Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto
CHAM, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, FCSH,
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 1069-061 Lisboa

Connecting the Dots : From the Mythical East to the Real Asia

ABSTRACT

Magellan opened a new connecting link among Europe, Asia, and America, paving the way for the formation of a global world. But it was also a point of arrival of a long process that went back to antiquity. For many centuries, Europe and Asia had a fragmentary and distorted image of each other. In Europe, confusing notions of "East," "Asia," or "India" crossed antiquity and the Middle Ages and mixed fabulous tales with real data about what was beyond the Persian Empire or, later, the Muslim world. The information circulated mainly through land trade routes. In the fifteenth century, Iberian geopolitics determined a new approach: to reach Asia directly by sea. It was the Portuguese who successfully achieved this goal, sailing eastward around Africa and reaching not Marco Polo's mysterious "Cathay" but the real maritime Asia, putting a wide range of goods, trade routes, peoples, cultures, and civilizations within their range. In 1521, Magellan crossed an unknown ocean and reached Asia by sailing westward. The final dot of a secular process was finally connected. As the Italian Francesco Carletti noticed later, "We never heard of anyone sailing around the world in the ancient times as we do today, thanks to the value and virtue of the two crowns of Castile and Portugal [...]: one, sailing east, allows us to reach China and Japan; through the other, to the west, we reach the Philippine Islands [...] With these two ways, the two Crowns have drawn a circle around the world."

KEYWORDS
World Knowledge, Sea-Travel, Antiquity, Exploration,
Magellan, Portuguese Empire

> "And because the greatest and most extensive discoveries were largely made by seafaring especially in our times, I wanted to know who the pioneering navigators were after the Flood. Some say it was the Greeks, others the Phoenicians, others the Egyptians. The peoples of the Indies do not agree with any of these. They say they were the first who navigated the seas, and specifically the *Taybencos*, whom we now call the Chinese. They claim as proof that they are already the overlords of the Indies as far as the Cape of Good Hope and the island of Madagascar, all populated by them along the coast, as well as Java, Timor, the Celebes, Makassar, the Moluccas, Borneo, Mindanao, *Luções*, the *Lequios*, Japan and many other islands, and the continental territories of Cochinchina, Laos, Siam, Burma, Pegu, Arakan, all the way to Bengal; and even beyond this, New Spain, Peru, Brazil, the Antilles, and other lands adjoining them, as can be seen in the appearance and customs of these men and women, who have small eyes, round noses, and other visible traits."
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> —António Galvão, *Tratado dos Descobrimentos* (ed. 1563)

INTRODUCTION

The expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan had a deep impact in World History. Intended to find a Western route to Asia and to reach the Spice Islands, it came to be the first circumnavigation of the globe, after a long and risky journey. The details of this voyage have been widely studied, and its consequences for the formation of a global world have long captured

the attention of scholars and researchers. What happened before, the long and sometimes conflicting and puzzling path that eventually led to the success of Magellan's expedition, triggers much less interest. In fact, it was for Europe both a point of departure for the formation of the modern world and a point of arrival of a long process of learning and understanding of the realities of Asia and the ways to reach it.

We all love tales of heroes from novels and Hollywood movies who in their own right accomplish individual and heroic feats, daring discoveries, and risky journeys. Even history documentaries we see on television tend to focus on the profiles and actions of a single figure, because they grasp the audience's attention. In the case of the maritime explorations of the early modern age, Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan are the most obvious examples of such characters, because they conceived, planned, and developed their own individual projects and led the expeditions for which they became known. But what lay beneath remains in the shadows, generally speaking.

This widespread idea of a solitary, visionary, and individual hero (usually a victim of the incomprehension and injustice of his contemporaries) merges with the enduring notion that people in medieval Europe believed the earth was flat and Magellan made his voyage to prove it was round. Other common ideas include the fears of reaching the edge of the world, frightening legends and superstitions about sea monsters and distant lands, or the religious fanaticism imposed by the Catholic Church that allegedly restrained people from exploring and going beyond the known limits, a perfect scenario waiting for a daring and fearless hero who would go against the odds and reveal the truth to an ignorant and superstitious Europe.

The historical truth was not quite so, but much more complex and interesting. Far from being an individual feat, Magellan's expedition was actually the final dot of a large picture made of contacts, exchanges, and accurate knowledge and information about Asia that emerged slowly over the centuries from a mist of wonders, myths, and fabulous tales.

