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CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT FRA MAURO'S MAP

The Zheng He expeditions were the culmination of three centuries of intense Chinese navigation in the waters of the Indian Ocean, and by the beginning of the 15th century both Europe and China were beginning to notice their mutual presence at the extreme ends of the Eurasian continent.

As we have already seen in previous lectures, Europe had known of Cathay since the 13th century, and Marco Polo's book had inspired the geographical representation of Cathay in the Catalan map of Cresques in 1375.

The Portuguese will not enter the Indian Ocean until 1498, but the Venetians had never stopped travelling there, and one of them, Niccolo da Conti, claimed to have crossed the Indian Ocean, spent a year in Sumatra in 1421, and then travelled to the Malay Peninsula, India and Java.

These were the places and the times of the Zheng He expeditions, and even without mentioning them, he gathered considerable geographical information about the Far East, which he declared was equal to Italy in terms of wealth, culture and magnificence.

The account of Niccolo da Conti's travels had an immediate influence because it corroborated Marco Polo's text and his report found its way into 15th century maps. In 1457 a Genoese map already seems to be relying on da Conti's information, but the most important cartographic piece to build upon da Conti's travels will be the map of the Venetian monk Fra Mauro, drawn in 1460.

Why is Fra Mauro's map so important in understanding what Europe knew about Asia in the 15th century?

This map departs completely from both the medieval maps and Ptolemy's map, which had just been rediscovered. Compared with the Catalan map, drawn 70 years before, it is a much more matter of fact map.

It lacks both the lavish illustrations and mythic figures that embellished the Catalan map, and is a much more comprehensive view of the known world, showing clearly the recognizable contours of Europe, Africa and Asia.

Even the Paradise, that in medieval times was always a definite and central part of the map, appears now off the limits of the map, which amounts to being off the limits of the earth, lingering in one of its corners.

The beautiful walled Paradise is no longer a real place to look at. In the other corner of the map, we see a geocentric diagram of the universe, with the earth at its centre, and the planets, the moon and the sun turning around it.

Even if it follows a classical geocentric view of the universe, its placement at the corner of the map reminds us that the earth is now just a part of a much bigger cosmos.

Furthermore, some elements signal this map as a turning point in Europe's knowledge of the **route to Asia. Let's now compare Fra Mauro's map with the highly influential Ptolemy's map, as** it was drawn in the 14th century, because it is quite doubtful that Ptolemy himself ever drew any map.

Even so, when describing the Indian Ocean, Fra Mauro had relied on recent and direct information that he was able to check. But for the Far East, Marco Polo seems to have been his only source. When reaching Cathay, Fra Mauro's map depicts a highly urbanized world full of palaces with silhouettes reminding the tower of Pisa, the roman columns and the duomos of the talian cities. The capital, Cambalic, is surrounded by luxurious nomadic tents

Fra Mauro's map certainly follows some of the Ptolemaic conventions. It over expands the size of Asia and it minimizes the oceans. In both maps, the only important seas are the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and no place is left for the Atlantic or the Pacific oceans.

But Fra Mauro's map departs in some crucial points from Ptolemy's map. The Indian Ocean now appears open and connected by sea with the Atlantic Ocean, while in Ptolemy's map the Indian Ocean was land locked, with Africa welded to an enormous Antarctic continent.

Notice that the round point of Africa appears clearly, albeit pointing to the east as was also the case in the Genoese map. And we can see, a Chinese junk is rounding the Cape of Good Hope and has a long explanatory inscription close to it. The inscription explains that some of these ships, called junks, went out from the Indian Ocean in 1420 and that they sailed for 40 days and 2,000 miles without ever finding anything other than wind and water.

The map contains very detailed images of Chinese junks, together with an explanation saying that these junks carry four masts or more, that can be raised or lowered, and have 40 to 60 cabins for the merchants.

Let's remember that 1420 was the year when both Niccolo da Conti and the fleets of Zheng He, with junks like this one described by Fra Mauro, were criss-crossing the Indian Ocean.

Fra Mauro's map also shows a much more thorough knowledge of the Far East. Ceylon, Sumatra and Java are neatly depicted and so is a small Japan called Zimpagu after Marco Polo's Cipango: this is the first appearance of Japan on western maps.

But Fra Mauro's East Asia lacks the accuracy of his Indian Ocean. He can't count any more with direct and reliable information that he could check. His only source seems to be Marco Polo and his own imagination.

A very rich urban civilization spreads around the Cathay's label. Its capital, Cambalic displays a highly European architecture, with silhouettes reminding the tower of Pisa, the Roman columns and the duomos of Italian cities, and three luxurious nomadic tents exhibit their richness.

But by now its Mongol owners had already been gone for almost a century.