

## Early Encounters with Buddhism

**Some medieval European travelogue authors offer first insights into a foreign religion. Explorations of an uncharted territory**

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**ABSTRACT** | Knowledge of Buddhism seems to have reached Europe not until the eighteenth century or later. Medieval Christians were, after all, primarily concerned with the conflicts butting themselves against the Jews and Muslims. Leaving mostly aside the comments by the armchair traveler John Mandeville, this paper will focus, instead, on three significant authors who based their accounts on extensive personal experiences, probably also with Buddhism, whether they understood the foreign religion or not, Marco Polo's *Travels*, the insightful comments by an anonymous who left behind the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* and the work published by Odorico da Pordenone.

**KEYWORDS** | Buddhism; Religious Encounters; Marco Polo; *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*; Odorico da Pordenone; Travelogues

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## 1 Religious Conditions in Medieval Europe

The general interest in travel both for economic and religious reasons grew tremendously throughout the high and late Middle Ages, which brought countless Christians into contact both with representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church and of Islam, especially in the Holy Land and Egypt (Ohler 2004; Classen, ed. 2018). Since the late twelfth century, European travelers and merchants even endeavored to reach ever more distant countries and shores, and this soon took them as far east as the Black Sea, then to the territory of the Silk Road, and finally even China.

To what extent Asian travelers aimed for the West, we cannot yet tell – many Chinese travelers went as far west as to India: cf. Si-yu-ki (1884) – but we know for certain that the entire Black Sea basin was a major hub for international trade, bringing together, on the one hand, Genoese, Venetians, and Byzantines, and, on the other, Arabs, Persians, and many other merchants from the Middle East, perhaps even further East (Khvalkov 2018; Cristea and Pilat 2020).

We are still not in a good position to determine with all desired precision what cultural exchanges took place there, but recent research has revealed the extent to which ancient Indian (*Panchatantra*) and Persian (*Kalila and Dimna*) literature made their way to Arabic, and from there to Hebrew, Latin, and then the various European vernaculars (Classen 2020). Considering the various narrative traditions during the Middle Ages involving such genres as the fable, didactic literature, and mirrors for princes, we can be certain that the western world was more familiar with eastern literature than we might have assumed in the past (Classen 2021). We do not know yet, however, to what extent European Christians were aware of the religion of Buddhism, even though we can be certain of relatively close economic and perhaps also political contacts and trade between East and West (Schmitz-Esser 2018).

Concomitantly, we cannot be certain whether western customers really investigated or understood the images and symbols of eastern textiles which became quite popular in late medieval Italy and elsewhere (Müller 2020), or whether they simply accepted them as decorative elements of exotic quality without any further examination. Who would have cared about religious practices that were so far removed from those dominating the West, especially when linguistic and geophysical barriers separated both worlds so vastly?

However, counter to many expectations and assumptions, in light of the famous and highly popular account of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, which derived its inspiration from the life of Buddha from the first or second century C.E. (Faure 2022), we can confirm that some of the fundamental ideas of Buddhism migrated at least through this literary channel to medieval Europe, although the protagonist's experiences were then cast as characteristic of the Christian faith (Cordoni

und Meyer, ed. 2015). However, despite these significant cultural adaptations, the events as described by the countless translators always take place in an Indian kingdom where the monk Barlaam arrives at the court and succeeds in converting the young prince Josaphat to Christianity. India itself was a fixed entity in the mind of most European intellectuals, either through literary or biblical references (Knefelkamp 1991; Classen 2005; Classen 2020). Of course, this does not mean that they had a clear understanding of the country and the various religions there, but this did not develop anyway until the nineteenth or twentieth century. But by then the European concepts were already deeply colored by their Orientalizing gaze informed by colonialist perspectives (Said 1978).

Most pre-modern western literature seems to refrain from including references to India and countries further east, not to speak of the religion of Buddhism, but we have recently realized that globalism was already operating at that early time, as the rich corpus of medieval travel literature indicates (Phillips 2013; Beaujard 2019). At closer examination, with an open mind toward often ignored texts, we can actually discover an undeniable amount of comments about very distant lands and the various local cultures here and there. Granted, those comments often prove to be rather vague, they seem to be influenced by mythical thinking, or they were the results of fictional imagination, but they confirm, after all, a considerable interest in foreign worlds and their individual characters well before the modern age.

