Imperial Reflections: China, Rome and the Spatial Logics of History in the *Ásia* of João de Barros

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"Seeing the world from above is a timeless fantasy
that geographical maps make actual by way of metaphor."[1]

"He looked into the eyes of the boy… in which the sun was setting… He had not known
that you could see yourself in others' eyes nor see therein such things as suns."[2]

Reflection occurs when a signal hits a surface and returns to where it last came from. By extension, reflection lends its name to acts of human thought and, in particular, the practice of thinking about oneself. Self-reflection is generally an individual act made possible by a tortuous history of confrontations with larger collective identities, and Renaissance travel writing in particular set the stage for a crucial self-reflective turn in the West.[3] But what about empires? Can empires think about themselves in relation to the wider context they are set in? To what extent can narratives complement the otherwise elusive archaeologies of empire?[4] If the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, for example, proves difficult to grasp beyond its texts, what exactly can those texts tell us about it? Where ruins, coins and inscriptions fail us, especially with regard to distant

*. This article is a revised and updated version of "De regresso ao Quarto Império: a China de João de Barros e o imaginário imperial joanino." My work on this subject goes back to the History Seminar conducted by Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz at the New University of Lisbon in 1999–2000. Some ideas were further developed in the Portuguese Studies Research Seminar at Oxford in February 2008 under the direction of Tom F. Earle. I would like to thank Dejanirah Couto and François Lachaud for encouraging me to revisit this material and make it accessible to a wider audience. Over the years, I have gained inspiration for this revision from conversations with Ângela Barreto Xavier, Anthony Pagden, David Lupher, Giuseppe Marcocci and Ricardo Padrón.

1. Christian Jacob, *The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography Throughout History*, translated by Tom Conley, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 1.

2. Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*, New York, Robert Knopf, 1994.

3. See Nandini Das, "'Apes of Imitation': Imitation and Identity in Sir Thomas Roe's Embassy to India," in *A Companion to the Global Renaissance. English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion*, Jyotsna G. Singh (ed.), Oxford, Blackwell, 2009, p. 115.

4. On the problems of identifying empires and imperial territories in the archaeological record, see Monica L. Smith, "Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95/4 (2005), pp. 832–849.

regions such as the Far East, is it possible to dig into the deeper layers of the empire's textual and pictorial legacy to find traces of how it defined itself?

The present article explores how the idea of empire was consolidated in Portugal during the second quarter of the sixteenth century in the context of the country's contacts with China. It looks into a textual mirror construed by one of Portugal's leading humanists, João de Barros (*ca.* 1496–1570), with the original aim of allowing the Portuguese elite to gaze at itself. The textual surface under analysis facilitated, as one might expect, the juxtaposition of the western and eastern extremities of Eurasia in the imperial imagination of its day. But it also allowed, perhaps more intriguingly, for the reflection of things across time. Barros' China became a distant mirror capable of placing not only Portugal in the presence of the Middle Kingdom, but also the Middle Kingdom in the presence of Rome, hence putting, through a subtly dissimulated twist, Renaissance Portugal at the heart of the quest for universal empire. The first part of this article explores the backdrop against which Barros worked, with a brief analysis of the so-called "letters of the captives of Guangzhou," one of the earliest Portuguese sources on China. The second part takes a glance at the classicist turn in Portuguese court culture under John III. The third part offers a close reading of Barros' description of the Middle Kingdom and proposes an evaluation of its textual strategy in connection with the cultural conventions of the High Renaissance and the mapping of global space within that specific episteme.

Imperial Proliferation and Portugal's Place in Europe

The sixteenth century brought a proliferation of polities identified by Western observers as empires. Whilst the old imperial theme rooted in the donation of Constantine remained a vital aspect of European politics, other empires began to infringe on this protagonism.[5] They mushroomed in the Lusitanian perception of Eurasia especially during the reign of John III (r. 1521–1557), when the initial enthusiasm of Manueline expansion was overcome[6] and the recently found grandeur of Portugal checked in the public's perception by the magnificence not only of imperial Spain, but also of Safavid Persia, Mughal India and Ming China, to name but a few. Despite all his fervour and some resounding military successes in Asia, Manuel I (r. 1495–1521) never quite managed to impose himself on the European stage as a genuinely respectable monarch. His detractors in France and Venice had pointed out rather poignantly that the *roi épicier*, as Francis I is said to have called him, was really not more than *un piccolo Re*, as someone south of the Alps put it.[7]

