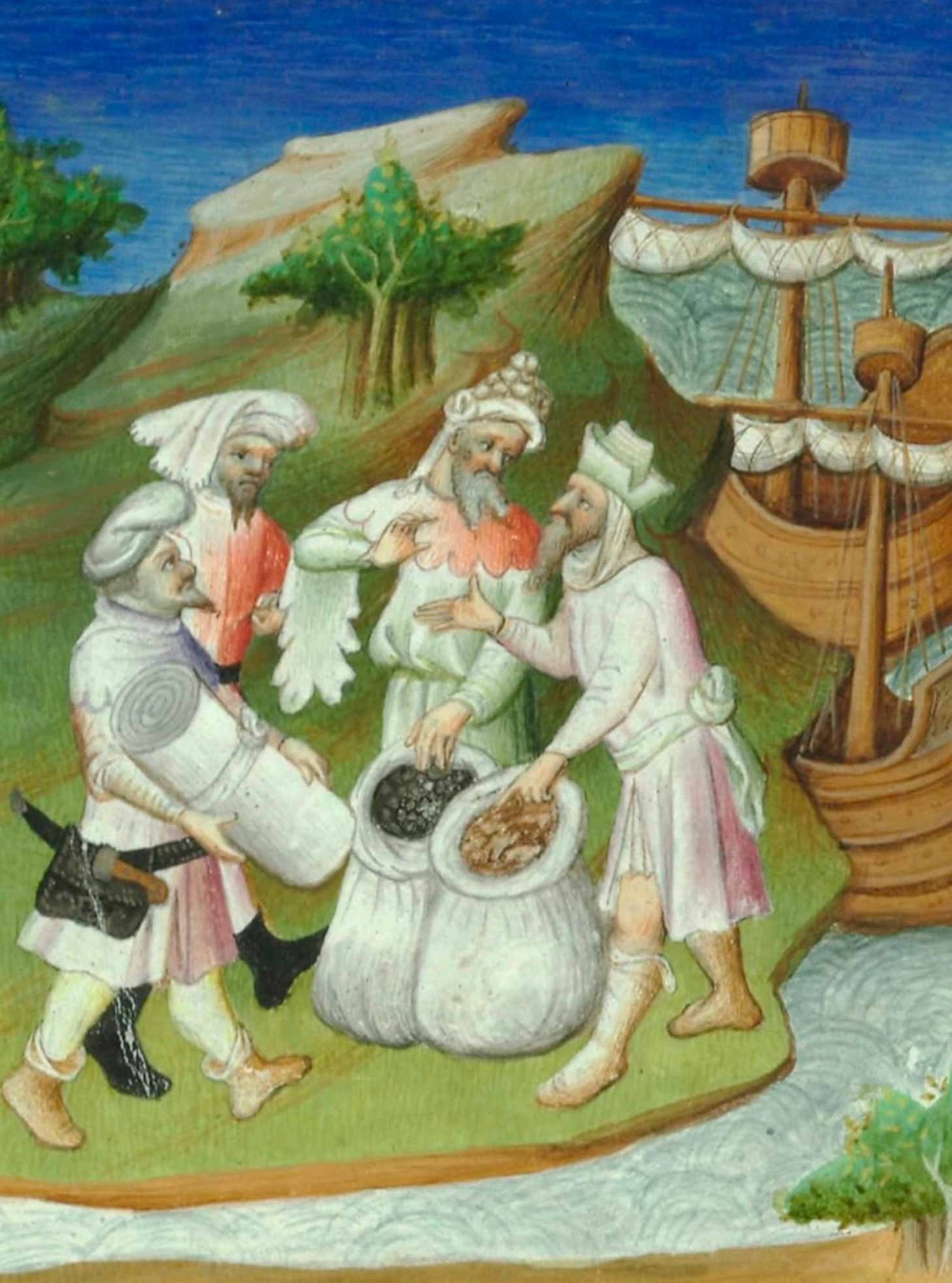

Eastern Splendour, Western Longings: Italian Silks of the 14th and 15th Centuries and Their Imagery

Kathrin Müller

An Italian silk manufactured probably in the second half of the fourteenth century and today belonging to the Musée de Cluny in Paris shows a pattern that is essentially made up of two scenes, each duplicated symmetrically and featuring a plant, a woman, and an animal (fig. 1).[1] In its original state, the dark brown figures were golden elements surrounded by the once vibrant green and white motifs of the pattern against a red or rose ground. The upper scene of the piece shows a woman thrusting her body downward from a bundle of tall grass. She holds onto one of the stems with one hand and thus steadies herself in order to grab the lion below her by its mane. What is striking about this scene is the woman's boldness and strength. Not only does she demonstrate confidence while in a rather precarious pose, but she also dares to oppose a ferocious animal with her bare hands. The other scene, in contrast, conveys serenity and ease. Here the woman is standing upright against the trunk of a palm, resting one hand on her leashed dog and picking a piece of fruit with the other. The dog's excitement should not be misunderstood as a disturbance of the woman's calm state, as its species and the leash indicate that this is her lead dog ("limier"), that is, a highly trained dog used for the hunt, to track down game.[2] The dog in the pattern seems to be hoping that its mistress is picking a treat for it. The contrasts between the two scenes are thus manifold: intimacy versus enmity, the domesticated animal versus the wild one, physical recreation versus strain and agitation, and the amenities of nature, signified by the fruits of the palm, versus the harshness of nature, signified by the conflict between the woman and the lion.[3]

1 Paris, Musée de Cluny – Musée national du Moyen Âge, inv. no. Cl. 3076. Sophie Desrosiers, *Soieries et autres textiles de l'antiquité au XVIe siècle*, Paris 2003, cat. 199.

2 Jacques Bugnion, *Les chasses médiévales. Le brachet, le lévrier, l'épagneul, leur nomenclature, leur métier, leur typologie*, Gollion 2005, p. 137.

3 It is thus not primarily an "opposition entre nature et culture" as suggested by Desrosiers 2003 (note 1), cat. 199.

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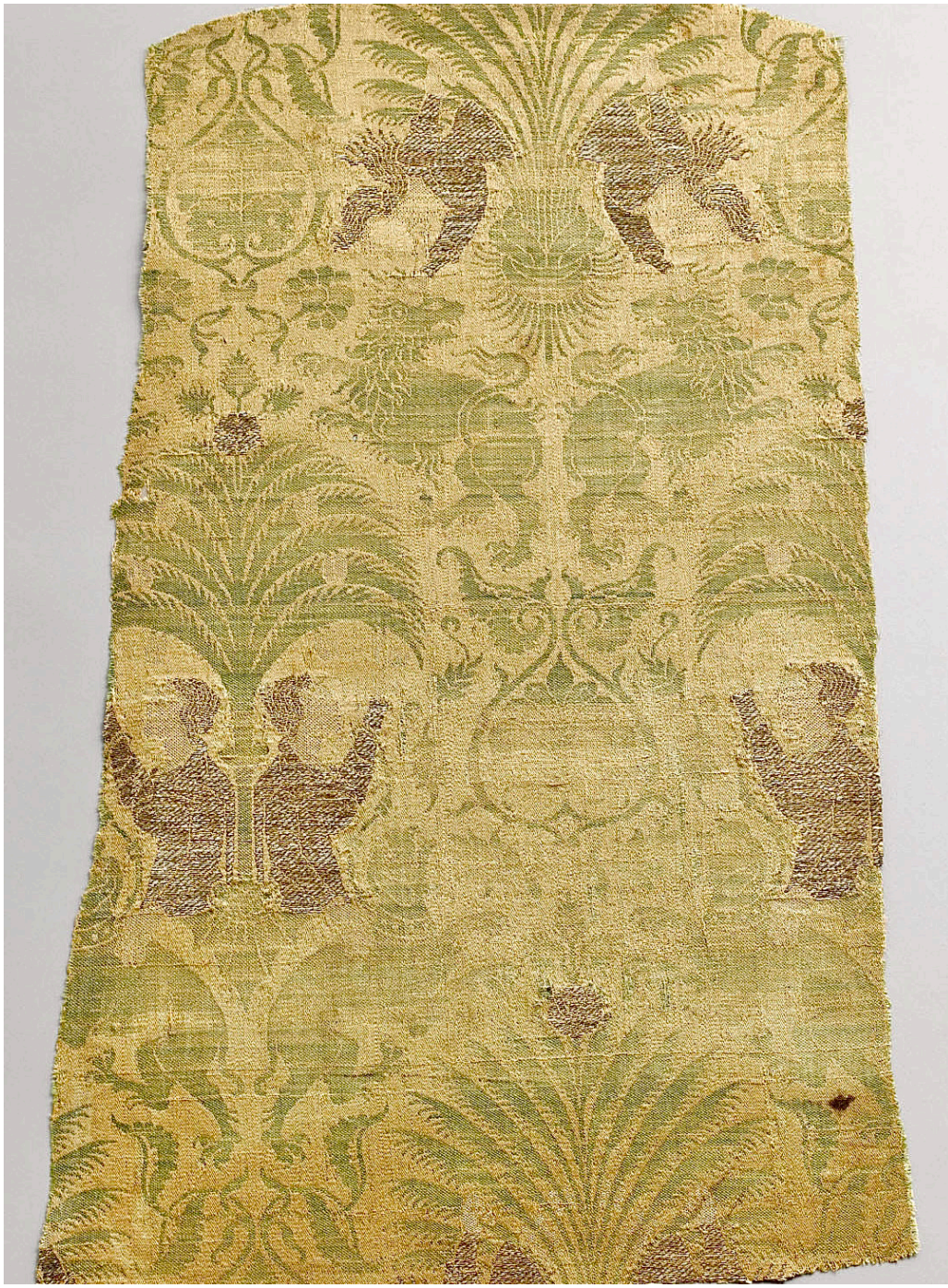

