

Travel Account of Missionaries and the Reader in the Late Medieval Europe: the Case of Jordanus Catala's Travel Account

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I. Introduction

Travel accounts flourished in the late middle ages, until the Mongolian Empire fell down in mid-fourteenth century. The most famous authors were Plano de Carpini, Guillaume de Rubrouck, Marco Polo, Odorico da Pordenone, Jordanus de Catala, Giovanni de Marignoli etc. The destinations of these authors were usually China or the Mongol Empire, but Jordanus de Catala travelled to India, not to China. The title of his travel account is "*Mirabilia Descripta*" which means "The marvelous things described" or "Describing Marvelous Things". Focusing on the marvelous things described in the text and the word 'mirabilia', I will present the special features of this short account. Especially how the new information about India was incorporated into the existing knowledge system.

II. Writer

There remains little information about the author. We have only two letters and a book "*Mirabilia Descripta*". His full name written in the book is Jordanus Catala de Sévérac.¹ His surname 'Catala' definitely means 'from Catalunya', so it is considered that his family originally

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¹ «fratrem Jordanum ordinis praedicatorum oriendum de Severaco», H. Cordier, *Mirabilia Descripta: Les Merveilles de l'Asie par Le Père Jourdain Catalani de Sévérac*, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1925, p.109. Ch. Gadrat, *Une image de l'Orient au XIV^e siècle*, Paris: Ecole des chartes, 2005, p.243.

came from Spanish Catalunya. And “Sévérac” must be “Sévérac-le-Chateau” in Aveyron in southern France. Sévérac-le-Chateau was a vassalage of the Count of Barcelona. Considering that he compared Toulouse with Tartar cities in his account,² it is supposed that Toulouse was the biggest city that he knew. Therefore, we can conclude that his family came originally from Catalunya and settled in the southern France as a vassal of the Count of Barcelona.

In 1320, Jordanus stayed in the monastery in Tabriz, Persia before he left for India. It seems that he arrived in Western India in 1321. Jordanus departed with Franciscan Brothers, but the Brothers died near Bombay in April 1321. Left alone, he arrived at Quilon (today Kollam) in October, and there he did missionary activities.³ After that, between the autumn of 1327 and the spring of 1328, passing through Hormuz of the Arabian Peninsula, he returned in Avignon of France where the Papacy was situated then.

He settled in Avignon at the Dominican Monastery. Probably the fellow monks would have wanted to know his experience, so he decided that it would be better to write than to tell them as a story. He seems to have deep friendship with Pope John XXII. And in 1329 Pope John XXII appointed him as Bishop of Quilon in India. The diocese falls into today’s India, Pakistan, Bangladesh etc. But it is not known when and where he died.⁴

The title of his travel account to India is “*Mirabilia Descripta*”. There remains only one copy of this account in British Library.⁵ This manuscript is presumed to be a first-hand manuscript directly transcribed from the original in the 1330s in southern France. Even the existence of this manuscript was largely unknown until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The printed edition was published in 1839, and H. Yule translated in English and H. Cordier in French. Recently Christine Gadrat made an in-depth study from various aspects.⁶

The table of contents illustrates what his travel account deals with. Jordanus himself set a title by region, as follows: Greece, Armenia, Persian kingdom, Minor India(actual Pakistan), Major India, Third India (eastern Africa), Major Arabia, Great Tatar, Chaldea, Aran, Morgan (South Caucasus), Caspian Mountains (Caucasus Mountains), Georgia, Chios. Description of these

² “In that empire are very great cities, as I have heard tell from those who have seen them; and there is one called Hyemo which it taketh a day’s journey on horseback to cross, by a direct street through the middle of it. I have heard that that emperor had two hundred cities under him greater than Toulouse; and I certainly believe them to have more inhabitants.” H. Yule, *Mirabilia descripta: The Wonders of the East by Friar Jordanus* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863), p.47

³ H. Cordier, p.19. H. Yule, *Cathay.*, pp.75-78. “I am left alone a poor pilgrim in India, where for my sins I have been allowed to survive after the passion of those blessed martyrs, Thomas the holy, James the glorious, Peter, and Demetrius.”

⁴ Some believes that Jordanus died as a martyr during his second missionary to India.

