

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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CHINA AND ISLAM

Islam reached China almost immediately, in 627, that's just five years after the Hegira. The Tang dynasty saw a continuous flow of Muslims arriving to China.

Some of them came in the trails of the Silk Road caravans and settled in Gansu, Qinghai and Shaanxi, while others sailed on Indian Ocean waters and established themselves in the excellent ports of south China, mostly Canton and the great Fujian cities, like Quanzhou.

Muslims lived in their own quarter and had a judge of their community to deal with their own conflicts.

By the time of the Song, in the 10th century, the Indian Ocean had become a Muslim lake and a regular maritime route was established, linking Siraf to Canton. The round trip took a year and a half. That was a long sea route, probably the longest in regular use before the European expansion in the sixteenth century.

Siraf was the chief port for seagoing ships, but river craft could carry the cargoes right up to Baghdad, linking the Tigris river with the Chinese mainland.

The Arabs are often mentioned in Chinese official histories, but it is in the narrative of

Zhao Rugua, a 12th century foreign trade inspector in Fujian, that the largest text on the Islamic world is to be found.

He praises the elegance and richness of the Muslim attire, the excellent capacities of their artisans, the frantic activity of their markets, the richness of the Muslim palaces, and the military strength of their armies. About their religion, Zhao Rugua says that they adore heaven and have a Buda of their own called Mohammed that found a sacred stone that empowered him to lead a rebellion against the Persian empire. He highlights the Ramadan month of fasting and the five daily prayers. He describes very accurately the regular annual overflowing of the river Nile and has a good description of the main port in its delta, Cairo. The text lists

the embassies sent by Islam to China, detailing the gifts they brought and the ones they received in exchange.

The text displays a thorough knowledge of the geographic dimensions of Islam.

It even contains a lengthy reference to Mulanpi, the Almoravid empire that stood at the Islamic Far West. Alluding to the Mediterranean, Zhao Rugua states that Mulanpi, basically Andalucía, lays at the end of a great sea that is surrounded by innumerable countries, but that Andalucía is the only place visited by the big Arabian ships.

Andalucía, lays at the end of a great sea that is surrounded by innumerable countries, but that Andalucía is the only place visited by the big Arabian ships. Andalucía is a country of rich and plenty, that produces excellent rice and wheat, and the biggest melons and the fattest sheep of the whole world. North of Mulanpi the days become shorter until lasting only six hours. That's quite a graphic description of North Europe and reveals what the 12th century Chinese knew about Europe: they only saw it through the lens of Islam.

At the other side of Eurasia, the Arabs had quite a number of texts related to China. In fact, due to the continuous exchanges between Islam and China, the earliest foreign eyewitness accounts of China were mostly Arabic. The first text to contain a lengthy description of China, traditionally attributed to a 9th century merchant called Sulayman, contains the detailed description of the Muslim quarter in Canton, its legal organization and its economic links with Siraf.

The author describe the Chinese, as Europeans will do many centuries later, as beautiful and white, and very well dressed in silk garments. But he is shocked by the women that go around with their heads uncovered and their hair fluttering in the wind, and by the fact that men don't use turbans. And he finds disgusting that after relieving themselves they don't wash but use toilet paper instead.

He heartily approves of the elaborate funeral rites of the Chinese and comments with surprise that everybody in China is able to read and write, be they poor or rich, young or old. All Chinese cities have schools for poor children while the state provides them with the necessary food supply. The Chinese state also provides the poor with the necessary medicines: as later Europeans will also do, he presents China as a welfare state. But unlike later Europeans, he casts a neutral eye on Chinese homosexuality, even when it recurs to male prostitution.

Sulayman understood well the administrative pyramid that linked big cities to smaller ones in a continuous urban web, and he praises the transport facilities of people and merchandises. He dwells on what the Chinese eat and drink, and goes into detail about how the tea is produced, sold and prepared, as well as on the importance of the taxes that the state collects from it. He provides a clear view of the financial organization of the Chinese state, and describes the ever-normal granaries that the state uses for price-control.

Sulayman text has the convincing flavour of an eye-witness account, even if he probably relied on other travellers' texts. Compared with the Chinese texts on Islam it points to a largest presence of Islam in China than that of China in the Islamic world.

The early Islamic knowledge of a maritime route to the Far East encircling Africa is already evident in one of the great world maps coming from the Islamic world. By the middle of the 12th century, al-Idrisi, an Islamic geographer from Ceuta in Morocco, presented the King of Norman Sicily a geographical book with the title of "Entertainment for he who longs to travel the world".

It contained 70 regional maps and one world map, that drew on Greek, Christian and Islamic traditions of geography and travel. It is a world

with the Arabian peninsula at its center and Mecca and the Kaaba at its heart.

The world appears as a round surface, encircled by water. Africa is seriously distorted and expanded and appears linked to the imaginary southern continent from the Ptolemaic tradition. But even so, it can be rounded and it provides access

to a myriad of islands scattered at the east end of the Indian Ocean.