TRADITIONS FROM THE ANTIQUITY

The cradle of what we name "Western civilization" was not exactly Europe. In fact, it developed around a sea-lake, the Mediterranean, a connected space that allowed the intensification of exchanges and the development of cities and states. This region was limited by natural barriers in the west and south, and by inhospitable conditions in the north. To the east, the obstacle was of another sort, essentially political in nature, caused by an antagonistic power, the Persian Empire.

It was not by chance that Europe obtained the first credible information about what existed beyond Persia after the military campaigns of Alexander, who conquered the Persian Empire and reached India, in the late fourth century BCE. Until then, the most important repositories of information about Asia were Herodotus and the works of Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek physician of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes II (445-359 BCE). The two treatises written by this author, mainly *Indica*, which gathered and disseminated a set of fabulous stories about India, described Asia as a land of wonders. Most of the images we usually associate with medieval mythologies about Asia—i.e., legendary creatures and monsters, people with huge feet that served as umbrellas, griffins, unicorns, gigantic animals—have their origins in the works of this Greek author:

> On these mountains there live men with the head of a dog, whose clothing is the skin of wild beasts. They speak no language, but bark like dogs, and in this manner make themselves understood by each other. Their teeth are larger than those of dogs, their nails like those of these animals, but longer and rounder. They inhabit the mountains as far as the river Indus. Their complexion is swarthy. They are extremely just, like the rest of the Indians with whom they associate. They understand the Indian language but are unable to converse, only barking or making signs with their hands and fingers by way

> of reply, like the deaf and dumb. They are called by the Indians *Calystrii*, in Greek *Cynocephali*. (Livius.org; n.d.)

In the aftermath of the military campaigns of Alexander, in 326 BC, different images arose. A Greek called Megasthenes (c. 350-c. 290 BC), who served as ambassador of Seleucus I Nicator to the court of Chandragupta (the most powerful king of the Mauryas dynasty in the Ganges region), produced the first descriptions of the societies and kingdoms of India, as well as their geography and institutions. However, this author mixed credible information with descriptions of monsters and fabulous creatures.

This confusion between fact and fiction lasted over time, through the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, and was not contested until the sixteenth century. The longevity was due to the fact that the main Greek and Roman geographers and historians, whose authority was not easy to challenge, reproduced all this confusing information (Lach 1965, 7–11).

What were the main geographical conceptions of the ancient world? There were several dominant, sometimes contradictory, ideas and concepts that persisted in Europe until the sixteenth century. One of the most important was the notion that the earth was round. Eratosthenes, who lived in the third century BCE, calculated with an acceptable error the dimension of the earth. Most geographers represented the world in a circular form, with the three continents and the Mediterranean in the center (Figure 1). Some represented the continents surrounded by a continuous, flowing river called Ocean, but there was no consensus about this question. For instance, Claudius Ptolemy (second century CE), one of the most prestigious geographers of the antiquity, thought otherwise. A related question divided the opinions: was there more water or more land in the world? In other words, the oceans were lakes surrounded by land masses, or was it the opposite, say, the continents were, in fact, islands surrounded

by sea-water? This issue had a clear impact on cartography and the representations of the world and intrigued the geographers of later periods until the modern times. In fact, it was definitely solved only after Magellan's voyage and the exploration of the Pacific Ocean.

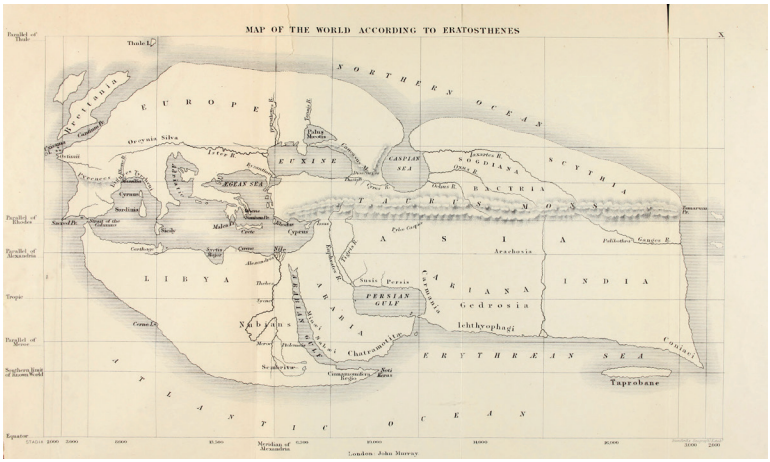

Figure 1. The world according to Erastothenes
Bunbury 1883, 667

One of the most interesting ideas, developed, among others, by Crates of Mallus (second century BCE), assumed the existence of a "torrid zone" south of Europe, between the tropics. Here, human life would be impossible, due to the extreme heat. The possibility of other existing continents was accepted, south of this "torrid zone" as well as on the other side of the Earth. They were called "antipodes," and the known world (Europe, Africa, and Asia) was therefore unable to contact them (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reconstruction of the globe of Crates of Mallus, with the representation of the "torrid zone" and the antipodes
adapted from Stevenson 1921, 7

