

Between Miracles and Observation: Jordanus's Mirabilia and the Reshaping of the Medieval Oriental Narrative

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Abstract

This paper examines *Mirabilia Descripta* (1329) by the Dominican missionary Jordanus Catalanus to explore how late medieval Europe reimagined the “East” at the intersection of religion and empirical observation. Focusing on the text’s narrative strategies, knowledge classification, and intertextual networks, it traces the semantic shift of *mirabilia* from “miraculous wonders” to “empirical knowledge.” The study argues that *Mirabilia Descripta* represents a crucial moment in medieval geographic writing, bridging theological discourse and experiential observation, while anticipating the emergence of modern empirical geography and ethnographic narration. This analysis clarifies the work’s significance in the history of medieval geographic imagination and cross-cultural knowledge transmission.

Keywords

Jordanus Catalanus, *mirabilia descripta*, oriental narratives, *mirabilia*, empirical knowledge

1. Introduction

Since the thirteenth century, the rise of the Mongol Empire and the expansion of Eurasian communication networks brought about a profound transformation in Europe’s understanding of the East. Missionaries, merchants, and envoys increasingly traveled eastward, promoting the accumulation and circulation of geographical knowledge while also giving rise to diverse forms of writing about the Orient. Within this broader shift in knowledge production, the *Mirabilia Descripta*, written around 1329 by the Dominican missionary Jordanus Catalani, emerged as a significant work that combined a religious perspective with an empirical mode of observation. Compared with the writings of Marco Polo and Odoric of Pordenone, Jordanus was not merely a traveler but also a systematic recorder. Although he used “marvels” as the organizing thread of his narrative, his ultimate concern was the production of knowledge. In doing so, he created a distinctive tension between accounts of miracles and empirical observation.

For a long time, however, scholarly interpretations of the *Mirabilia Descripta* have remained largely confined to the fields of missionary history and textual criticism. Its narrative strategies, mechanisms of knowledge classification, and position within the broader tradition of medieval geographical imagination have yet to receive systematic analysis. Through close reading and intertextual analysis, this study aims to demonstrate how the *Mirabilia Descripta* reshaped the meaning of the traditional category of *mirabilia*, thereby

facilitating a cognitive shift from the witnessing of miracles to the construction of empirical knowledge. More specifically, this article addresses three central questions. How did Jordanus establish the authority of empirical observation through his distinction between “personal witness” and “hearsay”? How did he systematize knowledge through the tripartite structure of geography, material products, and religion? And how did the writing strategies of the *Mirabilia Descripta* both reflect and contribute to the transformation of late medieval European perceptions of the East?

This article argues that the *Mirabilia Descripta* not only inherited the rhetorical tradition of “marvel literature,” but also promoted the emergence of a more empirical mode of geographical writing through its structural organization and linguistic strategies. The text functioned not only as a record of the Eastern world, but also as a reconstruction of ways of knowing. Within a framework shaped by faith, it introduced the seeds of rational inquiry, and through the experience of wonder, transformed marvels into knowledge. From this perspective, the present study seeks to reposition the *Mirabilia Descripta* within the intersecting histories of medieval knowledge production and cross-cultural transmission, while also clarifying its historical significance as a crucial cognitive nexus.

2. Mission and Writing: Jordanus’s Eastern Experience and the Composition of the *Mirabilia Descripta*

Jordanus Catalani, also commonly known as Jordanus of Sévérac, was born approximately between 1275 and 1280 and occupied a central position in the history of Dominican missions to the East in the early fourteenth century. His significance lies not only in the vast geographical scope of his missionary journeys across Eurasia, but also in his role as a key intermediary linking the Latin Christian world with the civilizations of the Indian Ocean littoral.

He was born in Occitanie, in the town of Sévérac-le-Château. His surname “Catala,” which in Occitan means “Catalan,” suggests that his family may have had connections with Catalonia. According to local archival evidence, several individuals bearing the surname “Catala” lived in the Sévérac region during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries [14]. One figure named Jordan Catala was active between 1286 and 1318 and may have belonged to the same family as the missionary Jordanus [5]. Although these traces are insufficient to establish his exact origins with certainty, they collectively reinforce the view that he emerged from an urban social background rather than from the feudal nobility.

During his youth, Jordanus received training within the Dominican Province of Toulouse and likely studied at the University of Toulouse, where he undertook systematic instruction in scholastic philosophy, theology, and classical rhetoric [6]. In the thirteenth century, the Dominican Order actively promoted missionary work in the East, particularly through its important base at Sultaniyya in Persia. During his education within the order, Jordanus may already have acquired knowledge of Persian and accepted the missionary vocation that prepared him culturally and linguistically for his later work in Persia and India [10].