In the late Middle Ages, pilgrimage to the Holy Land increased in popularity, but the many accounts written in the various languages are mostly limited to the journey to the eastern Mediterranean and then to the various pilgrimage sites, including Egypt (Alexandria, Cairo, Sinai, St. Catherine Monastery). However, pilgrims normally did not go beyond the traditional scope of Christian interests, so we cannot expect any information about Buddhism there (Taylor, Craig, et al., ed. 2010). Similarly, diplomatic reports, if they exist in the first place, would not have concerned themselves with the world east of the Arabic-Muslim domain. Hence, we might have to close this paper before it has actually started with some negative conclusions. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions to the rule, and those will form the center of attention of this study (for the eastern world, see Getz 2000).

## 2 Marco Polo

We might have expected to receive a more detailed report about Buddhism in the famous *Travels* (or *Devisement dou Monde*) by Marco Polo (1254–1324) because of his great interest in factual details reflecting almost every aspect relevant in the eastern world, but the author then covers too much ground to go into many specifics of the various religions which he encountered (Polo, trans.

Latham 1985; I will quote from his work throughout). Moreover, his interest focused particularly on economic and political aspects, whereas cultural and religious features entered the picture only on some occasion. Previous scholars have additionally cast the author as primarily critical of Christianity who therefore resorted to and examined briefly the Eastern religions as a background foil to demonstrate the decline of the Christian faith (Conklin Akbari and Iannucci, ed. 2008). We must also not ignore the fact that Polo primarily aimed at his European Christian audience, trying to raise their interest in a foreign world without necessarily encouraging them to visit it or even to adapt to its own culture or religion. Polo, like virtually all of his contemporaries, intended to inform, to entertain, and to impress, but he was not a missionary, not religiously motivated, and not anti-European, as much as he conveyed his amazement about the wonders at the Mongol court.

Polo approached his task of describing everything he witnessed on his journey in a systematic fashion, discussing both the geography and the fauna and flora; he outlines the natural products available at various locations and comments on the people's habits and customs, including their religion. Many times, there are certain possibilities that the author might have referenced Buddhism, but it remains unclear whether that is definitely the case (Witte 1915). The common formula used by the author is "idolaters" (78) whenever he does not understand exactly what religion it might be which was practiced in one kingdom or another. Otherness, if not exoticism, ruled his approach to the East, so it does not come as a surprise that Polo regularly explored the various local cultures. The people of Kashmir, for instance, are identified by that term of 'idolater' and are associated with enchantment, powerful magic, and devil worship.

On his way down to the Indian Sea, Polo reached a kingdom which was richly populated by hermits and where one could find numerous monasteries, that is, institutions which the author could only describe by means of the terms he had available from back home. The hermits are introduced as resolute in their following the laws, "practising strict abstinence in eating and drinking and avoidance of all unchastity and taking the utmost pains to commit no sin that is contrary to their law" (79). Polo expresses his amazement at the old age which those hermits could reach, and he then adds that there are many monasteries in that country "where the brethren live an austere life and wear tonsures like Dominicans and Franciscans" (79). According to their customs, they do not kill any animal, but have Saracen (Muslim) servants do that job for them and thus help them to get enough food.

In another country, he also remarks that the people worship Muhammed ("Mahomet," 79), but he does not define their religion; instead, this turns into a formula which could always mean 'Islam' in very generic terms, or something else as well. Polo frankly admits that he has no clear idea who they are because they speak a language of their own, apparently not understandable to him (79).

He does not grant himself any space and time to explore more in detail who those people might be, and instead, he moves quickly from one kingdom to another, each time demonstrating more interest in the geophysical and economic conditions than in the cultural or religious framework of the respective people. But just this somewhat careless approach opens valuable perspectives for our analysis.