Under Manuel's successor John III, new textual and visual strategies were deployed to consolidate the image of the Portuguese monarchy, to put order in the emerging multi-centric

5. On the imperial theme in Europe, Frances Yates' *Astraea* remains unsurpassed. It is rather ironic that John Headley, who has so convincingly pointed to the problem of the multiplication of imperial ambitions within Europe, should also have clung so vigorously to the thesis of European "exceptionalism" and ignored the multiplication of empires across the globe. See "The Burden of European Imperialisms, 1500–1800" (review article of Anthony Pagden's *Lords of All the World*), *The International History Review* 18/4 (1996), pp. 873–887 and "The Universalizing Principle and Process: On the West's Intrinsic Commitment to a Global Context," *Journal of World History* 13/2 (2002), pp. 291–321.

6. João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, "Do sonho manuelino ao realismo joanino. Novos documentos sobre as relações luso-chinesas na terceira década do século XVI," *Studia* 50 (1991), pp. 121–156.

7. Jean Aubin, "Le Portugal dans l'Europe des années 1500," in *L'humanisme portugais et l'Europe, Actes du XXIe coloque international d'études humanistes, Tours, 3-13 juillet 1978*, Paris, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre culturel portugais, 1984, pp. 224–225.

world and tackle the growing issue of cultural diversity along the way. With the early messianic ideology of the Portuguese empire gone, authors in the second and third quarters of the century turned to the combined paradigms of *Imperium* and *Romanitas* to improve the image of Portugal and find a place for polities such as China in the new picture of the world. A classicist image of the Middle Kingdom made its appearance in Portugal towards the end of the second quarter of the sixteenth century. It surfaced most splendidly in João de Barros' third volume of the *Décadas da Asia*, in a long chapter on China concluded sometime between 1544 and 1558, and printed in Lisbon in 1563.[8] Other texts such as Jerónimo Osório's *De Gloria* (printed in 1549) and Frei Gaspar da Cruz' *Tractado das Cousas da China* (1569) followed a comparable logic, but none with such systematic zeal as the major, quasi-official chronicle of the Portuguese *gesta* in Asia. It is in Barros that we find the most representative expression of the new cultural paradigm.

As a mirror to the West, Barros' China raises questions about the way Portuguese humanism confronted alterity on the emerging global stage. In a classic, widely quoted essay, the cultural historian António José Saraiva once affirmed that Barros saw China as a counterweight to Europe, an admirable model polity that made the humanists in Portugal realize how "our civilization was not *the* civilization and our values not the universal values [of mankind]."[9] There is little doubt that this interpretation is to some extent correct. Compared with many other Western texts on Asia, the writings of Barros reveal a considerable overture.[10] On the other hand, however, the apparent empiricism and cultural relativism of Barros is one part only of the story. It is important to steer clear from anachronistic projections of modern academic and social values into the past. Portugal certainly produced practitioners of a radical empiricism that declared war on bookish erudition and posited experience as the highest epistemic ideal.[11] But pure empiricism was by no means a hegemonic stance. The fresh ethnographic data arriving from Asia after 1500 interacted, in Portugal as anywhere else in the West, with classical and other ideas, especially after the death of Manuel I in 1521. Interestingly enough, however, we still await an ample, in-depth study of the Joanine imperial ideology and its take on transcontinental cultural alterity.[12]

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8. I rely on the following edition: *Ásia de João de Barros. Dos feitos que os Portugueses fizeram no descobrimento e conquista dos mares e terras do Oriente, 4ª edição, conforme à edição princeps, iniciada por António Baião e continuada por Luís F. Lindley Sintra [Coimbra, 1932], reimpressão fac-similada*, Lisbon, IN-CM, 1988, 3 Vols. (vols. 1-2 present modern numeration of pages, vol. 3 the original folio numbers). The description of China that was printed in the Third Decade in 1563 is likely to have been concluded after 1543, but only because in the general description of Asia in the First Decade, which was probably written before the Third Decade, Japan is mentioned as the last place reached by Portuguese navigators (*Ásia*, Decade I, book 9, chapter I, p. 347). Barros admits that, when he began writing on China for the First Decade, he did not yet have all the sources that he used in the Third Decade (III, ii, 7; fol. 45v). The latter is likely to have been concluded before 1554–1557, i.e. before the official foundation of Macao, since Barros still describes Portuguese trade in the Pearl River delta as being illegal.