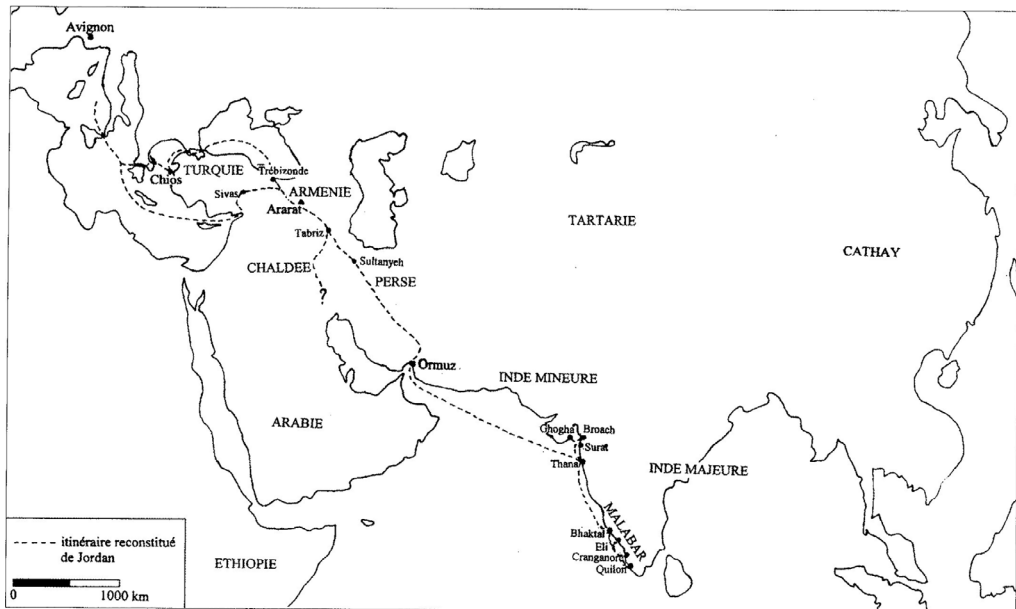
⁵ British Library, Additional 19513, fol.3-12. This manuscript includes the following works: Jacques de Vitry’s *Hystoria Jerosolemitana*, Marino Sanudo’s *Secret Secretorum fidelium Crucis*, And Turpin’s *Liber de gestis Caroli Magni*.

⁶ See footnote 1 & 2.

region is not evenly distributed, He described mainly Major India and Minor India.

At first glance, it seems that Jordanus left Avignon and traveled in this order. However, it should be noted that this order may not necessarily reflect his journey. He described Great Tartar and Third India, which he had not travelled. He described Major Arabia after Third India, but it is not certain that he passed by Major Arabia on his way going to India or returning to Europe.⁷ This order may have been made by Jordanus to remember easily the world based on his geographical knowledge. The uniqueness of Jordanus' accounts is that they were recorded according to the location of region in the worldview, unlike other travel accounts recorded according to the itinerary.⁸

Each chapter, corresponding to each region, is not equal in terms of the numbers of pages. He was interested in India, so he devoted the greatest amount of pages to describe India, especially Major and Minor India. This overweighing on India tells us that Jordanus' major concern was



⁷ “Of India Tertia, I will say this ... not having been there, but have heard them from trustworthy person” (no.106). “Of the Great Tartar, I relate what I have heard from trustworthy person” (no.125). “I have been in the Greater Arabia” (no.119). Jordanus used different expressions as these: “que audivi” (I have heard) to describe Great Tartar and “ubi fui” (I was there) to describe Major Arabia. The numbers of the text are the number of the paragraph assigned by Christine Gadrat.

⁸ Unlike Jordanus, it is Carpini and Rubruck, who described according to their travel routes. Marignolli's travel accounts were not composed of the itinerary either. It was made as a part of the *Chronicles of Bohemia (Cronica Boemorum)*, which is a description of world history from a Christian point of view. Marignolli, G., *Chronicon Johannis de Marignoli de Florentia*, ed. Gelase Dohner, in *Monumenta Historica Boemiae*, t. II, Prague, 1768, p. 68-282. Christine Gadrat also translated Marignolli's travel accounts: Ch. Gadrat, *Au Jardin d'Eden*, Anacharsis éditions, 2009.

the knowledge about India rather than journey itself. So his book is more like a geography or an ethnography rather than a travel account. In other words, his travel account was not a record to narrate his experience or to stimulate people's curiosity, but rather an attempt to give new information about the marginal region, in Jordanus' case about India, and, eventually, incorporate them into the existing knowledge of the world. It can be said that the figure of the world drawn by travel accounts changed slowly and gradually the existing knowledge system and world view.