1 Lampas silk, Italy, second half of the 14th century, 49 × 30,5 cm, Paris, Musée de Cluny – Musée national du Moyen Âge

All of this suggests that the imagery of this pattern was well thought out and far from randomly assembled. Two aspects thus characterize this textile: it is made of luxurious materials, namely silk and gold, and it is endowed with an elaborate figurative program. In the following, with a focus on both of these aspects, I will discuss the fascination that silk held for the Western European elite of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and will examine the imagery devised for silk fabrics. I will argue that figured silks were far more than merely sumptuous textiles signalling material wealth and high social status. Specifically, they made it possible for the European elite to participate materially or physically in the abundance of the East, and at the same time to turn this abundance into a distinguishing mark of Western identity.

The silk fabrics I will consider here are European products. They were manufactured in northern Italy, where silk production went back to the High Middle Ages, with Lucca as its centre.[4] After political upheavals forced weavers to leave Lucca in the early fourteenth century, silk weaving was established on a grand scale in Venice, and on a more modest scale in Bologna, Florence, and Genoa. Ultimately, several northern Italian cities, among them Milan and Siena, had their own silk production. From the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the Italian silk industry dominated the European market. The raw material was imported from the Eastern Mediterranean, the regions of the Black Sea, and Iran, with only a small amount coming from Italian sericulture.[5] From the beginning, the motifs incorporated into the patterns of the Italian fabrics likewise came from overseas.[6]

4 Luca Molà, "A Luxury Industry. The Production of Italian Silks 1400–1600," in Bart Lambert and Katherine Anne Wilson (eds.), *Europe's Rich Fabric. The Consumption, Commercialisation, and Production of Luxury Textiles in Italy, the Low Countries and Neighbouring Territories (Fourteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)*, Farnham/Burlington 2016, pp. 205–234; Lisa Monnas, *Merchants, Princes, and Painters. Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300–1550*, New Haven/London 2008, pp. 4–8; David Jacoby, "Dalla materia prima ai drappi. Bisanzio, il Levante e Venezia. La prima fase dell'industria serica veneziana," in Luca Molà, Reinhold C. Mueller, and Claudio Zanier (eds.), *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento. Dal bacco al drappo*, Venice 2000 (Presente storico, 2), pp. 265–304; Luca Molà, The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice, Baltimore/London 2000; id., *La comunità dei Lucchesi a Venezia. Immigrazione e industria della seta nel tardo medioevo*, Venice 1994.

5 Molà 2016 (note 4), pp. 209–213; Jacoby 2000 (note 4), pp. 270–275; id., "Genoa, Silk Trade and Silk Manufacture in the Mediterranean Region (ca. 1100–1300)," in Anna R. Calderoni Masetti, Clario di Fabio, and Mario Marcenaro (eds.), *Tessuti, oreficerie, miniature in Liguria, XIII–XV secolo*, Bordighera 1999 (International Institute for Ligurian Studies, Atti dei convegni, 3), pp. 11–40; id., "Silk Crosses the Mediterranean," in Gabriella Airaldi (ed.), *Le vie del Mediterraneo. Idee, uomini, oggetti (secoli XI–XVI). Genova, 19–20 aprile 1994*, Genoa 1997, pp. 55–79, here pp. 71–79.

6 For the cross-cultural trade in silks and the exchange of techniques, patterns, and terminology, see the studies by David Jacoby, especially "Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols. Patterns of Trade and Distribution in the West," in Juliane von Fircks and Regula Schorta (eds.), *Oriental Silks in Medieval Europe*, Riggisberg 2016 (Riggisberger Berichte, 21), pp. 92–123; "Oriental Silks Go West. A Declining Trade in the Later Middle Ages," in Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli and Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World. Trade, Gift Exchange and Artistic Transfer*, Venice 2010 (Collana del Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz/Max-Planck-Institut, 15), pp. 71–88; "Silk Economic

The design that made the silks from Lucca famous was in fact a 'Mediterranean' pattern also used by weavers in the Levant and Spain.[7] It owed its imposing effect to the rigidly symmetrical arrangement of largescale pairs of animals—such as peacocks, griffins, or eagles—and ogival plant forms. This pattern type changed rather dramatically when, at some point, probably in the early fourteenth century, Italian weavers began to draw inspiration from silks imported from Central Asia and Greater Iran.[8]

The prime example of such an imported silk is a fabric that was manufactured in Central Asia, probably in the first half of the fourteenth century, and found its way to Europe—namely to the German city of Stralsund on the Baltic Sea, where it was used at the beginning of the fifteenth century for a dalmatic and a tunic.[9] The pattern shows two creatures woven in gold on a red ground: a winged, lion-like quadruped flying toward a contorted serpentine dragon, each with an open snout and long tongue and stabilized by a large leaf attached to its body and surrounded by small foliage. The fierce-looking animals are integral parts of a deliberately asymmetrical, sinuous structure that creates an effect of vivacity and movement. Italian weavers adopted this type of pattern and created similarly dynamic designs, as seen, for example, in a fabric from a dalmatic from Halberstadt featuring exotic birds and 'European' dragons in between serpentine plant stems.[10] However, this did not become the dominant pattern type of he fourteenth