Unlike Alexander's empire, which extended to India through Persia, the Roman Empire had its core in the Mediterranean, transformed into a Roman lake for several centuries, but the Roman authors were practical and conservative in nature and did not introduce relevant innovations. However, the rule of Rome over Egypt and the shores of Red Sea increased trade contacts with India, where silks, spices, and other exotic products destined for the Roman elites came from. In the first century BCE, a Greek named Hippalus learned about the pendular winds, which made possible sailing directly from Arabia to India. A later treatise called *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* describes the coastal regions of India and the intense commercial traffic that linked this country to the Red Sea and from there to Rome (Figure 3). The work mentions the name of the man who allegedly discovered the direct crossing route from Arabia to India, and vice-versa, by means of the winds later called monsoons:

> The whole of the circumnavigation described from Kanē [Hisn Ghurab, Arabia] and Eudaimon Arabia [Aden] was formerly made in small ships by sailing round the bays; but Hippalos was the first navigator who, by observing the

> position of the marts and the character of the sea, discovered a route across the ocean. Since then, when the winds blow locally from the ocean according to season, as with us, when the monsoon in the Indian ocean appears to be south-west, it is called Hippalos from the name of the man who discovered the passage across. From then till now, some sail direct from Kane, others from Aromata [Cape Guardafui], those sailing to Limurikē [Damirikē, South India] turning the bows of the ship against the wind, and those going to Barugaza [Broach, Gujarat] or to Skuthia [Scythia] hold out to the contrary for not more than three days, and for the rest of the voyage keep their own courses clear of land, sailing past the bays which have been mentioned. (Huntingford 1980, 52–53)

The final chapters contain references to the lands beyond the Ganges River, namely, an island called "Khrusē" (possibly Burma) and "Thina," a land "not easy to reach" from where raw and yarn silk came, probably the first reference to China (55–56).

Figure 3. The *Periplus of the Erithraean Sea*
George Tsiagalakis / CC-BY-SA-4 license

Evidence about direct contacts between China and the Roman Empire is doubtful and confusing. Vague mentions of the "Seres" people or "Serica" (the Land of Silk) present in the works of Ptolemy and other geographers are not clear about referring to China or to other regions of Asia. The alleged Roman embassy arriving in China in 166 CE and other diplomatic missions in later times are controversial.

The decline and collapse of the Roman Empire and the political fragmentation and turmoil that followed, with the emergence of intermediate powers and new empires, created new difficulties for communication and the circulation of knowledge and information between the Mediterranean world and Asia. When the capital of the Roman Empire moved to Constantinople, land routes through Syria and Armenia gained importance over Egypt and the Red Sea connections. Like the Persian Empires in the antiquity, the Byzantine Empire became a real middle barrier between Europe and Asia. In the seventh century, a new and expanding Islamic power emerged in Arabia. The sprawl of this new power across the Middle East and North Africa posed a threat to the Christian kingdoms of Europe and, in practical terms, accelerated and consolidated its isolation from Asia.

A Glimpse of the Middle Ages

In medieval Europe, the old and confused tales about a distant and fabulous East, populated by legendary beings, became widespread, as direct contacts and trade with the Indian Ocean faded away. The geographers of the Middle Ages repeated the notions of the classic authors, adding new items, references, and information collected from the Bible. Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century, described the world as round and divided in three parts (Europe, Africa, and Asia), separated by the Mediterranean and the River Nile. The typical medieval cartography followed this scheme in a simplified way and represented the world in the so-called "T-O maps," with Jerusalem in the center and the East on top (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Representation of the world with a triumphant Christ presiding over its destinies
Psalter Map, 13th century, British Library, London; WikiCommons

Traditional historiography tended to consider the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages as a clashing battlefield between a besieged Christian Europe and a threatening Islam, but reality was much more complex. On one side, despite the religious antagonism and the intermittent state of war, contacts and trade between the two camps were frequent. On the other side, "East" was not synonymous to Islam for western Europeans, but it included the Byzantine Empire as well. In fact, the Christian kingdoms of medieval Europe looked with equal suspicion to the Abbasid Caliphate, the Turkish Seljuk Empire, or the Christian Byzantine Empire, seen as wealthy but decadent. The first movement of European expansion toward