It often remains uncertain what Polo might be referring to, which carries considerable potential for us to interpret his comments in a more discriminating fashion. In the country called Uighuristan, the people are “idolaters, but they include many Christians of the Nestorian sect and some Saracens” (88; cf. Baum and Winkler 2003). This can only imply that the majority of people adhere to a different faith, which could have been Buddhism. Since the Islamization of that region, such as the second Uyghur kingdom, the Kingdom of Qocho, was not completed until the end of the fifteenth century (Soucek 2000), we may be able to trust Polo’s statement that the people were neither Christians nor Muslims. The term “idolaters” would thus be nothing but a stand-in for religious “otherness” which the European traveler could not understand. He was, of course, delighted to encounter some Christians, even though they were Nestorians, but it seems to have been difficult for him to engage with this other very new group of faithful people in any critical fashion. All Polo has to say about them amounts to some curiosity, some respect, but then also indifference: “The idolaters are very well versed in their own laws and traditions and are keen students of the liberal arts” (89).

In a subsequent section, the author praises them for their virtuous lifestyle, in which they avoid lechery, and then he embarks on a lengthy discussion of the men’s sexual interaction with women. This travelogue author highlights the external features of religious practices and does not engage with the specific spiritual aspects, so when he emphasizes their observance of the lunar cycle and vegetarian habits: “There is one such cycle in which for five days all the idolaters in the world kill neither beast nor bird; nor do they eat the flesh of animals killed during these days” (91). Their monks abstain from eating meat all their lives. But immediately following this section, the author returns to marriage practices which strike him as most unusual and fascinating at the same time because some men are entitled to marry up to thirty women and to treat them as their chattel (91).

Polo informs us about religious practices every time when he turns his attention to a different country, and we then hear commonly what the various religions are, e.g., “The inhabitants [of Tangut] include Nestorian Christians, idolaters, and Mahometans” (103–104). But then he immediately turns to the cities and road system because he as a traveler was naturally most interested in economic, architectural, and logistic aspects. In the province of Egrigut, for in-

stance, idolatry dominates, “but there are three churches of Nestorian Christians” (105).

More significantly, as we can already confirm, he stunned his audience with these reports about very non-European religions and religious customs and thus deeply challenged Christianity itself not by specific criticism, but by presenting, without any further comments, very alternative faiths as practiced in eastern Asia. Polo does not offer specific explanations, but expresses his amazement, if not admiration for the hermits and other religiously devoted individuals: “They sleep on mats of wicker-work. Altogether they lead the most austere lives of any men in the world” (112).

Most impressively, Polo regularly underscores the fact that he found representatives of various world religions living right next to each other without any group persecuting the other. Quoting the Great Khan, we are informed: “There are prophets who are worshipped and to whom all the world does reverence. The Christians say that their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens Mahomet, the Jews Moses, and the idolaters Sakyamuni Burkhan, who was the first to be represented as God in the form of an idol” (119). As much respect as the Khan displayed for the Christian faith, he refused to convert because he did not observe the Christians as being intelligent and powerful, whereas the opposite was the case with the Buddhists (119). If the pope would have sent a large group of missionaries who would have been able to demonstrate power superior to that of his sorcerers, he might have considered such a move. For Polo, however, this was an impossibility, so he can only lament briefly that no missionaries were sent, meaning that the pope thus missed a great opportunity to achieve a major breakthrough in religious conversions also on the Asian continent (120).

As unspecific as Polo might be about the Buddhists he encountered in eastern Asia, he introduced them specifically to his Christian audience and thus began to build a significant bridge between both worlds, and this simply by exposing his European audiences to very different religious practices and faiths which he identified as valid, powerful, and influential, as much as he himself tried to highlight the presence of Nestorian Christians in the various parts of the Mongol empire and elsewhere as hopeful signs that Christianity was moving forward even there (Pasqualotto 2012).

As far as he could observe, according to Polo, Genghis Khan held the highest position of power and authority, and all representatives of the various religions performed similarly to express on his birthday their respect and love for this ruler, which signaled, as far as Polo was concerned, that they held equal esteem and influence.

