dou monde*.[6] A caption in the Indian Ocean notes nearly 8000 islands, which are so rich in "marvellous things" ("*les maravellozes cosas*") that our mapmaker cannot describe them ("*no podem respondre assi*") (Grosjean 1978: 92, caption I). The local pearl fishers, in order to ward off man-eating fish (sharks) before diving, apparently recited magical incantations. If they should dive without first doing so, they would be eaten. Cresques Abraham added that "this is something that has been proved repeatedly": evidently, he assumed that the reader might find this incredible, but he himself felt that the number of proofs that had been offered (though he does not elaborate these) was grounds for believing it.[7] Another type of reference by mapmakers to wonders is exemplified by a legend on the Hereford *mappamundi*. This affirms that India contained "5000 cities and peoples with extremely diverse, monstrous appearance, with unbelievably various ritual practice and dress".[8] The mapmaker, while conceding that reports on the sheer variety of India's cultures might be difficult for his readers to believe, is prepared to declare that this is indeed what India contained. Captions such as this implicitly drew a distinction between what was truly unbelievable and what merely appeared to be so.

The fifteenth century was a transitional period in European geographical knowledge: many new sources of information about the Atlantic world began to circulate, while knowledge of Asia was still restricted to much older sources. In 1406, Ptolemy's *Geographia* was re-introduced to the Latin West, and with it, a system for representing space by means of latitude and longitude co-ordinates became widely known in humanist circles.[9] From the early fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators regularly introduced new information about Africa and the Atlantic islands (Newitt 2005: 48–53). When the fleet captained by the Portuguese Vasco da Gama reached India in 1498, it augured the beginning of sustained seaborne voyages between Europe and the Far East. However, little in the way of new sources about Asia (derivative or otherwise) circulated between the early fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries.[10] The travels of Marco Polo, Odoric de Pordenone and John de Piano Carpini had long been available; John Mandeville's account, compiled around the 1350s, continued to circulate widely (this imaginatively combined elements from all of these and more) (Lach 1965: I, 4).

The most extensively annotated of surviving world maps produced before European oceanic voyages to Asia appeared around 1448–1453 (Figure 1).[11] This map, nearly 2 metres in diameter, is covered in geographical text-captions, with a smaller number of illustrations.[12] It was made by Fra Mauro, a lay brother of the Camaldolese monastic order at the monastery of San Michele di Murano in Venice, in collaboration with the mapmaker Andrea Bianco and the painter Francesco da Cherso. We know almost nothing about Fra Mauro apart from what we can discern from the map (Falchetta 2006: 23).[13] A caption informs us that "this work [was] made for the contemplation of this most illustrious signoria [of Venice]".[14] The map appeared at a time

Figure 1. World map, Fra Mauro/Andrea Bianco, c. 1450 (Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana).

when the geographical authority of the ancients was being questioned, but when little new information about Asia had appeared for nearly two centuries. What makes this map unusual is the sheer volume of captions devoted to evaluating its sources. Examining those passages that indicate belief, surprise, doubt or incredulity helps us to explore the principles of judgment that could be applied to the wondrousness of the East by a fifteenth-century Venetian mapmaker.[15] It is clear from the map's captions that Fra Mauro had some awareness of humanist approaches to textual scholarship.[16]

For Fra Mauro, the East contained many notable features ("*cosse notabile*"). He notes that certain ancient authors had shown that in India

> there are cities, castles and innumerable peoples of different varieties, standing and customs, powerful lords, a great number of elephants and a diversity of almost incredible monsters, both human and animal ... horrible beasts ... precious fruits, timber and herbs and roots with virtuous properties and a variety of gemstones ... and many other things that I cannot mention here.[17]

Asia as a whole was characterized by various forms of abundance eliciting strong emotions: powerful empires, natural bounty and marvels at the edge of what was possible (Figure 2). The monsters described by these authors were almost, but not quite,

Figure 2. World map, Fra Mauro/Andrea Bianco, c. 1450 (Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana), detail from Ind.

incredible. By implication, there were stories of other, unbelievable monsters. This is an important concession to these authors, since Fra Mauro notes elsewhere, as we shall see, that many accounts of monsters were merely tall tales. For him, it was reasonable that India should contain things that were marvellous. What was not clear was the relation between the credibility of a marvel and whether it existed at all: monsters in India were just within the bounds of belief, but had they been just outside them, that would not necessarily have meant that they did not exist. The Hereford map, as we have seen, made reference to "unbelievable" wonders of India that were, nonetheless, said to be present in India. What such references to doubtful elements suggest is that late medieval and Renaissance mapmakers were concerned that what they considered to be real, and relevant for inclusion on a map on that basis, was not necessarily believable to the viewers of their maps. Equally, things which readers of maps—or travel accounts, for that matter—found believable were not necessarily true.

For Fra Mauro, India was so diverse that it could not be represented adequately on a map, even one as large as this example:

> . . .there are many kingdoms and provinces, which I have not included because of lack of space. Thus, I have decided to omit many things of note and take out those that seemed to me to be the best known. And I have not even made mention of many rivers, mountains and deserts in various parts. . . Similarly, I have decided to refrain from speaking of the novelties, customs and condition of the magnificent peoples and powerful seignories and the great diversity of animals and of an infinite number of other things.[18]

This is a rare justification for what a mapmaker has included and excluded. Historians of cartography have often levelled charges of sensationalism at mapmakers. This

extract offers an alternative possibility. In the absence of sufficient space, the best-known material may be excluded in order to communicate what is new, unexpected or little known. Of course, one needs to be wary of taking Fra Mauro at face value; but, since he is also reticent regarding the sensational ethnography of monsters, as we shall see, and is generally cautious, he is probably being sincere.