9. António José Saraiva, *Para a História da Cultura em Portugal*, (7th edition), Lisbon, Gradiva, 1995, Vol. 2, pp. 267–290.

10. See Zoltán Biedermann, "Nos primórdios da antropologia moderna: a *Ásia* de João de Barros," in *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 4 (2003), pp. 29–61.

11. Luís Filipe Barreto, *Descobrimentos e Renascimento. Formas de ser e pensar nos séculos XV e XVI*, Lisbon, IN-CM, 1983; Onésimo T. Almeida, "*Experiência a madre das cousas* – Experience, the Mother of Things – On the 'Revolution of Experience' in 16th Century Portuguese Maritime Discoveries and its Foundational Role in the Emergence of the Scientific Worldview," in *Portuguese Humanism and the Republic of Letters*, Maria Berbara & Karl A.E. Enenkel (eds.), Leiden, Brill, 2012, pp. 381–400.

12. On the Manueline ideology of empire see Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, "L'idée impériale manuéline," in *La découverte portugaise et l'Europe, Actes du colloque, Paris, les 26, 27 et 28 Mai 1988*, Jean Aubin (ed.), Paris, Société française d'histoire du Portugal, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre culturel portugais,1990,

Imperialism and Early Ideas of Conquest: The Letters of Guangzhou

In order to fully appreciate the significance of Joanine humanism, it is useful to take a glance at what it reacted to. Although direct contacts with China were initiated by the Portuguese in the 1510s, the earliest attempts at reaching Beijing were a failure. Most empires may be on the move in one way or another, but a juxtaposition of Ming China as it stood in the sixteenth century with the emerging *Estado da Índia* of the Portuguese reveals striking contrasts. Starting in the 1510s Ming China, firmly grounded in millennia of territorial consolidation despite all the upheavals it suffered along the way, faced the representatives of a territorially discontinuous and wildly heterogeneous, young, ambitious and thoroughly disjointed network of forts, ports and individual traders whose country of origin—when identified at all —had little significance on the world maps of the Chinese. The Middle Kingdom had retracted from maritime expansion quite precisely at the time when the Portuguese began to realize the potential of circumnavigating Africa to reach Asia. This means in no way that the Chinese authorities had no interest in the Portuguese, or that the Portuguese presence in China should not be seen through the prism of Chinese political, social and economic processes—the very existence of Macao is attributable to a transnational combination of interests.[13] But it does entail that in their early attempts to move into China, the Portuguese faced greater diplomatic challenges than almost anywhere else in Asia.[14]

The Portuguese were not only slow to develop a sustainable relationship with the Chinese state, it also took them several decades to come up with a coherent picture of the Middle Kingdom. One of the textual sources available to João de Barros when working on his description of China under John III was a pair of letters written in Guangzhou by two Portuguese-speaking individuals who had ventured into China too boldly, too soon, and consequently ended up imprisoned. Two of the earliest Portuguese descriptions of China were thus produced in a rather peculiar context by Cristóvão Vieira and Vasco Calvo,[15] a pair of individuals known as the "captives of Guangzhou." Whether these were written in 1524–1526, as has been argued by some historians, or 1534–1536, as sustained by others, the crucible for our purpose is not so much the absolute date, but the fact that Vieira and Calvo left the Portuguese sphere before the death of Manuel I and remained isolated from later developments in Portugal.[16] In other words, the captives lived

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pp. 35–103 and Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz & Jorge Santos Alves, "Da Cruzada ao Quinto Império," in *A Memória da Nação. Colóquio do Gabinete de estudos de Simbologia realizado na Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian 7–9 Outubro, 1987*, Francisco Bethencourt & Diogo Ramada Curto (eds.), Lisbon, Sá da Costa, 1991, pp. 81–165.

13. See Roderich Ptak, "China's Medieval Fanfang – A Model for Macau under the Ming?," *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 2 (2001), pp. 47–71.

14. On some Luso-Chinese contrasts see Robert Finlay, "Portuguese and Chinese Maritime Imperialism: Camoes's Lusiads and Luo Maodeng's Voyage of the San Bao Eunuch," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34/2 (1992), pp. 225–241.