Around the 1310s, he departed from the Mediterranean world and entered Persia through Armenia. He initially resided at the Dominican mission in Tabriz, which at the time served as both the political and commercial center of the Ilkhanate and an important site of interaction between Latin missionaries, Eastern Christians, and Muslims. Around 1320, he traveled southward along the Persian Gulf and embarked on his missionary journey to the Indian subcontinent [2]. In 1321, together with the friar Thomas of Tolentino and several companions, he sailed from Persia across the Arabian Sea and arrived at Thane on the western coast of India. Soon afterward, Thomas and his companions were executed by local authorities as a result of religious conflict, while Jordanus himself survived [11]. This event profoundly shaped his understanding of the risks of missionary work and the complexities of religious confrontation within non-Christian societies.

Afterward, he continued his activities across southern and western India, traveling through regions such as Gujarat and Surat. He maintained close contact with the Saint Thomas Christians and sent two Latin letters from India, dated October 12, 1321 and January 24, 1323 respectively, to his Dominican companions in Persia in order to report on missionary developments [7]. These letters constitute some of the earliest surviving European firsthand accounts of the society, religions, and natural environment of India’s western coast, combining the functions of missionary reporting and empirical observation.

Around 1324, Jordanus arrived at Kollam, also referred to in Latin sources as Columbum or Quilon, where he established a missionary center [11]. On April 8, 1330, Pope John XXII formally appointed him Bishop of Columbum through the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*. His jurisdiction extended across India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and parts of Southeast Asia. This appointment not only established Jordanus as the first Latin bishop in India, but also signaled the formal incorporation of the Indian Ocean region into the universal pastoral and administrative framework of the Roman Church [11]. His responsibilities included coordinating relations between the Saint Thomas Christians of southern India and the papacy, while also assisting the diplomatic and ecclesiastical affairs of the archdiocese of Sultaniyya. In this sense, his role extended beyond that of a conventional missionary and positioned him as an active agent in the eastward expansion of ecclesiastical institutions.

Jordanus's prolonged residence in the East enabled him to develop a mode of writing centered on the processes of observation, recording, and interpretation. The *Mirabilia Descripta* was the culmination of this accumulated experience. The work provides detailed descriptions of India's natural environment, social customs, and religious practices and may be regarded as a representative example of medieval missionary geography. Scholars generally agree that the text was composed between 1329 and 1338, possibly during his second journey to the East or while returning to Europe. After this period, historical records no longer mention his activities, leading scholars to assume that he died either in India or during the return voyage [5].

The life and writings of Jordanus provide indispensable evidence for understanding religious and intellectual exchanges across Eurasia in the late Middle Ages. He lived at a historical moment shaped by the intersection of European geographical expansion, missionary ambition, and institutionalized systems of knowledge transmission. His travels across Persia, Armenia, and the Indian Ocean world exemplify the characteristic features of what may be termed "missionary geography." Unlike traditional pilgrimage narratives centered on Jerusalem, Jordanus expanded his perspective toward a much broader maritime world, transforming the East from the "periphery of the Holy Land" into a space integrated within the universal Church. As William H. McNeill and other scholars have suggested, Jordanus's writings reveal an early form of "universal ecclesiastical geography," a knowledge structure that connected the intelligibility of the world with the expansion of Christian evangelization [12]. Consequently, Jordanus represents not only a transition from pilgrimage to missionary enterprise, but also the emergence of a new epistemological model in which empirical observation and religious interpretation became closely intertwined. The study of Jordanus therefore contributes to the reconstruction of Dominican missionary practice and intellectual networks in the fourteenth century, while also offering an important case study for examining cross-cultural interaction between the medieval Christian world and Asian societies.

3. The Order of Marvels: Structure and Writing Strategies in the *Mirabilia Descripta*

As its title suggests, the *Mirabilia Descripta* belongs to the literary tradition of "collections of marvels" that extended from Greco-Roman antiquity into the medieval period. Unlike earlier *mirabilia* literature centered primarily on visions, monsters, and fantastical beings, however, the marvels described by Jordanus Catalani gradually move away from the realm of pure fantasy toward a mode of writing grounded in experience and observation. Although the text still mentions traditional motifs such as Amazons, cynocephali, griffins, and unicorns, Jordanus generally treats these accounts with caution and skepticism. He relegates such legendary beings to the distant margins of the "Third India" or the mysterious regions of Ethiopia, thereby signaling a deliberate distancing from the classical system of marvels. By contrast, he devotes considerable attention to firsthand descriptions of natural phenomena, animals, plants, and local customs. In Jordanus's view, the true marvel no longer resides in mythology, but in the visible realities of the world itself — a world that can be observed, recorded, and verified.