Asia arose precisely from a misunderstanding involving the latter two entities. In 1095, the Byzantine emperor asked Catholic Europe for military aid to resist the pressure from Seljuk Turks, but Pope Urban II turned this request into a call for a general mobilization to an armed pilgrimage directed at the Holy Land. There were rumours and stories that circulated in Europe about alleged atrocities and massacres committed by the Turks against Christians in the Middle East. It was just another episode of the ignorance and the stereotyped ideas that Christian Europe had about Islam and the realities of Asia. Thousands of pilgrims and soldiers then headed East, motivated by greed and religious zeal, eventually conquering several territories in Palestine and taking Jerusalem in 1099. This became known as the First Crusade and was followed by identical initiatives over the following two centuries. In one of them, the Fourth Crusade, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Crusaders besieged and sacked the city of Constantinople itself, capital of the Christian Empire of Byzantium.

This movement of expansion did not result in a clearer and more accurate image and knowledge about Asia and its realities. On the contrary, another legend found fertile ground to flourish here: the one about a mysterious and powerful Christian kingdom located somewhere beyond the Muslim world (Hamilton 2009). This mighty king had allegedly inflicted a heavy defeat on the Turks and was ready to contact Europe to promote an alliance against the common Muslim enemy. This story was actually based on distorted and confused information about Christian communities in Asia and some victories achieved by the Mongols against the Seljuk Turks. The tale spread across Europe by means of the German Otto of Freising, soon after the fall of the Crusade County of Edessa into the hands of the Atabeg of Mosul in 1144. The mighty king, who became known as Prester John, was supposedly a descendant of the Three Magi and ruled over a large, wealthy, and powerful realm.

The legend of Prester John quickly became popular, and other details and apocryphal additions have been incorporated in the following years. An alleged "Letter from Prester John" to the Byzantine Emperor started to

circulate in Europe shortly after. It described a powerful, pious and wealthy monarch, who ruled a peaceful and extensive realm, full of wonders and firmly attached to the Christian faith:

> I am a devout Christian, and everywhere do we defend poor Christians, whom the empire of our clemency rules, and we sustain them with alms. We have vowed to visit the Sepulcher of the Lord with the greatest army, just as it is befitting the glory of our majesty, in order to humble and defeat the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name. Our magnificence dominates the Three Indias, and our land extends from farthest India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests, to the place where the sun rises, and returns by slopes to the Babylonian Desert near the Tower of Babel. Seventy-two provinces serve us, of which a few are Christian, and each one of them has its own king, who all are our tributaries. (Taylor; n.d.)

Several travelers from the thirteenth century, the famous Marco Polo among them, identified the Prester John with different Mongol princes. The myth about a powerful Christian king located somewhere in Asia was a useful tool for the imagination of medieval Europe and a sign of hope for the Crusader States in the Middle East, which were on the verge of collapse.

In fact, the changing geopolitics of Asia stimulated curiosity and the search for information about what was happening beyond the Middle East. Early in this century, the Mongol leader Genghis Khan united several nomad peoples in Central Asia under a confederation and founded a powerful empire, which expanded both eastward, toward China, and westward, toward the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. The peace that prevailed throughout the thirteenth century in most part of Asia, the *Pax Mongolica*, allowed the development of contacts and exchanges along the traditional routes known as the "Silk Road." News began to reach Europe about the ferocity of these "Tartars" (as they were called) and the destruction they were causing in the Muslim world. Several embassies

were sent to gather information and establish diplomatic contacts, such as those of Giovanni Pian di Carpine, Odorico de Pordenone, and William of Rubruck, who left testimony about the realities of Central Asia. A possible anti-Muslim alliance was in the sight of these initiatives.

It is interesting to notice that similar projects aroused identical interest on the other side. The Mongol Khan Arghun (1258–1291) tried to establish a military alliance with Europe against Mamluk Egypt, having sent several missions in the 1280s. One of those missions was led by the Nestorian Christian monk Rabban Mar Sawma, who visited Rome, Genoa, and Paris and was received by the Pope Nicholas IV and the King of France Philip IV, known as "The Fair." In his report about the embassy, Sawma clearly described the intentions of his lord, despite being a Buddhist and not a Christian:

> For his affection for the house of King Arghon was very warm, because Arghon loved the Christians with his whole heart. And Arghon intended to go into the countries of Palestine and Syria and to subjugate them and take possession of them, but he said to himself, "If the Western Kings, who are Christians, will not help me I shall not be able to fulfil my desire." (Budge 1928, 165)

Despite mutual interest and exchange of embassies and diplomatic missions, the Euro-Mongol alliance never materialized, while the image of the Asian Prester John faded away. In 1291, Acre, the last city held by the Crusaders in Palestine, fell into the hands of the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt. The Prester John resurfaced a few decades later, no longer identified with any Mongol power but with the Negus of Ethiopia. The Dominican Catalan Jordan of Severac (known as Jordanus), who visited India in the 1320s, seems to have been the first to say it clearly (Jordanus 1863, 42).