III. Contents

III-1. 'Mirabilia' in Tradition

For the medieval Europeans, the Orient, or the East, referred to all the land beyond the Muslim world. In the East, on the one hand, there are real places as Persia, India, China etc. But on the other hand, there are also places of legend and imagination such as paradise, Kingdom of Prester John, Land of 'Gog and Magog', and there lived various monsters and monstrous people which were called 'marvelous things (*mirabilia*)' in the Middle Ages.⁹

Jordanus' travel account also contains such places and monsters. Some of the contents had already been described in other travel accounts in detail and in abundance. The most notable content is the location of the Kingdom of Prester John. All the accounts talked about Prester John and his Kingdom, though Prester John was not a real person. By appearing in all the travel accounts, he gradually became a real person. His kingdom also survived for a longtime. At first, his kingdom was known to be situated in India. Mandeville also referred to Prester John who governed India. However, as a result of some adventurous travels, it was sure that he was not there. But he did not die immediately but survived and find a new home.

The region 'India' was broadly and newly interpreted, so that he was considered to live in Third India, that is in Africa. Jordanus also divided India into three parts and said that the Third India was eastern Africa close to Ethiopia and Prester John was the emperor of the Ethiopians.¹⁰ But he avoided giving the definite answer by simply saying that 'he had heard' the story of Prester John. In this way, the position of the Kingdom changed repeatedly. On the basis of this belief, however, the Portuguese looked for the Kingdom of Prester John in eastern Africa, and this exploration led to the Age of Discovery.

⁹ Jacques Le Goff, "The Marvelous in the Medieval West", *The Medieval Imagination* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 36-38. Le Goff categorized the marvelous things as follows: 1. Sites such as mountains, springs and paradise, 2. Humans and anthropomorphs such as giants, fairies, Bertha-Big-Foot etc., 3. Natural and imaginary animals such as unicorn, griffin, and dragon, 4. Half-human, half-animal creature such as Melusina, 5. Objects such as Holy Grail, Horn of Roland etc., 6. Historical Personage such as Alexander in the Romance.

¹⁰ Jordanus said "the emperor of the Ethiopians, whom you call Prester John" (no.107) and "Between this India (Third India) and Ethiopia is said to be, towards the east, the terrestrial paradise" (no.111).

Kingdom of Prester John was not the only marvelous things usually described in the travel accounts. Biblical marvels as Noah's ark and paradise were also mentioned in Jordanus' account, but he said that he only 'heard' from trustworthy person as follows:

“Between this India (Third India) and Ethiopia is said to be, towards the east, the terrestrial paradise” and “a mountain of excessive height and immense extent, on which Noah's ark is said to have rested.”

Besides these, the Iron Gate and the people 'Gog and Magog', given by Alexander Romance, and monsters and strange people such as cannibals, cynocephalus, amazons, roc (giant bird), based on the traditional legends, also comprised a large part of the story about the East. These marvelous things were mentioned not only in most of travel account but in Jordanus' account.

Generally speaking, these elements were descended from the ancient writings such as *The Natural History* by Pliny (Plinius), *Etymology* by Isidore of Seville (Isidorus), *Polyhistor* by Solinus etc.¹¹ These writings were not travel accounts, but encyclopedias. Encyclopedia is a set of the well-organized knowledge. So a new information would not be easily included in a well-organized structure.

The travel writer repeated these traditional ideas, when describing what they had not seen. If they omitted the traditional legend, the reader would be suspicious of the travel itself. So the writer had to describe the legendary marvelous things in order to meet public requirements. In other words, when the information based on reality was different from their traditional ideas, it was very difficult to change their view from old to new. Therefore, almost all medieval travel accounts contained similar contents. In short, people do not try to change what they believe, even when their beliefs proved to be false, and the authors tend to write their reports in response to the readers' demands.

Jordanus also repeated these legends and traditions, but compared with other travel writings, he did not repeat a lot. Moreover, Jordanus distinguished what he saw at first hand and what he heard or did not see. When he talked about what he did not see, he said “I heard...” It is remarkable that he placed them in the Third India or the other marginal territories which he did not visit. So Jordanus pushed out what he did not see to the places which he did not visit.

¹¹ For example, Rubruck said that his geographical knowledge about Caspian Sea was based on Isidore: “We reached the Etilia, an enormous river, ... falling into a lake or sea called nowadays the Sea of Siroan, ... though Isidore calls it the Caspian Sea.” In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore said “The larger inlets of the sea are called gulfs (*sinus*), as the Ionian in the Mediterranean, and in the Ocean, the Caspian, Indian, Persian and the Arabian gulf...”, Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XIII, xvii, 1. But Rubruck pointed out the wrong idea of Isidore: “What Isidore says, to the effect that it is a gulf extending inland from the Ocean, is incorrect: at no point does it make contact with the Ocean, being completely landlocked.” I refer to the Rubruck's writing translated in English. *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253-1255*, translated by Peter Jackson, (Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), ch. XVIII, 4, pp.128-129.