Fra Mauro thought hard about whether wonders were possible. He was hesitant about monstrous peoples, which are largely absent from his map:

> Some write that in these Indies are a great diversity of monsters, both human and animal, but because few give credit to these things, here I have made no note of them, except for certain of the animals, such as the serpents which are said to have seven heads. Again, on this point, there are extremely large ants and—something I almost do not dare to say—they seem to be dogs. It could be that here there is a species of animal that is similar to the ant.[19]

The sources Fra Mauro disagrees with are identified with the vague "some people", in a subtle delegitimizing strategy that Fra Mauro uses on several occasions.[20] He does not repeat these stories because few think they are true. This implies that Fra Mauro saw his map as being, in the main, a record of reality, albeit with some references (suitably flagged) to more controversial ideas. The reference to dog-sized ants was ultimately derived from the giant gold-digging ants described by the classical authors Ctesias and Pliny the Elder.[21] The fantastic gold-digging element has been excised. Fra Mauro himself suggests that the creatures are neither dogs nor ants. Thus, a marvellous creature that challenges expectations about dogs and ants has been normalized into one that is merely unknown and similar to ants.

Fra Mauro valued eyewitness observations highly. In his discussion of Southern Africa, he explicitly challenges those who suspect new information, asserting that

> . . .because to some it will appear as a novelty that I should speak of these Southern parts [of Africa], which were almost unknown to the ancients, I will reply that this entire drawing, from Sayto upwards, I have had from those who were born there. These people are clerics who, with their own hands, drew for me these provinces and cities and rivers and mountains with their names.[22]

Fra Mauro could have obtained this information from Ethiopian and Coptic clerics on their way to the Council of Florence; the retinue arrived in Venice c. 1440–1441 (Cattaneo 2011: 186). His mapping of Southern Africa, he tells us, descends directly from eyewitness observations. He made a related point to justify his placement of Babylon on the Tigris and not the Euphrates where some writers had placed it, challenging his detractors to ask those who had seen Babylon to judge his map (Falchetta 2006: *957).

Fra Mauro explicitly states his preference for contemporary travellers' sources with regard to distant lands. He notes that "many opinions and texts" ("molte opinion e leture") assert that the Indian Ocean could not be reached by sea from West Africa, opinions that probably derived from Ptolemy's *Geographia*.[23] Nevertheless, sailors on Portuguese-sponsored expeditions, who had begun to sail along the West African coast, believed otherwise, and had yet to find the limits of navigability along the African shoreline. He reveals that these sailors "have drawn new navigational charts" ("*hano fato nuove carte*"), of which he had a copy. Such sailors' records also

made them textual authorities—thus challenging the only card in the hands of those who wrote, but had seen nothing. He continues by contending that if one disagrees with those "who have seen with their own eyes" ("*questi i qual hano visto ad ochio*"), then there is even more reason for dissenting from those who did not.[24] In the arbitration between contradictory textual sources, those who were writing about what they had seen were more valuable. Of course, Fra Mauro's own map was an amalgamation of information that he described but had not seen.

One might wonder, then, how Fra Mauro thought his own readers should evaluate his map. He values those who report the testimony of named travellers, something he frequently does himself. Regarding the possibility of reaching India by sailing around Africa, he notes how he spoke with "a trustworthy person" ("*digna de fede*") who, caught in a storm on an Indian ship, travelled (according to the ship's astronomers) some 4000 miles. He then cites Pomponius Mela who, in his *Cosmographia*, described how Eudoxus, fleeing the king of Alexandria, sailed from the Persian Gulf to Cadiz, thus rounding the Cape of Good Hope. From this he deduced that the Indian Ocean was not a landlocked sea, adding that "this is what is said by all those who sail this sea and live in those islands".[25] The reader is given no explanation why the person caught in a tempest is trustworthy; we are perhaps, to trust Fra Mauro on this account. The caption ends by offering indigenous informants as trustworthy authorities, but no explicit reason is given as to why a mid-fifteenth century European should believe the word of those whom they would have considered to be pagans or infidels. The only possible reason for believing them is their status as eyewitnesses. Their testimony is also given the stamp of traditional authority through the reference to Pomponius Mela's story of Eudoxus's escape.[26] Eudoxus's status as a named source strengthened Pomponius's account. The authority of a known eyewitness could be transferred from one commentator to another, forming an earwitness of the new commentator—as indeed Fra Mauro was fashioning himself to be.

The tension between texts written by those who had seen things and those who had not (albeit often including claims that they had spoken to eyewitnesses) comes to a head in a discussion about monstrous peoples in West Africa. Fra Mauro was working during a period when new information about the region was becoming available:

> Because there are many cosmographers and most learned men who write that in this Africa—and, above all, in the Mauritanias—there are human and animal monsters, I think it necessary to give my opinion. Not because I want to contradict the authority of these men but because of the care I have taken in all these years in studying all possible information concerning Africa: from Libya, Barbaria and all the Mauritanias... And through all these kingdoms of blacks I never found anyone who could tell me anything about that which I have found written about it; thus, not knowing of it anything to which I can bear witness, I leave the research to those who are curious to learn of such novelties.[27]

This rare show of deference towards learned authorities prompts Fra Mauro to explain the maps's dearth of monsters. It is not their wondrousness that has rendered them incredible and inappropriate for inclusion, but the sedentary nature of those who had described them. Given his inability to find anyone from Africa who could

corroborate these statements, he decided that he "cannot bear witness to anything". This turn of phrase is a key one: effectively, he sought to become an earwitness by hearing eyewitness testimony on monsters and carrying it, as it were, to his own audience. This interpretation of the idea of witnessing allows him to give the impression that he himself had travelled through Africa looking for first-hand reports while at the same time leaving open the possibility that he had not, and was not falsely claiming to have done so; the sparse evidence about Fra Mauro gives no hint of such a journey.[28] Curiously, he does not allow here for scholars who might themselves have painstakingly gathered the testimony of travellers.

