

2 Distance and Credibility in Sixteenth-Century Travel Writing

Discovery, Text, and Truth in Varthema,
Vespucci, and Pigafetta

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Prologue: The Traveller Who Could Not Be Trusted

Travel writing, not unlike historical writing, was in pre-modern times both a popular source of knowledge about exotic peoples and places, and a focus of scepticism about claims to eyewitnessing, especially in relation to the marvellous and extraordinary that many ancient and medieval geographical genres tended to privilege. This was true within the confines of Latin Christendom but also in other literary contexts, for example in the rich Arabic tradition of travel writing that flourished with particular impetus across the vast Islamic oecumene from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries.¹ By contrast, the European genre, whether in Latin or vernacular languages, was quite limited until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The challenge for the varied European audiences of a book as exceptional as Marco Polo's *Description of the World* (c.1298), rich in particulars about distant lands in the East, was how to assess plausibility in a text that was translated, altered and adapted in many versions, but which had few alternative sources of verification (and those that existed were not easily accessible). The same could be said of the audiences of Ibn Battuta's *rihla* (756/1355) in Fez and Granada when they were presented with stories about India or China: there existed networks of trade that connected distant Muslim communities with a common ideal of shared religious and legal learning, but unless you happened to communicate with other travellers, or read other books, many particulars were difficult to verify (and in fact verification via books could be misleading, as an unreliable traveller might simply have lifted information from them, as was in fact the case of some portions of Ibn Battuta's account copied from Ibn Jubair). Thus in the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages it was difficult to determine whether the traveller reported something that was entirely accurate, whether he simply repeated fantastic stories of dubious authenticity,

1 On the Arabic genres of travel writing, see Houari Touati, *Islam et Voyage au Moyen Âge* (Seuil: Paris, 2000). For the wider context of Arabic geographical literature: André Miquel, *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*, 4 vols (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1967–75).

or worse, whether he made things up to augment his fame. Intermediary professional writers like Rustichello of Pisa and Ibn Juzayy of Granada, acting according to the literary conventions of their separate cultural milieux, spent a considerable effort establishing the authority of their exceptional witnesses, because they could not personally verify any of the particulars. Both Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta dictated their accounts and addressed them to courtly and urban audiences, and both Rustichello and Ibn Juzayy began the narratives by asserting the trustworthiness and capacity for observation of each respective traveller and, in effect, constructing for them a legitimate social persona. The Pisan writer, famously writing down what the man he introduced as “a wise and noble citizen of Venice” had reported to him while in a Genoese prison, and composing in the same Italianate French he usually employed for chivalric romances, was keen to point out which things Polo had witnessed personally and which he simply reported from hearsay.² Similarly Ibn Juzayy, commissioned by the Marinid Sultan Abu Inan of Morocco, noted that Ibn Battuta was a sheikh learned in the law who had adopted the soundest methods for authenticating his reports and discarded questionable ones.³ Nonetheless, both travellers were accused of lying by some of their contemporaries.

As at the turn of the sixteenth century the multifarious European genre of travel writing multiplied its production and its geographical range, and emerged as central to the European culture of printed books, the conditions for establishing and contesting credibility also changed. In particular, a new trend can be observed by which the authority of the traveller could be gradually disciplined, and this, in turn, made travel writing much more authoritative. However, the trend was not apparent to everybody at the same time, and audiences in different contexts reacted differently. It is important to examine the sources of resistance that accompanied the gradual establishment

2 It is worth quoting Rustichello’s prefatory note as found in the oldest fourteenth-century manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1116), because it was largely devoted to establishing the traveller’s credibility: “Our book will tell you in an orderly and clear fashion those things reported by Messer Marc Pol, wise and noble citizen of Venice, as he saw them with his own eyes; but there are some things that he has not seen but which he heard from dependable and truthful men. And for this reason, we will set forth the things seen as seen, and the things heard as heard, so that our book is accurate and truthful and free from any falsehood. And everybody who reads this book, or who hears it read aloud, should believe it, because all the things in it are true (*notre livre voç contera por ordre apertement, si come meïsser March Pol, sajes et noble citaiens de Venece, raconte, por ce que a seç taus meïssme il le vit; mes auques hi ni a qu’il ne vit pas mes il l’entendi da homes citables et de verité. Et por ce met{r}eron les chouses veue por veue et l’entendue por entandue, por ce que notre livre soit droit et vertables sanç nulle mensonge; et chascuns que cest livre liroie, ou hoïront, le doivent croire, por ce que toutes sunt chouses vertables*)”. Marco Polo, *Le Devisement dou Monde*, edited by Mario Eusebio and Eugenio Burgio (Venice: Edizioni Ca’Foscari, 2018), 35.

3 Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, 4 vols (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1958–1994), I, 5–7.

of the genre's new authority, because they sometimes involved men of learning and erudition. An interesting example of such a resistance is the German cleric Joannes Boemus (or Hans Böhm, 1485–1535), a chaplain of the Teutonic order in Ulm, and author of one of the most influential books on cultural diversity published in early modern Europe. The *Omnium gentium mores, leges et ritus* (Manners, Laws and Customs of all the Nations), first printed in Augsburg in 1520, was especially popular in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Italy throughout the sixteenth century.⁴ In particular, editions multiplied after 1535, following the death of the author, and for a number of years reprints of the Latin text – occasionally with additional materials – were published almost in an annual succession, in addition to the various translations and adaptations into French, Italian, English, and Castilian, all of which had appeared by 1556.⁵

Boemus offered a compendium of the various customs, ancient and modern, that could be gathered from a vast range of historians and cosmographers, from Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily, Strabo, Pliny, and Tacitus, to the more recent Vincent of Beauvais, Pope Pius II, and Marcantonio Sabellico. Organized geographically and supported with a copious thematic index, the systematic display of strange customs was meant to help the readers

- 4 For a classic general assessment see Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 131–43. Also Margaret T. Hodgen, “Johann Boemus (fl. 1500): An Early Anthropologist”, *American Anthropologist* 55, no. 2 (1953): 284–94. The most detailed study of Johannes Boemus and his book remains Erich Schmidt, *Deutsche Volkskunde im Zeitalter des Humanismus und der Reformation* (Berlin: Ebering, 1904), 60–107 and 146–58. More recently, Hartmut Kugler, “Boemus, Johannes, Aubanus”, in *Verfasserlexikon: Deutscher Humanismus 1480–1520*, ed. Franz Josef Worstbrock, 3 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), I, 209–17. The most important recent discussions are Klaus A. Vogel, “Cultural Variety in a Renaissance Perspective: Johannes Boemus on the ‘Manners, Laws and Customs of All People’ (1520)”, in *Shifting Cultures: Interaction and Discourse in the Expansion of Europe*, ed. Henriette Bugge and Joan-Pau Rubiés (Münster: Lit, 1995), 17–34; Andreas Motsch, “La collection des moeurs de Johannes Boemus ou la mise en scène du savoir ethnographique”, in *Le Théâtre de la Curiosité*, ed. by Frank Lestringant (Paris: PUPS, 2008), 51–65; Diego Pirillo, “Relativismo culturale e ‘armonia del mondo’: l’enciclopedia etnografica di Johannes Boemus”, in *L’Europa Divisa e i Nuovi Mondi. Per Adriano Prosperi*, ed. Massimo Donattini, Giuseppe Marcocci, and Stefania Pastore, 2 vols (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2011), II, 67–77; C. Philipp E. Nothaft, “The Early History of Man and the Uses of Diodorus in Renaissance Scholarship: From Annius of Viterbo to Johannes Boemus”, in *For the Sake of Learning. Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, ed. Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 722–28; and Giuseppe Marcocci, *The Globe on Paper. Writing Histories of the World in Renaissance Europe and the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 87–96.
- 5 Thus the Lyon edition of 1535 and those that followed it had a larger impact than the *editio princeps* of 1520. For a list of the various editions see Schmidt, *Deutsche Volkskunde*, 146–47 (albeit incomplete), and for some of the vernacular adaptations see Motsch, “La collection des moeurs”; and Pirillo, “Relativismo culturale”. On the Spanish translation by Támara, see Marcocci, *The Globe*, 100–05.

reflect on the history of the progress of civilization, by contrast with the rude simplicity of the earliest times, and also learn to distinguish those customs that were good and praiseworthy (usually those which agreed with European Christian morality) from those which were dishonest and obscene.⁶ Although interested in the classical understanding of a history of civilization from savage origins involving technological and political progress, Boemus sought to integrate this narrative into a religious vision dominated by the theme of the loss of religious and cultural unity after the fall and during the dispersion of mankind. Thus, while accepting that a degree of cultural variety was perfectly natural, the author seems to have been anxious about the dangers posed to mankind by religious diversity, and was also particularly concerned with diverse marriage customs and proper female sexual behaviour, possibly reflecting the moral anxieties of a humanist cleric of his generation.⁷

Interestingly, however, while emphatically positive about the educational value of travel, Boemus was rather sceptical about the reliability of some recent accounts about distant regions written by “vagrants” seeking to excite the public with tall tales. Assuming that actual travel, however profitable, was often hard to undertake, the author’s aim was to gather and organize information found in those books written by grave and trustworthy authors (*ex gravium fidedignissimorum authorum scriptis*), so that *de facto* he relied entirely on classical, humanist, and medieval Latin sources while excluding vernacular accounts about newly discovered lands: these were not, in his judgement, sufficiently authoritative, and their authors did not fit the emblematic image of the wise traveller who, like weather-beaten Ulysses, learnt about the manners of many peoples and cities.⁸ One of his primary targets was someone he referred to as Ludovico from Bologna, that is, Ludovico de Varthema, whose extraordinary account of a journey to India had recently become available in a German translation published in the

6 Joannes Boemus, *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus* (Augsburg: Grimm, 1520), “Praefatio ad Lectorem”, [f4r].