15. The letters are published in *Enformação das cousas da China. Textos do século XVI*, Raffaella D'Intino (ed.), Lisbon, IN-CM, 1989, pp. 7–53 and in *Cartas dos cativos de Cantão (1524?)*, Rui Manuel Loureiro (ed.), Lisbon, Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1992.

16. The dating of the letters remains an unresolved issue. According to Armando Cortesão, "1534" and "1536" result from copying errors and should read as "1524" and "1526" (*A Suma Oriental de Tomé Pires e o Livro de Francisco Rodrigues*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 1978; *cf.* Rui Manuel Loureiro, *O manuscrito de Lisboa da "Suma Oriental" de Tomé Pires (contribuição para uma edição crítica)*, Lisbon, Instituto Português do Oriente, 1996, pp. 43–46. Raffaella D'Intino follows Cortesão (*op. cit.*, p. 5). Loureiro, on the other hand, defends rather convincingly the later dates: *cf.* "A visão da China nas cartas dos cativos de Cantão (1534–1536)," *Estudos Orientais* 3 (1992), pp. 279–295, with a comprehensive bibliography on the subject. What we do know is that Barros had access to both letters (*Ásia*, III, 6, 2, fol. 160v).

in a time capsule and wrote to Portugal as survivors of a by-gone era when imperial exaltation had led people to dream of an effortless expansion in Asia.[17] With their early imperial enthusiasm came a style of writing that could perhaps have moved the audience which the letters were originally intended for, but was in stark contrast with the aesthetic and political ideals of the society in which the letters were received.

This was, on the one hand, a matter of values and attitudes. The captives had voiced an understandably pessimistic view of China, underlining the unfairness of the country's judicial and administrative system, the cruelty of its functionaries, and extrapolating from there to the hatred all this nurtured in the Chinese people. Antipathy against the Chinese state was almost naturally a central aspect of these two texts. In contrast, most humanist authors in Portugal and other European countries after 1530 began to treat China with sympathy, transforming it into a playground for Utopian ideals. But the anachronistic nature of the letters of Guangzhou cannot be reduced to a matter of feelings. Their lack of success has to do with shifts occurring at a more fundamental level in Portuguese writing culture. Before the Joanine textual order emerged, the letters of Guangzhou—and especially the letter of Vasco Calvo—would have looked familiar to many in Lisbon. They were frank and forthright, non-erudite pieces of writing assembling the data on China in a sequence serving most bluntly a single, explicitly proclaimed purpose: to whet the Portuguese monarch's appetite for a military expedition to the Far East, encouraging the Crown to embark on a mission of conquest. Epistemologically these texts can be related with a certain predilection among Portuguese authors for refusing to look at the world through a prism of bookish erudition. The historian Luís Filipe Barreto has qualified this "realistic," anti-erudite orientation in the Portuguese intellectual tradition as resulting from a misunderstanding of Aristotelian mimesis as a simple "reflection, copy, exact transfer" of things from reality to text.[18] The letters of Guangzhou are extreme expressions of the refusal of erudition—though their "realism" is certainly a matter to be debated. The order in which the information is presented is, in itself, a good indicator of how the authors proceed:

<u>Order of the data given in the letter of Cristóvão Vieira</u>

Voyage of the author to China – diplomatic ceremonies – treason of the mandarins – death of the "King of China" – the prison in *Cantão* – loss of trading goods – massacre of the Portuguese – 15 governorships in China, starting with those along the coast – *Pequim* and *Nanquim* – morphology of the Chinese littoral – abundance in rivers – Beijing does not have wood nor stone – the Bay of *Ainão* – mountains of South China and ways of crossing them – dependence of *Cantão* on riverboats – worth of *Cantão* for China – China has 13 principal cities – mobility of the Crown officials – mandarins as *cavaleiros* – arms and weapons – deaths, punishments and tortures – division of lands – agrarian fiscal regime – land-bound transportation – fortifications – houses and families – justice – arrogance of the mandarins – ships and boats – importance of trade for South China – piracy – Chinese as weak people – Hainan – cities and rivers between Hainan and *Cantão* – Guangzhou has 200 horses – hierarchy of offices in *Ucheu* – other offices in *Cantão* – coming of Martim Afonso de Melo in 1522 – narrative of events – Chinese xenophobia – *Ainancha*, its houses, streets and churches of hewn stone – importance of rivers – topography of *Cantão* – Chinese expansion – Chinese are arrogant and cruel – strangers are seen as savages – Kingdom of *Dõ* – exhortation to war: come to burn and massacre without compromise and further delays.