The Buddhists appear first in this list, but there were no major differences in their customs to celebrate this special day. All the dignitaries then approach the ruler and pronounce, irrespective of what faith they might embrace, their admiration (140). An altar is set up where they all pay their respect to the Khan and

upon which they place their gifts, which signals, once again, that the Buddhists operated in the very same fashion as the Christians and Muslims at the Mongol court. We are not told in any particular manner whether the Buddhists enjoyed a higher status; instead, it is the Khan alone who occupies the central position in Polo's account, and under whom everyone has to submit in worship. From the author's point of view, the Buddhists were of course deeply anchored in the Mongol world, or they were fully acknowledged by the Mongol rulers, but so were the other religions as well, especially because the various religious leaders conformed with the ceremonial requirements at court.

In a later section, Polo changes the term for the Buddhists, suddenly calling them Cathayans due to the new location he was in (158), but there they operated the same way peacefully next to the other religions (158). In short, Polo is talking here about the Chinese zodiac, which is apparently recognized as critically important by everyone irrespective of the religious orientation. In that context, however, the author finally goes into more details and describes the common practice of worship in most households by the idolaters (160).

To what extent Polo had a clear understanding of Buddhism, or whether he only commented on ordinary customs which he could observe on a daily basis, cannot be determined precisely. He never uses the name of Gautama or Buddha but refers once to an "image representing Natigai, the god of earthly things, who guides the course of all that is born on earth" (160). Although he expresses contempt for their alleged disregard of their own souls and the afterlife, he acknowledges and describes the fundamental Buddhist teachings regarding the soul:

they believe indeed that it is immortal, but in this fashion. They hold that as soon as a man is dead he enters into another body; and according as he has conducted himself well or ill in life, he passes from good to better or from bad to worse. (160–161)

Polo recognized here only the social ladder for the souls within human society, identifying the various social classes as open for rebirth, and he did not know about the danger for the soul to be reborn in a lower life form, such as a fish or a worm in case of bad karma (Gethin 1998; Gombrich 2009; Bronkhorst 2011). To be sure, we can recognize Polo's awareness of rebirth and immortality as fundamental pillars of Buddhist thought which he more or less managed to convey to his European audiences. He also painted a very positive image of the Buddhist population in the Mongol Empire outlining their belief system in at least rough brush strokes, in this case withholding most of his personal comments – certainly a surprising and valuable perspective within the late medieval context.

In later passages, dealing with subsequent parts of his journeys, Polo returns to the same descriptions of the native population and regarding their faiths, commonly identifying a mixed situation (177). In other kingdoms, there are

only idolaters (i.e., Buddhists), which Polo mentions quickly in passing because he is more interested in the gold found there, in snakes and serpents, and even monsters (178–179). The people of Zar-dandan are identified as idolaters, which Polo mentions briefly, and then are introduced through a description of their unique habits and customs, which leaves religion mostly sidelined (181). Nevertheless, there are also references to sacrifice and libation ceremonies to heal a sick person (183).

We consistently perceive the extent to which the author pays great respect to the various peoples, whether he calls them “idolaters” or not. The immediate connection of religion with money in one case might be curious, but it sheds light on the little importance which the author paid to religion as such, a feature which he simply noted but did not evaluate in any particular way (195).

I have resorted to the term of “Buddhism” throughout so far, but it is not really that clear whether Polo was aware of the difference between that religion and Hinduism, or any other religious groups. In Cathay, for instance, he observed the practice of worshipping many idols: “They declare that the supreme god has assigned to each of these its own distinctive faculty, one concerned with the finding of lost objects, one with ensuring the fertility of the crops and tempering the weather for their growth” (198). He specifically identifies here a non-Christian religion as a contrast, but the cult might not have been Buddhist; instead, he probably observed different faiths, and in this case Hinduism.

Whatever the situation might have been, Polo insists with all earnestness that the custom to pray to one of the idols in a temple would produce guaranteed results since an old woman, working like a sacristan, would talk to the gods after incense has been burned and a sacrifice been made. With all sincerity, the author affirms that the gods certainly help, as he himself had tested and found to be true, though he subsequently tries to pretend that he did not appeal to the idols (199). We are left baffling whether the author actually believed it, or whether he only pretended to entrust himself to those gods. At any rate, as even his own excuse at the end underscores, he had embraced that religious institution and had found it to be working for himself at least in practical terms.