7 Nonetheless, as Anthony Grafton has observed, Boemus was not an ethnocentric bigot, because his comparisons could reflect positively on some non-Christian laws and institutions that seemed reasonable, for example Turkish marriages. He also understood that some European customs could be perceived as strange from outside. Anthony Grafton, “Comparisons Compared: A Study in the Early Modern Roots of Cultural History”, in *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology*, ed. Renaud Gagné, Simon Goldhill, and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 18–48. He was, in other words, open to some expressions of cultural diversity, although it would be an exaggeration to consider him a relativist. He does not seem to have embraced the Lutheran Reformation, unlike many of his humanist friends such as Andreas Althamer (Pirillo, “Relativismo culturale”, 67; but see also Marcocci, *The Globe*, 90, who suggests that towards the end of his life he did become a Lutheran – I have been unable to verify this).

8 The exclusion involved not only recent accounts of overseas discoveries, but also widely circulated late medieval texts such as Marco Polo’s *Description of the World*.

same city of Augsburg.⁹ Boemus explained his reasoning in the prefatory letter to the humanist doctor, and publisher of the volume, Sigismund Grimm, who in fact had reprinted Varthema's book the previous year:¹⁰

Last year you printed two similar books, one about the peoples of the north, whose author is Matthias de Michau, the other about the peoples of the south by one Ludovicus of Bologna. And you have exhorted me to make available and translate my present book into our German language; quite rightly, because you understand and are an expert about these and other things that have been related about foreign nations (*externis nationibus*). Of course, not from fraudulent vagrants, or from wandering liars (*non ex levibus circulatoribus, non es vagis mendicis*), who in order to be admired and accepted by the populace lie in a most pernicious and shameless way (so that one must not only distrust them, but nearly all other who write or repeat anything of theirs); but from texts written by grave and trustworthy authors.¹¹

Boemus, with sufficient delicacy, did not condemn Varthema directly, but the fact that he did not use any of his many relevant observations strongly suggests that the journey of the Italian adventurer had inspired the image of an unreliable vagrant, as opposed to an experienced traveller who clearly belonged to the social elite and, upon returning home, could become a magistrate or a counsellor.

This bookish attitude that privileged authoritative texts over novel accounts, and effectively promoted vicarious travel over adventurous empiricism, helps explain the often-noted paradox that Boemus's text, one of the most important ethnographic compilations of the sixteenth century, included Africa, Asia, and Europe, but made no mention of the New World (indeed, the traditional tripartite division structured the book). This seems surprising

9 The illustrated German translation appeared in 1515, but Boemus seems to have seen the Augsburg edition of 1518, to which he refers in his prefatory letter. There is some hesitancy about the spelling of Varthema's name. The German version had Ludowico Vartomans von Bolonia. He signed both the manuscript he presented to Vittoria Colonna and the original Italian edition of 1510 as Ludovico de Varthema Bolognese, and this was followed by subsequent Italian editions (although a few have Verthema or Barthema). The Latin of 1511 has Ludovicus Patricius Romanus (not an innocent change, as Julius II had recently incorporated Bologna into the Papal States), and the Spanish translation followed this. Here I respect Varthema's original usage (unlike her most recent modern editor Valentina Martino, who instead adopted Vartema).

10 Although the letter to Grimm is dated Ulm, 1 April 1520, the two books Boemus mentions as having appeared "last year" were published in 1518. This might indicate that a previous draft of the letter had been written in 1519.

11 Boemus, *Omnium Gentium*, fol. 2r. Remarkably, the proposed German translation Boemus mentioned was not published, and generations of German readers had access only to the Latin text.

in 1520, by which time not only the sensationalist navigator Amerigo Vespucci, but also humanist writers like Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, had started to publish materials in Latin concerning the Columbian discoveries, often casting doubt on initial idea that the newly discovered lands corresponded to India or Cathay in the oriental extremes of Asia.¹² Contemporary maps also tended to incorporate the new observations of the Portuguese and the Spanish in their eastern and western navigations. No doubt Boemus was not fully aware of all of these publications when completing his work in 1519–20, which suggests some of the limitations of his humanist circles in Ulm.¹³ But what is even more symptomatic is that the *Omnium gentium mores* continued to be published decades later, occasionally (notably in the 1556 Spanish version by Francisco Támara) with substantial amplifications concerning the Western Indies, but more often without altering the original emphasis on the traditional tripartite geographical divisions of the ancient world.¹⁴ Thus it seems that the compilation by the armchair scholar that privileged ancient sources or those written by established ecclesiastical or humanist writers had a cultural logic of its own, one with enduring value in sixteenth-century Europe despite its remarkable conservatism when it came to selecting sources of information. It appealed, in particular, to Renaissance cosmographers with an encyclopaedic bent such as Sebastian Münster and his French adapter François de Belleforest. Admittedly, these later authors were more confident than Boemus about the new geographical discoveries of the Spanish and Portuguese, and more sceptical about ancient reports of monstrous races, but nonetheless they continued to rely on his largely anachronistic compilation as a major source of information on cultural diversity.

The Problem of Credibility in Sixteenth-Century Travel Narratives and History Writing

Boemus's attachment to the old geographical divisions of antiquity and his doubts about the value of new narratives can be construed as a conservative bias, and has sometimes been taken to exemplify a supposed "reluctance to accept novelty" in the humanistic culture of Renaissance, primarily geared

12 Peter Martyr conceived the project of writing *De Orbe Novo* for a learned audience of *viros doctos* as early as October 1494, thanks to his position at the court of the Catholic kings Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain, which gave him privileged access to information about the Columbian expeditions. Following the example of classical historians, he organized his books into groups of ten or "decades".

13 Boemus probably also ignored the Northern European editions in Latin of Francanzio da Montalboddo's early collection of "newly discovered countries" from 1507. It is hard to believe that at least some notice of the newly discovered islands across the Western Ocean, or the mainland of Brazil, had failed to reach him, but quite possibly he did not consider authors like Vespucci sufficiently authoritative.

14 Also noteworthy is the 1542 edition from Antwerp, the first to incorporate the Latin account to the circumnavigation of the world, *De Moluccis insulis*, by Maximilian Transylvanus.

towards the recovery of ancient learning. This thesis, whose classic formulation by John Elliott some fifty years ago in terms of the “blunted impact” of the discoveries, continues to be influential, has nonetheless been questioned by more recent authors.¹⁵ While the circulation of news was not homogeneous across Europe, and the true geographical significance of the Columbian encounter could only be appreciated gradually, considering the whole sixteenth century and beyond we have plenty of evidence of the celebration of discovery in print and image, including of course the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara’s famous opening statement in his *Historia General de las Indias* (1552) that the discovery of the Indies was “the greatest thing after the creation of the world, excepting the incarnation and death of Him who created it”.¹⁶ By the end of the sixteenth century Columbus, Magellan, and Vespucci had become quasi-mythical figures celebrated across Europe, and their national identity jealously disputed too; in this respect, although in this period there was patriotic tension between Spain and Italy about, for example, the “ownership” of the Genoese Columbus, we must look beyond a simplistic opposition between different national cultural spheres, because in reality Italy and the Iberian world were closely connected politically and by religion, and effectively functioned as complementary spaces in the construction of a “modern” literature of geographical discovery. Through that interaction, and others that communicated southern and northern Europe, the celebration of modern discoveries became both a rhetorical commonplace and a positive identity that could be national, European, Christian, or even cosmopolitan. Indeed, in a period dominated by the idea of a renaissance of arts and letters that first emulated and eventually surpassed the achievements of the ancients, the theme of the advancement of geographical learning helped crystalize the genre of travel writing in the great collections by Ramusio, Richard Hakluyt, and others. In other words, the emergence of an authoritative genre of travel writing throughout the early modern centuries was connected to these multi-layered identities and the political projects that accompanied them, thus superseding the conservatism

- 15 John H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New 1492–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), argued for a widespread reluctance to “accept the New World into consciousness”, with further nuance in John H. Elliott, “Renaissance Europe and America: A Blunted Impact?” in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 11–23; and John H. Elliott, “Final Reflections: The Old World and the New Revisited”, in *America in European Consciousness 1493–1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 395, where he acknowledged that the issue of degree of interest was separate from questions of assimilation and cultural transformation. I offered my revised assessment in Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Travel Writing and Humanistic Culture: A Blunted Impact?” *Journal of Early Modern History* 10, no. 1/2 (2006): 131–68.
- 16 Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de las Indias (1552)*, ed. Monique Moustapha, Louise Bénat-Tachot, Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling, Paul Roche (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2020), “Dedication to Emperor Charles V”, 69.

earlier displayed by Boemus, largely geared towards digesting the historical learning inherited from the classical past.