Two other indicators of verisimilitude were the large number of corroborating witnesses and testimony about analogous phenomena. Fra Mauro's analyses of ponds that were said to have transmutative powers deploy both. In a discussion of a lake on the island of Andaman, in the Indian Ocean, we learn that "many say" ("*molti se dice*") that if you immerse iron in this lake, it turns to gold. Fra Mauro adds that "I say this to do justice to the testimony of many people".[29] For him, then, truth by numbers is potentially problematic: on the one hand, the numbers compel him to record this anecdote; on the other, the somewhat redundant second clause makes us wonder whether Fra Mauro truly considered that multiple testimony a sign of verisimilitude—is he repeating the story merely "to do justice?" He noted elsewhere that such transmutations are wonderful, even monstrous, recounting a similar story about a lake in Ireland (Hibernia), which could turn wood into iron and stone. He concludes this story by referring to the other: "and if one believes this thing, one can also believe in the lake of Andaman".[30] The credibility of the Andaman lake depends on that of the Hibernian one, a lake that turns wood into iron and stone presumably being more marvellous that one that can turn iron into gold. Fra Mauro notes that "those who wish to have plentiful information on these wonderful and monstrous things" can consult such authors as Solinus, Pomponius Mela, St Augustine, Albertus Magnus and St Thomas of Aquinas. In comparison with established authorities, Fra Mauro's commentaries are hardly excessive. Such phenomena are within the bounds of possibility; the litany of authors who write about them, and the analogous examples of monstrous peoples in Pliny, serve as testament to those things that are far from normal, but just this side of the edge of the possible. Fra Mauro's list of common authorities illustrates the interlocking, interdependent nature of medieval scholastic and Renaissance humanistic intellectual traditions in mid-fifteenth century Venice. Aquinas and Augustine, those paragons of medieval scholarship, jostle cheek-by-jowl with Ptolemy and Pliny.

Also interesting are the surprising stories that are included without comment: the "giantropophagi", presumably giant eaters of human flesh; the people with dog-like faces and the seven-headed serpents of Malabar are some examples.[31] The matter-of-fact ways in which these beings are described are at odds with Fra Mauro's critical analyses of the importance of eyewitnesses and the evidentiary problems of monsters. Interpreting the significance of these stories is problematic. On the one hand, the brevity of these references suggests that Fra Mauro was including them because he felt he had to, but that they were so far-fetched that they did not merit the dignity

of being debated. On the other hand, they might have been credible to him for reasons that we do not understand. Fra Mauro credited the account of seven-headed serpents, mentioned twice on the map, which he would have learned about from the report of the fifteenth-century Venetian merchant Nicolò de' Conti (see Rubiés 2000: 85–89). The serpents appear in a matter-of-fact statement on the Indian coast ("Here there are serpents seven feet long with seven heads"), and within a caption on monstrous beings of India in which few are said to believe.[32] Fra Mauro notes that he has recorded few such animals. The continuum of credibility stretched from the animals he does not mention (least credible), to the serpents (beyond doubt even if, as he noted elsewhere, their head-count is debatable) and to wondrous creatures that are perfectly credible so long as they are not conceived of as dogs or ants.

It is curious that one of Fra Mauro's main sources was Marco Polo's *Divisament dou Monde*, but none of these moments of doubt relate to Polian material. In fact, Polo is not mentioned by name anywhere on the map. As Angelo Cattaneo has recently shown, Fra Mauro's use of the Latin and Venetian recensions of the *Divisament* took the forms of borrowing toponyms and historical events, summarizing passages, verbatim quotation, and illustrations of aspects of the text; the *Divisament* also shaped the map's overall structure.[33] In 1430, a certain Meo Ceffoni noted that a copy of *Il Milione* was "chained at the Venice Rialto so that everyone can read it".[34] While the story may well be apocryphal, it bears witness to the Venetians' familiarity with the work during the mid-fifteenth century. The fact that Fra Mauro did not need to cite *Il Milione*, as it was known in Italian, might indicate that it was unnecessary to do so.[35]

Fra Mauro's overall view of his own work was one of frustration. In a caption introducing the map, he noted that "it is not possible for the human intellect without divine assistance to verify everything on this cosmography or map of the world, the information which is more like a taste than the complete satisfaction of one's desire".[36] He notes that Ptolemy himself conceded that it was impossible to speak accurately about regions that were rarely visited, and that future travel would improve his own image of the world. He goes so far as to assert that, for Ptolemy, life was "brief and experience fallible . . . he concedes that with time such a work could be better produced or that one could have more definite information than he has here".[37] This, then, is Fra Mauro's justification for having "tried to validate written sources with experience, researching for many years and profiting from the experience of trustworthy persons who have seen with their own eyes".[38] Where geography was concerned, the very primacy of eyewitness authority could be justified on the basis of an ancient author, Ptolemy.

Fra Mauro's discussions reveal a mapmaker who was keenly interested in assessing his sources critically. His map simultaneously critiques pre-Ptolemaic and Ptolemaic geography and attempts to synthesize them, along with the newest eyewitness information, into a coherent world-picture-text. He also felt compelled to record information on things about which he was unsure. While he preferred sources with links to eyewitnesses, he was unable, even reluctant, to disengage from authorities lacking named witnesses, even when he disagreed with them. Yet his judgment of the authority of sources solely on the basis of their access to eyewitness testimony indicates that late

medieval notions of authority, where the moral status of a witness or text was important, were rather less relevant for mid-fifteenth century Venetian cartographers than in other contexts, such as Renaissance France or early modern England.[39] The fact that Fra Mauro was based in a sea-faring republic, whose sailors depended on verifiable and repeatable sailing directions in order to survive, may have made the testimony of first-hand observers particularly important for him.

