

INTRODUCING THE MEDIEVAL GLOBE

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WHEN A CERTAIN Genoese mariner sailed southward to find the elusive Indies, he was guided by two favorite books. We know one as *The Travels of Marco Polo*: the product of a collaboration between that Venetian merchant-adventurer and his cellmate in a Genoese prison, a purveyor of popular romances named Rustichello of Pisa. This book was composed around 1298, in a literary creole designated today as “Franco-Italian,” but it was soon circulating widely in many different languages and editions. (There is no “original” text; the copy owned and annotated by that famous mariner was a later Latin translation.¹) The other book, attributed to one Johan (or John) de Mandeville, was published around the middle of the fourteenth century, in the French dialect then prevalent in England. It, too, survives in numerous variants, none of which is the “original” text. In its own time, the former work was often titled *Le devise-ment du monde* (The Description of the World), *Le livre des merveilles* (The Book of Marvels), or *Il milione* (The Million). The latter work was also known as *Le livre des merveilles*.

Along with their titles, these influential texts share some other salient characteristics: authorial and linguistic indeterminacy, a tangled history of transmission and reception, the tendency to imprint ancient imaginaries on a mesh of contemporary fantasy and observation. What were these books supposed to be about? How were they understood by generations of readers? To what extent do they constitute evidence for contemporary worldviews? Such questions are open to debate. In essence, these books are not travel narratives or practical manuals: they are *mises-en-abyme*. The mysterious conditions of their making underscore the challenges of knowing anything about the world they purport to describe—the difficulty, even, of talking about that world in terms that mirror its own conceptual categories. (“Franco-Italian,” “the French dialect of England,” the literary work as a fixed entity: all of these are anachronisms.) Yet like so many readers before me, I have drawn inspiration from one of these books.

¹ It is now in the library of the Institución Colombina in Sevilla (Spain). For an excellent introduction to this multi-layered text, see Gaunt (2013). See also Kinoshita (2013), whose new annotated translation of the text is forthcoming. On the reasons for the southerly course charted by Columbus, see Wey Gómez (2008).

On this topic, I've many times recalled something I heard when I was young, about how a brave man once left our parts in order to explore the world. So he passed through India and the islands beyond India (where there are more than five thousand islands) and went so far by sea and by land—so far around the world for so many seasons—that he found an island where he heard his own language spoken, and even heard the oxen being called in the very same words as in his own country, so that he was much amazed. Because he did not know how that could ever be. But I say that he had gone so far by land and by sea that he had gone around the whole earth, that he had come right back around to his own borders. And if he had only gone a bit further on, he would have found his own lands and his own knowledge. But he went all the way back the way he had come and so lost much of his effort, just as he himself said, a great while after, when he finally returned.²

This story captures the alienation experienced by anyone who ventures beyond the bounds of homely knowledge. It warns that my own neighborhood will come to seem so strange, in a global context, that I won't recognize it. But it also holds out hope that I'll achieve, in time, a broader vision.

The Medieval Globe is dedicated to exploring varieties of connectivity, communication, and exchange during a period central to human history: the millennium or so prior to 1500. It is an interdisciplinary journal for all scholars studying any aspect of this era, including those who work in parts of the medieval world that may seem well trodden and familiar (in my case, Western Europe). A global approach to medieval studies need not encompass the globe in any territorial sense. Rather, *The Medieval Globe* seeks to advance a new theory and praxis of medieval studies by encouraging the investigation of phenomena that have been rendered practically or conceptually invisible by modern categories and expectations: move-