However, the problem of a potential clash between the questionable sincerity of a personal witness against the authority of established authors whose writings transmitted the learning of the ancient world persisted.¹⁷ In this respect, it may be worth emphasizing the extent to which the authority of the traveller (or the colonial settler) was closely connected to the construction of modern standards of historiography. To return to López de Gómara, possibly the most influential sixteenth-century historian of the discovery and conquest of the Spanish Indies (notwithstanding Phillip II's abrupt prohibition of his work in Spain), it would be hard to fault his sources of information about the conquest of Mexico, as he had at his disposal the archive of his patron Hernán Cortés, including some substantial Franciscan ethnographic works about the Mexica. He also took pains to seek out and interview some conquerors besides Cortés himself. Gómara was however writing from Valladolid, at the heart of Castile, so it was easy for a resentful old conqueror settled in Guatemala, Bernal Díaz de Castillo, to claim that he alone could offer the "true" history of the conquest of New Spain, because he had been at the heart of the events as they unfolded and did not rely on hearsay.¹⁸ His main complaint was that the elegant historian Gómara – a humanist cleric with uncommon rhetorical skill – had placed all of his emphasis on the heroic actions of Cortés, his own patron, given that he had been paid to write by the family (incidentally, this glorification of Cortés was also why the king's Council of the Indies was hostile to the work, as it struggled to consolidate its authority in the viceroyalty and feared the conqueror's alternative source of local power).¹⁹ Bernal Díaz, in turn, with his "plain style", was concerned to restore to the common soldiers who followed Cortés their own place in the epic of conquest, motivated by a deep sense of injustice with the manner in which the Crown of Castile had failed to reward the few surviving "first conquerors" with sufficient numbers of Indians (in the form of *encomiendas*).²⁰ The resulting blow-by-blow account of the conquest was in many ways dependant on

17 See the classic discussions in Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Shock of Discovery and the Power of Tradition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

18 Díaz explicitly wrote "como testigo de vista", as an eyewitness, albeit from memory many years later. This important work was only published in Madrid in 1632 with some interpolations by the Mercedarian friar Alonso Remón.

19 In chapter XVIII of his chronicle (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. Guillermo Serés (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2011), 70–74), Bernal Díaz suddenly interrupted the narrative of his own personal deeds to start a series of recurrent complaints against Gómara and those chroniclers who had followed him. This helps date the book's first draft to the mid-1550s (other documents mention its existence in this period), although it was only completed in 1568, and further revised until the author's death in 1584.

20 The "common soldier" who writes with "plain style" is obviously also the colonial settler fighting for perpetual power over the natives as a "just reward".

Gómara's clarity for its structure, but at many points added further details, often personal; where Gómara had been succinct and to the point, Díaz was expansive and colourful, and took every opportunity to correct the armchair historian, sometimes with obsessive exaggeration. The "true history" tells us many things that Cortés would have liked to hide, and makes for riveting reading, but does this mean that it is entirely reliable, given that it was written from memory more than thirty years after the events described? Modern historians disagree as to the extent to which Bernal Díaz's "personal witnessing" *de facto* became a creative form of remembering. Some have even argued (unconvincingly in my view) that he could not have possibly written the work himself.²¹ What is crucial in any case is that the appeal to personal experience, or autopsy, must be recognized as problematic.

If we take a *longue-durée* perspective throughout the early modern centuries, it is possible to argue that the genre of travel writing only became authoritative in European intellectual culture by dealing with the problem of credibility in a manner than had not been possible in previous centuries. Symptomatic of the way systematic engagement with texts could make a difference is Hakluyt's change of attitude towards the book of Sir John Mandeville, now known to be apocryphal. In the 1589 edition of the *Principall Navigations [...] of the English nation*, the Latin version of Mandeville was published as an authentic eyewitness, despite some hesitation.²² For the second edition of 1598, after editing the narrative of friar Odoric of Pordenone to India and Cathay, Hakluyt apparently concluded that "Mandeville" had simply copied this text (and possibly others), and therefore he substituted the suspicious account with the friar's.²³ His concern with "certain and full discovery of the world" (my emphasis) through the critical edition of travel narratives was not unique, but largely modelled on the previous work by the Venetian Giovanni Battista Ramusio in his landmark collection *Navigazioni et Viaggi*. However, Ramusio's adoption of the same principle of contrasting information had led him to the opposite assessment with reference to another medieval text whose authenticity had, as we have seen, often been questioned, Marco Polo's *Description of the World*. Thanks to Ramusio's ability to bring together and cross-examine many reports of the Oriental Indies, notably those of the Portuguese, it was now quite possible to conclude that Polo was not a

21 Christian Duverger, *Cortés et son double. Enquête sur une mystification* (Paris: Seuil, 2013). Duverger's thesis is ingenious but not compelling. For an informed critique see Hugh Thomas, "Bernal o Cortés", *Letras Libres*, 10 June 2013, www.letraslibres.com/mexico-espana/bernal-o-cortes.

22 Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London: Bishop, 1589), 77.

23 On the reception of Mandeville, see Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville 1371–1550* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) and Ladan Niayesh, ed. *A Knight's Legacy: Mandeville and Mandevillian Lore in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

fabulous storyteller, but rather, Ramusio insisted with a degree of patriotic pride, a pioneer of modern and accurate geographical observation.²⁴ It is not coincidental that the judgment of these two humanist-educated editors of the sixteenth century about their medieval sources has on the whole stood the test of time. The “scientific” (or perhaps we should say “forensic”) criteria of internal cogency, philological analysis, verification with independent documents or witnesses, and historical coherence that we use today to establish authenticity are not substantially different from those that emerged in the sixteenth century throughout the process of questioning the credibility of particular travellers, although of course the resources that make possible a confident judgement were not stable, but tended to expand with the growth of long-distance travel and the multiplication of travel accounts. In the end the confidence a reader might have that a text is truly authoritative is always relative, not absolute. This is why, even today, some authors seek to argue that Cortés, not Bernal Díaz del Castillo, wrote the *Historia Verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España*, while others still ask – with increasing difficulty – whether Marco Polo ever went to China.²⁵

It is therefore crucial to appreciate that the problem of whether travellers could be believed is not simply a modern concern but was acknowledged as important throughout the early modern period, and in fact shaped the evolution of the genre.²⁶ The English saying “travellers may lie by authority” received many replies already before the end of the sixteenth century, some remarkably thoughtful, such as by the Calvinist pastor Jean de Léry, who noted that some things were indeed novel and extraordinary, and it was important to keep an open mind.²⁷ His detailed account of the Tupinamba of Brazil naturalized the behaviour of naked cannibals for a sceptical European readership that included Montaigne. In a contested field, therefore, travellers did not simply insist that they were themselves trustworthy, they also questioned the attitude of those who did not wish to believe that which was novel and were, therefore, narrow-minded. Modernity was predicated on acknowledging that the ancients did not know everything, and the theme of geographical discovery was a powerful motif (for example, it was echoed by Francesco Guicciardini when analysing the historical significance of Magellan’s circumnavigation of the world, in one of the most memorable chapters

24 Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, 3 vols (Venice, 1550–59), III, 22. Ramusio emphasized that Polo was an accurate recorder of what he saw despite belonging to a period where “few men were intelligent of that doctrine”, and despite spending so many years surrounded by the “unpolished Tartar nation”.

25 Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995). The rather opportunistic thesis was demolished by, among others, Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

26 See especially Daniel Carey, “The Problem of Credibility in Early Modern Travel”, *Renaissance Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 524–47.

27 Jean de Léry, *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, ed. Frank Lesfrant (Paris: Libr. Générale française, 1994), 93–95.

of his *History of Italy*).²⁸ At the same time, apologists for the modern genre rightly claimed that not all travellers were equally reliable – Léry himself was involved in a dispute about authenticity with his contemporary and Catholic rival André Thevet, royal cosmographer in France.²⁹ Which criteria could be used to determine when scepticism was reasonable, and justified? For example, eyewitnesses, but also the historians who relied on them, had to be disinterested, trustworthy, and intelligent, as emphasized by Charles de Rochefort in his *Natural and Moral History of the Antilles* of 1658.³⁰ On the other hand, as Montaigne had also (previously) noted when discussing the cannibals of Brazil, direct observers with less education might actually be more truthful, because they were less likely to distort a straightforward account of what they saw with their own interpretative biases.³¹

Beyond the recognition of the existence of a rhetorical battleground concerning the reliability of travellers in this period, is there a history to be written of how the criteria that determined credibility were developed in the changing cultural circumstances of the early modern period? My contribution, focused on a number of key examples belonging to the first decades of the sixteenth century, can only hope to offer the first chapter of this story. However, I would argue that it is a chapter that belongs to a particularly explosive moment, one that shaped much of what was to come.

Varthema's Social Strategies; or the Invention of the Curious Traveller

To begin with, let us look more closely at the case of Varthema, whose journey of seven years supposedly lasted from his departure from Venice to Alexandria in 1502 to his return to Italy via Portugal in 1508: can we trust him today, with the contextual knowledge many of contemporaries lacked? There is no doubt that Ludovico had reached India from Muslim lands, travelling, he says, in disguise, and then eventually fleeing from the king of Calicut to join the Portuguese, who welcomed him as a Christian European with valuable information. The literary persona of the “I” witness construed by Varthema in his *Itinerario* is, on the other hand, a flexible device that allows him to adopt many different roles, as a soldier, a trader, a madman, a

28 Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Silvana Seidel Menchi, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), I, 589.

29 For the polemic with Léry, see Frank Lestringant, *André Thevet, cosmographe des derniers Valois* (Geneva: Droz, 1991), 213–16, 236–43.

30 Charles de Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l'Amérique* (Rotterdam: Leers, 1658). As Daniel Carey cleverly observes (“The Problem of Credibility”, 527), the argument was somewhat circular: the historian proclaimed his own personal honesty and experience of the New World as guarantee that his written sources were themselves trustworthy.