The author also associates idolatry with the burning of the dead, such as in the province of Manzi (204; cf., for instance, Williams 2012). He additionally uses the reference to idolatry as an identity marker for the various peoples whom he encountered. As in many other previous cases, Polo combines the term of “idolaters” with monasteries and abbeys (218), suggesting, once again, that he operated in a Buddhist (or Hindu) world where such institutions were quite common. These references served him to create analogies to the western world, though it might be questionable to talk about “abbeys” as he does. Nevertheless, he observed religious communities and hence a supra-structure outside of Christianity with its great emphasis on monasticism.



To enliven his report, Polo also included accounts from his uncle, Messer Maffeo, who was told once by a Saracen about yet another religious group:

In such and such a place there is a community whose religion nobody knows. It is evidently not idolatrous, since they keep no idols. They do not worship fire. They do not profess Mahomet. And they do not appear to observe the Christian order ... . (235)

However, as it turned out, they were Christians as well, though they had lost contact with their tradition and only worshiped three of the apostles, drawing inspiration from the Psalter, which was preserved in another language. This group was later acknowledged by the Great Khan as an independent religious sect (236), who thus proved to be very tolerant once again. Polo himself related this story in order to underscore the religious freedom at the Mongol court which Christians did enjoy, but this does not undermine the role played by the Buddhists whom the author encountered most of the time.

When he turns his attention to India, Polo becomes more specific and identifies the Brahmins who work as enchanter for the fishers to help them gain a good catch, although we would normally associate Brahmins with priests of the Vedic religion (261). The author also mentions the words which the king-priest of the province of Maabar utters in honor of his idols in the morning, and evening as a public ceremony: “Pacauta, Pacauta, Pacauta” (262). We further learn about the custom that a criminal condemned to die would commit the killing himself in honor of his idols, and about widows who fling themselves into their dead husband’s pyre in order to observe their marital vows (264–65). The deeper we explore Polo’s travelogue, the more we learn about other religious practices, whether they were Buddhist or not. He reports rather globally about non-Christian rituals and ceremonies and thereby gives them much credit, as exotic as they appear to be: “they have many idols in their monasteries, both male and female, and to these idols many maidens are offered in the following manner ... ” (270).

Of course, there is implied criticism, even fear of the foreign world, but overall, we can attest Polo a considerable degree of respect, if not toleration, of the Asian religion/s which he described with some accuracy, though he probably mostly misread the essential components of the theology behind the rituals and ceremonies. In the end, the comments about the non-Christians and non-Muslims turn into an almost meaningless and empty trope, “The people here are idolaters and tributary to none” (272; in reference to the kingdom of Motupalli). Polo actually betrays thereby that he does not really care about the religious difference and only states that they are idolaters in order to establish a formal difference to the Christians. Immediately following, both here and throughout the entire work, the author’s mercantile interests reemerge and dominate the narra-

tive where we are informed about the local products and raw material, and not so much about matters of faith.

One exception to this rule proves to be the section in which Polo introduces the group of Brahmans and characterizes them as the most trustworthy and selfless individuals in the world (277). And finally, in the section dealing with Ceylon (Sri Lanka) once again, Polo returns to a significant story which he had originally intended to tell, and this story suddenly proves to be the actual life story of Buddha himself; not in the vein of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, but in the original version, dealing with the young prince who is kept in an artificial space of bliss because his father wants to protect him from the sorrows and pain of ordinary life. However, he then encounters a dead man, and soon an old man, and both those experiences make him resolve to leave the artificiality of the palace where he had been pampered all the time by 30.000 maidens:

So he left the palace and his father and took his way into the high and desolate mountains; and there he spent the rest of his days most virtuously and chastely and in great austerity. For assuredly, had he been a Christian, he would have been a great saint with our Lord Jesus Christ. (283)

This prince then dies, and the corpse is brought to his father, who grieves bitterly and has subsequently a sculpture made in his image to be worshipped by people as a god. Most significantly, Polo then adds the account that this prince had died eighty-four times and had been reborn in all kinds of animals until he was finally reborn once again, but then as a god: "And he is deemed by the idolaters to be the best and greatest god they have. And you must know that this was the first idol ever made by the idolaters and hence come all the idols in the world" (283). With these remarks we have finally firm proof that Polo was familiar with Buddhism after all, not only in terms of its rituals and ceremonies but also with its basic theological tenets, although he names this prince as Sakyamuni Burkhan, "that is to say, Sakyamuni the Saint" (283), another name of Gautama Buddha (Komatsu 1989).