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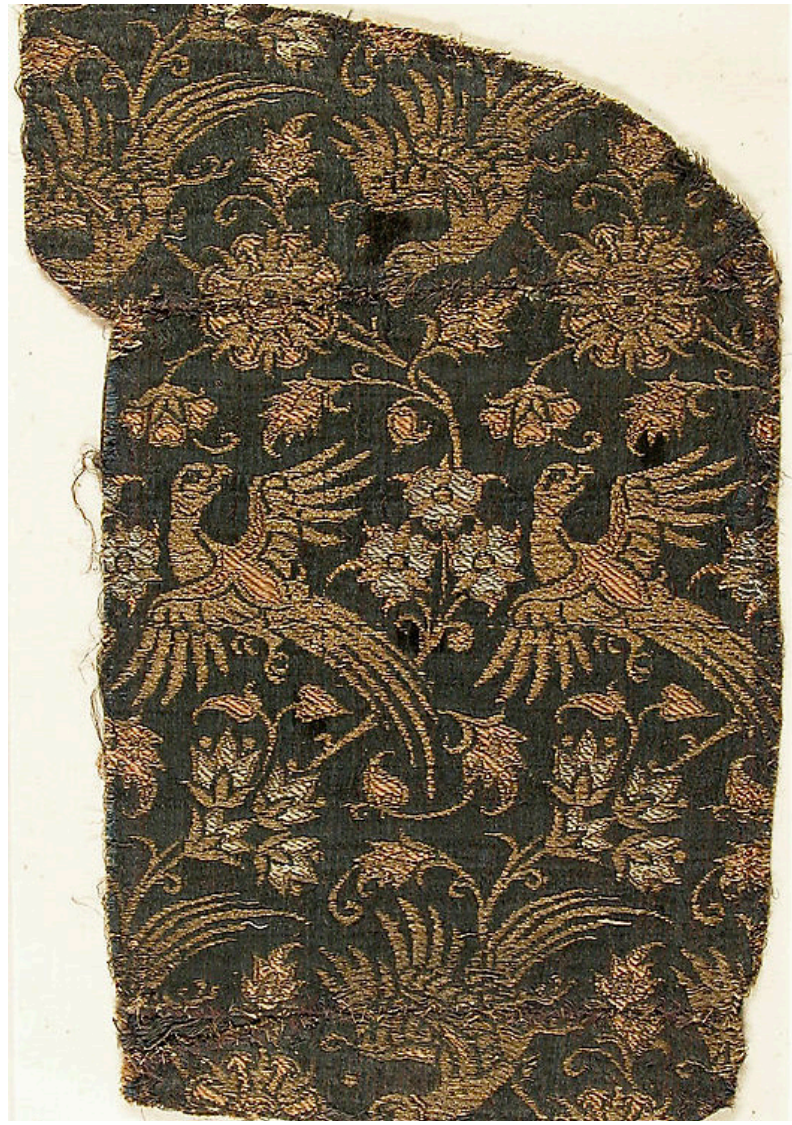
and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction. Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58, 2004, pp. 197–240. See also Lisa Monnas, "The Impact of Oriental Silks on Italian Silk Weaving in the Fourteenth Century," in Lieselotte E. Saurma-Jeltsch and Anja Eisenbeiß (eds.), *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations. Art and Culture between Europe and Asia*, Berlin/Munich 2010, pp. 27–29 and 65–89.

7 See, for example, Karel Otavský and Anne E. Wardwell, *Mittelalterliche Textilien II. Zwischen Europa und China*, Riggisberg 2011 (Die Textilsammlung der Abegg-Stiftung, 5), cat. 55–57 (Karel Otavský).

8 Jacoby 2016 (note 6); id., 2010 (note 6); Monnas 2010 (note 6); Anne E. Wardwell, "Indigenous Elements in Central Asian Silk Designs of the Mongol Period, and Their Impact on Italian Gothic Silks," in *Bulletin du CIETA* 77, 2000, pp. 87–98; ead., "Panni tartarici. Eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silver (13th and 14th Centuries)," in *Islamic Art. An Annual Dedicated to the Art and Culture of the Muslim World* 3, 1988–1989, pp. 95–173; ead., "Flight of the Phoenix. Crosscurrents in Late Thirteenth- to Fourteenth-Century Silk Patterns and Motifs," in *The Bulletin of The Cleveland Museum of Art* 74/1, 1987, pp. 2–35; Otto von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, 2 vol., Berlin 1913, vol. 2, pp. 46–57 and 69–74; id., "Chinesische Seidenstoffe des XIV. Jahrhunderts und ihre Bedeutung für die Seidenkunst Italiens," in *Jahrbuch der preußischen Kunstsammlungen* 33, 1912, pp. 176–192.

9 Stralsund, Stralsund Museum, inv. no. 1862:14; Copenhagen, Designmuseum Danmark, inv. no. B 129 (1930). Juliane von Fircks, *Liturgische Gewänder des Mittelalters aus St. Nikolai in Stralsund*, Riggisberg, 2008, cat. 17 and 17a.

10 Halberstadt, Dommuseum, inv. no. 194. *Der heilige Schatz im Dom zu Halberstadt*, Harald Meller, Ingo Mundt, and Boje E. Hans Schmuhl (eds.), Regensburg, 2008, cat. 69 (Annemarie Stauffer).



2 Lampas silk, Italy, second half of the 14th century, 30,9 × 19,3 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

and early fifteenth centuries. Rather, the interest in this new kind of textile ornament initiated a process by which a variety of elaborate new patterns were invented. Some of them—such as one piece with exotic birds (fig. 2)—readily betray their origins;[11] others borrow and change motifs from imported models, such as the flying animals, which in a

11 New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 12.55.1. See the catalogue entry on a different piece of the same fabric in Cologne, Museum für Angewandte Kunst Köln, in Barbara Markowsky, *Europäische Seidengewebe des 13.–18. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne 1976 (Kataloge des Kunstgewerbemuseums Köln, 8), cat. 11.

fabric now in Boston have been turned into dogs soaring over castles.[12] Moreover, some pieces retain a symmetrical pattern structure and thus contain both spirited and static elements, as in the example at the opening of this essay.

Figured Silks as Visual Media

My rather arbitrary choice of examples by no means covers the whole spectrum. Although surely only a small portion of the figured silks produced during the period in question have come down to us, the astonishingly large number we have at our disposal testify to an impressive range of patterns, with motifs taken from nature, in particular the world of animals, and from court life, in particular the hunt and courtly love.[13] Today most of the silks can be found in museum collections or church treasuries. In the latter case, some have survived as (parts of) liturgical vestments or other types of liturgical cloth, representing one of the several usages of figured silks in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.[14] They were also used in prestigious secular garments and, though presumably to a lesser extent, items of interior decoration, such as pillowcases or, in royal households and those of the higher nobility, bed canopies.[15] Sometimes the silk of a secular garment was reused for a liturgical vestment or cloth.[16] Yet even when new figured silk was donated to a liturgical context, it usually featured secular patterns with animals and plants or even overtly courtly topics such as the courtly hunt or love. The market thus catered first and foremost

12 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 35.84. Adèle Coulin Weibel, *Two Thousand Years of Textiles. The Figured Textiles of Europe and the Near East*, New York 1952, cat. 199.

13 To this day, the most comprehensive overview can be gained from publications from around 1900, such as: von Falke, 1913 (note 8), vol. 2; Julius Lessing, *Die Gewebesammlung des königlichen Kunst-Gewerbe-Museums zu Berlin*, 7 vol., Berlin, 1900–1909; Friedrich Fischbach, *Die wichtigsten Webe-Ornamente bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, 5 vol., vol. 1–3, Wiesbaden, 1901.

14 One of the most impressive collections of late medieval liturgical vestments made of figured silks belonged to the Church of St. Mary in Gdańsk (Danzig), Poland. See Walter Mannowsky, *Der Danziger Paramentenschatz. Kirchliche Gewänder und Stickereien aus der Marienkirche*, 5 vol., Berlin/Leipzig, 1931–1938. Parts of this collection are preserved at the Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, the St. Annen-Museum in Lübeck, and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. See also the liturgical vestments from the Church of St. Nicolai in Stralsund now in the Stralsund Museum, catalogued by von Fircks, 2008 (note 9). For a recent case study of the liturgical usages of (presumably) oriental silks, see Evelin Wetter, "Perceptions of Oriental Silks at the Court of the Bohemian Kings during the Fourteenth Century," in von Fircks and Schorta (eds.), 2016 (note 6), pp. 195–212.

15 Katherine Anne Wilson, "'In the chamber, in the garde robe, in the chapel, in a chest.' The Possession and Uses of Luxury Textiles. The Case of Later Medieval Dijon," in Lambert and Wilson 2016 (note 4), pp. 11–33; Françoise Piponnier, "Usages et diffusion de la soie en France à la fin du Moyen Âge," in Simonetta Cavaciocchi (ed.), *La seta in Europa sec. XIII–XX. Atti della 'Ventiquattresima Settimana di Studi,' 4–9 maggio 1992*, Prato/Florence 1993 (Atti delle 'Settimane di Studi' e altri Convegni, 24), pp. 785–800.

16 See, for example, von Fircks 2008 (note 9), cat. 15 and 15a.

to the needs and tastes of the aristocratic world. What should be stressed here is that the demand for such multifaceted imagery in woven silk was specific to the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries. There had been no such demand previously, and later the situation would change yet again with the emergence of velvet as the preferred luxury fabric and of the so-called pomegranate pattern.[17] But in in the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries, and within the context of the aristocratic world, figured silk was expected to be a visual medium. I am interested in specific aspects of this medium, namely the expectations of the noble clients, the promise held by the figured silks, and the ideal worlds they helped to shape.