2 "Et pur ceo m'ad il souvenuz mointefoiz d'une chose qe jeo oÿ compter quant jeo fuy jeovenes, comment un vaillant homme s'em party jadis de noz parties pur aler ceercher le mounde. Si passa Ynde et les isles outre Ynde ou il y a plus de V^m isles, et tant ala par mer et par terre et tant envirouna le mounde par mointes saisouns q'il troeva un isle ou il oÿ parler soun langage et toucher les boefs en disant tieles paroles come l'em fait en son pays don't il s'enmerveilla moult. Qar il ne savoit coment ceo poait estre. Mes jeo dy q'il avoit tant irré par terre et par mer q'il avoit environé toute la terre, qu'il estoit revenuz envyronant jusques a ses marches, et s'il vousist avoir passé avant q'il eust troevé et son pays et sa connaissance. Mes il retorna ariere par illecques ou il estoit venuz, si perdy assez de ses peines si come il mesmes le disoit un grand piece après q'il fust revenuz" (Mandeville [c. 1357]/2000: 337, my translation). On the manuscript history and variants of this text, see the editorial introduction of Christiane Deluz (Mandeville [c. 1357]/2000: 28–84).

ments, networks, interactions, affinities, borrowings, ways of knowing, forms of agency, systems of belief. This enterprise has the potential to expand our understanding of long-term global developments while simultaneously transforming the ways that we approach this particular age.

Although “the medieval globe” might seem to be a contradiction in terms, its components have an old and complicated relationship. The “discovery” of a “new world” unsettled Europeans’ understanding of their place in world history at a time when the expansion of the mighty Ottoman empire, and intensified contact with the civilizations of South and East Asia, were also posing new threats and opportunities. Meanwhile, notions of territorial sovereignty in Europe itself were being based on powerful historical fictions that some states had a warrant to colonize others. Although the terms “medieval” and “Middle Ages” were not coined until the early nineteenth century (Stein 1995), the complex associations that eventually crystallized in these terms were already forming in the very early sixteenth (Dagenais and Greer 2000; Summit and Wallace 2006; Davis 2008). On the one hand, this medieval past became a source of legitimacy and identity, an object of reverence and nostalgia; on the other, it was construed as a “feudal age” of cruelty and ignorance. Non-European cultures were accordingly described as “medieval” in order to subordinate and denigrate them (Wolf 1982; Davis and Altschul 2009). The current use of “medieval” as a synonym for “primitive” or “inhuman” continues this trend (e.g., Holsinger 2007); at the same time, the Middle Ages continues to be the cradle of the West’s vaunted superiority, the font of romantic mythologies and “natural” rights (Geary 2002; Symes 2011a; Geary and Klaniczky 2013).

In many ways, then, the concept of “the Middle Ages” made possible “the modern world-system” heralded by Wallerstein (1974); “the medieval” and “the global” defined each other. If they now appear to denote mutually exclusive realms of inquiry, that is because triumphal narratives of modernity require them to remain separate (Abu-Lughod 1989; Gaonkar 2000; Bennett 2006; Goody 2006; Sassen 2008; Symes 2011b). Nationalist origin stories and universal teleologies do not work when events and their outcomes are viewed as the products of chancy, contingent forces (Smail et al. 2011). Only in the past two decades, for example, have Europe’s component regions—and “Europe” itself—been recognized as colonized and postcolonial spaces (e.g., Bartlett 1994; Cohen 2000; Fernández-Armesto and Muldoon 2008; Murray 2009). Yet there is still tremendous resistance to critical approaches that would threaten claims of political autonomy or territory staked in medieval precedent. New paradigms that would debunk the presumption of an essential binary

between “East” and “West” (or “Muslim” and “Christian,” for example) also generate resistance, and are consequently all the more important (see, e.g., Lieberman 1999; McCormick 2001; Grabar 2006; Komaroff 2006; Lieberman 2007–09; Szigorich 2009; Flood 2009; Foltz 2010; Mallette 2010; Beihammer 2011).

