



Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510 (The Middle Ages Series)

Kim M. Phillips

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A distinct European perspective on Asia emerged in the late Middle Ages. Early reports of a homogeneous "India" of marvels and monsters gave way to accounts written by medieval travelers that indulged readers' curiosity about far-flung landscapes and cultures without exhibiting the attitudes evident in the later writings of aspiring imperialists. Mining the accounts of more than twenty Europeans who made—or claimed to have made—journeys to Mongolia, China, India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia between the mid-thirteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Kim Phillips reconstructs a medieval European vision of Asia that was by turns critical, neutral, and admiring.

In offering a cultural history of the encounter between medieval Latin Christians and the distant East, *Before Orientalism* reveals how Europeans' prevailing preoccupations with food and eating habits, gender roles, sexualities, civility, and the foreign body helped shape their perceptions of Asian peoples and societies. Phillips gives particular attention to the texts' known or likely audiences, the cultural settings within which they found a foothold, and the broader impact of their descriptions, while also considering the motivations of their writers. She reveals in rich detail responses from European travelers that ranged from pragmatism to wonder. Fear of military might, admiration for high standards of civic life and court culture, and even delight in foreign magnificence rarely assumed the kind of secular Eurocentric superiority that would later characterize Orientalism. Placing medieval writing on the East in the context of an emergent "Europe" whose explorers sought to learn more than to rule, *Before Orientalism* complicates our understanding of medieval attitudes toward the foreign.

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