Jordanus does not seem to fully trust the traditional marvelous things.

Above all, the Jordanus' travel account differs from the rest of the travel writings in that he described in detail the food, flora, fauna, minerals, animals, natural phenomena, astronomy, religion, custom, such as birds of various colors, trees bearing fruit all year round, giant turtles and elephants, and Buddhist practices etc. It is also noticeable that these detailed descriptions are mainly about the Major India and the Minor India, which he visited in person. The description of 'real' India is largely based on what he saw. In a word, Jordanus was an observer with a thoroughly objective attitude and his travel account was a kind of natural science and ethnography.

III-2. 'Mirabilia' in Jordanus' account

We should pay more attention to the word 'mirabilia'. This word means wonder, surprise, new things etc. To describe these things, 'miracula' or 'monstra' was used in the ancient times and the early Middle Ages. From 12th and 13th centuries 'mirabilia' often appeared in the literature and replaced 'miracula' and 'monstra'. According to Gervase of Tilbury in his *Otia Imperialia* written in the 13th century, this word means "a phenomenon that is natural but beyond our understanding".¹² Furthermore, it was believed that these monsters and miracles lived in the border of this world, especially over the Islamic world in the East. But as travel and pilgrimage to the East progressed, the monsters and miracles were driven out farther and farther. In short, during the time of travel to China or India, the word 'mirabilia' was a word referring to various monsters and strange things from ancient times.

However, Jordanus seems to have used the word 'mirabilia' somewhat differently. He used this word 'mirabilia' and derivatives of this word¹³ 46 times. These words were mainly used to refer to what Jordanus himself saw with his own eyes, such as flowers, populations, and jewels, and what he was interested in. For example, in describing an elephant, he described in detail the size of an elephant and how to capture it.¹⁴ These details cannot be portrayed without direct observation.

Considering that 'mir-', the root of the word 'mirabilia', means 'to see' or 'sight'¹⁵, Jordanus seems to deliberately choose the word 'mirabilia' to express what he actually observed. Naturally this word was most often used to describe the Major India and the Minor India where he 'saw' new things with his own eyes, but rarely used to describe the Third India that he did

¹² Gervais de Tilbury, *Le livre des merveilles*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014, pp.20-21. This book is the French translation of *Otia Imperialia*, which is originally written in Latin.

¹³ 'Mirabile' (adjective), 'mirabiliter' (adverb), 'mirus' and 'mira' (adjective with the same etymology), 'mirari' (verb), including the same meaning words such as 'digna narratione' and 'digna notabile'.

¹⁴ "And the mode of taking them is wonderful." (no.103). Concerning elephant, Jordanus enumerated the size, how to use as labor force, how to capture, fight between them etc.

¹⁵ Ch. Gadrat, *Une Image de l'Orient.*, p.194.

not visited. As I mentioned above, Jordanus said that there were legendary ethnic groups and imaginary places in the Third India. These were traditionally called ‘mirabilia’, but Jordanus no longer referred to them as that name. In a word, Jordanus gave the name ‘mirabilia’ to what he observed himself, throwing out the traditional marvelous things into Africa.

Jordanus’ travel account, on the one hand, reflected a typical world view of the medieval Europeans, but on the other hand, contained description of new things under name of ‘mirabilia’ based on his personal experience and observation. In general, the contents of the region that he did not visit relied heavily on tradition, and the region that he visited was based on careful observation. To describe in this way, Jordanus must have meet with a problem. When he visited a certain region where were the marvelous things according to the traditional knowledge, he did not find the traditional marvelous things. In this embarrassing situation, Jordanus kept the traditional ‘mirabilia’ by moving them to a marginal region, instead of denying them. Jordanus provides a relatively accurate knowledge of the India that he visited, under the name of ‘mirabilia’, and moved the legendary ‘mirabilia’ to marginal parts of the world, such as the Third India, Ethiopia or the islands in the Indian Ocean. In other words, referring to the monsters, miracles, and unfamiliar customs traditionally known to be in the East as ‘mirabilia’, Jordanus gave the name ‘mirabilia’ to something new that he observed in person. In this way, he incorporated new information into the traditional encyclopedic knowledge, and his observations did not conflict with the traditional worldview.

IV. The Reader

Who were the readers of these travel writings? For the medieval writings, the number of manuscript can give the rough idea about the number of readers. Of course, there are some problems. In the Middle Ages, people heard the stories rather than read. So we can only guess the influence of these writings. And it is not sure that the more its manuscript remains, the more it influenced. But we cannot say that the book with the most numerous manuscript would not have been influential, and similarly the book with the least manuscript would have been very influential.