We can thus conclude that Polo's *Travels* in fact introduced the world of Buddhist Asia to the European audiences in somewhat tenuous terms, and this without much fanfare or a sense of western superiority. Christianity was, of course, for Polo the only 'true' religion, but he presented Buddhism (at times, probably Hinduism) as well and acknowledged its considerable importance in the many different Asian kingdoms and empires. Considering the astounding popularity of his travelogue, irrespective of some criticism voiced occasionally, we face here a fantastic opportunity to expand on our understanding of globalism in the Middle Ages, which also included the various religions.

### 3 *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*

An anonymous author from the Cologne area composed this fourteenth-century travelogue which presents some of the most expansive and detailed comments about the Orient available in the late Middle Ages (based on the manuscript W\*3 of the *Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln*). The author might have been a merchant who spent more than twelve years in the Middle East (between ca. 1336/37 to ca. 1350) and returned with a wealth of knowledge about that world which makes the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* a true narrative treasure for many different research approaches, including history, religion, geography, politics, and biology (ed. and trans., Brall-Tuchel 2019; a new critical edition has now been published by Micklin 2021; for a good introduction, see Brincken 1987).

We are here provided with deep insights into the world of the Holy Land, Egypt, Persia, Armenia, Georgia, and also further east, India. The author was particularly interested in the workings of the Three Holy Magi, and he added many details about the history and physical conditions of the various countries he visited. Although the *Orientbericht* draws extensively from a host of relevant sources, it was, as in the case of Polo's *Travels*, deeply determined by the author's personal experiences. Scholars have regularly emphasized the directness of the account, and the author's subjective responses to people's sufferings from wars and other problems (Brincken 1987, 999; Brall-Tuchel 2019, 22–23), which he correlates with the suffering of Jews back home at the hands of their Christian enemies (Cologne, August 1349; Cluse 2005, 11–12). The recent renewed interest in this fascinating travelogue derives from the astounding focus on local details pursued by the anonymous, who presents a much more realistic portrait of that eastern world than in most other late medieval narratives (Brall-Tuchel 2019, 23–24). This justifies placing the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* next to Marco Polo's *Travels*.

As to be expected, fact and fiction, or realism and myth mingle, thus when the author engages intensively with Prester John and his expansive empire in India. All this, however, is complemented with a wealth of factual data concerning the geo-physical features of that world, the various populations (with a lot of mythologizing going on here once again), the political structures, the Sultan's court life, the relationships between the Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the culture of the Tartars (Mongols), the Caliph of Baghdad, and monsters.

When the attention turns to the Mongol empire, we are also confronted with remarkable comments about the Buddhist teachings. The author does not pay overly much attention, but he is very clear about the specifics which characterize that religion. As he remarks, the people there believe that a person's soul would enter a wild animal (reincarnation) and would thus be reborn. A person who led a good life would be given the privilege of his soul returning again in the body of a noble animal; in the opposite case, the rebirth would happen in a not noble

animal, such as a wolf or a fox. Because of this belief in reincarnation, animals are treated with great respect since they are regarded as the carriers of their predecessors and relatives (146).

When we comb through the text, which offers a rather sweeping view of the various kingdoms, peoples, and cultures from the Ottoman Empire to the Mongols, we recognize that the author was apparently quite aware of the presence of religious groups beyond the traditional monotheistic religions. At the Sultan's court, for instance, the assembly comprised Christians, Jews, and "heiden van allen zungen de in der werelt sint und sunge ere eyn na dem anderen eynnen sanck und loff van gode und van dem soldain" (92; "pagans speaking in all the tongues of the world, they all sing one after the other a song and give praise to God and the Sultan"). The author does not specify what religions those might be, but they are certainly of a different kind, possibly Buddhism or Hinduism. He also tries to differentiate further among the many different peoples in the eastern world, but it seems more like a compilation of names than a realistic listing, including Persians, Ismaelites, Agareni, and others (70).