3.1 The Structure and Rhythm of Geographical Narrative

Although relatively brief in length, the *Mirabilia Descripta* is highly structured and densely informative. The work consists of sixteen chapters covering a wide range of subjects, including natural geography, flora and fauna, religious customs, social organization, and political institutions. Its geographical narrative follows a spatial pattern that moves outward from the familiar toward the distant and then gradually returns. The opening section (chapters 1–3) focuses on the Mediterranean, Armenia, and Persia, thereby establishing the

narrative within the boundaries of a relatively familiar world. The central section (chapters 4–6) concentrates on “Lesser India,” “Greater India,” and the “Third India,” which together form the core landscape of Eastern marvels. The later chapters (7–14) shift toward regions such as “Greater Arabia,” “Great Tartary,” and Georgia, presenting a more complex image of foreign civilizations. Finally, the concluding chapters (15–16) return once again to matters associated with the Mediterranean frontier, thereby completing the narrative cycle.

This “radiating and returning” structure is not merely a geographical arrangement but also a form of theological ordering. The narrative begins from the known Christian world, passes through lands associated with non-Christians, and ultimately returns symbolically to the center of faith. The movement from center to periphery and back again creates a metaphorical path of redemption, transforming geographical space into a hierarchical spiritual landscape.

Within the narrative itself, Jordanus frequently employs the Latin expressions *vidi* (“I have seen”) and *dicitur* (“it is said”) in order to distinguish between firsthand experience and hearsay [11]. This distinction reveals a conscious awareness of empirical writing practices. Although Jordanus was not an empiricist in the modern sense, such differentiation nevertheless marks a significant transition from narratives of miracle toward narratives of observation. This tendency is particularly evident in Chapter Eight, “Concerning the Great Tartar,” where he describes the ruler of Great Tartary in strikingly positive terms, portraying him as wealthy, just, diligent, courteous, and magnificently dressed [11]. He also provides detailed accounts of paper currency, porcelain production, and funeral customs. The balanced and relatively neutral tone of these descriptions recalls the writings of Marco Polo and Odoric of Pordenone. More importantly, it demonstrates that the “East” in Jordanus’s writing is not represented solely as a realm of strangeness and terror, but rather as a civilization possessing order, rationality, and human dignity.

3.2 From Geographical Description to a Missionary Vision

The organization of the text also reveals a clear missionary-geographical purpose. In chapters four through six, Jordanus’s discussion of the “Three Indias” repeatedly emphasizes the survival and renewal of Christianity within non-Christian lands. For example, he provides detailed descriptions of the Saint Thomas Christians, praises the relative tolerance of local non-Christian communities, and expresses optimism regarding the future possibility of large-scale conversion. These passages are closely connected with the missionary strategies of the papacy, as reflected in the letters of Pope John XXII and the overseas activities of the Franciscan and Dominican orders. Jordanus’s objective was therefore not simply descriptive. Rather, he sought to establish a geographical foundation for a universal missionary vision of the Church. As Robert Silverberg has argued, the *Mirabilia Descripta* may be understood as “the textual component of a Franciscan world atlas,” in which geographical writing and religious expansion are fundamentally intertwined [18].

It is also significant that Jordanus organizes his chapters not according to physical distance alone, but according to degrees of spiritual proximity and concentrations of marvels. The most distant Eastern regions, especially Greater India and Great Tartary, contain the greatest density of miraculous and extraordinary descriptions. This reflects the enduring medieval tradition of *mirabilia* literature, in which distant lands were imagined as privileged spaces of divine manifestation. Such territories functioned simultaneously as objects of curiosity and as arenas for spiritual testing. Henry Yule once suggested that the structure of the *Mirabilia Descripta* may imply a “pilgrimage-like path of reading,” beginning in the Christian world, passing through foreign marvels, and ultimately returning to the center of faith [11].

From the perspective of textual intention, the arrangement of the *Mirabilia Descripta* reveals a geographical imagination centered on the accessibility of salvation. The narrative begins in the familiar regions of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, moves through Armenia and Persia as ancient borderlands of Christianity, advances into India and Tartary as domains of non-Christian peoples, and finally returns toward regions such as Georgia and Asia Minor that once again approach the spiritual center of Christendom. This cyclical movement corresponds closely to the symbolic model of medieval “universal ecclesiastical geography,” in which descriptions of geographical expansion simultaneously demonstrated the potential universality of Christian salvation [7]. In this sense, the *Mirabilia Descripta* is not merely a geographical treatise but also a theological narrative. It transforms the writing of marvels into a strategy for legitimizing faith, thereby incorporating the “strangeness” of foreign lands into the rational order of universal Christianity.