To be sure, textile historians have acquired broad knowledge on the Italian silk industry of this period, on the origins of and changes in the patterns, and on the courtly themes addressed in them. However, at least since Otto von Falke's seminal study of ornament in silk weaving, entitled *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei* and first published in 1913, the field of textile history has believed in a set of anthropological, commercial, and social constants that have seemed to make further questioning unnecessary.[18] One of these beliefs is that whenever highly valued portable objects such as silks travel, their designs are copied. According to this universal law, there is no need to ask about specific motifs.[19] Another is that precious things from far away generally arouse interest and find a ready market. Consequently, it is assumed that the Italians produced a great variety of figured silks, some with exotic elements, because they sold well.[20] And lastly, since these luxurious fabrics have always been exclusive goods capable of serving the nobility as status symbols, it is assumed that their imagery always relates to the aristocratic world. With these ready notions, the field of textile history seems both to have adopted and distorted concepts of art history dating from the late nineteenth century, for example, Heinrich Wölfflin's idea of ornament as "the flowering of a force that is beyond duty."[21] Likewise, Alois Riegl assumed ornament's functional and representational freedom and

17 For this later development see Monnas 2008 (note 4), pp. 96–215.

18 von Falke 1913 (note 8).

19 This traditional approach has become all the more questionable as art historical research has embarked on more profound discussions of cross-cultural artistic interaction and the politics of identity. As a departure point, see Eva Hoffmann, "Pathways of Portability. Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries," in *Art History* 24, 2001, pp. 17–50.

20 While Jacoby, for example, convincingly argues that the success of imported silks induced Italian entrepreneurs and weavers to secure their market share, that is, to produce similar fabrics, his notion of the customers' interest in the exotic remains rather unspecific: "The strong fascination with the Orient, the pronounced taste for bright and lustrous colours, the sheen provided by gold and silver threads, and the exotic patterns adorning the new types of Oriental silks ensured their success and a broad diffusion in courtly circles and among urban elites." Jacoby 2010 (note 6), p. 73. For commercial considerations, see id., 2016 (note 6), pp. 110–116; id., 2010 (note 6), pp. 77–78; id., 2004 (note 6), pp. 215–223.

21 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur*, PhD thesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich 1886; Jasper Cepl (ed.), Berlin 1999, p. 38: "das Aufblühen einer Kraft, die nichts mehr zu leisten hat."

appreciated it as the most unspoiled indicator of the *Formgefühl* or *Kunstwollen* specific to a stylistic phase or mental state.[22] Textile historians have similarly understood the ornamentation of late medieval Italian silks as a symptom of a "late medieval fantasy"[23] or "boundless Italian imagination."[24]

These notions are all the more questionable in light of scholarship stressing the great efforts that had to be made to adjust the mechanics of a drawloom in order to produce each new, elaborate pattern. This complex process involved many steps and required artisans and assistants with specific knowledge and training. The pattern had to be drawn, and the drawing then translated into a scheme for the adjustment of the drawloom. This adjustment had to be carried out by an experienced weaver, who needed the help of assistants, so-called drawboys, for the final weaving of the pattern.[25] The textile historian Brigitte Tietzel has claimed that the fact that the process of preparing the drawloom "could take even months makes clear that, already for this technical reason alone, a rapid change of fashion, that is, of the patterns, seems unlikely."[26] In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, however, silk weaving was all but a conservative craft. On the whole, the technical elaboration, variety of motifs, and range of themes suggest that figured silks—whether used as garments or interior decorations, commissioned as gifts or bought for personal use—shaped and contributed to specific aspects of elite culture and identity. In the following, I will investigate the taste for the exotic more closely.

The Appeal of the East

In fourteenth-century Western Europe there was a keen awareness of the fact that imported silks came from the East. This is evident in the nomenclature employed for different types of silks in inventories and weavers' statutes. There were, for example, *panni tartarici*,

22 Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen. Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin 1893. See Debra Schafter, "From Medieval Metaphor to Modern 'Kunstwollen.' The Nineteenth-Century Transformation of Ornamental Perception," in Ralph Dekoninck, Caroline Heering, and Michel Lefftz (eds.), *Questions d'ornements, XV–XVIII^e siècles*, Turnhout 2013, pp. 22–30, here pp. 26–28; Frank-Lothar Kroll, "Ornamenttheorien im Zeitalter des Historismus," in Isabelle Frank and Freia Hartung (eds.), *Die Rhetorik des Ornaments*, Munich 2001, pp. 163–175, here pp. 167–168.

23 Monique King and Donald King, *European Textiles in the Keir Collection 400 BC to 1800 AC*, London/Boston, 1990, pp. 43–67.

24 Wardwell 2000 (note 8), p. 95. In the words of Falke 1913 (note 8), pp. V–VI: "Mit den Seidenstoffen wanderten spätantike Ornamente nach Persien, persische Muster nach Byzanz und nach China, chinesische wieder zurück in das Gebiet des Islam von Iran bis Andalusien und nach Italien, überall die Phantasie der Empfänger mit den Gedanken weit entlegener Nationen befruchtend."

25 Monnas 2008 (note 4), pp. 8 and 41–44.

26 Brigitte Tietzel, *Italienische Seidengewebe des 13., 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne 1984 (Kataloge des Deutschen Textilmuseums Krefeld, 1), p. 11.

cloths of gold and figured or plain silks from Mongol territories whose inhabitants were called Tartars; *panni de Tars* or *de Turky* from Tarsus in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and from Turkish-ruled territories in Asia Minor; *suriani* from Syria; *damaschini* from Damascus; and *saracinati*, Saracen silks, from Muslim territories in the Middle East.[27] These terms evoked a mental map of a very broad scope, extending from the Far and Middle East to the regions *outremer*, that is, the Levant. The merchants of northern Italy, the majority of them Venetian and Genoese, were based at all the major maritime trading posts from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea and had established networks of long-distance commerce.[28] However, the East had become somehow familiar to those at home as well. It was precisely the royal, noble, and patrician clientele of the silk weavers who purchased travel accounts, a rather new type of literature at the time. There also existed a cherished tradition of literature about travelling heroes such as Alexander the Great or the Knights of the Round Table.[29] In 1298, however, with the help of the romance writer Rustichello da Pisa, Marco Polo, a member of a Venetian family of merchants, recorded his *Devisement du monde*, an account of his voyage to and his stay at the court of Kublai Khan in which he offered firsthand insights, though with subtle elements of chivalric romance.[30] His text was a huge success. Originally written in Franco-Italian, from as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century onward, the text also circulated in French, Latin, Tuscan, and Venetian. The number of surviving manuscripts amounts to more than 140.[31] Recent