31 Michel de Montaigne, “Des Cannibals”, in *Les Essais*, ed. D. Bjaï et al. (Paris: LGF, 2001), 184.

physician, or a spy.³² In this respect, the eyewitness is also a chameleon, and while his presence in Mecca (forbidden to Christians) is a testimony to the success of his disguise as a Mamluk soldier, an Italian captured as a child and converted to Islam, the suspicion of those around him and his fear of discovery as a European Christian spy provide much of the dramatic tension of the narrative, which at various points becomes an adventure story rather than simply a description of lands and peoples visited. It is hard not to be sceptical of some of the more picaresque and romantic episodes, most famously his account of how he escaped his imprisonment in Yemen by manipulating (but not fulfilling) the sexual desire of an Arab queen for a white man.³³ There are, however, grounds to suspect that Varthema's literary invention goes much deeper, because the chronology and geography of his travels in the interior of Persia and towards the East beyond southern India (all the way to the Malay peninsula, Sumatra, and the Spice Islands) simply makes no sense, and it seems pretty certain that, at least for those regions, he reported as his own observations a great deal of hearsay probably gathered in Kerala.³⁴ Indeed, offering a careful reconstruction of this constrained chronology and of Varthema's moves in the Middle East, the French historian Jean Aubin even suggested that Varthema did not simply pretend to be a mercenary soldier of Italian origins among Muslims, but was in reality for some years an actual renegade (hence his knowledge of colloquial Arabic), who later changed his mind and opportunistically joined the Portuguese.³⁵ His account is therefore, to a large extent, unreliable.

32 See my detailed analysis in Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125–63.

33 Ludovico de Varthema, *Itinerario*, ed. Valentina Martino (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2011), 283–93.

34 In particular, his trip from Yemen to Persia, India, and beyond to Southeast Asia, needs to be crammed between August 1504, which is the earliest date he could have sailed towards India, and the end of 1505, when he met the Portuguese in Malabar. All the sea journeys would have been constrained by the monsoons. The journey to the interior of Persia all the way to Shiraz and Herat is impossible. It is however clear that Varthema spent quite a few months in Malabar, where he learnt some Malayalam, leaving little time for a journey further East. Remarkably, many modern editors have resisted the obvious conclusion and still try to find ways to make Varthema's journey to Persia and Southeast Asia somewhat authentic, even while admitting that many of the actual dates and distances provided are inaccurate. For the most recent example consider Valentina Martino's efforts to reconstruct an actual journey in Varthema, *Itinerario*, 86–87 and 159–90, where she appeals to the internal complexity of the narrative, and the fact that the traveller did not keep a written record, in order to justify this lack of precision.

35 Jean Aubin, "Deux Chrétiens au Yémen Tahiride", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3rd series 3, no. 1 (1993): 33–52, argues that following his adventures in Yemen, Varthema only left Aden in the summer of 1505, also ruling out his travels in West India (Gujarat and Vijayanagara). He speculates that he may have travelled to India still as a Mamluk mercenary specialized in artillery, sent by the

If we accept that the narrative of the eyewitness is in part genuine, and in part fraudulent, the interesting question is not simply which parts are believable for the modern historian, but rather which literary and para-literary devices he used to construct his authority as a genuine traveller. Back in Italy in the fall of 1508, after seven years abroad, Varthema of course was perfectly aware that he needed to enhance this precarious authority in order to transform his adventurous tale of India – a distant region that by then had become a strategic commercial and religious concern – into something exploitable, that is, something that might allow him to consolidate his social opportunities as a well-travelled “patrician from Bologna”. In reality what he could sell was novel information about the East, and this led directly to adopting the desire “to see the diversity of places and peoples” as his official motivation for travel. It was a theme that conveniently echoed the exploits of the Homeric hero Ulysses *qui mores hominum multorum vidit et urbes* (the verse by Horace was, by then, a humanistic commonplace).³⁶ Upon his arrival in Italy Varthema was first interviewed, and paid, by the Venetian Senate. His next destination was the Papal States, and it was in Rome where he eventually published his book in 1510.

Despite the references to Ulysses in the preface, in reality the *Itinerario* was, as I have suggested, far more entertaining than erudite. A Portuguese knighthood for services rendered after fleeing from the king of Calicut helped rehabilitate Varthema’s obscure past as a Mamluk mercenary, but quite clearly he did not plan to pursue a military career, let alone any intellectual endeavours. In the light of his lack of an alternative profession, other than as a self-appointed curious traveller who apparently – if we are to take the preface seriously – was thinking about next turning his attention towards exploring the North, it is quite possible that Varthema’s patrician background in Bologna had been exaggerated: we must understand this claim to social status as one that needed to be enhanced by gaining further patronage, which

Sultan of Egypt to help the King of Calicut against the Portuguese. I find these additional hypotheses overly sceptical.

- 36 The theme was made explicit in the book’s preface. It also appears in one of two anonymous sonnets of the one surviving manuscript of the book presented to the eighteen-year old Vittoria Colonna, the daughter of the book’s dedicatee Agnesina of Montefeltro, and then just married to Fernando d’Ávalos, Marquis of Pescara: “Taccia chi dà la palm’al grec’Olysse / fra quei c’han visto stran costum e gente / vento da Ludovico qui presente / e Omer e le fabul che lui scrisse” (Varthema, *Itinerario*, 126). This particular manuscript (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze, Landau Finaly 9) was a luxury product written by the celebrated calligrapher Ludovico of Arrighi, and can be dated 1510, not many months before the *Itinerario* was published in Rome, because Varthema recalls the time he spent in Marino the previous year, in 1509, telling the story of his travels to the two women. In aristocratic circles, the gift of a luxury manuscript was probably more appropriate than a copy of the printed book. There are enough similarities to suggest that the sonnets were composed by the same professional writer who helped Varthema compose the book’s preface, although they were only included in the manuscript.

is precisely what we find him doing by appealing directly to some aristocratic ladies and by becoming familiar with cardinals at the court of pope Julius II. Hence, in 1509 he was in Marino at the palace of the Duque of Tagliacozzo Fabrizio Colonna and his wife Agnesina of Montefeltro, daughter of the former Duke of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro, and it was to her that he dedicated the book. In the dedicatory preface, which he probably had some professional help in writing (given the hint of some popular humanistic themes, otherwise absent in the book), Varthema emphasized the rhetorical themes of scientific curiosity – the verbs are *investigare*, *cognoscere*, *recercare* – as well as the value of direct eyewitnessing (*visivo testimonio*), as opposed to hearsay.³⁷ Perhaps more crucially, by the very action of choosing a virtuous noblewoman as his dedicatee Varthema also sought to visualize the acquisition of authority by the text and by its author. This offering to the Duchess was precisely the first image the readers of the illustrated German translation of 1515 would see in the book's cover, before being confronted with more exotic, exciting, and potentially disturbing engravings by the artist by Jörg Breu the Elder depicting cannibalism and devil worship in the inside pages.³⁸ This frontispiece could be seen as a pre-emptive strike by the Augsburg publishers Hans Miller and Sigismund Grimm, to the implicit scepticism concerning unreliable vagabonds expressed by the latter's friend Joannes Boemus a few years later (Figure 2.1).

Despite the combined rhetoric of elite sociability, conventional classical references, and lavish imagery, Varthema and his publishers were not altogether successful in building an unassailable reputation in his own century. A number of Portuguese learned writers, in particular, were explicitly critical. Writing about oriental plants and drugs in Goa, the capital of Portuguese India, the New Christian physician and naturalist García da Orta asserted that Varthema had made many scientific errors concerning the natural products of Persia and Southeast Asia because he had not travelled further East than Calicut and Cochin, and the fact that he was an unreliable witness was confirmed by many Portuguese who had told him that “he went about in the dress of a Moor”, hinting at his condition as a renegade.³⁹ At the same time in Lisbon the humanist historian João de Barros, who had read Varthema's narrative in the important Latin collection of travel accounts about the “New World” edited by the German humanists Johann Hüttich and Simon Grynaeus, *Novus orbis regionum ac insularum veteribus incognitarum* (Basel,

37 Varthema, *Itinerario*, 224.

38 Through a detailed and sophisticated analysis, Stephanie Leitch has argued that the whole series of engravings by Jörg Breu, not only the title page, also served to authorize the text, offering a visual complement to the narrative standpoint of the eyewitness. See Stephanie Leitch, *Mapping Ethnography in Early Modern Germany: New Worlds in Print Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 101–45.

39 García da Orta, *Coloquios dos simples e drogas da Índia* (Goa: Ioannes De Endem, 1563), fol. 29v–30r. Orta seems to have read the Latin version of the *Itinerario* (or the Spanish that derived from it) rather than the original Italian, and may have misread some terms.

