

Kim M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Print. 328 pp. 6 black and white illustrations. \$79.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4548-6.



Review

When one considers European perceptions of the Orient throughout the medieval period, what usually comes to mind are images of decadence, monstrosity, and ‘Otherness’. In this study, however, Kim M. Phillips argues that writings and illustrations referring to the East may actually tell us more about the prevailing interests of the writers and their audiences, specifically, in food, gender roles, sexualities, civilisations, and foreignness. In doing so, she reveals that the notion of Eurocentric superiority was, in fact, a later invention of the colonial period, and that people during the medieval, or ‘precolonial’, period actually regarded the Orient – places such as Mongolia, China, India, and Southeast Asia – with curiosity, even wonder. Phillips’ study delivers a fascinating reinterpretation of numerous travel writings, encompassing both lesser-known and fragmentary sources and more popular writings such as those by Marco Polo and the famous *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, providing an important contribution to the emerging field of precolonial studies.

The first part of Phillips’ book, ‘Theory, People, Genres’, provides a detailed theoretical background, which serves to contextualise the thematic textual analyses in the second part. Her first chapter deconstructs the meaning of the word ‘Orientalism’ as posited by the literary theorist Edward Said, and attempts to reconcile it with the precolonial medieval period. She argues that there was no especial ‘Orientalist’ discourse until the early modern period and that it is therefore counterproductive to use Said’s theoretical framework to analyse medieval texts. She emphasises that the aim of her book is not to provide a single answer about how we should read these

texts, but instead to offer a starting point for studies which will account for the polysemous nature of the East in the medieval European mindset. In her second chapter Phillips provides an introduction to the sources which she uses throughout the rest of her study, focusing on providing background on the contexts in which they were composed, disseminated, and read.

Following on from this, the third chapter discusses more broadly the genre of travel writing, arguing that readers have hitherto made numerous assumptions about the genre which are an impediment to conducting a holistic study. She suggests in particular that there is an overemphasis on the portrayals of otherness in travel accounts, while other motifs talking about similarities and continuities have been largely ignored. Of especial note is Phillips' discussion at the end of the chapter of whether or not there existed a single notion of 'Europe'. She proposes that it is important to differentiate between collective 'European' and 'Christian' identities, due to the modern connotations pervading the former appellation. While numerous historians have argued for the existence of a 'Europe' as a medieval construct, it is also important to remember that many people's interests were not quite on such a large scale, and that local concerns may have been at the forefront of readers' and writers' minds, rather than a singular European identity.

The second part of Phillips' book, 'Envisioning Orients', comprises five comparative textual studies, which focus upon the following themes: food and foodways, femininities, sex, civility, and bodies. In this section, Phillips tests her overarching argument that medieval writers used travel writings as a means of discussing, without overt moralisation or judgement, issues which were important to them. For example, when discussing sexuality, Phillips notes that acts which were acknowledged as illicit according to the dominant Christian mindset (such as polygamy and extramarital sex) were not always shown as emblematic of immorality; writers also focused upon the attractiveness of exotic eastern sexuality. By considering numerous microstudies using a thematic structure, Phillips also demonstrates that

medieval travel writers largely did not believe in the East as a homogenous entity. In her chapter on femininities, for instance, descriptions of Mongolian, Chinese, and Indian women are compared, and it is concluded that although stereotypes were prevalent, there were variations. While Mongolian women were portrayed as powerful, hard-working and unattractive, Chinese women were described as sexually alluring and beautiful, and Indian women were seen as erotic.

By challenging the dominant idea that medieval European travel writings portrayed a homogenous, fearmongering impression of the Orient, Phillips has provided an exciting starting point for historians to reinterpret different aspects of the relationship between Europe and the East throughout the centuries preceding the colonial period. This study has also revealed a secondary function of travel writings: although their primary focus is on describing the exotic locations and peoples the writer has encountered, they also tell us a lot about the writer's context, especially the prevailing concerns of both them and their readers. The success of Phillips' work rests largely upon this argument, the theoretical discussion provided in the first section, and her overall emphasis on nuances and multivalence.

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