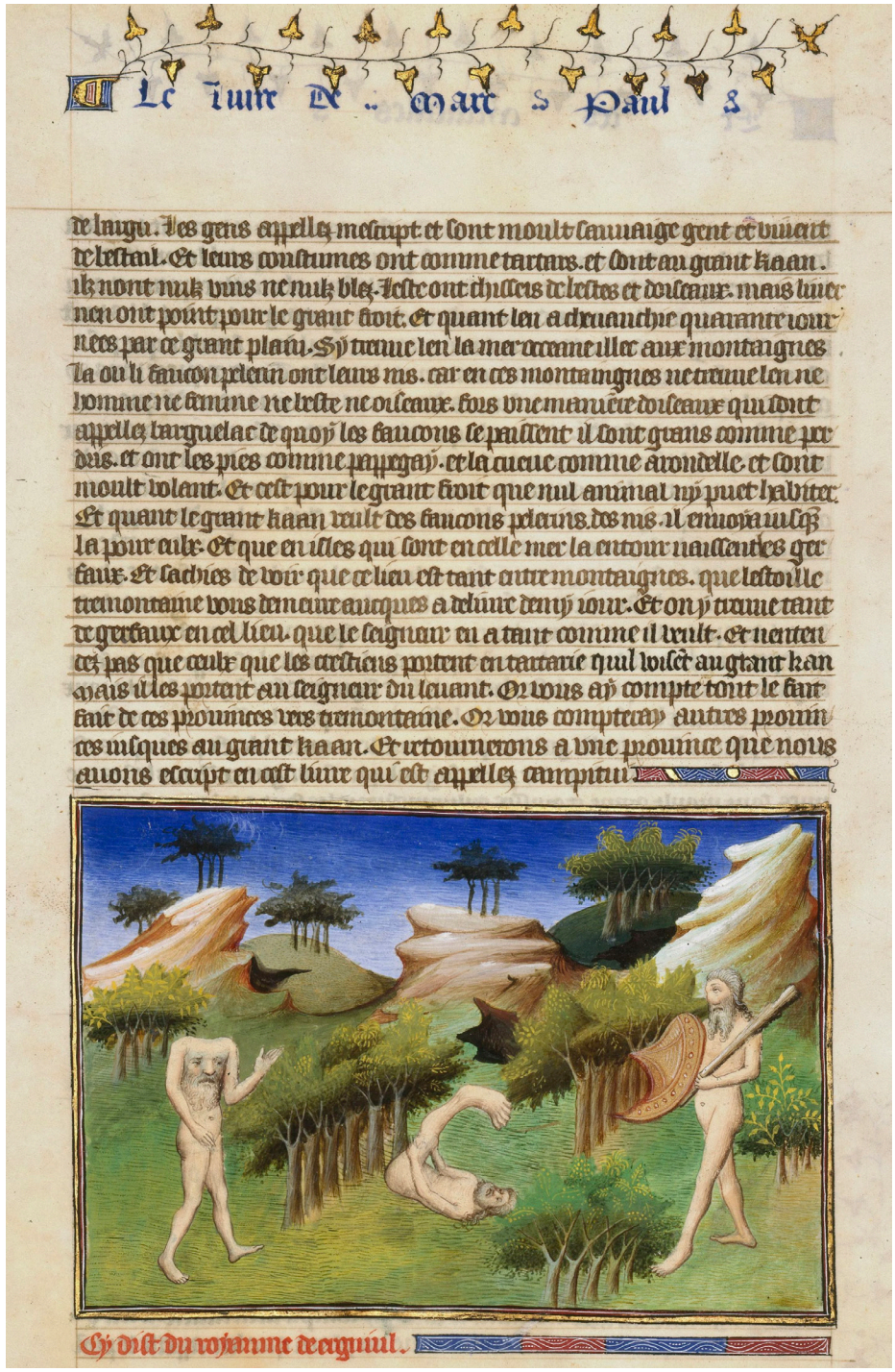
27 Jacoby 2016 (note 6), pp. 93, 100, 110f.; Jacoby 2010 (note 6); Monnas 2008 (note 4), pp. 13–14; Wardwell 1988–1989 (note 8).

28 Jacoby, 2016 (note 6), pp. 94–105, stressing that "[...] undue importance has been ascribed to the trading of Western merchants in Mongolian territories, in a skewed Eurocentric perspective." Ibid., p. 104. From the older literature, see Jacques Paviot, "Les marchands italiens dans l'Iran mongol," in Denise Aigle (ed.), *L'Iran face à la domination mongole*, Teheran, 1997, pp. 71–86; Roberto S. López, "Nouveaux documents sur les marchands italiens en Chine à l'époque mongole," in *Comptes rendus des séances. Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 121, 1977, pp. 445–458; Michel Balard, "Precursori di Colombo. I Genovesi in Estremo-Oriente nel XIV secolo," in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Colombiani, 13 a 14 ottobre 1973*, Genoa, 1974, pp. 149–164; Luciano Petech, "Les marchands italiens dans l'empire mongol," in *Journal asiatique* 250, 1964, pp. 549–574.

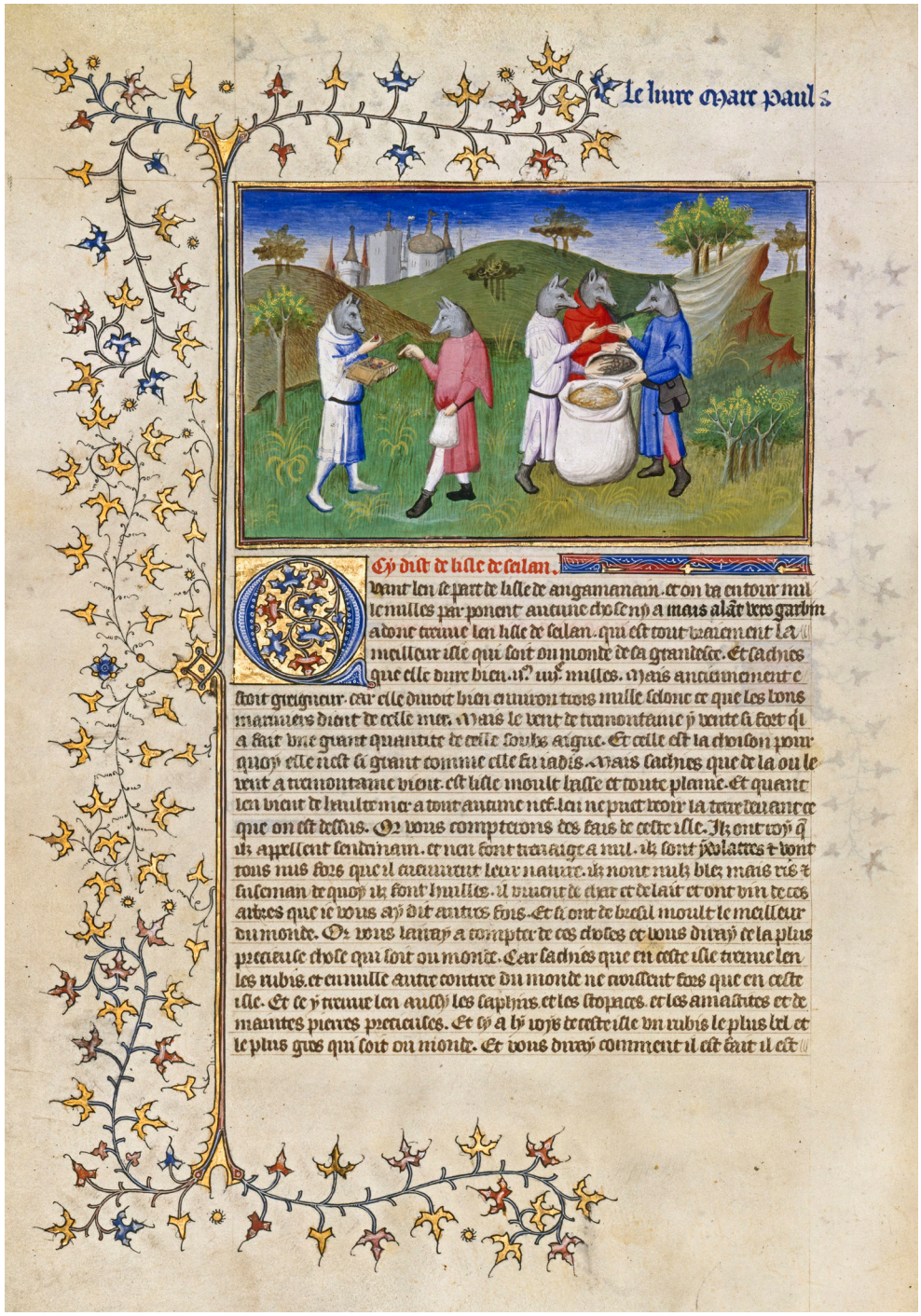
29 Helen Fulton (ed.), *A Companion to Arthurian Literature, Chichester, 2012; Z. David Zuwiyya (ed.), A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Leiden/Boston 2011 (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 29).

30 Marco Polo, *Milione. Le divisament dou monde. Il Milione nelle redazioni toscana e franco-italiana*, Gabriella Ronchi (ed.), Milan 1982. What was new about Marco Polo and his travel account was "the lay observer's personal observations – which challenged with its enormous popularity a fairly recent tradition of missionary discourse." Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India through European Eyes*, 1250–1625, Cambridge 2000, p. 46. In addition to the studies cited below, from the vast literature on the Devisement, see especially Kim M. Philips, *Before Orientalism. Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing*, 1245–1510, Philadelphia 2014; Simon Gaunt, *Marco Polo's 'Le Devisement du monde.' Narrative Voice, Language and Diversity*, Cambridge 2013 (Gallica, 31); John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, New York/London 1999.