In the broader contexts of geography and navigation, the importance of first-hand experience was self-evident in late medieval maritime centres. Portolan charts and rutters (books of directions) summarized and organized travellers' experiences of seaborne travel (Ash 2007: 513). But what was unusual about Fra Mauro's map was the amount of space dedicated on the map to evaluating and critiquing sources. Fra Mauro showed the reader his thought-processes. In so doing, he left us with clues to how mid-fifteenth century Venetian cartographers could think about the wondrousness of the East, and of the very routes to it.

The Authority of Marco Polo in the Age of Oceanic Expansion

On the globe that Martin Behaim, a Nuremberg mapmaker and merchant, produced for the town council there in 1492 (before the return of Columbus's ships from across the Atlantic), the texts of Marco Polo, Mandeville and Ptolemy complement one another. Behaim refers to Marco Polo and Mandeville in the light of both ancient writings and contemporary travels. A legend in Southern China announces that "Ptolemy has described the world no further, but the remainder has been described by Marco Polo and Mandeville".[40] Ptolemy's limitations are of scope, not substance. Marco Polo and Mandeville here extend rather than refute or critique him. Behaim does not distinguish between Marco Polo and Mandeville in terms of the credibility. His inscription on the sources consulted introduces each as a knight (*ritter*) (Ravenstein 1908: 71). For Behaim, the testimonies of Marco Polo and Mandeville appear to have been roughly analogous, although he mentions Marco Polo more frequently.

Behaim's globe refers to Marco Polo and Mandeville in the light of both ancient writings and contemporary travels. He makes precise references to Marco Polo's *Divisament*, giving book and chapter citations. For example, a legend in the South-Eastern part of the Indian Ocean states that

> in the last book of Marco Polo in the sixteenth chapter it is written that the people of this island, Angama, have heads, eyes and teeth like dogs, and are thoroughly misshapen, and savage, for they prefer human flesh to other flesh.[41]

This level of precision was a new development which allows us to identify that Behaim used the redaction that was later printed by Giovanni Battista Ramusio.[42] In Behaim's time there were three printed editions of the *Divisament*: a German and a Venetian version, and Francesco Pipino's Latin translation (Larner 1999: 139).

One author who is considered to have bolstered the status of Marco Polo's account in the sixteenth century is the Venetian humanist Giovanni Battista Ramusio. In the 1550s, Ramusio prepared a three-volume compendium of travel narratives entitled

Navigationi et viaggi, devoted to voyages to Asia, Africa and the Americas (Ramusio 1550–1559).[43] Like Martin Behaim, Ramusio considered that the knowledge of Ptolemy's *Geographia* could be extended using the information obtained by recent travellers.[44] In addition, he used the evidence of new voyages to argue that the testimony of Marco Polo, his countryman, should be given more credence. Ramusio was the first to call Marco's text the *Travels*, thus subtly changing his readers' expectations of the text from geography to itinerary (Larner 2008: 134–136).
Regarding Asia, Ramusio points out that

> of these parts [of the world], those towards the South have almost all been discovered in our times by the Portuguese sea captains; those beyond the mountains and towards the Greek Levant [were discovered] by the magnificent Messer Marco Polo, honoured gentleman of Venice, almost three hundred years ago now, as one can copiously read about in his book . . . not only did they make the journey, but they knew that it was important to write down and describe what they saw, which very few people did at the time.[45]

For Ramusio, Marco Polo had made discoveries in the North that were comparable to the recent Portuguese achievements—except that Polo had been three centuries ahead. Even more importantly, he, like the Portuguese, understood the necessity of documenting his findings. In fact, as we have already seen, Polo did not write for himself the book that bears his name.

Ramusio notes that Polo's testimony had for some time been received with scepticism, and considered as fables, even dreams. More recently, however, merchants in the Far East began to find corroborating evidence.[46] Ramusio notes that the Portuguese traveller, João de Barros, had found that Canton, described by Marco Polo, was one of China's principal cities. For Ramusio, this confirmation provided the grounds for his publication of Marco Polo's text. There was also corroboration in the West:

> And although there are written in this book many things that appear fabulous and incredible, one should not therefore lend less credence to the other things of which it tells, which are true. . . And he who reads Strabo, Pliny, Herodotus and other similar ancient writers will find many more marvellous things, and things that are outside any credence. But what should I say of the writers of our own times, who tell of the West Indies, found by Signor Don Christopher Columbus? Do they not depict incredible mountains of gold and silver? Trees, fruits and animals of marvellous form?[47]

For Ramusio, any charges of incredibility that readers might wish to lay at Polo's feet must also be heaped upon ancient authorities and modern travellers who make similar claims. At this point, Ramusio turns on his own critique, asking readers to take account "of the animals, fruits and plants, every hour being brought copiously into Italy, and one knows that I have written the truth".[48] He draws a powerful analogy between the Chinese city of Quinsay, visited by Polo, and Tenochtitlán, conquered by Hernán Cortés. The implication is that both were wondrous, almost incredible, but—as we know from physical evidence brought to Italy—true:

> And many times I have thought this same thing to myself: on the voyage made through the lands by our Venetian gentleman, and that made over sea by the aforementioned Don Christopher Columbus, and wondered which of the two was more marvellous?[49]

Ramusio argues that Polo's achievement was even greater than that of Columbus, since overland travel was far slower and more difficult.