In contrast to Marco Polo, the anonymous author deftly combines mythological references to monsters and Amazons with very concrete and specific information about plants and animals. For that reason, the brief comments about Buddhists are to be taken with a grain of salt since they appear to be more copied from other accounts than to be the result of personal studies. He cared more about miraculous stories about monstrous peoples than to assess carefully the situation on the ground in spiritual terms, but in this regard, this was nearly a *conditio sine qua non* of most medieval travel literature.

Nevertheless, this one, most significant paragraph all by itself underscores that Buddhism was already known and recognized by the author as a unique religion dominant in East Asia, even if the anonymous has not much more to say about it. But in contrast to Polo, he offers more specifics about reincarnation, which entails animals and not only people. Polo could only imagine that the Buddhists believed that the soul would be reborn in another person, whereas the anonymous indicated that according to their concept the soul would reappear in animals.

The difference between *The Travels* and the *Orientbericht* has also to be kept in mind. Polo reflected on his own extensive and far-reaching travel experiences, whereas the anonymous appears to have spent most of his time in the Holy Land, Armenia, and Egypt, and might not have ventured much further east. His knowledge about Buddhism and other eastern religions thus could have reached him only through second-hand sources (Brall-Tuchel 2019, 25).

Nevertheless, we can thus identify the *Orientbericht* as a second source confirming at least some tenuous knowledge about eastern religions in western literature. While the Christians had to suffer from prosecutions at the hands of the Muslims (112), the relationship among the various religious groups in the eastern

countries appears as balanced, or at least unproblematic. However, the author increasingly combines all kinds of information and mixes it so much that it becomes very difficult to distinguish between the Mongols (Tartars) and the peoples subjugated by them, many of whom are depicted in monstrous terms. We regularly hear about Christians, Muslims, and pagans (Buddhists?) as members of the same society (162) who observe similar religious practices regarding funerals, for instance. But we would search in vain for further references to Buddhism.

#### 4 Odorico da Pordenone

The travelogue (*Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*) by the Franciscan Odorico da Pordenone (ca. 1265/1281–1331), who also made his way to China, i.e., the Mongol court, similarly contains a brief reference to Buddhism, apart from many rather fanciful reports about miraculous events, monsters, religious practices, sacrifices, cities, agriculture, animals, etc. (Yule 2002; for a critical edition, see Marchisio 2016). Odorico composed a narrative that was somewhat comparable to Polo's *Travels*, but he was much more concerned with the suffering of Christian martyrs, and then also with many different forms of self-sacrifice by people in the Asian world for religious reasons. We learn, for instance, about the martyrdom of four friars in the city of Tana (79–96), about the kingdom of Minibar and the production of pepper (96–98), idolatry by various peoples using ox urine and feces (98–100), cannibalism (104–106), etc. In short, Odorico offers a wide gamut of anthropological observations which he freely mixed with religious commentary, entertaining his western Christian audience with often rather horrifying scenes of violence and killing in the name of various gods. He also does not shy away from introducing all kinds of marvels which he had allegedly observed in the East, and offers examples of kings' polygamy, their exotic armies of elephants, and of monstrous creatures (Reichert).

When he turns to the city of Cansay (today, Hangzhou, south of Shanghai), Odorico had the occasion to relate a curious scene which at first sight seems to reflect nothing but an unusual local religious custom, but at a second look reveals to be a crucial reference to Buddhism, similar to the way how the anonymous of the *Orientbericht* had related his limited knowledge. A man of high rank who had converted to Christianity one day takes him to a monastery (Buddhist?): "a certain great monastery of the people of the country" (129). There he is supposed to witness some amazing events so that he later would be able to report about them once he would have returned home. A monk leads him to a hilly area where he attracts many different animals by beating on a gong. They all sit down in an orderly fashion and are fed by the monk with scraps from the dinner table.

Once that is over, he beats the gong again, and all the animals disappear into their hiding places.