31 Christine Gadrat, *Lire Marco Polo au Moyen Âge. Traduction, diffusion et réception du 'Devisement du monde,'*



3 Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810, ca. 1410–1412, fol. 29v, wondrous races



4 Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810, ca. 1410–1412, fol.76v, dog-headed people in the Bay of Bengal negotiating over sacks of merchandise

studies investigating the readership of the *Devisement du monde* have shown that the account reached all strata of elite society in Western Europe—regular as well as secular clerics, merchants, princes, urban patricians, and university scholars.[32] In 1373, the French king Charles V owned no fewer than five copies; his brother John, Duke of Berry, at least three. One of these was the well-known, sumptuous copy now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (ms. fr. 2810), which John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, had commissioned for himself but then gave to his uncle in 1413 as a New Year's gift.[33]

Marco Polo's book was read for both entertainment and instruction. Its adventures and anecdotes and descriptions of rare, novel, and strange things inspired pleasure and delight. Moreover, the book contained geographic and ethnographic information that was thought to be reliable.[34] To a certain extent, the audience expected Marco Polo to confirm the traditional notion of the East as a region full of *mirabilia* by reporting on his encounters with marvellous creatures, such as members of the well-known wondrous races with oversized extremities or heads of dogs. It should be stressed, however, that this traditional view does not prevail in the *Devisement*. The wondrous races shown in the miniature on fol. 29v of ms. fr. 2810 (fig. 3), for instance, are not even mentioned in the text. Rather, whereas Marco Polo referred in this chapter to a "native tribe" (*sauvaje jens*) that lived on animals, mainly deer, which they also rode, the miniaturist resorted to an established iconography.[35] Other miniatures, however, do illustrate aspects specific to Marco Polo's account. In her study on the notion of the Indies in the medieval West, Marianne O'Doherty convincingly argues that the miniatures in early fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Devisement* "invite their audience to consider a world bound together by a common interest in the trade in luxury goods."[36] Even the dog-headed people living on an island in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean are part of the global community of merchants. In the miniature on fol. 76v of ms. fr. 2810, they are negotiating over sacks

Turnhout 2015 (Terrarum orbis, 12), pp. 13–111; Consuelo Wager Dutschke, *Francesco Pipino and the Manuscripts of Marco Polo's 'Travels,'* PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993, pp. 20–42 and 262–1018.

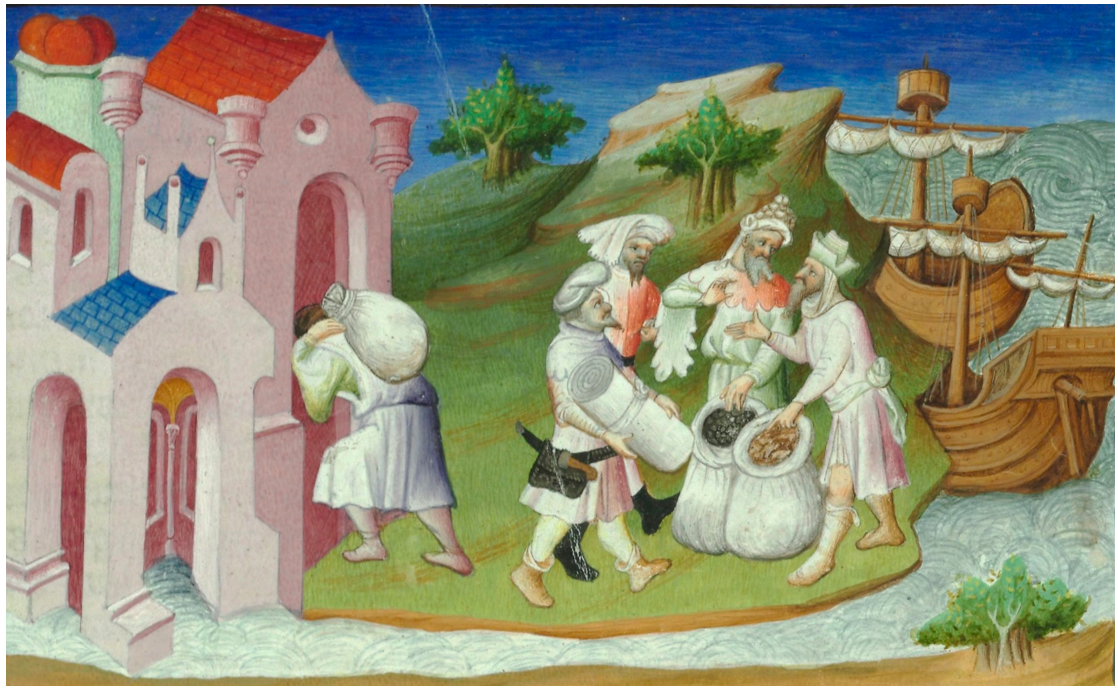
32 Gadrat 2015 (note 31), pp. 113–241; Marianne O'Doherty, *The Indies and the Medieval West. Thought, Report, Imagination*, Turnhout 2013 (Medieval Voyaging, 2), pp. 105–199; Volker Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China. Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter*, Sigmaringen 1992 (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters, 15), pp. 170–196.

33 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810. URL: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52000858n.r=francais+2810.langFR [accessed: 20.03.2023]. François Avril, "Das Buch der Wunder der Welt. Ms. fr. 2810 der Bibliothèque Nationale de France," in Marco Polo, *Das Buch der Wunder, aus 'Le Livre des Merveilles du Monde,' Ms. fr. 2810 der Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris,* Munich 1999, pp. 197–216.

34 Gadrat 2015 (note 31), pp. 147–164; O'Doherty 2013 (note 32), pp. 105–199; Reichert 1992 (note 32), pp. 170–196.

35 Debra Higgs Strickland, "Text, Image, and Contradiction in the *Devisement du monde*," in Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (eds.), *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, Toronto/Buffalo/London 2008, pp. 23–59; Rudolf Wittkower, "Marco Polo and the Pictorial Tradition of the Marvels of the East," in *Oriente Poliano. Studi e conferenze tenute all'Is.M.E.O. in occasione del 7. centenario della nascità di Marco Polo (1254–1954)*, Rome 1957, pp. 155–172.

36 O'Doherty 2013 (note 32), p. 122.

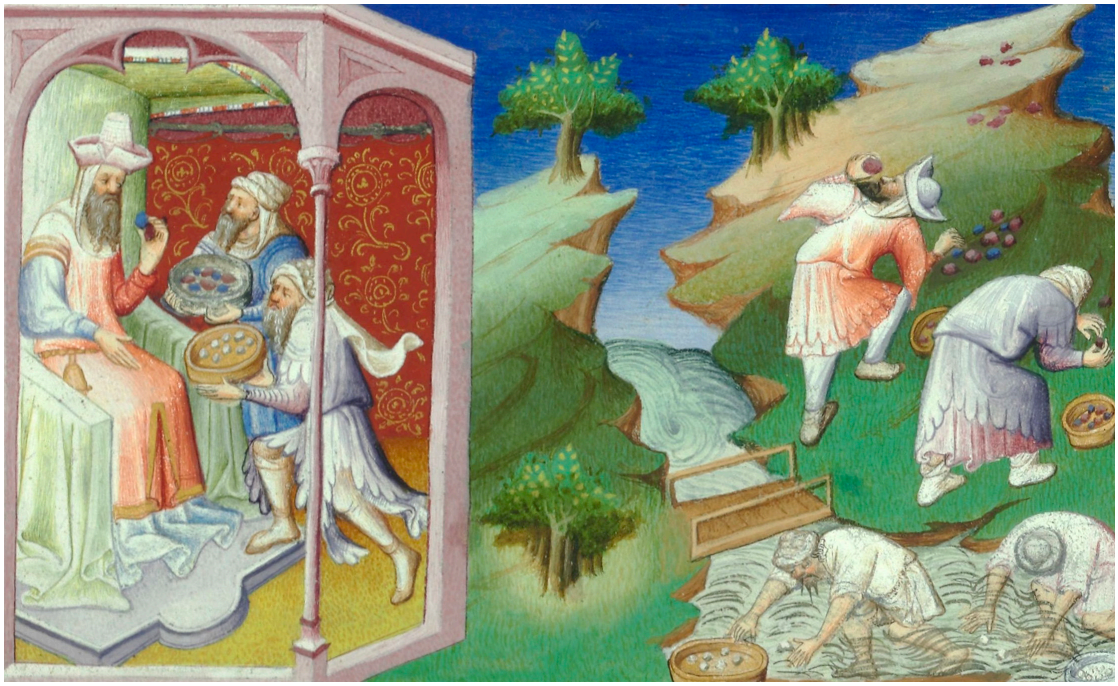


5 Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810, ca. 1410–1412, fol. 51r, detail, trade activity along the Yellow River in northern China

of merchandise, possibly spices (fig. 4). On fol. 51r, the trade activity of inhabitants of the cities along the Yellow River in northern China involves the same sacks of produce and a bundle of cloth, possibly silk (fig. 5). Referring to examples such as these, O'Doherty speaks of an "iconography of production and exchange that highlights the exotic sources of European luxury goods."[37]