Another story about the East that grasped the attention of medieval Europe was the tomb of the Apostle St. Thomas, who, according to the tradition, left the territories of the Roman Empire and went east to evangelize India. The Christians of Kerala adopted his name, becoming known as "Saint Thomas Christians." A whole set of different stories about

the life, the preaching activities in Asia, the death, and the relics of this saint circulated among the Syrian, Greek, and Latin Christian communities and churches since antiquity. These stories were filled with marvelous episodes and the miracles performed by the uncorrupted body or, more commonly, by the hand of the apostle in his tomb somewhere in India. The *Travels of John Mandeville*, the work of a fourteenth-century unknown author who mixed legendary information with data originated from real travelogues, provides one version of this wonder: the hand of the saint was the supreme judge used on quarrels and feuds (Figure 5).

> And by that hand they make all their judgments in the country, whoso hath right or wrong. For when there is any dissension between two parties, and every of them maintaineth his cause, and saith that his cause is rightful, and that other saith the contrary, then both parties write their causes in two bills and put them in the hand of Saint Thomas. And anon he casteth away the bill of the wrong cause and holdeth still the bill with the right cause. And therefore men come from far countries to have judgment of doubtable causes. And other judgment use they none there. (*Travels* 1900, 115–116)

The Travels of John Mandeville is a good example of the confusing and mixing nature of the information about Asia that circulated in Europe. It was composed, on one hand, by tales about the lure of t he wonders of the east, fabulous animals, incredible wealth, semi-human creatures, giants, and monsters. On the other, it included actual information from travelers who went and explored Asia.

Figure 5. The tomb of Saint Thomas in India
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 2810, fol. 186v; gallica.bnf.fr

The most famous traveler, whose account was widely disseminated in Europe and caused a deep impression in the European image of Asia, was Marco Polo, who spent several years at the service of the emperor of China Kublai Khan. However, and despite the amount of accurate information it included, Marco Polo's account contains unreliable elements and fabulous information; the most famous was the dog-headed men that populated the Andaman Islands, which clearly evokes the *cynocephali* that populated Europe's imagination since Ctesias of Cnidus (Wittkower 2009) (Figure 6):

> The people are without a king and are idolaters, and no better than wild beasts. And I assure you all the men of this Island of Angamanain have heads like dogs, and teeth and eyes likewise; in fact, in the face they are all just like big mastiff dogs. (Yule 1875, 292)

One may ask: what was going on outside Europe? Was there no geographical knowledge and curiosity, travel accounts, or cartography in circulation? In fact, the Muslim world developed and perfected various sciences, from mathematics to astronomy or medicine. Geography and cartography also made remarkable progress, as proven by the treatise on astronomy and geography called *The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes*, produced in eleventh-century Egypt, or the map by Muhammad al-Idrisi's. Among the Muslim travelers, one name detached, the one of Ibn Battuta, who lived in the fourteenth century. Ibn Battuta made several journeys through North Africa, the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia, among other regions, producing important travelogues. However, his works were not known in Europe until the nineteenth century. Another important name to remember is Ibn Majid, the famous Arab navigator and cartographer of the fifteenth century, whose works allowed an important development of navigation in the Indian Ocean. None of these was known in Europe at that time.

Figure 6. Dog-headed men from the Andaman Islands
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 2810, fol. 76v; gallica.bnf.fr

The Explorations of the Fifteenth Century and the Role of Portugal

In the fifteenth century, the European image of the world comprised a mix of dots of different origins. As Angelo Cattaneo (2016, 38) put it, "Medieval cosmography was the culmination of a cultural synthesis uniting Christian cosmology, Aristotelian natural philosophy of scholastic origins, Latin and Greek classical author–chiefly, from the fifteenth-century onwards, Ptolemy–and accounts of the voyages undertaken by more recent writers such as the missionaries who travelled to Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries." It also included, I might add, a good portion of tales and stories about wonders and fabulous beings and monsters that populated remote lands and the unknown areas of the ocean. Maps provide some useful information about how these elements mixed.