Ramusio assessed the truth of seemingly incredible tales about distant places by analogy: since the marvellous tales about the West could be proved by empirical means available to those who did not travel—the booty that returned to Europe—and since Marco Polo's tales about the East were, on internal evidence, no more unlikely, his testimony could be assigned the same level of belief as that of travellers to the West whose claims had been verified in Europe. Ramusio had patriotic motivations for celebrating Marco Polo, but the idea that Polo was a reasonable authority pre-dated his *Navigationi*. As we have seen, Cresques Abraham used him in the fourteenth century, and Fra Mauro and Martin Behaim used him in the late fifteenth century. During the first half of the sixteenth century, mapmakers in Germany, Spain and France drew on Marco Polo.[50] Among mapmakers across key centres of production, Marco Polo's stock had remained high during the period in which, according to Ramusio, he had fallen into disrepute.

Modern scholars have observed that the relative authority of Polo and Mandeville over time has often seemed to lie in inverse proportion to one another. If the numbers of surviving manuscripts are taken to be representative of demand, Mandeville enjoyed a much greater popularity during the era before print. Copies of Marco Polo's *Divisament* number around 150. By contrast, Mandeville's *Book*, despite appearing some seventy years after Marco Polo, survives in over 300 manuscripts. Belief in Marco Polo's account declined from the 1370s, and it was probably less popular than that of Mandeville before the sixteenth century (Larner 1999: 106; Higgins 1997: 6 and 271, n. 18). Mandeville's book was one of the earliest works to be printed, and was the most popular incunable by a medieval prose writer (Campbell 1988: 122). Outlining his alleged journey to the Holy Land, it had appeared in at least seventy-two editions by the end of the sixteenth century (Tzanaki 2003: 1, n. 1). Andrea Frisch has argued that the changing fortunes of the two texts hinged upon the different ways in which they signalled the truth claims of their testimony (Frisch 2004: 15). Analysis of surviving maps from the late medieval period to the seventeenth century, however, suggests that mapmakers consistently drew on Marco Polo from the late fourteenth century.

Wonder and Marco Polo on Early Modern Maps of Asia

From the 1520s, new first-hand information about East Asia began to circulate in Europe, first from Portuguese sailors and traders, and then from Jesuit missionaries' letters which were printed from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Mapmakers responded to these sources using many of the same strategies as were employed by earlier cartographers. At the same time, new information was not necessarily added at the expense of the old. The following examples illustrate some of the important continuities between the ways in which mapmakers read sources between the mid-fifteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. They are taken from the works of three of the most influential, prolific and best-known contemporary mapmakers.

One of the earliest maps to refer to the new published sources about the Far East was Gerhard Mercator's 1569 world map.[51] Mercator noted in a cartouche that he drew on ancient texts, manuscript and printed travel accounts and on both Portuguese and Castilian sea-charts. He explains why he used particular sources, and what he found doubtful, rather in the manner of Fra Mauro's map. One example is the analysis of the size and location of the hypothetical Southern continent of Terra Australis. Not only does Mercator cite the account of the Italian traveller "Ludovico di Varthema, in Bk. 3, on India, Chap. 27",[52] but he also points out that this information was "coming from the mouth of his Indian pilot".[53] He then compares it against Marco Polo's description of Eastern islands, and finally considers "John Mandeville, an author who, though he relates some fables, is not to be disregarded as concerns the positions of places".[54] Mercator managed to get all these sources to corroborate his positioning of the Southern continent, although he judged them somewhat differently. Varthema had travelled in this region, but the relevant testimony came from his pilot rather than from Varthema himself; Mercator seems to judge that this makes it more reliable on account of local knowledge, an approach he shared with Fra Mauro. Mandeville was deemed not always to be reliable, but his faults did not lie in his positioning of places. Mercator referred to Polo frequently on such topics as the history of the Mongols and the spices found on Java Minor.

In some cases, the disjunction between earlier and later sources was explained by positing changes to the earth's physical geography in the intervening period. One example appears on a 1567 map of Asia by Abraham Ortelius. A cartouche describing the islands of Southeast Asia posits that Samotra [Sumatra] is Ptolemy's Chersonesus since it is rich in gold. The text continues thus:

> For it is true that Samotra is not now a peninsula, but it is very likely that it was torn from the continent by the force of the Ocean after Ptolemy's time. Moreover, if you imagine Samotra being joined to Malacca with an isthmus, it will agree very well with the shape of Golden Chersonesus as described by Ptolemy.[55]

Here, Ortelius attempts to make empirical observations fit with existing geographical ideas. His mental gymnastics, the like of which we saw on Fra Mauro's map, is characteristic of scholarly traditions for coaxing the square pegs of classical texts into the round holes of religious doctrine. Ortelius harmonizes observations with theory in a nuanced way in an introductory caption on East Asia, noting that the region was inhabited by numerous peoples of great intelligence, learning, skill, fine character and possessing various luxuries. He observed that Jesuit and Portuguese sources had revealed that, in certain respects, "it seems to surpass Europe and the other parts of the world, so that it can deservedly be called paradise on earth".[56]