In the text of the *Devisement*, however, the presence of such goods, especially silk fabrics, is even stronger. Marco Polo constantly praises the Far East as a highly liveable and civilized world due to its natural plenitude and its cultural achievements. Not only does the abundance of nature guarantee a paradisiacal standard of living but, what is more, in many regions the people have very well-established, efficiently practiced, and lucrative high-grade crafts. Literally everywhere, fabrics of silk and gold are produced. One example is the city of Cinghianfu in eastern China whose inhabitants, according to the *Devisement*, "live on trade and crafts; they have ample silk; they make cloth of gold and silk of many kinds. There are rich and great merchants; they have ample game of beasts and birds; they

37 Ibid., p. 134.



6 Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810, ca. 1410–1412, fol. 54r, detail, pearls and gems presented to the Great

have great plantations of wheat and of things necessary for life."[38] Marco Polo's perception of the East is still best described by Mary Baine Campbell, a scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature: "Costliness is everywhere; even the peasants dress in embroidered silks and satins. It is a shiny world: it is not wealth simply as wealth that Marco so admires, but wealth as manifested in radiance and colour."[39] Needless to say, the court of the Great Khan was where this sumptuousness reached its height.[40] The splendour of the Khan and his cities and palaces was terrific—and could merely be alluded to in miniatures such as the one on fol. 54r of ms. fr. 2810 referring to the Khan's privileged entitlement to the pearls fished from a river in southwestern China, and showing the ruler himself, his throne, and the interior wall of his cubicle richly covered with textiles (fig. 6). In this passage Marco

38 "[...] vivent de merchandise et de l'art; ils ont soie assez; ils font draps d'or et de soies de maintes façons. Il y a des riches et grands marchands; ils ont gibier de bestes et d'oiseaux assez; ils ont grande plantation de blé et de choses de vivre." Polo 1982 (note 30), p. 509 (XCLIX).

39 Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World. Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600*, New York 1988, p. 108.

40 See, for example, Polo's description of the courtly festivities for the New Year, Polo 1982 (note 30), pp. 425–429 (LXXXIX–XC).

Polo also points out that some luxury items, these pearls included, were designated exclusively for the Khan and would not reach Europe.[41] All in all, for Western imaginations the East described in the *Devisement* was a realm of unheard-of wealth and vibrancy.

Seen in this context, the silks become perceivable as items that made it possible for those in the West to veritably share in the richness of the much-admired East. As objects, the manuscripts, by comparison, offered a much less immediate Eastern experience. Their texts related what someone else had seen, and their miniatures were created according to Western standards. Silks, however, made Eastern luxury materially available in the Western world. The material itself was the basic requirement for the idea of participating in global riches. The point I want to make, however, is that the silks offered—and were used for—much more than just this. What is interesting about the silks is that they also had their own iconography.

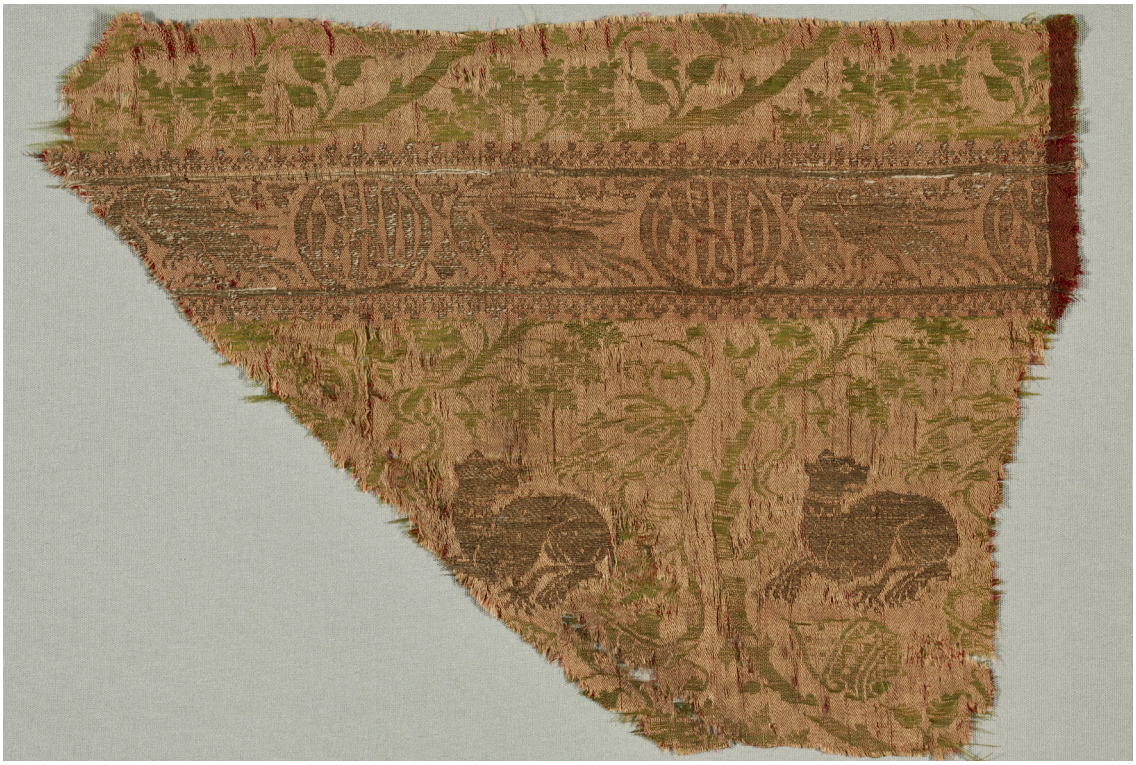
Silk Patterns as Gateways to the East

Some of the patterns, in particular those very obviously relying on imported models (fig. 2), enhanced the reference to the East already inherent in the material itself. In other cases, such as that of the silk from the introduction to this essay (fig. 1), a new pattern was created that combined Western and exotic elements: the pattern was used to embed motifs from the Western iconography of the courtly hunt, in this case the lady hunter with her lead dog, in an exotic setting. The palm does not necessarily indicate the Far East, but more plausibly the Near East, since that is where some fourteenth-century Westerners—namely Christian pilgrims—knew date palms from.[42] No matter how geographically specific or unspecific the allusion to the East was meant to be, the natural surroundings of the lady hunter in the pattern are pleasant, as the fruits of the palm are easy to reach and ostensibly delicious. It is a delightful scene. It certainly invited the beholder to imagine engaging in his or her own hunting activities in regions similar to those pictured, places located far away and known for their natural fecundity. The pattern thus offered the opportunity to inscribe oneself—and Western culture as a whole—into an ideal exotic world and, by so doing, offered an intensified sense of belonging or access to that ideal world.[43]

41 Ibid., p. 563 (CLXXV); Campbell 1988 (note 39), p. 108.

42 For example, dates figure in the lists of expenses made by Giorgio Gucci from Tuscany during his pilgrimage in the Holy Land in 1384–1385. Leonardo Frescobaldi, Giorgio Gucci and Simone Sigoli, *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384*, Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (transl.), Jerusalem 1948 (Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 6), pp. 152–156, here p. 154. Marco Polo mentions dates in his description of the Fars province in Southern Iran: "Et la pro[v]ense de coi nos comi[n]son ore est apellé Reobar. Les sien fr[u]it sunt datarl et pome de paraise et pistac et autres fruit, les quelz ne sunt en nostre leu froit." Polo 1982 (note 30), pp. 344–345 (XXXVI).