3.3 The Circulation of the Text and Its Modern Rediscovery

The textual history and scholarly transmission of the *Mirabilia Descripta* reflect the characteristic trajectory of many medieval works from private manuscript circulation within religious orders to modern rediscovery within the contexts of geography and Oriental studies, and finally to contemporary reinterpretation through interdisciplinary scholarship. The transmission history of the text itself may therefore be understood as a six-century-long “journey of knowledge.”

The earliest surviving Latin manuscript was probably copied between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Its style of writing suggests origins within the manuscript traditions of religious houses in northern Italy. The text was first published in 1839 by the French scholar Coquebert-Montbret in the *Recueil de Voyages et de Mémoires*. The edition was based on a fourteenth-century parchment manuscript from the collection of Baron Walckenaer [11]. Later, the French sinologist Henri Cordier noted in *Les Voyages de Jordanus* that the manuscript originally circulated within Franciscan and Dominican missionary networks and that certain sections had at times been mistakenly attributed to Odoric or other missionaries. Marginal annotations and geographical corrections contained within the manuscript further reveal continuous revision and supplementation by later readers and copyists [2].

The modern scholarly revival of the *Mirabilia Descripta* began with the publication of Henry Yule’s English translation in 1863. Through careful textual comparison and geographical identification, Yule established the author’s identity as Jordanus of Sévérac and corrected the earlier misconception that he was “Jordanus the Catalan.” Yule argued that although the work did not provide major geographical discoveries, it represented one of the earliest examples of “religious geography” in Europe and revealed the institutional presence of the Latin Church in India during the early fourteenth century [11]. According to Yule, Jordanus was “not a scientist,” yet he possessed an “organ of wonder,” an ability to observe situated between faith and experience that granted his writing a distinctive epistemological significance.

At the same time, Yule’s interpretation also reflected the colonial intellectual climate of the nineteenth century. In the conclusion of his preface, he asserted that “unless India becomes the land of Christ, there is no hope of resurrection.” This statement reveals the dual identity of Yule as both missionary-minded scholar and Orientalist. While he admired medieval marvel writing, he also used it to reaffirm the religious assumptions of the imperial age. Consequently, Yule’s translation functioned not only as a textual recovery, but also as an ideological reconstruction that granted the *Mirabilia Descripta* renewed scholarly legitimacy within modern Orientalist discourse.

During the twentieth century, Henri Cordier further consolidated the text’s importance in the study of medieval geography and missionary history through works such as *Bibliotheca Sinica* and *Les Voyages de Jordanus*. Cordier argued that the text’s composition was closely linked to the papal missionary programs of the thirteenth century and represented a transition from miracle narrative toward geographical observation. Although rooted in religious belief, the work increasingly relied upon methods of observation, comparison, and inductive reasoning in its representation of foreign spaces. Meanwhile, the British historian Peter Jackson reinterpreted Jordanus within the broader history of Eurasian exchange in *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410*. He identified the *Mirabilia Descripta* as a crucial source for understanding information networks and ecclesiastical communication systems during the era of the Mongol Empire [10].

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the *Mirabilia Descripta* had also become integrated into the fields of travel narrative studies and postcolonial scholarship. Robert Silverberg associated the text with legends of Eastern Christian kingdoms in *The Realm of Prester John*, arguing that it continued the tradition of “biblical geography” through which unknown lands were symbolically incorporated into the universal framework of salvation history [18]. Similarly, scholars such as Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Felipe Fernández-Armesto have emphasized that the *Mirabilia Descripta* represents a transitional form between marvel writing and empirical geography. Although constrained by rhetorical and theological conventions, the text nevertheless reveals early tendencies toward empirical observation.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholarship on the *Mirabilia Descripta* has continued to expand through new translations and critical editions. The Catalan edition translated and edited by Jordi Joan Baños has provided an important foundation for research within Iberian academic contexts. At the same time, the study *Une image de l’Orient au XIVe siècle: les Mirabilia descripta de Jordan Catala de Sévérac* [5],

completed in 2005 at the *École des chartes* by Christine Gadrat, has been praised by Thomas Tanase as “destined to become the authoritative edition” [19]. Gadrat not only conducted a meticulous textual analysis but also explored, from the perspectives of iconography and cultural history, the ways in which Jordanus constructed his image of the East. Her work further strengthened the importance of the *Mirabilia Descripta* within the fields of medieval travel literature and cross-cultural studies. Together, these recent scholarly contributions have deepened and broadened the interpretation of this remarkable medieval text.