For all of these reasons, the problem of how we conceptualize and study a global Middle Ages is not going to be easy to solve. How can we even discuss this era meaningfully, given the value-laden vocabulary we must use? What should we call the communities and regions of encounter that formed and reformed throughout this period when they do not map onto discrete territories or modern nation-states? What names might we give to peoples or religions that better reflect indigenous identities and beliefs? How do we deal with the fact of asynchronous developments within and between societies as diverse as Heian Japan, classical Angkor, the Delhi Sultanate, Song China, Carolingian Europe, the Emergent Mississippi Culture of North America, and the Aztecs of the Postclassical Period? Yet the difficulty of the task is part of the reason for undertaking it. No human endeavor can be divorced from global phenomena, and it is imperative that we learn how the interconnected pasts of medieval societies shaped the complex world we have inherited from them.

In pursuit of this goal, *The Medieval Globe* (TMG) will promote scholarship in three related areas of study: the means by which peoples, things, and ideas came into contact with one another; the deep roots of global developments; and the ways that perceptions of “the medieval” have been (and are) created around the world. TMG is also committed to supporting innovative, collaborative work in a variety of genres: full-length articles, scholarly dialogues, multi-authored discussions of critical problems, review essays, editions or translations of source materials, and other formats. The common denominator among articles accepted for publication will be their authors’ willingness to explore points of convergence or movement (potential or actual), to address topics of broad scholarly interest, or to pioneer portable methodologies.

The need for such a forum is clear. Many programs and research centers traditionally devoted to the European Middle Ages are being reconfigured to enable the study of co-eval cultures across the world; these include my own Program for Medieval Studies at the University of Illinois, the launching pad for TMG. Students entering the many specialized fields and disciplines embraced by this globalized medieval studies will need to be trained accordingly (Heng 2009) and will also need appropriate outlets for their work. Scholars of other eras, dissatisfied with the modernist (Western) perspectives that have dominated global studies to date,

will also find a home in this emerging community. *TMG* envisions a new place for “the medieval” in global studies, but it also insists that all ages have been fundamental to the formation of our world (Shryock and Smail 2011; Smail and Shryock 2013). Its role is to mediate, to make the *medium ævum* truly an “age between”.

This inaugural double issue of *The Medieval Globe* is a special showcase for these aspirations. Its editor, Monica H. Green, has assembled a team of experts from many diverse disciplines to address a global, medieval phenomenon that is still affecting human beings and ecosystems around the world. She has also nurtured communication among these contributors and ensured that their work engages the broadest possible audience. The essays gathered here, individually and collectively, bring state-of-the-art scientific and humanistic methods to bear on both new and old bodies of evidence. They greatly advance our understanding of the medieval Black Death, and they also reveal how much our current knowledge of this pandemic—its causes, effects, and more recent manifestations—has been limited by assumptions that have not yet yielded to those methods. As important and far-reaching as this issue is, it is not intended to be definitive; rather, it provides a series of firm footholds for future scholarship and lays out an ambitious agenda for collaborative research. I cannot think of a better introduction to *The Medieval Globe*.

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The next issue of *TMG* (2.1, forthcoming in 2015) will feature articles fostered by our conference on “The Medieval Globe: Communication, Connectivity, Exchange,” held in April of 2012: the source of inspiration for this journal. I warmly acknowledge those who participated in that inspiring encounter: Jonathan Conant, Kathleen Davis, Margot Fassler, Geraldine Heng, Sharon Kinoshita, Linda Komaroff, Elizabeth Lambourn, Carla Nappi, Michael Puett, Christian Raffensperger, and Nicolás Wey Gómez. Finally, I thank guest editor Monica Green for approaching me with the idea for this special issue in the spring of 2013, and for skillfully bringing it to fruition.

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Abstract The concept of “the medieval” has long been essential to global imperial ventures, national ideologies, and the discourse of modernity. And yet the projects enabled by this powerful construct have essentially hindered investigation of the world’s interconnected territories during a millennium of movement and exchange. The mission of *The Medieval Globe* is to reclaim this “middle age” and to place it at the center of global studies.

Keywords Medieval, Middle Ages, medievalism, global studies, empire, postcolonial studies, colonization, nationalism, modernity, Columbus, Marco Polo, John Mandeville.