Ortelius's comparison of the distant East to paradise—and by extension, to the Earthly Paradise—has its roots in biblical sources and medieval cartographic traditions. In Aristotelian theology, the earthly paradise, the Biblical Garden of Eden, was a physical place on the earth. Medieval commentators argued that Paradise was to be found in the East, albeit separated from the surrounding lands by, variously,

fires, oceans or mountains (Scafi 2006: 51, 102, 135, 172, 174). Ortelius's simile was also part of a long tradition of placing Paradise in the utter East, a key feature of medieval *mappaemundi*. From the thirteenth century, the difficulty in locating the earthly paradise began to vex scholars and cartographers (Scafi 2006: 170). The problem, as Alessandro Scafi recently put it, was that paradise "was *on* earth but not *of* earth": while it was physically located upon the earth (with the precise location under debate), it was not governed by its rules or limitations (Scafi 2006: 160). Ortelius saw the observed East as containing a place that was similar to, rather than being, the unreachable earthly paradise. Perhaps, for him, the quasi-paradisiacal observations made by contemporary travellers suggested that, by extension, the earthly paradise could not be far away. Ortelius's apparently fanciful comparison of East Asia to paradise thus emerges from a raft of statements about the achievements and character of the local inhabitants, as recounted by two independent sets of contemporary observers. This cautious suggestion that paradise might itself be in East Asia was, by the mid-sixteenth century, being challenged: Jean Calvin had declared that paradise was in fact in Mesopotamia, albeit drastically transfigured since the Fall, and the idea was being taking up by scholars and cartographers.[57] Thus, Ortelius's view on East Asia's attributes shows how old ideas could also be resuscitated, corroborated or confirmed with new evidence.

Renaissance oceanic voyages led to an array of different and sometimes contradictory accounts. How might a mapmaker deal with doubtful, unreliable or contradictory sources? A frequent and long-standing strategy in cartography was to provide all the information and to allow readers to make up their own minds. One example from Jodocus Hondius the Younger's 1611 world map concerns the location of Java Minor:

> Various are the opinions of geographers as to the site of Java Minor. Some, on the authority of Marco Polo the Venetian, Book 3, chap. 13, place it under the tropic of Capricorn; others contend that Sumatra is the Java Minor of the same Polo, both from the distance and position of the places, and from other circumstances. Some also would have it that the island of Cambaba [Sumbawa] is called Java Minor. The matter still being doubtful we prefer not to affirm anything positive about it.[58]

We see here a continuing preference for citing Marco Polo, despite the centuries that had passed since his travels. Hondius's inclusive approach to contradictory sources echoes Ortelius's 1567 map of Asia, examined earlier. Ortelius suggested that Marco Polo's testimony may be extended by contemporary travellers, rather than overturned by them. His choice to refrain from arbitrating between sources, preferring to let his readers make up their own minds, also echoes the practices of medieval mapmakers and of Fra Mauro.

Conclusion

From the era of the *mappaemundi* to the mid-seventeenth century, world maps were picture-texts upon which the important, little-known and surprising aspects of history

and geography, abstracted from a plurality of sources, were gathered together for easy reference. To infer from this that cartographic workshops were hotbeds of sensationalism and tabloid journalism would be to misunderstand how they functioned and were understood in their own time. As Fra Mauro noted more than once, there was no room on a map of the world to record everything. The map was intentionally a selective rather than representative summary intended to help viewers distinguish one region from another, and to set historical events in a geographical context. What these maps do tell us is how this significance was conceptualized—what seemed historically important or surprising to their makers.

On Fra Mauro's map and on later maps, as well as in Ramusio's travel compendium, we see a similar methodology by which readers evaluated the claims that were made for distant places. In Ramusio, we see an apologist for a traveller using particular strategies to increase an eyewitness's credibility. Another continuity is the preference for citing Marco Polo. While scholars consider Mandeville to have been more popular than Marco Polo until the mid-sixteenth century, among mapmakers, Marco's word on Asia was the preferred reference for nearly two centuries spanning Ramusio's enthusiastic edition. The continuing prevalence of Polian references well into the seventeenth century might be explained by looking briefly at the mapping of America. Here, regions such as Guiana and Florida contained captions about their earliest explorers and significant events. Maps containing such texts effectively offered a narrative of discovery and exploration with a cartographic framework. Marco Polo's continued presence on maps in captions relating to Asia may have functioned as a record of the first—or, at least, most famous—European to reach the wondrous East.

The mapmakers' need to repeat information that they claimed not to believe may have been a way of signalling that they knew their classical sources, that they had had a proper education. A number of the cartographers considered here, including Ortelius and Mercator, were closely involved in humanist scholarship. Rehearsing ancient geographical ideas on one's map was a way of showing that you knew the history of your discipline—the cartographic equivalent of an introductory survey, in which you relate the twists and turns of scholarly thinking that preceded your own.

To what extent did something new take place in the Renaissance? Occasional references to proof and reliability of sources on medieval maps show that mapmakers had long been grappling with these issues, and that the East was a particular problem, since it was truly wondrous but—and indeed, wondrous *and therefore*—unbelievable. What was new in the Renaissance was the citation of, literally, chapter and verse, when providing details of a textual authority: once printed books began to appear, more regular systems of referencing began to emerge.

Since maps and geographies were themselves read widely in this period for ethnographic as well as topographic information, they in turn shaped ideas about distant places. Mapmakers had to grapple with the problem of assessing the reliability of travellers who, as a popular proverb recounted, could lie with impunity since their claims could not be tested. The commentary on maps such as Fra Mauro's world map reveals how seriously some of them took their task.

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Notes

[1] For an overview of perceptions of the wonders of the East, see Daston and Park (1998) and Wittkower (1942: 25–66).

[2] For the genealogy of surviving manuscripts, see Polo (1938: 40–42).

[3] For scholarly responses, see, e.g., Grafton, Shelford, and Siraisi (1992: Ch. 3).

[4] For medieval maps, see Edson (2007). The primary purpose of such works was not a precise relational understanding of topography, but a comparative overview of the earth's parts, history and inhabitants across time as well as space.

[5] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Ms Espagnol 30. For a facsimile, see Grosjean (1978).

[6] Larner (1999: 135). For other examples, see Larner (1999: 191–194).

[7] Grosjean (1978: 85), caption K: "*açò és molt provada cosa*".