In sum, the *Mirabilia Descripta* is not merely a medieval collection of marvels, but also a crucial node in the production and circulation of knowledge. Its textual history mirrors the transformation of medieval learning into modern scholarship. From monastic manuscripts to Orientalist translations, and from religious testimony to cultural analysis, the writings of Jordanus have continued to be rediscovered and reinterpreted across changing intellectual contexts.

4. From “Miracle” to “Knowledge”: The Semantic Transformation of *Mirabilia* and the Emergence of Empirical Writing

4.1 The Semantics and Cognitive Function of “Marvels”

The term *mirabilia* derives from the Latin verb *mirari*, meaning “to wonder” or “to marvel,” and fundamentally refers to things that inspire astonishment or admiration. In both classical and medieval contexts, *mirabilia* occupied an ambiguous space between miracle and natural wonder. It could refer simultaneously to manifestations of divine power and to unfamiliar phenomena found in nature or in distant lands. In the Latin translation of the Bible, the phrase *mirabilia Deispecifically* denoted the “wonders of God,” carrying a strong theological significance as a linguistic expression of the relationship between faith and miracle. By the medieval period, however, especially within the tradition of *mirabilia mundi* literature, the semantic range of *mirabilia* gradually expanded to include geographical wonders, natural anomalies, and legendary accounts. It became an important discursive framework through which the unknown world could be interpreted and organized. In other words, *mirabilia* was not merely a religious category, but a composite concept situated at the intersection of theology, natural philosophy, and narrative rhetoric. Its ambiguity and flexibility enabled it to function as a bridge between religious cognition and empirical observation.

On the one hand, the concept preserved the tradition of miracle narratives by allowing travelers and writers to affirm divine authority and the order of creation through the language of marvels. On the other hand, it also provided a legitimate mode of expression for empirical observation, enabling foreign lands to be represented as knowable and describable realities. As Mary B. Campbell has argued, medieval travel narratives may be understood as a form of “theological empiricism,” in which the traveler’s witness functioned simultaneously as religious testimony and empirical report. Within this discursive structure, marvels became a rhetorical instrument that legitimized experiential statements. Through the narration of wonder, authors were able both to interpret the world theologically and to record it empirically [1].

From the perspective of cognition, marvels gradually evolved into an important engine of knowledge production. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have demonstrated that from the twelfth century onward, wonder increasingly became institutionalized as a mode of understanding the world. The recording and classification of marvels no longer functioned merely as supplements to faith, but emerged as essential methods for comprehending the order of nature [3]. Similarly, Anthony Grafton has emphasized that medieval practices of collecting extraordinary stories and ancient texts laid important cultural and methodological foundations for early modern scholarship [8]. By the late Middle Ages, therefore, *mirabilia* had ceased to function solely as evidence of divine miracles and instead became a cognitive mechanism that stimulated observation, documentation, and classification. This gradual semantic and methodological shift from marvels to *scientia* marked a profound transformation within the medieval system of knowledge itself.

The *Mirabilia Descripta* stands as a representative text of this epistemological transition. As a Dominican missionary, Jordanus Catalani initially approached the East from the perspective of religious evangelization. Yet during his travels, he increasingly adopted strategies grounded in empirical observation. He frequently employed expressions such as *ut vidi* (“as I have seen”) and *ut audiui a fide dignis* (“as I heard from trustworthy persons”) in order to distinguish firsthand experience from reported information. Through this distinction, he established a form of epistemic authority rooted in perception and experience (*auctoritas per experientiam*).

Unlike the scholastic tradition, which relied primarily upon textual authority and patristic sources (*auctoritas per textum*), Jordanus strengthened the credibility of his narrative through the perspective of the eyewitness. By continually invoking the reader's sense of wonder, he transformed marvels into both a rhetorical strategy for the spread of faith and a medium for the production of geographical and ethnographic knowledge.

4.2 Jordanus's Empirical Strategies

As a missionary, Jordanus demonstrated remarkable attentiveness to the religions, customs, and natural resources of the peoples he encountered in the East. His interests, however, were highly selective. Although contact with Eastern Christian communities must have been important to his work, he devoted relatively little attention to them. Instead, he adopted a posture of detached yet careful observation, offering vivid descriptions of Hindu and Parsi rituals. Significantly, he rarely judged these religious practices directly. His concern lay less with the truth or falsity of doctrine than with ritual practice itself and with the people who performed it. As a result, the reader senses that the true focus of his narrative is humanity rather than dogma.

A similar precision and sense of wonder characterize his descriptions of local customs, food, domesticated animals, and plant life. Jordanus recorded a wide variety of Indian flora and fauna, and his detailed discussions of elephants in particular reveal a deep curiosity about the natural world of the East.

