Eyewitness accounts of 'the Indies' in the Later Medieval West: reading, reception, and re-use (c. 1300-1500)


Abstract

Despite increased mercantile and missionary contact between the Latin West and India and China between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, scholars have often noted that Western Europe’s knowledge of India, as judged by geographical texts from the period, changed surprisingly little during this time. This thesis employs some of the methodologies of reception studies in order to investigate the role played by first-hand travel accounts in the construction and change of concepts of the Indies during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It investigates in particular the reception in Italy, France and England of the information about the area known as India or the ‘three Indies’ presented in the texts produced by two Italian travellers to the East: the Divisament dou monde of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo (c. 1298), and the Relatio of the Franciscan missionary Odorico da Pordenone (1330). The thesis falls into three distinct parts. In the first section, I contextualise the project with a broad survey of the Latin European ideas of India in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and with an outline of the travellers’ journeys and their contexts. The second part of the thesis provides a broad overview of the circumstances of diffusion of the two travel accounts in England, France and Italy over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, before conducting a detailed, manuscript-based investigation of the ways in which the two accounts of India were approached by their early readers. This investigation focuses principally upon the presentation and possible modes of reception of the texts’ geographical and ethnographic details and relies heavily on the evidence of presentation, paratext and the traces of reading present in the physical texts of the accounts. The third and final part of the thesis considers the evidence of the reception of elements from first-hand travel accounts in other textual and cartographic productions. Proceeding on the basis of case studies, it demonstrates that first-hand accounts of ‘the Indies’ were used by the authors and compilers of cosmographical texts in this period in a variety of ways. It suggests, however, that the manner and context of the deployment of elements from such accounts often tended to assimilate these with, rather than distinguish them from, the writings of accepted authorities. This section also contrasts the way that details from travel accounts were re-used in texts with the way the same information was handled in the composition of maps. Finally, by an analysis of the ways eyewitness accounts of the Indies were re-used in certain ambiguous and comic texts produced in this period, the thesis sheds light on an underexplored aspect of the reception both of eyewitness information and of the genres in which it appeared. The appendices contain tables presenting information relative to the manuscripts discussed that support the arguments presented in section two.

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