The famous Fra Mauro's world map, drawn around 1450 and commissioned by King Afonso V of Portugal, compiles from various sources the available data at the time. The author is skeptical of the existence of monsters and wonders and the map shows no evidence of such tales. However, another map produced around the same time, the anonymous Genoese Map of 1457, presents a different world view, although the author relies on the reports of several travelers, such as Niccolò de Conti. In the section of the map dedicated to the Indian Ocean, four different monsters are depicted: a sea hog (a pig with a fish's tail), a siren, a fish with a human face, and a devil-like figure with horns, beard, and ears, who allegedly attacked cattle and was captured and exhibited in Italy (Van Duzer 2013, 55–60) (Figure 7).

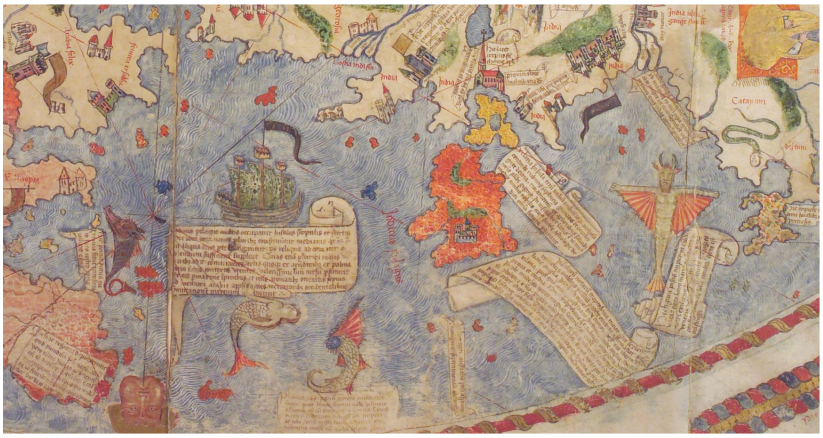

Figure 7. Monsters in the Indian Ocean
Genoese Word Map of 1457, detail; National Central Library, Florence

At this point, a new, reliable source of geographical information was underway, provided by the Portuguese, who had been exploring the Atlantic Ocean and the shores of Africa since the 1430s. The motivations that drove the Portuguese into this project that would eventually lead them to India are many and complex. They involved politics, the desire for profit, curiosity, the wish to know the limits of the Muslim world and the search for Christians beyond that horizon, perhaps even the mythical Prester John. The process was slow, tentative at first and linked to the old medieval motivation to fight the Muslims in the territories that had been Christian before the Arab invasions. It was after the failure of the military expeditions to Morocco that travel gained momentum and the exploration of the African shores became more intensive. In the late fifteenth century, the process was underway and was irreversible. Under King John II, from 1481 onwards, voyages started to be organized and financed by the Portuguese Crown according to a meticulous plan that aimed to pass the southern tip of Africa and reach India. And when Vasco da Gama finally made the first direct sea voyage between Europe and India, in 1498, the main motivations for the whole enterprise were summed up in the explanation given by a Portuguese to some Muslims from Maghrib he met in Calicut after landing: "we came in search of Christians and spice."

The Portuguese voyages of exploration required a systematic and innovative work of adaptation of navigation tools and practices–ships, guidance instruments on the high seas, and knowledge of the winds and currents of the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, the existing knowledge in Europe at that time was useless, because it was suitable to navigate in the Mediterranean, not in the Atlantic. In this way, it was the practice of navigation, not information from ancient geographers, that allowed the exploration of an unknown ocean and the recognition of the African coast, step by step. This way, the Portuguese created a new tradition of geographic knowledge, parallel to others that already existed in Europe, based on the classical authors, tales and legends, or the medieval travelers. This was, perhaps, the most important dot that would allow Magellan to complete his journey successfully, few years later.

It was basically practical knowledge, supported by empirical information collected throughout a long process of experience that took several decades. Unlike Columbus, the Portuguese were not looking for Cathay or Cipango described by Marco Polo, whose influence in Portuguese maps is minimal. They were looking for the real India and, in the following step, for Melaka, China, and the Moluccas, all accessible directly by sea. Their perspective of Asia was basically a maritime view aimed at sea-routes, city-ports, ships, monsoons, and trade, not a continental sight.