Jordanus's originality becomes especially clear in the way he negotiated the tension between inherited literary traditions and personal experience. He openly declared that his work aimed to describe unusual things. Yet whenever such marvels threatened to exceed the boundaries of plausibility, his tone became restrained and cautious. In Greece, for example, he found little worth recording, whereas his descriptions became increasingly detailed as he traveled farther east. Even so, his narrative remained anchored within the realm of experiential credibility. Although he rarely cited the Bible or ecclesiastical authorities directly, he nevertheless sought to preserve many legendary motifs traditionally associated with the East. His solution was to assign these myths to clearly demarcated geographical zones, particularly the so-called "Third India," while explicitly stating that he had never personally visited these regions and knew of them only through reliable testimony. Through this strategy, he successfully distinguished between observed reality and inherited legend, satisfying his readers' expectations of marvels while preserving the credibility of his experiential narrative.

This balance is particularly evident in his discussion of the unicorn. In describing "Lesser India," Jordanus refers to an animal called the Rhinoceros, which resembled a horse and possessed a curved horn on its forehead. Yet he carefully emphasizes that this creature was "not the unicorn" [11]. The "true unicorn," by contrast, is relocated to the distant "Third India," alongside dragons and the giant bird known as the rukh. There, he writes, "in this land of India are found the true unicorns, shaped like large horses, with a single horn upon the forehead, short, thick, sharp, and solid." This narrative strategy reflects a subtle compromise. Jordanus remained faithful to his own observations by distinguishing the rhinoceros from the mythical unicorn, yet he also preserved the imaginative power of traditional legend by situating the unicorn within a remote and inaccessible realm. In doing so, he created an intermediate space between empirical reality and inherited fantasy.

This approach contrasts sharply with the stronger realism of Marco Polo. In his travel account, Marco Polo describes the "unicorns" of Sumatra as ugly creatures with the skin of buffaloes, legs like elephants, and black horns, which delighted in wallowing in mud and resembled wild boars [13], in other words, rhinoceroses stripped entirely of mythical grandeur. Jordanus, by contrast, chose a strategy of coexistence rather than demystification. His narrative expanded geographical knowledge while still preserving the poetic and symbolic dimension of marvel literature.

Jordanus employed a similar distinction between experience and legend in his discussion of the Earthly Paradise. He explicitly located Paradise between the "Third India" and Ethiopia, in a region he himself had never visited. He described four rivers flowing from Paradise, carrying gold and precious stones, while dragons dwelling near one of these rivers supposedly left behind bones and jewels that eventually came into the possession of the Ethiopian ruler known as Prester John. These descriptions demonstrate that Jordanus did not simply repeat traditional legends uncritically. Rather, he organized them within a carefully defined framework that clearly separated empirical observation from unverifiable myth. In this way, he maintained a crucial equilibrium between wonder and credibility.

The broader logic underlying Jordanus's narrative strategy may be understood through the interconnected principles of testimony, measurement, and difference.

First, at the level of testimony (*testimonium*), Jordanus consistently emphasized his own firsthand experience and the reliability of his sources. Expressions such as "I saw with my own eyes" or "I learned from trustworthy persons" establish a foundation of narrative authenticity. This rhetoric of witnessing continued the devotional logic of medieval pilgrimage narratives, in which testimony reinforced faith, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for a new form of empirical authority. As Valerie I. J. Flint has argued, medieval marvel narratives traditionally relied upon chains of authority in order to validate their truthfulness [4]. Jordanus, however, internalized authority within the experience of the individual observer. He reorganized the visible world of the East through the eyes of the traveler rather than through the doctrinal framework of the missionary. This experiential witnessing not only gave the text a stronger sense of reality, but also enabled the transformation of marvels into objects of knowledge.

Second, at the level of measurement (*mensuratio*), Jordanus introduced quantitative language in order to define and compare spaces, resources, and customs. He frequently employed expressions such as "a certain number of days' journey," "richer in gold than the kingdoms of Europe," or "twice the height of ordinary men." Through such comparisons, marvelous phenomena were incorporated into a measurable cognitive system. As Mary B. Campbell has observed, measurement in medieval geographical writing was itself a form of intellectual power. By introducing numbers, proportions, and spatial calculations, marvels were repositioned within a rational order. Jordanus's narrative technique therefore marked a further secularization of the semantic meaning of *mirabilia*. The marvelous no longer referred solely to divine miracles, but increasingly to observable and measurable forms of difference.