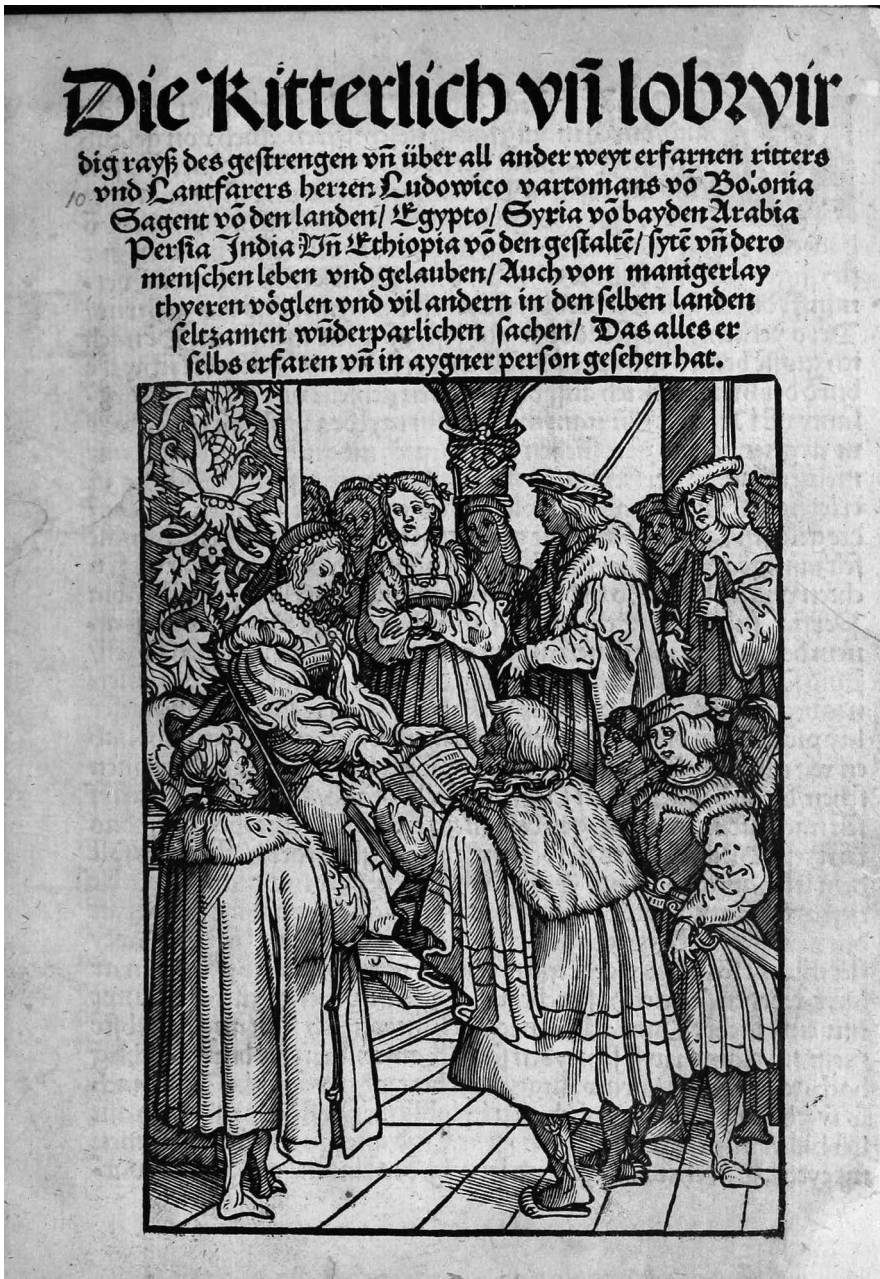


Figure 2.1 Title page of the German translation of Varthema's travel account, illustrated by Jörg Breu, *Die ritterlich und lobwirdig rayss des gestrengen und über all ander weyt erfahren ritters und landtfarers herren Ludowico Vartomans von Bolonia* (Augsburg: Hans Miller, 1515). The public offering of the book to an aristocratic lady helped authorize a text by a man of obscure past who sought to be recognized as a patrician from Bologna. Source: Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

1532), was pointedly cautious in his use of the source: he only reported those events that could be confirmed by Portuguese testimonies – namely those concerning how Varthema joined the Portuguese and offered them important information – but otherwise left the rest, most of the narrative, to “the faith of the author”.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that he had never travelled to India, Barros worked as royal factor at the India Office (*Casa da Índia*) in Lisbon, where he amassed a remarkable amount of primary sources, thus becoming the best informed historian about Asia in Europe of his period.⁴¹

Retrospectively it seems that sixteenth-century Portuguese critics in Lisbon as well as Goa had good reasons to question whether Varthema was entirely trustworthy. However, unlike the case of the armchair ethnologist Boemus, this had little to do with geographical distance, the novelty of the traveller’s observations, or his obscurity: on the contrary, it was their capacity to contrast various sources of information – and in particular their proximity to alternative sources, written and oral, about India and about Varthema – that ultimately enabled them to question the Italian adventurer’s exploitation of the distance between Italy and India to advance his semi-fraudulent tale. In other words, while Boemus’s scepticism was culturally prejudiced, because it relied on traditional written authorities and the uncertainty of the traveller’s socio-cultural standing, Barros and Orta became sceptical from their superior knowledge of the modern historical context.

The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci: the Invention of a Commercial Genre

Even though we have good reasons to question the accuracy of many travel writers who, like Varthema, claimed scientific curiosity as their primary motivation, and their own personal experience and observation as the foundation for their authority, what is certain is the rhetorical importance of such claims. Paradoxically, the role of printing only made the problem more complex, because at the same time that it contributed to fixing a text for a wide readership, it introduced a new agency, with its own commercial and ideological agendas in the development of the genre.

Vespucci’s published letters, the Latin *Mundus Novus* addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici (undated but probably printed in Florence early 1503), and the subsequent *Lettera de Amerigo Vespucci delle isole nuovamente trovate in quattro suoi viaggi* addressed to Piero Soderini (Florence, 1504), provide a case in point, because they appear to have been tampered with, either by Vespucci himself or by a Florentine editor. Thus, they claim more voyages to South America (four in total) than Vespucci is known to have performed from his own manuscript letters (two), and a number of chronological and geographical details seem

40 João de Barros, *Ásia*, vol. 1 (Lisbon: Galharde, 1552), fol. 123r.

41 The *Casa da Índia* managed all the key activities of the Portuguese colonial empire in Asia, including trade, navigation, shipping, and geographical information.

incompatible.⁴² By contrast, we can make perfect sense of the three manuscript letters addressed in Tuscan to his patron in Florence Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici (Vespucci was his commercial agent in Seville), dated 1500, 1501, and 1502.⁴³ Here the navigator appears as a member of the Florentine community in Seville, a man distinguished by his cosmographical expertise and who, as a pilot at the service of the Catholic kings, accompanied Alonso de Ojeda and Juan de la Cosa in their exploration of the Caribbean coast of South America in 1499–1500, looking for a passage towards the East between the mouths of the Amazon and Orinoco rivers.⁴⁴

The following year, Vespucci transferred his services to king Manuel I of Portugal and sailed to the recently discovered Brazil, perhaps as a pilot or cosmographer (he was not the ship's captain).⁴⁵ On this occasion, after a chance encounter in the Cape Verde Islands in West Africa with the returning India fleet led by Pedro Alvares Cabral (whose information about the East was the subject of the second of Vespucci's letters, dated June 1501), Vespucci's ship went on to explore the south-eastern coasts of South America, perhaps in an attempt to find a route towards Malacca and Ptolemy's "Taprobana" (which after talking to Cabral's Jewish interpreter Gaspar da India Vespucci identified with Sumatra).⁴⁶ The letter describing this second voyage during 1501–1502 was especially important for its astronomical observations of the southern hemisphere, and also for its detailed ethnography of the naked cannibals of southern Brazil in the bay

- 42 For a sophisticated introduction to the complicated Vespuccian question, see the introduction by Luciano Formisano to the Spanish edition: Amerigo Vespucci, *Cartas de Viaje*, ed. Luciano Formisano (Madrid: Alianza, 1986), 9–45. The dispute is not settled, but I consider the analysis by Alberto Magnaghi that prioritizes the unpublished manuscript letters still roughly correct: Alberto Magnaghi, *Amerigo Vespucci: Studio Critico*, 2 vols (Rome: Fratelli Treves, 1924–26). See also Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave his Name to America* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2007), 108–34, who largely agrees with Formisano.
- 43 Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici was a banker and a younger cousin to Lorenzo "Il Magnifico" (of the senior branch of the family), and had been educated in Florentine humanist circles alongside Vespucci. After 1494 he had come to exercise great political and cultural influence in Florence as part of the Republican party in opposition to Piero de Medici, the exiled heir of Lorenzo il Magnifico.
- 44 Vespucci, however, after landfall in modern Guyana sailed separately. While Ojeda and Juan de la Cosa sailed westward and explored the coast of modern Venezuela, Vespucci travelled south towards modern Brazil.
- 45 It is not clear whether the commander of this important expedition was Gaspar de Lemos, who had brought news to Portugal of the accidental discovery of Brazil with Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500, or more probably Gonçalo Coelho.
- 46 Although in ancient sources, including Ptolemy, the description and depiction of the island of Taprobana can be associated to modern Sri Lanka, and as such was interpreted by most Arabic writers and by Marco Polo, Vespucci, Varthema and others in the sixteenth century identified Taprobana with Sumatra, and this view prevailed in some of the most influential sixteenth-century maps, such as those by Ramusio's collaborator Giacomo Gastaldi.

of Rio de Janeiro, later known as the Tupinamba. An educated man (son of a notary) who quoted Ptolemy, Dante, and Petrarch, and one of the first to understand the nature of South America as a distinct continent, Vespucci would eventually re-join the services of Castile and settle in Seville as the chief pilot of the House of Trade (*Casa de Contratación*). He also became a business partner of Columbus, who seems to have trusted him with his affairs.⁴⁷

The first problem with the two accounts that were printed in Florence is that the dates of the two recorded voyages were different from those documented elsewhere. In addition Vespucci improbably claimed that he had already sailed to South America in 1497, which means that he had “discovered” the mainland before Columbus himself. Whether composed by Vespucci himself, seeking to enhance his fame (at the expense of his “friend” and rival Columbus), or by someone acting in his name and using his writings with some creativity, the contradictions in the published letters suggest that authentic materials could be altered in order to serve extraneous purposes, one of which was claiming priority in the discovery of new lands (symptomatically, Vespucci never mentions the captains under whom he served). It might be too simplistic to conclude that only the unpublished letters contain authentic material, because it seems certain that Vespucci had kept a more detailed “book” or journal during his journeys, as he repeatedly claimed, and therefore both the unpublished and the published letters probably shared this common source.⁴⁸ Another fragmentary letter written in response to some queries raised by his previous reports among the sceptical patricians of Florence confirms this interpretation, because in his fascinating replies about subjects such as nakedness, climate, and skin colour Vespucci referred to various statements which can be found sometimes in his published and at other times in his unpublished materials.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, it is still the case that the published texts were not entirely accurate, and that their description of Brazil and its inhabitants often departed significantly, in fact and interpretation, from the unpublished letters, whose sober tone is far more plausible. They must therefore be read as a skilful fabrication constructed in Florence from authentic Vespuccian materials. In the case of the *Mundus Novus*, in Latin, the fabricated text was addressed to an international learned elite. This makes it necessary to regard any ethnographic observations not found in the manuscript letters with considerable caution.