[8] See, e.g. Westrem (2001): caption 53: "*quinque milia civitatum et diversissimo gentes monstruoso vultu, ritu, et habitu vario, plus quam credi possit*".

[9] Before this date, there was some knowledge of the *Geographia* in the Latin West and its diffusion occurred over centuries in many intellectual and cultural settings. See Gautier Dalché (2009: Ch. III) and Gautier Dalché (2007, esp. 287).

[10] One exception is the Castilian embassy, led by Ruy González de Clavijo in 1403, to the court of Timur in 1403–1406; for this, see González de Clavijo (1999).

[11] Venice, Biblioteca Marciana. The dating of the map is a complex problem. The most detailed and persuasive argument posits c. 1448–1454 for the map's geographical information and 1455–1460 for the depiction of Earthly Paradise at one corner (Cattaneo 2011: 38–46).

[12] The map is too large to be reproduced here in its entirety so as to make captions and illustrations visible. For a published facsimile, transcription and translation, see Falchetta (2006); this includes a full-size reproduction of the map on CD-Rom. For a printed facsimile and transcription, see Fra Mauro (1956). My translations from this map are based on those in Falchetta's edition; I have made occasional changes. I am grateful to Glyn Davies for his assistance. Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this article are my own.

[13] For Fra Mauro's possible sources and models, see Falchetta (2006: 36–55). For a brief biography and references to the surviving documentary evidence, see Cattaneo (2011: 35–38).

[14] Falchetta (2006: *2834): "*Questa opera, fata a contemplation de questa illustrissima signoria*".

[15] For links between emotion and cognition in the apprehension of marvels, see Daston and Park (1998: 180, 187–190); for wonder, pleasure/horror and ethnography in English and French writing from the late sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, see Campbell (1999). Unlike the examples considered by Campbell, the cartographic cases considered here offer limited evidence of horror, and less still of pleasure, among the writers concerned: the mapmakers' and geographers' emotions relate more closely to the intellectual implications of particular anecdotes.

[16] For an argument about how Fra Mauro's selections from, and uses of, his sources suggest that he was exposed to humanist ideas, see Cattaneo (2011: 253–258).

[17] Falchetta (2006: *779): "*citade, castelli, inumerabel populi uarietà, condition, costumi, gran potentie de signori, gran numero de elephanti, diversità de monstri quasi incredibili e de homeni e de animali . . . orribel bestie . . . fructi pretiosi e legni et herbe e radice virtuose e*

diversità de çoie . . . e molte altre cosse che qui dir non posso". Falchetta's commentary lists the texts to which Fra Mauro is referring.

[18] Falchetta (2006: *793): "*. . . sono molti Regni e molte provincie, le qual io non meto per non haver luogo, unde ho convenudo lassar molte cosse de meço e tuor quele me ha parso più note et etiam non ho fato mention de molti fiumi e monti e deserti in diverse parte e maxime verso l'ostro in arabia e verso tramontana in le parte . . . E similiter ho convenuto lassar de dir de le novità e de costumi e condition de populi magnificentie e potentie de signori e gran diversità de animal e de altre cosse sono infinite*."

[19] Falchetta (2006: *707): "*Alguni scriveno che in queste Indie sono molte diversità de monstri sì de monei come de animali, ma perché a queste cosse pochi dano fede qui non ne faço nota, salvo che pur à certo de alguni animali, come sono serpe le qual se dice haver vij teste. Ancora de qui sono formige grandissime e quasi che qui dir non ardisco pareno cani. Questo può esser che'l sia specie de animali che sia simile a le formige*."

[20] For example, he uses this method to cast aspersions on the view that that Alexander the Great had imprisoned Gog and Magog in the Mount Caspian region; see Falchetta (2006: *2403).

[21] For Ctesias, see Campbell (1988: 47–51).

[22] Falchetta (2006: *98): "*Perché ad alguni par da nuovo che io parli de questa parte meridional, la qual quasi està incognita a li antichi, perhò io respondo che tuto questo desegno da sayto in suso io l'ò habuto da queli proprij che sono nasudi qui, che sono stà religiosi, i qual cum le suo man me hano desegnato tute queste provincie e citade e fiumi e monti cum li suo nomi*."

[23] For this suggestion, see Falchetta (2006: *149), commentary.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.: *149: "*cusì affermano tuti queli che navegano quel mar e che habitano quele insule*".

[26] Romer (2001: 3.90).

[27] Falchetta (2006: *1043): "*Perché sono molti cosmographi e doctissimi homeni i qual scriveno che in questa affrica, maxime ne le mauritanie, esservi molti monstruosi homeni e animali, parme neccessario qui notar el parer mio, non perhò che io vogli contradir a le autorità de tanti, ma per dir la diligentia ho habuta in inquirir tute le novità se à possudo investigar per molti anni de questa affrica, commençando da libia, barbaria e tute le mauritanie . . . e per tuti queli regni de negri non trovi mai alguno me ne sapesse dar aviso de quelo io trovo scripto da queli; vunde non ne sapiando altro non ne posso testificar, lasso a çercar a queli che sono curiosi de intender tal novitade*."

[28] The scanty evidence on Fra Mauro's life neither supports nor denies this, but one of his collaborators did travel; see Edson (2007: 142).

[29] Falchetta (2006: *220): "*e questo io dico a satisfation del testimoniar de molti*".

[30] Ibid.: (*2212): "*e se questo se crede se pò ancor creder de lago de andaman*".

[31] Ibid., (*579, *155, and *316, respectively).

[32] Falchetta (2006: *316): "*Qui sono serpe longe sete pie*"; Falchetta (2006: *707).