Finally, at the level of difference (*differentia*), Jordanus organized Eastern products, customs, and religions through strategies of comparison that situated them at the boundaries of European knowledge systems. Statements such as "their faith is contrary to ours," "stones grow within their waters," or "their trees bear silver" preserved the exotic appeal of marvel narratives while simultaneously reinforcing a Western-centered perspective of knowledge through contrast and differentiation. Yet this construction of difference was not entirely exclusionary. Rather, it constituted a fundamental principle of medieval empirical classification. As Anthony Pagden has argued, the discourse of difference in European travel writing functioned as a mechanism of knowledge production through which the world could be reorganized into a comprehensible whole [1]. In this sense, Jordanus's text represents an intermediate stage in the transformation of marvels into empirical geographical knowledge.

Taken together, the *Mirabilia Descripta* is far more than a simple collection of curiosities. It is a representative text that reflects the transformation of European knowledge paradigms during the fourteenth century. Although still clothed in the language of marvels, the work quietly advanced a new mode of cognition through the self-validation of testimony, the rational framing of measurement, and the epistemological organization of difference [8]. In this process, Jordanus not only recorded a richly varied Eastern world, but also demonstrated, through his cautious and innovative prose, how late medieval Europeans gradually attempted to measure with the tools of experience a distant world that had long been defined by myth and miracle.

5. Intertextuality and Inheritance: The Position of the *Mirabilia Descripta* within the Genealogy of Medieval Geographical Imagination

Within the medieval literary tradition of *mirabilia*, the *Mirabilia Descripta* of Jordanus Catalani did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it formed part of a broader intertextual network that connected it with both earlier and contemporary writings. This intertextuality is especially visible in descriptions of certain exotic peoples, such as the *Cynocephali* and the *Pygmies*, both of which functioned as recurring cross-cultural motifs within medieval geographical imagination.

As early as the travel account of Odoric of Pordenone, the inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands were described as people with human faces and canine features who worshipped oxen, displayed courage, and practiced cannibalism [15]. Odoric nevertheless noted that their ruler governed justly and allowed foreign travelers to move safely through the region. Similarly, Marco Polo located the *Cynocephali* in the Andaman Islands,

describing the women as beautiful while portraying the men as dog-headed cannibals [13]. Comparable accounts also appeared in the writings of Ibn Battuta [9]. Jordanus inherited this traditional motif, yet he relocated it to the “Third India” and attempted to integrate it into a more systematic geographical framework.

A similar intertextual relationship may be observed in the descriptions of the Pygmies. Odoric wrote that although these people were physically small, they nevertheless possessed rational souls [20]. Jordanus likewise described a group living on Java who were no taller than children of three or four years of age, covered in hair, and dwelling in forests and mountains [11]. Yet neither writer treated these peoples simply as monstrous non-human beings. Instead, both attempted to redefine them through categories of rationality and embodied experience. This shift reflects a broader cognitive transition within medieval marvel literature, moving gradually toward empiricism and away from pure mythological representation.

Such transformation becomes even more apparent in the overall structure of the *Mirabilia Descripta*. Unlike the narrative method of Marco Polo, whose account follows the linear logic of travel and relies upon the authority of personal visitation “I was there”, Jordanus abandoned the framework of sequential journeying and reorganized his material into a tripartite structure of geography, material products, and religion. This arrangement creates a layered progression from material realities to systems of belief. For example, in his discussion of India, he first describes products such as pearls, diamonds, and frankincense, then turns to local customs and notions of chastity, and finally addresses religious practices. Through this structure, marvels cease to depend solely upon personal anecdote and instead become integrated into a more systematic framework of knowledge. As Mary B. Campbell has observed, Jordanus “begins with wonder but ends with classification” [1]. This act of classification was not merely a method of organizing information, but also a rhetorical strategy for legitimizing knowledge itself. Through rationally ordered narrative structures, marvels were transformed into comprehensible and transmissible forms of world knowledge.

Christine Gadrat has further argued that although Jordanus physically traveled in the East, his writing remained deeply rooted within the intertextual tradition of marvel literature. On the one hand, he presented himself as an eyewitness narrator. On the other hand, he consciously adopted narrative models familiar to his audience, thereby creating a productive tension between personal experience and inherited literary conventions. His linguistic style also reveals important cross-cultural dimensions. His concise Latin prose occasionally incorporated Romance and Eastern linguistic elements. The early use of the term *porcellana* for porcelain, for instance, reflects the close relationship between geographical knowledge and linguistic transmission [6]. This linguistic hybridity was not merely a stylistic feature but also reveals the social pathways through which knowledge circulated. Through monastic copying, oral retelling, and translation, the *Mirabilia Descripta* became a shared “text of Eastern knowledge” among religious communities and contributed to the formation of a broader late medieval “community of Oriental narratives.”