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17. On "Manueline dreamings" see Anthony Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, Vol. 2, pp. 125–129.

18. L.F. Barreto, *Descobrimentos e Renascimento*, p. 129.

The entanglement in the letters between geography and a self-explanatory imagination of conquest is perhaps at its bluntest in a passage dedicated to the judicial system. From a description of the various tribunals, the text proceeds to comment upon the number of servants working for the mandarins, only to conclude with a section dedicated to the quality and magnitude of the latter's houses. This information is not deemed relevant *per se* but because, as the author has it, the buildings could be dismantled by the Portuguese conquerors to provide the necessary building materials for new fortifications.[19] Indeed, virtually every aspect of the judiciary, military and fiscal apparatus of the Chinese state is described as bearing relevance for the feasibility of an invasion. The letter places emphasis on the negative feelings of the Chinese population towards the mandarins, arguing that a Portuguese liberation would receive ample local support. A long passage describes in gruesome detail the techniques of torture and execution invented by the mandarins to terrorize their own people.[20]

The letters of Guangzhou are not only crude in their contents. They show no attempt at imposing a more abstract order on the text, at construing an erudite framework, or even describing anything that is not directly related to their primary objective: to convince the Portuguese monarch to embark on the conquest of China. This, it must be said, was very much in tune with the wider textual order of Manueline imperialism. The captives' texts resonate with key writings of the early sixteenth century, namely the geographical questionnaire issued by Manuel I to Diogo Lopes de Sequeira in 1508, the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires written around 1515, and the earliest version of the *Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, from 1516:

> Order of matters in the Questionnaire of Manuel I, 1508
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> From where do the *chins* come to Melaka, from how far and how often – with how many ships do they come – what are the ships like – do they have their own *feitores* or houses in Melaka – are they rich merchants – are they weak or warlike – do they have weapons and artillery – how do they dress – are they tall people – "any other information" [*toda a outra enformaçam*] – are they Christians or *gentios* – is their land large – do they have more than one king – are there Moors living among them – what do they believe in and adore – what are their customs – where does their land extend to, and whom do they border on?
>
> Order of the data in Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental, ca.* 1515
>
> Greatness of China in terms of land, people, riches, pomp and statehood – a land of many horses – a gentile king – white people – dresses – they are like the Germans – long beards – shoes in the French style – food – drink – weakness and dishonesty of the people – they eat with sticks – the women look like those of Castile – a land of many cities and fortresses – Beijing – a hidden king – tributary embassies – diplomatic ceremonial – the port of Guangzhou – the islands of *Guanispola* […] [21 folios later:] the littoral from Hainan to Guangzhou – the port of Guangzhou – form of the river and the city – large junks – guards – the way from Guangzhou to Melaka – profits – xenophobia – piracy – captains for one year only – fear of the Javanese – an honoured and rich land, good for conquest from Melaka – import of pepper, cloves, incense, elephant teeth etc. – anchorages – trade customs and practices – export of white raw silk, coloured silk, pearls, vases etc. – taxes in Melaka – the value of salt – *Fuquiem* – other ports – the Tartars, extending to the environs of Russia – the lands beyond China are still unknown.

19. *Enformação*, p. 28.
20. *Enformação*, pp. 25–26.

Order of the data in the Book of Duarte Barbosa, *ca.* 1516

> Navigating to the north, one finds China, a very large kingdom – Chinese as *gentios* – island with Chinese governors – the king residing inland in cities – foreigners not allowed to enter – embassies – white men, beautiful women – dressing – they have their own language – table manners – the Chinese are honest, but also bad warriors – porcelain – silk – rhubarb etc. – Chinese are great navigators – commerce with Melaka – value of pepper in China – merchants take their families with them – China confines with Tartary and is 400 leagues north of Melaka.[21]

The insistence on conquerability generates interesting distortions. There is, for example, a remarkable emphasis on the accessibility of China's maritime rim and on rivers as a dominant feature not only of the Chinese landscape, but also of social and economic life across the country:

> "From *Cantão* to *Foquiem* the coast runs more or less northeast to southwest, from *Foquem* to *Pequim* it runs straight north-south [and] makes a turn [and] they say it is very clean [i.e. navigable] and [has] many cities and villages near the sea along rivers: all these 15 *governanças* are under one king. The best of this land is along rivers that all come down to the sea […] where we have been it is all rivers, they have innumerable barges and ships […] I affirm that I have seen more than 30,000 large and small ones […] no doubt these rivers can be navigated with galleys […]"[22]

Water seems to be flowing everywhere, even on the steep mountain paths connecting the south of China with the north.[23] Bearing in mind the primary aim of prompting a Portuguese invasion, it comes as no surprise that when describing China's rivers the captives insist on their navigability for larger warships and on the strategic advantage of controlling them.[24] In fact, the reader enters the country as if carried on such a vessel. Every detail of the description serves to underline how the country could be conquered by the Portuguese. Towns that are not situated near a fully navigable waterway are declared irrelevant:

> "[As for] the cities and towns that are along such rivers that can only be navigated by towing: do not worry about them because when the big obey [the conquerors], the small will not rise [to disobey]."[25]

Is it only a coincidence that this insistence is so noticeably in tune with the emphasis on river mouths in Portuguese maritime charts of the Manueline period? The gesture of the text is an embrace of China from the sea towards the land, following in writing the practical logics of Portuguese maritime expansion.

With regard to the prime importance of water, there might be more at play here than just strategic planning. The mapping of water was by default fundamental to maritime cartography, especially in the Portolan tradition. But it played a particularly important symbolic role during the Manueline period as a part of the imperial ideology sponsored by the Portuguese Crown. In a series of maps commissioned by Manuel I in 1519,[26] the contours of the continents are almost

21. Taken from the Spanish translation of 1524, the closest to the lost original of 1516.
22. *Enformação*, p. 21.
23. *Enformação*, p. 22.
24. *Enformação*, pp. 21–22.
25. *Enformação*, p. 24.
26. See Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, "The Atlas Miller and the Ideology of Manueline Imperialism," in *Atlas Miller*, Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz & Alfredo Pinheiro Marques (eds.), Barcelona, Moleiro Ed., 2006, pp. 219–253.

obsessively interspersed with deep and disproportionately wide entrances of rivers suggesting an intense connectivity between maritime and terrestrial space. Manuel I himself had a predilection for the idea of being a king of the seas. This image found its way into the European imagination through Martin Waldseemüller's *Carta Marina* printed in 1516. There, the Portuguese king appears as a modern Neptune riding a giant fish through the waters south of the Cape of Good Hope.[27] Symbolically speaking, water was the medium that Manuel's ideologists believed would help the Portuguese spread the message of Christ and, rather literally, wash away the sins of humanity. Water signified accessibility in this ideology, an essential ingredient for the opening of new horizons and the conveying of the Christian faith to people all over the world. One precondition for—and hence a premonitory sign of—the coming of the Age of the Holy Spirit in the Manueline theology of history was a dramatically increased inter-visibility on the global stage: once all people were allowed to hear the gospel, they would unite under one emperor and march into a new Golden Age.[28]

This messianic imperial ideology, based on the writings of Joachim de Fiore, has been convincingly identified as a distinctive trait of Manueline court culture by the historians Jean Aubin and Luís Filipe Thomaz. It may not have had the widest of diffusions in Portuguese society, and it may not even have had much more of a social function than that of helping to legitimize the material gains that the monarch made from taxing (and personally conducting) maritime trade. But the repeated criticism voiced by historians who attempt to relativize the importance of religious motivations in Portuguese expansion as opposed to economic objectives misses the point.[29] Manuel's imperial ideology proclaiming the pivotal historical role of the monarch on the doorstep to a new age of universal unification was not an empty ideological shell. The very notion of ideology as a rhetoric configuration void of substance is questionable enough. The theory of the coming of the empire of the Holy Spirit was in fact an instrumental element in the Crown's political discourse, and as such it stood at the heart of heated debates within the Portuguese elite about how to conduct expansion in the East. The principal question was whether the nascent Portuguese empire beyond the Cape should take shape under royal control and pursue certain policies under the sign of ideologically charged objectives (finding Christian allies, fighting Islam, developing a system of fortified outposts controlled by the Crown), or whether the Asian trade should rather be left unsupervised in the hands of an elite interested in commerce and nothing else.