For Odorico, the entire setting causes him to laugh because the animals appear to him acting like human beings. Indeed, as the monk then explains to him, “These animals be the souls of gentlemen, which we feed in this fashion for the love of God” (130). When Odorico protests that those are just beasts without souls, he has to learn that according to the monks’ conviction, they all carry the souls of previously deceased people: “For if a man be noble his soul entereth the form of some one of these noble animals; but the souls of boors enter the forms of baser animals and dwell therein” (130).

As fragmentary as this brief account proves to be, it demonstrates explicitly an early encounter with Buddhism and an attempt to explain some of its abstract concepts of reincarnation. For Odorico, of course, this did not mean much in theological terms, since he quickly dropped the topic again, and instead, he then turns his attention to the splendor and vastness of that city: “For ‘tis the greatest and noblest city, and the finest for merchandise, that the whole world containeth” (130). We can be certain, however, that he allowed here a brief gaze into this foreign religion, though he did not really understand it fully. Foreignness clouded his comprehension, and all he could do was to include this brief scene into his account, a puzzle piece that meant little for him, but reveals to us that even here we can identify early references to Buddhism.

## 5 Sir John Mandeville

Although Mandeville’s *Travels* have commonly been identified as a fanciful compilation of various sources about the East, we can draw also from this travelogue to confirm that some basic elements of Buddhistic teachings were more commonly known, whether the western authors understood the details or not (Mandeville 1983). Here leaving all the fanciful monster lore aside, at one point this contemporary of the anonymous poet of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* also turns to some religious notions as practiced in the East and repeats more or less the same comments while discussing a monastery. A monk is feeding all kinds of animals who have arrived upon hearing a gong being beaten, and they orderly sit down to receive their food. Then we are told:

These monks say that those beasts which are pretty and gentle are the souls of lords and gentle folk, and those beasts which are not so are the souls of other men. They maintain that the souls of men when they leave their bodies enter into those beasts; that is their firm belief, and no one can shake their opinion. The souls of great men, they say, go into gentle and beautiful animals, and the souls of men of low

rank go into ugly animals; and therefore they give them meat and alms for the love of God. (139)

However, the narrator then undermines his own account by revealing that all those animals had been captured when they were still young and were hence trained to wait for their food, like in a petting zoo. Apparently, we are not even supposed to take this account seriously, since Mandeville next refers quickly to many other marvels which he had allegedly witnessed. This religious practice hence appears as something easily to be dismissed. Yet, within our context, we can accept even this highly superficial reference as confirmation that some aspects of Buddhism were broadly known in the West and could be experimented with fairly freely also for the entertainment of a Christian audience since they are presented only as exotic and marvelous, not to be taken seriously.

## 6 Conclusion

To be sure, medieval Christendom was still mostly concerned with its own religious issues, still struggling to establish its complete hegemony over many different deviant groups, heretics, pagans, mystics, and others. Yet, the early exploration of Asia by Christian missionaries and merchant travelers opened many new perspectives. For most of the time, the various authors indulge in monster lore when treating India or the Mongol empire (especially Mandeville), but at closer analysis we can discover that major authors such as Marco Polo, but then also the anonymous composer of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* and the Franciscan Odorico da Pordenone took considerable interest in the religious features which they observed on their travels or which they had learned about through older sources. In this process, some elements of Buddhist concepts also entered the picture, though it would go too far to claim that these three authors among others displayed a sincere interest in this Asian religion.

Yet, there are a number of explicit references and comments to be found, which allow us to claim that pre-modern globalism had also entailed the opening up to Buddhism, as tenuous as those few and still rather brief descriptions certainly were. The authors had obviously no clear idea about the many different sects, branches, or groups of Buddhists who lived in a vast continent much larger than Europe. Yet, the fact alone that they at least included those new perspectives about eastern religions proves to be highly remarkable for medieval authors, whether they actually toured through those parts of the Asian continent or not. No one really cared whether Mandeville's *Travels* were based on fact or fiction; since his account was so cohesive and insisting regarding its truth, the future audience believed Mandeville more than they believed Polo's *Travels* (Campbell, 1988, 141). All this is the more remarkable insofar as the four sources

examined here did not find many successors throughout the following centuries, at least with respect to the comments about the eastern religions. This would entail that these late medieval texts constitute impressive predecessors of modern globalism, if we pay close attention to some of the details included in all four texts.

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