This mercantile focus is clearly visible on Portuguese maps, where there are no monsters and medieval toponyms like Cathay or Cipango are negligible. Let us take the famous Cantino Map, made in 1502 by an unknown Portuguese cartographer and smuggled to Italy. In a time where the Portuguese presence in Asia was limited to the Kerala coast on the west coast of India, the imagined and assumed Asia that extended beyond this region is obviously not well drawn, but it contains the practical information of what the Portuguese were interested in: not fabulous data, biblical references, or Marco Polo's places, but goods, trade products, and spices. The caption next to Melaka in the map reads the following words (Figure 8):

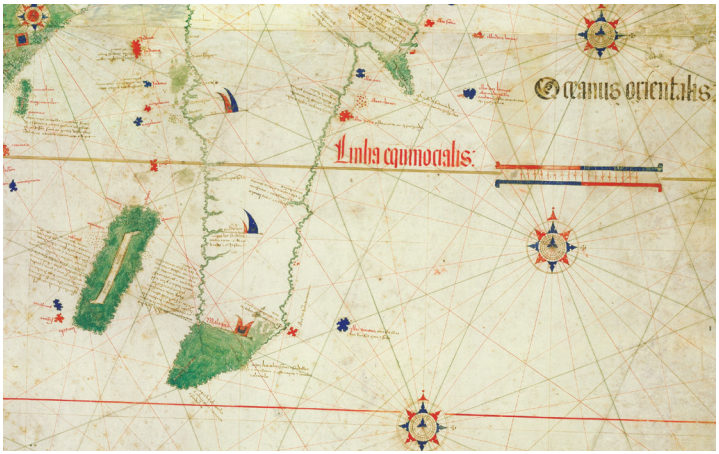

Figure 8. The Malay Peninsula in the "Cantino Map"
detail; WikiCommons

> Melaka - in this city there are all the goods that come to Calicut like cloves, benzoin and aloeswood and sandalwood, styrax and rhubarb and ivory and precious stones of great value and pearls and musk and fine porcelains and many other goods, most of them come from outside, in the direction of the land of the Chinese.
>
> *Malaqua em esta cidade ha todas as mercadorias que vem a qualiqut .s. crauo e benjoym e lenaloe e samdalos estoraque e ruybarbo e marfim e pedras preçiosas de muita valia e perlas e almizquer e porçolanas finas e outras muitas mercadorias todas a mor parte vem de fora contra a tera dos chins.*

Can one say that the information resulting from the exploration voyages replaced the knowledge of ancient geographers? Actually, no. The weight and authority of the classics remained untouched, and they were to be gradually challenged and removed. The most interesting example of this process was Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a Portuguese navigator, soldier, and geographer who wrote a detailed description of the African coast, with

information about products, populations, fauna and flora from each region. The very title of his work, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, written between 1505 and 1508, is an adaptation of a treatise by the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, which shows how Pereira tried to reconcile the new data obtained by the Portuguese travels with the traditions of the antiquity. It is, in fact, what he does throughout his entire work. His criterion of truth is new: not what the ancient geographers wrote, but "experience, which is the mother of knowledge, removes all doubt and misapprehension" (Pereira 1937, 12). In fact, and despite his recurrent quotations from Ptolemy, Strabo, Pomponius Mela, and others, he dares to contradict them because "the experience" proves so. The most flagrant case was the information about the "torrid zone," which they had said was uninhabitable, but experience had shown otherwise:

> Both Pomponius Mela [...] and Master John Sacrobosco, an English writer skilled in the art of astronomy [...], said that the country on the Equator was uninhabitable owing to the great heat of the sun, and since it was uninhabitable for this reason it could not admit of navigation. But all this is false and we have reason to wonder that such excellent authors as these, and also Pliny and other writers who averred this, should have fallen into so great an error; for they all allow that India is the real East and that its population is without number. Since the real East is the Equator, which passes through Guinea and India, and since the greater part of this region is inhabited, the falsehood of what they wrote is clearly proved, for at the Equator itself experience has shown us that the land is thickly populated. Since experience is the mother of knowledge, it has taught us the absolute truth. (Pereira 1937, 165)

In another passage of his work, Pereira discusses the issue that divided the geographers since antiquity about the extension of the continents and the seas. He denies the authors who claimed there was more water than land

and is convinced that the opposite is true, that the oceans are, in reality, lakes surrounded by continental masses. This tradition was defended by Ptolemy, who considered that the African continent was united with Asia by the south and that the Indian Ocean was, in reality, a lake (Figure 9). When the Portuguese crossed the Cape of Good Hope and arrived in India, they proved the opposite, but Pacheco Pereira, who was aware of the extent of the American continent, believed the Atlantic is a lake. Obviously, he was unaware of the existence of the Pacific Ocean. We know today that oceans occupy about 70 percent of the surface of the Earth, but this notion only prevailed after Magellan had crossed that wide ocean. Finally, Pereira turns to the authors of antiquity when he cannot get a satisfactory explanation based on "experience": at a certain point, he says there are populations and wild men on the African coast whom the ancients called "satyrs." And, ironically, he makes fabulous descriptions as well, such as describing snakes of immeasurable length that dissolved in water when they entered the sea.