Compare his description of the naked cannibals of Brazil in the letter of 1502 addressed to Lorenzo de Pierfrancesco de Medici, based on close observations that, according to Vespucci, lasted 27 days. This was in effect the

47 Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo*, 188–90.

48 Here I follow Formisano (Vespucci, *Cartas*, “Introducción”).

49 That is, the known manuscript letters to his Medici patron contain some but not all the statements referred to in this later exchange, whose contents on the other hand sometimes coincide with material only found in the apocryphal *Mundus Novus*. This letter, first published in 1937, is known as the Ridolfi fragment. For an edition, see *Il Mondo Nuovo di Amerigo Vespucci: scritti vespucciani e para-vespucciani*, ed. Mario Pozzi (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’ Orso, 1993), 93–100.

first detailed account of the Tupinamba, who were to become the most iconic “savages” of the sixteenth century:

They lack any law or any faith, living according to nature, and have no knowledge of the immortality of the soul. They have no private property among them, because everything is held in common. They have no borders between kingdoms or provinces. They have no king, and obey no one: everybody is his own master. They do not administer justice, which they do not need, because they are not ruled by greed.⁵⁰

And later, on the subject of marriage:

Their marriages are not with a single woman, but with as many as they wish and without much ceremony, we have met a man who has ten women. They are jealous of these [...] They are a very prolific people. They have no heirs, because they lack private goods. When their daughters reach the age to procreate, the first to corrupt them has to be the closest male relative except the father, and afterwards, thus corrupted, they marry them.⁵¹

The *Mundus Novus*, combining the two passages, has:

They have no clothes, neither of wool, linen or cotton, since they need them not; neither do they have private goods, but all things are held in common. They live together without king or government, and each man is his own master. They take as many women as they please; and *the son copulates with his mother, the brother with his sister, and any man with the first woman he meets*. They dissolve their marriages as often as they please, and observe no sort of law with respect to them. They have no temples, no religion and are not even idolaters. What more can I say? They live according to nature, and may be called Epicureans rather than Stoics [Figure 2.2].⁵²

Many other passages attest to the tendency of the published versions to erase the idea that there might be social rules, however strange, among the savages, and to exaggerate the elements of sexual disorder, such as incest, with the implication of bestiality and amorality. Vespucci is often made to become

50 I translate from the Italian in *ibid.*, 87.

51 *Ibid.*, 88.

52 *Ibid.*, 114 (my italics). The Epicureans here represent the pursuit of pleasure without restraint, by contrast with Stoic austerity and self-control: animal nature against the rational rules of natural law or religious morality. Vespucci himself repeated in the so-called Ridolfi fragment that he called these men Epicureans because they lacked private goods, laws, or government, and did not care about gold, something his Florentine critics had found hard to believe.



Figure 2.2 Anonymous engraving from the German translation of Vespucci's Letter to Piero Soderini (*Diß Büchlin saget, wie die zwen durchlüchtigsten Herren Her Fernandus K. zu Castilien und Herr Emanuel K. zu Portugal haben das weyte mör ersuchet und findet vil Insulen unnd ein nüwe Welt ... vormals unbekant*, Strasburg: Johann Grüninger, 1509). This illustrated edition was of a letter originally published in Florence that we know made exaggerated claims or had been tampered with.

Source: Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, A: 447.1 Theol. (5).

the witness to gruesome details, especially in relation to cannibalism. Hence, in the *Mundus Novus*:

Those whom they bring home captives from war they preserve, not to spare their lives, but that they may be slain for food; for they eat one another, the victors the vanquished, and among various kinds of meat human flesh is a common foodstuff with them. We can be sure of this fact because fathers

have been seen to eat their children and wives, and I knew a man, whom I also spoke to, who was reputed to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies.⁵³ And I remained twenty-seven days in a certain city (*urbe*) where I saw salted human flesh suspended from beams between the houses, just as with us it is the custom to hang bacon and pork. And I will say more: they themselves wonder why we do not eat our enemies and do not use as food their flesh, which they say is very tasty.⁵⁴

Leaving aside that the use of the word “city” for a Tupi village already reveals the hand of the editor or translator, the manuscript letter is more sober:

Those whom they capture [in war] they keep as prisoners, and they keep them as slaves in their homes; if she is female, they sleep with her, and if he is male, they marry them to their daughters. And at certain times, when a demoniac fury takes possession of them, they invite their relatives and all the people, and they place them in front of them – that is the [captured] mother with the children they had from her – and with certain ceremonies they kill them with arrows, and eat them. And they do the same with the male slaves and the children born from them. And this is certain, because we found in their houses human meat being smoked, a great deal of it, and we bought 10 children from them, male and female, whom they had destined for the sacrifice – or better said, the *malefice*. We told them off, but I do not know whether they will amend their ways.⁵⁵

What is clear from this account, as opposed to the published version, is that the Tupis ate their captives and their descendants, rather than simply their own wives and children, and not casually, but by means of collective ceremonies.

The “authentic” Vespucci of the manuscript letters went on to wonder about the origins of such “bestial” custom, and why people who were not ruled by greed or politics would wage war upon their enemies and treat them so cruelly. The reality described – of a naked man who was cruel and bestial, rather than simple and innocent – was in fact a direct challenge to the myth of the Golden Age, which associated lack of private property with a happy life without worries, and which Peter Martyr, largely inspired by Columbus’s promotional rhetoric, had famously evoked in his letters about Hispaniola.⁵⁶

53 In the manuscript letter Vespucci had also met a man who claimed to have had eaten more than two hundred bodies, so in this case the Latin translator simply exaggerated.

54 *Il Mondo Nuovo*, 116.

55 *Ibid.*, 89.

56 It seems likely that by 1502 Vespucci was familiar with some of Columbus’s writings (at some point he claimed that he had been in charge of his books), but less certain that he had read Martyr’s letters, and there is no evidence of a direct polemic between his “Stoic” Golden Age and Vespucci’s “Epicurean” primitive bestiality. In reality, already the Columbian encounter had quickly developed the two contrasting

Interrogated, the natives claimed that it was simply tradition, and that they were moved by a desire for revenge. The point here is not that the report of anthropophagy was false or misleading. Rather the contrary, it was based on a stay of a few weeks in southern Brazil, and despite Vespucci's limited knowledge of the language, many of the ethnographic details coincide with those offered by other travellers who spent long periods in this area later in the century, such as the mercenary captive Hans Staden and the Calvinist pastor Jean de Léry. Our conclusion therefore must be that there was a degree of manipulation, sometimes crude but more often quite subtle, in the transition from the observer's journal notes to the letters he circulated among his friends and patrons, and from those to the printed texts made available by a publisher to a wider readership. No doubt Vespucci was capable of editing and sensationalizing his own account, but it is hard not to see an editorial hand as well, seeking to enhance impact. After Vespucci, the genre of travel writing can rarely be read without taking into consideration the possibility that printers and editors might have shaped materials provided by observers claiming *autopsie*, most often in order to facilitate commercial success.

Pigafetta in Southeast Asia: Observations, Hearsay, and the Transformation of the Marvellous

The fundamental condition for the evolution of the multifarious European genre of travel writing in the intensively creative period between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries was the exponential growth of original narratives, in the context of a navigational revolution that multiplied opportunities for new encounters, facilitated the creation of long-distance colonial empires, and shortened distances. The marvellous, broadly understood as the extraordinary rather than as the magical or fabulous, did not as such disappear from the genre. However, its scope was reduced in the transition from the isolated account, such as those by Marco Polo or Odoric of Pordenone, to the regularly observed. In the same process, the scope for simply reporting hearsay was also reduced. We could therefore say that distance was not simply physical, but also cultural; not simply a question of how long it took to travel to the East Indies, for example, but also how often it was possible to do so, and in what conditions; finally, how much linguistic, ethnographic, and geographical expertise was accumulated within the West European cultural system by means of the flow of information made possible by an expanding network of overseas trading colonies and religious missions.

To illustrate this, let us briefly consider the quality of information provided by Antonio Pigafetta from Vicenza in the narrative of the first circumnavigation of the world, which began to circulate in various versions in French and Italian in

themes of the innocence of the Tainos and the cannibalism of their Carib predators, a duality strongly conditioned by the rhetorical strategies of Columbus himself in order to maintain the patronage of the Catholic Monarchs.