43 In addition, the second scene, that is, the lady chasing a lion, needs to be discussed in the context of patterns addressing the world of the hunt and the matter of the physically engaged female hunter.



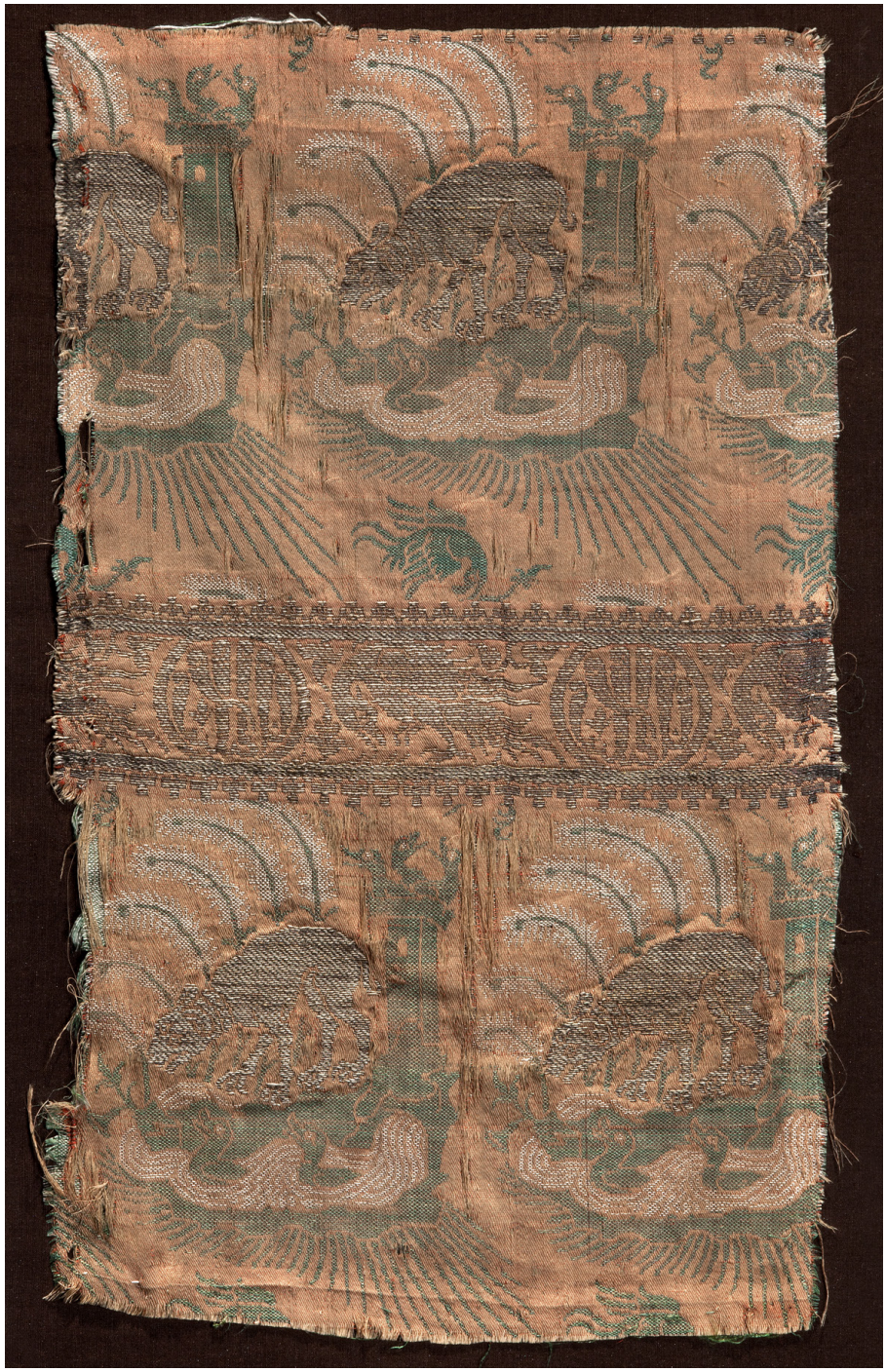
7 Lampas silk, Italy, second half of the 14th century, 25 × 35,5 cm, Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art

The same can be observed in the stripe patterns on two silks in Cleveland and Cologne, respectively (figs. 7–8).[44] These fabrics, too, have changed colour over the centuries. Again, the once red or rose ground has turned into the brown beige now visible, and the golden elements into dark brown motifs. Both pieces feature the same narrow band enclosing a compressed exotic bird and a medallion with the distorted Arabic inscription "al-sultan."[45] Patterns with such bands were designed after models imported from Muslim territories. The band itself—and all the more so when filled with exotic motifs—indicated the Eastern origins of the pattern and the silk.[46] In the piece in Cleveland, the area visible below the

44 Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. no. 1977.16; Wardwell 1987 (note 8), pp. 28–29. Cologne, Museum Schnütgen, inv. no. N 236; unpublished.

45 This is the reading according to the online inventory of The Cleveland Museum of Art: URL: http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1977.16? [accessed: 20.03.2023].

46 Stripe patterns go back to the fabrics with honorific inscriptions woven in courtly workshops of Muslim rulers since early medieval times. Both the fabrics and the workshops were called *tiraz*.



8 Lampas (?) silk, Italy, second half of the 14th century, 37 × 22,5 cm, Cologne, Museum Schnütgen

band is patterned with cheetahs sitting in a field of winding stems reminiscent of the sinuous plants in Central Asian patterns. The felines' collars indicate that they are hunting cheetahs—exotic animals that nevertheless relate to the courtly hunt in Western Europe. At the courts of the fourteenth century, cheetahs were rare yet prestigious and sought-after animals that quickly became part of the iconography of the hunt.[47] This pattern thus remains highly exotic while at the same time alluding to the—desired—possession of the exotic animal. In the example in Cologne, however, the narrow bands, an imported element, are used as a framework for a clearly Western motif. Here the cheetahs have been replaced with a dog that stands in front of feathery blades of grass and barks at swimming ducks next to a tower-like structure with more ducks in a nest at its top. This scene probably refers to a specific type of courtly hunt, namely falconry, with dogs flushing the game birds from the pond or river.[48] There is certainly nothing exotic in the scene itself yet it is framed by Eastern pattern devices. This suggests that the narrow, originally golden bands, with their exotic elements, served to radiate Eastern splendour onto the iconography of Western court life. It was through the pattern that the West became part of the ideal East. The medieval literature scholar E. Jane Burns has observed a comparable function in the riches of the East described in high medieval French courtly literature. There, silks, gems, and precious metals were used to "evoke a complex alliance between court life in western Europe and an expansive [East]."[49] Likewise, the imagery of woven silks helped to shape a Western courtly identity that purported knowledge of and participation in Eastern wealth. In sum, the patterns were original creations that shaped and contributed to Western courtly identity and imagination—in this case the 'Easternness' of the West.

Louise W. Mackie, *Symbols of Power. Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th to 21st Century*, Cleveland/New Haven/London 2015, pp. 82–127.

47 Thierry Buquet, "Le guépard médiéval, ou comment reconnaître un animal sans nom," in *Reinardus* 23, 2010–2011, pp. 12–47; Luigi Messedaglia, "Il pardo da caccia nella poesia, nella storia, nell'arte," in *Atti e memorie della Accademia di agricoltura, scienze e lettere di Verona* ser. 5/19, 1941, pp. 27–104.

48 Robin S. Oggins, *The Kings and Their Hawks. Falconry in Medieval England*, New York/London 2004, pp. 31–32; Baudouin Van den Abeele, *La fauconnerie au Moyen Âge. Connaissance, affaitage et médecine des oiseaux de chasse d'après les traités latins*, Paris 1994, p. 135.

49 E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed. Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, Philadelphia 2002, p. 194. See also ibid., p. 11, where she states that in high medieval French lyric and romance texts "courtly players are not simply westerners wearing eastern clothes but are clothed bodies for whom costly silks, gems, and precious metals imported from the east have become intrinsic markers of ostensibly western identities."

Image p. 114: Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 2810, ca. 1410–1412, fol. 51r (detail of fig. 5, p. 127: trade activity along the Yellow River in northern China)
Image p. 133: ibid., fol. 29v (detail of fig. 3, p. 126: wondrous races)