Figure 9. Ptolemy's vision of the known world
by Johannes Schnitzer, printed edition, 1482; WikiCommons

Meanwhile, the invention of the mechanical movable-type printing press allowed a wider dissemination and circulation of books across Europe. Several classical works were printed, as well as the report of Marco Polo and other travelers. One of the most successful printed books was the outdated work of John Mandeville, full of tales about monstruous creatures and fabulous beings.

Into a Global World

It is undeniable that the Portuguese introduced a new dimension in the geographical knowledge of the world and the European perspective about Asia, no longer a semi-mythical, remote, and blurred "East" but a continent with its own social, political, and economic dynamics. The experiences the Portuguese acquired in Asia were based on the maritime, commercial world they were introduced to after 1498, not the inland continent of Central Asia visited by Marco Polo, Carpine, and other medieval travelers. This is definitely the background of the geographic knowledge and practical experience that explain Magellan's plan to prepare and execute his 1519 voyage. The final dot.

Magellan and his project to reach Asia by means of a western route was a clear challenge to the Portuguese focus on moving eastward. His expedition, completed by Sebastián Elcano, was definitely a major contribution to the process of globalization that defines the essence of the modern world. It revealed the existence of a wide ocean between America and Asia that changed in a considerable way the perception of the Earth's real dimension; it consolidated the formation of both Iberian overseas empires, namely, the Portuguese centered in Asia, and the Spanish in America, throughout the sixteenth century; it allowed the extension of the Spanish Empire to Asia, which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. Most important, it created a common bond between different cultures and civilizations of the world when it proved it was possible to travel around the world by sea.

This aspect was truly the seed that allowed the modern world to germinate and grow. From that moment onwards, missionaries, merchants,

officers, and scholars were able to circulate from the New to the Old World, and vice versa, spreading knowledge and practices and exchanging goods, plants, books, ideologies, and information. Bolivian silver from Potosí fed the Chinese economy, the Japanese screens called *biombos nanban* reached Europe by both the Indian and the Manila routes, and Asian textiles were consumed in Mexico. These are only a few examples of the acceleration of trade and economic and social life that definitively changed the course of human history, all triggered by the Magellan–Elcano expedition, a point of departure and a point of arrival.

Let us close by quoting the Italian Francesco Carletti, who, less than a century after the journey of Magellan and Elcano, described with the following words the possibility of sailing around the world:

> The world had not been circumnavigated in olden times as it now is travelled around by value and virtue of the two crowns of Castile and Portugal, who had showed the way, the former navigating toward the east and reaching China and Japan, the other toward the west and reaching these Philippine Islands, about one thousand miles from the island of Macao in China, the residence of the Portuguese. Together, these two crowns have come to make a circle around the whole world, a thing that certainly is worthy of being much exalted and praised in those two nations, with the languages of which, and by means of whose navigations, anyone can enter into that magnificent enterprise and in less than four years go around the entire universe both by the way of the East Indies and by the way of the West. (Carletti 1965, 103–104)

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PAULO JORGE DE SOUSA PINTO
paulo.pinto@fcsh.unl.pt

Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto holds an MA in History of the Portuguese Expansion and a Ph.D. in Historical Sciences. His Ph.D. thesis focused on a comparative approach to the Portuguese and Spanish empires and their roles in Asia. The topic of his post-doctoral project was "Conflict and Collaboration - Presences and Representations of the Overseas Chinese in the Ibero-Asian Societies (16th-19th centuries)." He is currently a researcher at CHAM – Centro de Humanidades (Universidade Nova de Lisboa), where he coordinates "Portugal-Philippines: Connected Histories", a set of collaborative projects involving several Filipino institutions, aimed at promoting contacts and enhancing mutual knowledge between Portugal and the Philippines (https://portugalphilippines.fcsh.unl.pt/). His fields of work include Early Modern Southeast Asia and the European presence in Asia (16th–18th centuries) and the Iberian overseas empires. He has published several works on these subjects, namely *The Portuguese and the Straits of Melaka, 1575–1619: Power, Trade, and Diplomacy* (Singapore University Press, 2012), *Tinan 500 Portugal-Timor* (Dili, 2015) and *The Islands Beyond the Empire - Portuguese Essays on Early Modern Philippine History (16th-18th Centuries)* (org. w/ Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço) (Manila, Foreign Service Institute, release date: 2023).