The intertextual relationship between Jordanus and Odoric of Pordenone is especially revealing of Jordanus’s rhetorical position. Odoric’s *Itinerarium* largely centered upon miracles and sacred marvels, whereas Jordanus introduced a more empirical mode of narration into similar subject matter. In discussing the legendary mountain of Sri Lanka associated with Adam’s fall from Paradise, Jordanus wrote that local people claimed Adam had descended there, “yet the mark upon the rock is not as deep as the story declares.” The small conjunction “yet” transforms the account from a purely transcendent miracle into a phenomenon open to verification and observation. This “skepticism within faith” became an important innovation in fourteenth-century religious writing. Without dismantling the framework of belief, Jordanus introduced the logic of empirical verification, thereby allowing “the testimony of the missionary” and “the observation of the traveler” to coexist within the same narrative structure.

As Joan-Pau Rubiés has argued, the *Mirabilia Descripta* established “a new logic of coexistence between religious testimony and empirical description, making marvels part of geographical knowledge” [17]. This logic would later be inherited by Portuguese missionaries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who likewise began with wonder yet increasingly concluded with measurement, classification, and observation.

At the level of textual transmission and literary genealogy, Jordanus also formed important connections with later travelers such as John of Marignolli. In his own Eastern travel account, Marignolli continued the tripartite classificatory structure found in the *Mirabilia Descripta* and incorporated several of its empirical details. As Christine Gadrat has demonstrated, Jordanus’s letters concerning the martyrdom at Thane were repeatedly copied, revised, and expanded within monastic networks, eventually generating multiple manuscript

traditions [19]. This process reveals the fluidity and reproducibility of the *Mirabilia Descripta* as a “knowledge text.” It was not a static individual work, but rather a body of knowledge capable of being cited, expanded, and rewritten. Through this dynamic intertextual process, the *Mirabilia Descripta* secured its central place within the tradition of late medieval geographical writing.

6. Conclusion

The textual history of *Mirabilia Descripta* reflects a remarkable “intellectual journey” traversing its origins as a private monastic codex to its status as an object of modern scholarly inquiry and, ultimately, a subject of contemporary interdisciplinary interpretation. Through an analysis of its structure, narrative, and intertextual relations, this paper has elucidated the pivotal position of this work within the evolution of the medieval geographical imagination.

The writing of Jordanus Catalanus signifies a profound internal transformation within the tradition of “wonder” literature. While he did not entirely discard the religious undertones of *mirabilia*, he utilized the empirical strategies of “witnessing, measurement, and difference” to reshape wonder into a cognitive tool and an engine for knowledge production. In *Mirabilia Descripta*, the East is no longer a mere repository of myths and grotesqueries, instead, it emerges as an empirical object that can be observed, categorized, and understood. This semantic shift from “miracle” to “knowledge”—reflects not only the loosening of the late medieval cognitive system but also foreshadows the dawn of modern geographical and ethnographic methodologies.

In terms of narrative structure, Jordanus broke away from the traditional linear itinerary, replacing it with a tripartite classification system of “geography, commodities, and religion.” This structure serves as more than just a method of information organization, it represents a hierarchical construction of cognition ascending from the material world to the spiritual order and demonstrates the infiltration of rational thought into the theological framework. Within his specific accounts, the rigorous distinction between *vidi* (“I saw”) and *dicitur* (“it is said”) established the authority of individual experience in the constitution of knowledge, allowing the “missionary’s witness” and the “traveler’s observation” to coexist and mutually reinforce one another.

Within the broader context of intellectual history, *Mirabilia Descripta* participated in and facilitated the transformation of the “Oriental” image. Since the era of the Alexander Romance, the East had long been imagined as a stage for miracles and monstrosities. Under Jordanus’s pen, however, the East began to emerge as a world possessed of internal logic and accessible through rational inquiry. This shift concerns not only the expansion of geographical knowledge but also the ethical dimension of perceiving the “Other”, the Easterner is no longer a monster or a mere symbol, but a subject endowed with a rational soul and practical experience.

Consequently, *Mirabilia Descripta* serves as both a summation of the medieval *mirabilia* tradition and a harbinger of modern empirical knowledge. Beginning with wonder, employing systematic observation as its method, and culminating in the reconstruction of knowledge, the work builds an invisible bridge between *mirabilia* and *scientia*. This bridge connects faith with reason and miracles with experience, it also links an ending era of old cognition to a burgeoning epoch of new knowledge. The true value of *Mirabilia Descripta* lies in the subtlety of this historical pivot, it is an incomplete revolution, yet an undeniable enlightenment.

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