Of these sort of writings, Mandeville’s writing had over 250 manuscripts, that is doubled the number of famous “*Divisament dou Monde*” by Marco Polo. And Mandeville’s writing was translated into ten languages. We can easy guess the popularity of this writing. This popularity shows what the reader wanted to see in the traveling writing, and that the author knew the readers’ demands.

On the contrary, there is only one version of the Jordanus’ account. While Mandeville attracted the attention of people with the rich traditional legends, Jordanus spoke little of them and mainly of his experiences. Jordanus talked about only what he experienced or saw by himself. In a word, Jordanus’ attitude was scientific and objective, but it did not attract people’s interest. That

did not mean that Jordanus did not have any readers at all.

Let's take a closer look at the one remaining manuscript.¹⁶ There is some comments on the margins of manuscript. According to the Ch. Gadrat's research, there were four commenters, which does not necessarily mean four readers. These four commenters would have read all the folios because the comments of four persons were distributed evenly from the beginning to the end of the book. Three of these commenters were interested in the traditional 'mirabilia', while the third reader, who read the most carefully, seemed interested in the reality of India.¹⁷

We can suggest another reader. Giovanni Marignolli, who visited Asia after Jordanus in 1338 and also recorded his travel, would have read Jordanus' account. Before travel, Marignolli stayed at Avignon where Jordanus had written his travel account. When he said about India, he repeated the various kinds of plants that Jordanus observed such as 'Chaqui' and 'Bloqui' meaning bread tree,¹⁸ 'narguil' meaning indian coconut¹⁹, and some regional names of India such as Singalri, that is Cranganor in India today.

Therefore, Jordanus' account was considered to have been read by monks and intellectuals who were mainly interested in Asia. They observed real world. Their attitudes were scientific. So it can be said that the 'mirabilia' descended among the intellectuals. In other words, the marvelous things that had come from traditional legends had common people as readers, while 'mirabilia', that were the new wonders, had monks and intellectuals as readers.

V. Conclusion

Travel accounts started flourishing in the late middle ages, until the Mongolian Empire fell down in mid-fourteenth century. Jordanus de Catala's travel account (*Mirabilia Descripta*) was unique. At first glance, this travel account does not seem exciting, because some of the contents had already been described in other travel accounts in detail and in abundance. The most notable

¹⁶ Since I cannot see the manuscript directly, I totally relied on Christine Gadrat's research of the manuscript's annotation. Ch. Gadrat, *Une Image de l'Orient.*, pp. 82-84.

¹⁷ The first reader put a lot of comments at the beginning of the book, which seems to be due to his interest in Oriental Christianity. The second reader was interested in traditional marvelous things such as jewelry. The third reader was a very careful and meticulous reader, commenting on the comparison with the translation of Marco Polo's *Divisament dou Monde*. This reader seems to have been more interested in the missionary work than the marvelous things. The fourth reader has a commentary at the end of the book, which seems to be due to the fact that the annotation was already in the beginning. Ch. Gadrat, *Une Image de l'Orient.*, pp. 82-84.

¹⁸ Ch. Gadrat, *Une Image de l'Orient.*, pp. 247, 275-276. Giovanni Marignolli, *Chronicon de Johannis Marignoli de Florentia*, ed. G. Dobner, in *Monumenta historica Bohemiae*, Pragae, 1768, t.II, p.98.

¹⁹ The explanation of Jordanus is as follows. "The most unusual is a tree called 'nargil', which is what we call 'nucis de Yndia'", Ch. Gadrat, *Une Image de l'Orient.*, Pp. 248, 276-277. For Marignolli, "There are many amazing trees and fruits that we do not have, like 'nargillus'. Nargil is an Indian coconut." Giovanni Marignolli, *Chronicon de Johannis Marignoli de Florentia*, t.II, p.98.

thing is the word 'mirabilia' (marvelous things). In the Middle Ages, the term 'mirabilia' meant monsters, surprising things and miracles in the Orient. But Jordanus used the same word to describe what he observed in India. Though he did not discard the traditional meaning of the word 'mirabilia', he threw it out into the third India, i.e. Africa. In short, by using the same word in a comprehensive meaning, Jordanus integrated unwittingly, or even intentionally, the newly obtained knowledge into the traditional encyclopedic knowledge system. It shows how the originality of the Orient contained in the medieval travel accounts was reflected in the late medieval maps and was integrated in the traditional encyclopedic system.