1524 (only a summary of the former was printed in the sixteenth century).⁵⁷ Pigafetta, who in 1519 had volunteered to sail with Magellan, was an educated observer who kept a travel journal, and miraculously survived the long and dangerous trip. He excelled, for example, at describing valuable plants like the nutmeg tree from the Moluccas, and also recorded basic vocabularies in various native languages, such as Patagonian, Bisayan or Malay. He was being equally informative when he described a custom from the island of Cebu (in the modern Philippines) that many would have considered bizarre or perhaps even shocking, the use of penile implants (*sagra* or *palang*) by Bisayan men in order to enhance the pleasure of women during sex. As he himself could hardly believe it, he sought to examine them personally:

Old and young have placed across their member, near the head, from one side to the other, a nail made of gold, or perhaps with tin, thick as a goose feather, and at both ends of this metal nail some have like a star with pointed heads, others like the head of a cart nail. Many times I sought to see it both in old and young, because I could not believe it.⁵⁸

In a separate chapter, Pigafetta observed that in Java the men courted the ladies by placing a number of little round bells (*sonagli*) under the skin of their member, and would go below their lover's windows and shake it, so that the women immediately descended and made love in order to enjoy feeling and hearing the little bells inside them.⁵⁹

57 Upon the return of the survivors of Magellan's expedition to Spain in 1522, a number of reports began to circulate, notably the printed account by Maximilian of Transylvania (secretary to Charles V) addressed to the Archbishop of Salzburg, first published in Latin in 1523 as *De Moluccis Insulis*. The most detailed account however was by Pigafetta. This exceptional source was written in Italian c.1523/1524, but has only survived in adapted and summarized versions. One was addressed to Louise of Savoy, mother of the French king Francis I, and eventually published in French in an abridged form sometime after 1526. This truncated version, full of translation errors, was the one best known in the sixteenth century (Ramusio, therefore, published a retranslation into Italian). A fuller edition dedicated in 1524 to Philippe Villiers de l'Isle-Adam remained unpublished, although some manuscripts in French have survived. The closest we have to the lost original of this final version is the Italian manuscript preserved in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, only published in the nineteenth century, which I have used for my quotations: Antonio Pigafetta, *La mia longa et pericolosa navigatione: la prima circumnavigazione del globo: 1519-1522*, ed. Luigi Giovannini (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1989). For an attempt to combine the various French and Italian versions see *Le Voyage de Magellan (1519-1522): La relation d'Antonio Pigafetta et autres témoignages*, eds. Xavier de Castro, Jocelyne Hamon, and Luis Filipe Thomaz (Paris: Chandeigne, 2007). Also of value for its critical apparatus is Antonio Pigafetta, *Relazione del Primo Viaggio attorno al Mondo*, ed. Andrea Canova (Padova: Editrice Antenove, 1999).

58 Pigafetta, *La mia longa et pericolosa navigatione*, 131.

59 *Ibid.*, 208.

These observations of peculiar sexual customs were not strictly new, as already in the fifteenth century the Venetian merchant Nicolò Conti, in the account of his Indian travels that he dictated in 1441 to Pope Eugene IV's secretary Poggio Bracciolini (and widely circulated among humanists), had reported a similar use of inserted bells in the city of Ava in Pegu (Burma).⁶⁰ He was even invited by some women to undergo an operation in order to increase the size of his penis, which they made fun of, but he refused on the grounds that he was not willing to suffer pain in order to give pleasure to others. Nor was Pigafetta the last one to observe these practices, because as narratives multiplied throughout the century various other contemporary travellers reported the two variants throughout Southeast Asia, and with particular regularity after the Spanish colonized the Philippines.⁶¹ Hence besides the various unpublished accounts of the customs of the Bisayans by *encomenderos* like Miguel de Loarca or the anonymous compiler of the Boxer Codex of circa 1592 (who even provided an illustration), both the Florentine trader Francesco Carletti in his posthumous *Ragionamenti* (1701) and Antonio de Morga in his *Sucesos de la Islas Filipinas* (1609) made the practice known more widely, usually with a note of explicit condemnation.⁶² Carletti, interestingly, following in the steps of Pigafetta as a sceptical circumnavigator who did not simply rely on hearsay, sought to see the implants personally, and assured his audience (the account was addressed to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinand I) that "if I had not seen it, I would not have dared tell your Lordship, not to be taken as a liar".⁶³

It would therefore seem that travellers who defined themselves as motivated by curiosity constructed their authority by rejecting hearsay when the information was particularly surprising. However, direct witnessing was not always

60 Poggio Bracciolini, *De l'Inde: Les Voyages en Asie de Niccolò de Conti. De Varietate Fortunae Livre IV*, ed. Michèle Guéret-Laferté (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 102. Their size was of a small hazelnut, and according to Conti as many as twelve were surgically inserted.

61 The practice, with its two main variations, a metal nail across the glans with two heads, sometimes used to subject a ring with stars, or little balls sawn under the skin, was widely reported in this period across Southeast Asia, the former especially on the islands, the latter on the mainland. For a discussion of the contemporary European literature on this custom, see Carmen Nocentelli, *Empires of Love: Europe, Asia and the Making of Early Modern Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 35–36.

62 Francesco Carletti, *Ragionamenti di Francesco Carletti Fiorentino sopra le cose da lui vedute ne'suoi viaggi si dell'Indie Occidentali, e Orientali come d'altri paesi* (Florence: Manni, 1701), 148–50. Carletti was in the Philippines in 1596 and offered his report after his return to Florence in 1602. However, his account was only published, heavily edited by Jacopo Carlieri, in 1701. I have used this edition for my quotations. For the same passage in a modern edition of the best manuscript see Francesco Carletti, *Ragionamenti del mio viaggio intorno al mondo*, ed. Adele Dei (Milan: Mursia, 1987), 89.

63 Carletti, *Ragionamenti*, 149. Carletti in fact paid money to some men to have the metal implants shown and explained.

possible. When in the following chapters Pigafetta reported that there were islands near the Moluccas whose natives ate human flesh, another island inhabited by pygmies, who were apparently very affable, and yet another beyond Java – an island called Ocoloro which he himself never reached – where women lived without men and got pregnant from the wind, he was entirely accurate too, in the sense that he was transmitting faithfully what he had been told by an old Malay pilot from Tidore. The same pilot told him about an island where men and women lived underground, ran very fast, wore no clothes and were the size of a cubit (about 46 centimetres), with ears as big as they were tall, so that they used one as a bed and the other as a blanket.⁶⁴ Many of these stories may have sounded plausible in the sense that they were not totally unheard of – other travellers in the Indian Ocean, including Marco Polo, reported similar “marvels”, no doubt echoing the oral culture of the ports of Southeast Asia. Pigafetta’s narrative is similar to Marco Polo’s in the way in which it included both those things he had witnessed, and others he had heard about, often distinguishing them. The problem of credibility, therefore, was for the audience to solve. It was only from the perspective of the critical accumulation of contradictory reports that some of Pigafetta’s information could eventually be understood to be “false”, while the account of some forms of cannibalism and of penile implants was confirmed independently and became “true”. The reliability of the traveller was not the primary issue here: rather, as repeated observations confirmed or denied textual authorities that depended on hearsay, many marvels dissolved and were replaced by “facts”. In a cultural sense, the distance had been shortened through the accumulation of reports.

Conclusion

After considering these various cases, we may need to emphasize that in reality we have to distinguish four different aspects of the problem of credibility: the first one relates directly to the traveller’s honesty – can his (or her) claims to personal witnessing be trusted? Secondly, is the quality of his observations sufficient – how good are his linguistic skills, for example? Third, how reliable are his own sources when he reports hearsay – is, for example, Pigafetta’s Malay pilot simply telling tall tales to a foreigner? Finally, how reliable is any particular text after it has been copied, edited, translated, and printed?

With respect to the first issue, there are seldom any good reasons for a traveller not to claim that his testimony is perfectly honest and authentic, and this was always a commonplace of the genre of travel writing. In the case of the Italians Varthema, Vespucci, and Pigafetta, their own status as members of an educated urban middle class who could read and write (however artificially constructed in the case of Varthema) meant that their observations were invariably dressed in the rhetoric of scientific curiosity, echoing the themes of

64 Pigafetta, *La mia longa e pericolosa navigatione*, 205.

learned humanistic culture. On the other hand, this rhetorical starting point often needed additional authorization, because there could be many reasons for a traveller to exaggerate, to interpret creatively, to be selective, or even to lie, as we have seen in the case of Varthema. Some of these reasons could be personal, like building a career, or claiming originality and priority, an issue which may explain some of Vespucci's more mysterious expeditions; others were commercial, which seems to also have shaped the editing of Vespucci's letters for publication, and perhaps some of Varthema's novella-like episodes. A third source of distortion, which we have not considered here in detail, were political and institutional motivations when adapting information to particular audiences: for example, a conqueror like Cortés, accused of rebellion, had to subtly justify his unilateral actions in Mexico when writing his letters or relations – in theory a descriptive genre - to Charles V. Similarly, the Jesuit letters written from the missions later in the sixteenth century did not simply seek to inform other members of the order and the curious laity, they also had to edify them, emphasizing acts of piety and their hopes of success for example.