[33] Cattaneo (2011: Ch. V and VI). For bibliography on earlier analyses, see Cattaneo (2011: 188–191).

[34] Quoted in Polo (1928), CCX: "*istà a Vinegia in sul Rialto apichato cholle chatene ch'onnun el può legere*", translated in Falchetta (2006: 61).

[35] Falchetta (2006: 61).

[36] Ibid.: (*2834): "*non è possibile a l'intellecto human senza qualche superna demostration verificar in tuto questa cosmographia over mapamundi, de la qual se può haver qualche noticia più a degustation cha a supplimento del desiderio*".

[37] Ibid.: (*2834): "*la vita brieve e l'experimento fallace, resta che'l conciede che cum longença de tempo tal opera se possi meglio descriver over haverne più certa noticia de quel habuto lui*".

[38] Ibid.: (*2834): "*io . . . ho solicitado verificar la scriptura cum la experientia, investigando per molti anni e praticando cum persone degne de fede, le qual hano veduto ad ochio quelo che qui suso fedelmente demostro*".

[39] For these contexts, see Frisch (2004) and Shapiro (2000).

[40] Ravenstein (1908: 84): "*Nit ferner hot uns tholomeus die welt beschriben aber ander hat uns Marco Polo und Mandavilla geschriben*." Georg Glockenden illuminated the globe. Larner (1999: 149): Behaim is the first mapmaker to explicitly mention Marco Polo on his work.

[41] (Ravenstein 1908: 88): "*Im lezten buch marco polo im 16 capitel findt man geschrieben dass das volckh in diser jnsul angama genant hab hundts haupt augen und zähn gleich wic die hundte und das es vast ungestalt leutt sollen sein und wildt wan sy vast lieber menschen flaisch essen dan ander flaisch*".
The passage appears in Moule at p. 378.

[42] Ravenstein (1908: 63, 88). Moule ed., 44–46: Ramusio based his edition on the Latin translation by the Dominican friar Francesco Pipino, and added elements from the other recensions. Pipino had prepared his translation between 1310 and 1316, from a translation into Venetian of Marco Polo's *Divisament*; see C. W. Dutschke, "Francesco Pipino and the Manuscripts of Marco Polo's 'Travels'", PhD dissertation, UCLA, 1993, 512.

[43] The first edition of vol. III appeared in 1556, and was followed in 1559 by the first edition of vol. II.

[44] Subsequent references to Ramusio are from this edition.

[45] Ramusio: VI, 21–22: "*Delle qual parti, quella verso mezogiorno i capitani portoghesi a' tempi nostri prima di tutti hanno scoperta; quella verso tramontana e greco levante il magnifico messer Marco Polo, onorato gentiluomo veneziano, già quasi trecento anni, come piú copiosamente si leggerà nel suo libro . . . "*

[46] Similarly, for the sixteenth-century travellers Jean de Léry and Sir Walter Ralegh, the marvels described classical authors such as Pliny seemed less unlikely in the light of their own experiences of marvels in America; see Hartog (1988: 308).

[47] Ramusio: VI, 23: "*E benché in questo libro siano scritte molte cose che pareno fabulose e incredibili, non si deve però prestargli minor fede nell'altre ch'egli narra, che sono vere . . . E chi leggerà Strabone, Plinio, Erodoto e altri simili scrittori antichi, vi troverà di molto piú maravigliose e fuor d'ogni credenza. Ma che diremo degli scrittori de' nostri tempi, che narrano dell'Indie occidentali, trovate per il signor don Cristoforo Colombo? non dipingono monti d'oro e d'argento incredibili? arbori, frutti e animali di forma maravigliosa?*"

[48] Ibid., VI, 23: "*Degli animali, frutti e piante, ogni ora ne vengono copiosamente portate in Italia, e si conosce ch'hanno scritto la verità*".

[49] Ibid., VI, 23: "*E molte volte ho fra me stesso pensato, sopra il viaggio fatto per terra da questi nostri gentiluomini veneziani, e quello fatto per mare per il predetto signor don Cristoforo, qual di questi due sia piú maraviglioso*."

[50] These included Martin Waldseemüller, Sebastian Cabot and Pierre Desceliers.

[51] For a facsimile, see Mercator (1961).

[52] "*Ludovicus Vartomannus lib. 3 Indiae cap*. 27".

[53] "*ex ore naucleri sui Indi*".

[54] "*cui Jo. Mandevillanus, autor licet alioqui fabulosus, in situ tamen locorum non contemnendus*".

[55] Ortelius (1567):
Quod vero Samotra hodie non sit peninsula, post Ptolemei tempora a continente oceani aestu avulsam esse verisimile est: praeterea si tibi isthmu[?] quo Samotra[m] Malacae iungas finxeris, optime cum forma Aureae chersoneses a Ptolemeo descriptae quadrabit.
Translations, with minor amendments, are from Schilder (1986: IV, 73, 76–77).

[56] "*omnibusque insuper . . . nostram Europam, aliasque mundi partes, longe antecellere videatur, vt merito orbis terrarum paradysus dici possit*".

[57] Scafi (2006: 270–277; for other examples pre-dating Ortelius's map, see Scafi (2006: 291–292).

[58] "*Varia est Geographorum sententiae de Javae Minoris situ: sunt eum qui ex Marci Pauli Veneti Lib. 3, cap. 13. sub Tropico Capricorni eam locant: alii Sumatram ipsi Paulo Ven. esse Minorem*

Javam, tum ex locorum distantiis ac situ, tum ex aliis circumstantiis, contendunt: Sunt etiam qui Insulam Cambabam Iavam Minorem dici volunt. Nos etiamnum in re dubia certi hic aliquid affirmare noluimus." For a facsimile, see Stevenson (1907).

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