Finally, and beyond the more obvious political calculations, rhetorical strategies were often subtly ideological, even unconsciously so, and may have created a bias towards certain kinds of information. We must here consider whether novelty may have been culturally disruptive in some circles – for example, was a humanist cleric like Boemus trying to domesticate cultural variety? But also, from the opposite perspective, was exaggerated exoticism seductive – was a man like Vespucci fascinated by the “Epicurean” lifestyle of the Tupinamba of Brazil? Was Carletti secretly enjoying learning about those Southeast Asian sexual customs he described as diabolical? Did Pigafetta's observation that the Bisayans used penile implants “because their natures were weak” say something about the attitudes of Europeans, who regularly confused technological and military superiority with sexual prowess, believing that local native women preferred them, and whose abuses of the same native women in fact might have led to the surprise attack by the Cebuans on their supposed Christian allies after Magellan's death?⁶⁵

Quite clearly not all travel accounts are identical in the way in which they censored or embellished particular themes. In this respect it may be useful to break down the genre within the same period according to motivation and audience, because what Michele da Cuneo, who joined Columbus for his second voyage, wrote in private to a Genoese friend after returning from the New World could be more explicit and “honest” than what Columbus himself

65 Pigafetta, *La mia longa e pericolosa navigatione*, 131–32. On the reasons why the Europeans were betrayed by their Bisayan Christian allies the jury is out, but the testimony of the Genoese Martino Giudici recorded by Peter Martyr in Spain suggests that the sailors had been sexually abusing native women, and this offended their men “who were jealous” (by contrast Pigafetta's emphasis on the betrayal of a slave interpreter who had been mistreated by the Spanish seems by itself insufficient). For a discussion, see Pigafetta, *Le Voyage*, 410.

wrote when addressing Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in Spain. Hence Cuneo, in his letter of 1495 to Hieronymo Annari, described without embarrassment how he raped a “very pretty” Carib woman given to him by his good friend in the cabin of a ship, while Columbus avoided such themes and suffused his journal and letters with the themes of religious piety and the promise of gold, in this manner seeking to please both his royal patrons.⁶⁶ Thus we need, as part of the history of the genre of travel writing, a history of the cultural mechanisms by which testimonies bearing upon distant novelty were assessed as authentic and authoritative in general and in their particulars. Crucially, as I have shown, this was not simply about judging individuals as honest or mendacious, but also about considering the cultural context for the elaboration, circulation, publication, and reception of texts and images. Between Columbus’s immediate rhetorical needs and the sober assessment of Peter Martyr of Anghiera, an Italian humanist at the court of the Catholic kings who became the principal historian of the discovery of the New World, the interpretative emphasis was transformed, even though for many of his “facts” Peter Martyr relied on the letters and reports by Columbus. It was nonetheless possible for the historian with all his alternative sources – we could say with some additional distance – to doubt that the eyewitness Columbus had actually reached Asia, rather than a new continent.

From the Indies, East and West, via the Iberian Peninsula to Italy, where the reports by Vespucci, Varthema, and Pigafetta were written down and often published, and from Italy on to France, Germany, and England, where many of these works were translated and printed, various distances were crossed – in that respect Europe cannot be treated as a single homogeneous space. However, in the process of crossing distances the texts were also transformed, and new forms of social authorization were sought. As we have seen, these included the possible use of engravings to support the text, a practice which became especially common in Germany, precisely the space more remote from the Indies. Another way of creating an illusion of accuracy was to place the emphasis on cosmographical calculations of latitude and (to the extent that was possible) longitude within the Ptolemaic grid, as Vespucci himself did in his *Mundus Novus*.⁶⁷ The whole history of the genre was shaped by the various strategies used to buttress the authority of the curious traveller and to transform reports of the marvellous – increasingly understood as the new, the extraordinary or the monstrous within nature, rather than the

66 For Cuneo’s passage describing the rape of “una Camballa bellissima, la quale il signor armirante mi donò”, see *Italian reports of America 1493–1522: Accounts by contemporary observers*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 177–78. In the same letter Cuneo praised Columbus as a skilful navigator, but also was in no doubt that the search for gold and profit was his true motivation.

67 See Christine R. Johnson, *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the Strange and the Marvellous* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 47–87, for an insightful discussion of how rhetorically crucial but often illusory this talk of cosmographical precision could be.

miraculous - into truthful observation. In generating credibility, distance may be less important than conditions of production, conditions of reception, and genre conventions. It was widely understood that the principle of "I was there and saw it" could be abused in the search for personal fame, self-justification, or even the bookseller's commercial prospects. However, it could also be scrutinized in the light of other testimonies within the Republic of Letters.

One possibility was for the more educated writer to interrogate the individual traveller – a model example that emerged with force already in the fifteenth century is the manner in which Poggio Bracciolini questioned the testimony of the Venetian merchant Niccolò Conti and other Christian envoys from Central Asia and Ethiopia during the Council of Florence, looking for geographical precision, and also considering possible signs of mendacity. For example, the fact that a Turkish-speaking Nestorian envoy from Central Asia did not ask for money in exchange for providing information was seen as a sign that he was probably honest. Nonetheless, in this case the linguistic barrier proved insurmountable (an Armenian acted as interpreter, but this did not suffice). By contrast, Conti could offer a detailed and cogent account in Italian, even though many of his observations about India, China, and Southeast Asia were (as we have seen) truly surprising.⁶⁸

Poggio's difficulty was that he had few alternative sources. Throughout the sixteenth century the unprecedented density of information available, published or in some cases only available to restricted circles, helped in this task of sorting testimonies into credible and not credible, and identifying obvious plagiarisms. Some particularly well-informed authors and also institutions thus became authoritative, and in turn their prestige generated mechanisms to authorize or challenge further texts. We can include in this category humanist editors of travel accounts like Ramusio and Hakluyt; the official cosmographers and chroniclers connected to imperial institutions such as the *Casa da Índia* in Lisbon or the *Consejo de Indias* in Castile (men like João de Barros, Juan López de Velasco and Antonio de Herrera); or some of the historians of the Jesuit order like Acosta and Maffei, who were able to take advantage of the Society's extraordinary system of production, exchange, and centralization of information in order to produce works of synthesis concerning the West and East Indies of lasting significance.⁶⁹

Other cases remained more ambiguous: the prolific French cosmographer André Thevet, for example, author of the *Cosmographie de Levant* (Lyon, 1554), *Les Singularitez de la France Antarctique* (Paris, 1557), and the *Cosmographie Universelle* (Paris, 1584), all richly illustrated, was without doubt able to access many unique sources of information, and could even claim the status of a witness for a large number of "singularities" in the Levant and in

68 Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology*, 85–123.

69 The Jesuits in fact offer an interesting paradox: often tendentious in their reporting due to their religious zeal and edifying purposes, they nonetheless had privileged access to specialized first-hand information, and a vast network of exchange that facilitated its circulation.

Brazil that allowed him to routinely question ancient writers on the basis of modern experience. However, his reliance on the work of others was excessive, his claims to universal knowledge were widely perceived as exaggerated, and his criteria for interpretation were denounced as dubious. Hence, not surprisingly, his authority was quickly challenged by many of his contemporaries: some of his collaborators and ghost writers, like François de Belleforest, felt cheated of their intellectual work and rebelled against him, targeting Thevet's obviously false claims to having "discovered the whole world" and only relying on his own personal experience;⁷⁰ critics such as Martin Fumée (the translator of Gómara into French), and the Protestant pastor and traveller Jean de Léry, both accused him of mendacity and questioned his status as eyewitness in Brazil, that is in "la France Antarctique" (Thevet's ethnography of that region apparently relied on the reports collected by the authorities of the small French colony via interpreters "gone native", since during his sojourn of a few weeks he fell ill and could personally observe very little); Montaigne referred to him as the kind of man who wrote about things he did not know: having been to Palestine, he now thought he could give reports about the rest of the world;⁷¹ Hakluyt, in turn, made him the archetype of an armchair cosmographer whose false erudition and lack of rigour distorted the quality of genuine reports: in his words, the historically useful genre of travel writing (*peregrinationis historia*) was the opposite of "those weary volumes bearing the titles of universal Cosmography which some men that I could name have published as their own, being indeed most truly and unprofitably amassed and hurled together".⁷² Sound working methods and clarity of exposition were no less important than the status of a writer either as a direct observer, or as a man of learning – and Thevet had the distinction of failing in these two roles.⁷³ The problem, therefore, was the man, not the universal project of "a certain and full discovery of the world" that he shared with his contemporaries.⁷⁴ Paradoxically it was not the claim to the status of an eyewitness (which could be abused), but a rigorous compiler's broader perspective,

70 For details see Frank Lestringant, "Introduction", xxi–xlili, in André Thevet, *Cosmographie de Levant*, ed. Frank Lestringant (Geneva: Droz, 1985). Similarly, the antiquarian Mathurin Héret complained of lack of recognition for his work of classical erudition on *Les Singularitez de la France Antarctique*. Thevet's reply to his armchair critics was to invent fictional voyages in order to appropriate the observations made by other travellers.

71 Montaigne, "Des Cannibals", 317–18. Montaigne, like Hakluyt, did not name Thevet, but the target was obvious.

72 Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations*, fol. 3v (I modernize the spelling).

73 Thevet's status as royal cosmographer during a period of bitter religious and political conflict stimulated some of these attacks, at a time when France lacked a coherent maritime policy. The issue, however, was ultimately his mendacity and lack of intellectual cogency. For a discussion of Thevet's cosmographical vision and why it became quickly anachronistic, see Frank Lestringant, *Mapping the Renaissance World: The Geographical Imagination in the Age of Discovery* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 9–11 and 17–19.

74 Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations*, fol. 3v.

and the distance it offered from the potentially dubious motivations of an eyewitness that, in the end, gave an armchair editor like Ramusio the authority to identify the modern texts produced by Varthema, Vespucci, and Pigafetta as generally authentic, and include them in his canonical collection.⁷⁵ The mechanisms to assess problems of quality of observation, geographical distance, and subjectivity would be refined throughout the early modern centuries, but by the end of the sixteenth century the foundations had been laid out.

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75 Interestingly, however, Ramusio often had to rely on printed editions and experienced some difficulty in finding the best texts, notably in the case of Pigafetta, which (as we noted) he retranslated from the published French summary. For Varthema he sought to correct the original Italian with the Spanish version, in turn derived from the Latin – not necessarily an improvement! For an analysis of his linguistic and editorial choices see Fabio Romanini, "Se fussero più ordinate, e meglio scritte ...": *Giovanni Battista Ramusio correttore ed editore delle "Navigazioni et Viaggi"* (Rome: Viella, 2007), and the extensive study by Fiona Lejosne, *Écrire le Monde depuis Venise au XVIe siècle: Giovanni Battista Ramusio et les Navigazioni et Viaggi* (Geneva: Droz, 2021), especially 293–364.

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