What is most striking about the Manueline imperial ideology is perhaps its reliance on a verbally rich but structurally poor rhetoric—or, to put it more fairly, a rhetoric in which the ornament *is* the structure. It proclaimed the monarch's imperial status through an accumulation of words, but invested remarkably little in the elaboration of sophisticated, well-balanced texts. Like Manueline architecture, which placed its emphasis on decoration more than on structure—indeed the ornament as such can be seen as structurally constitutive of this form of

27. http://myloc.gov/exhibitions/earlyamericas/interactives/maps/html/cartamarina1516/index.html (last consulted 26th March 2013).

28. L.F. F.R. Thomaz, "L'idée impériale manuéline."

29. See e.g. *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, Francisco Bethencourt & Diogo Ramada Curto (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. For a more nuanced attempt at placing Manueline messianism in a wider European context, see Vasco Resende, "L'Orient islamique dans la culture moderne portugaise, du voyage de Vasco da Gama à la chute d'Ormuz (1498–1622)," unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Paris, EPHE, 2011, pp. 279–292. One recurrent and symptomatically pointless criticism brought up against Thomaz and Aubin's thesis is that the influence of Manuel's messianism in Portuguese society can not be properly measured.

late Gothic art[30]—Manuel's imperial persona drew majesty from things such as a complicated royal title invoking accumulatively the lordships of Guinea, Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India, but only rarely from a wider appreciation of the imperial potential of Portuguese expansion and its significance in a secular historical setting. The Fifth Empire of the Book of Daniel, the one that in Joachimite chiliasm was expected to bring Christian unification, seemed closer under Manuel I than the Fourth Empire, generally (though not always) held to be that of Rome.[31] Even when the monarch made some attempts at playing the card of Portuguese-Roman parallelism, this usually happened on the external diplomatic stage, namely at papal audiences in Rome.[32] There are certainly some important nuances to this picture, but overall it seems acceptable to say that classicism was not a central driving force in Portuguese cultural production in the early 1500s, and that the Manueline imperial ideology relied primarily on ideas of Christian salvation to define Portugal's possessions as an empire.[33]

True, the captives of Guangzhou remained silent with regard to the evangelization of China, but this attitude may result precisely from their disregard for systematic missionary labour in a world already programmed to convert. Calvo and Vieira made prominent mention of the "diabolic" nature of Chinese culture, the implication being that the deeds of the devil would be blown away as a consequence of Portuguese conquest. Perhaps the most important aspect to retain is, as mentioned already, the heavy emphasis placed on the accessibility of China by way of water. This was the one element that the Portuguese felt capable of dominating globally in the early decades of the sixteenth century. In theory, it might have been possible to describe the profusion of waterways in a more structured hydrographical system, but this was not deemed necessary. The providential nature of Portuguese expansion as perceived by many under Manuel I was not conducive to textual systematization. With God's help, China would be subdued. The contrast with what came in the second quarter of the sixteenth century could not have been more dramatic.

Classicism and the New Cultural Order of Empire: The Reign of John III

By the time the letters arrived, the Portuguese audience was simply not interested in the captives' flamboyant rhetoric of conquest any more. The Crown's view on China now exuded serenity and rationality. Numerous commentators in Lisbon began to praise China as a model kingdom calling not for conquest, but for careful observation and imitation. China, the easily conquerable rogue state described by Vieira and Calvo, became a model empire. The discursive chaos of the Guangzhou letters and their dystopian pitch constituted a stark antithesis to this new literary ideal. In the *Ásia* of João de Barros, and also in some other, contemporary works by Jerónimo Osório and Frei Gaspar da Cruz, China assumed model character. This was partly a matter of

30. *Cf.* on the northern European Gothic after 1500, Ethan Matt Kavaler, "The Gothic of the Renaissance: Ornament, Excess, and Identity," in *Renaissance Theory*, J. Elkins & R. Williams (eds.), New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 115–158.

31. See Doron Mendels, "The Five Empires: A Note on a Propagandistic Topos," *The American Journal of Philology* 102/3 (1981), pp. 330–337.

32. *Cf.* Jorge Manuel Flores, "A imagem do Oriente no Ocidente europeu: dos ecos da expansão mongol ao Portugal manuelino," *Revista da Biblioteca Nacional* 2ª série, 5/2 (1990), p. 21–40. On how these texts relate to the earlier canon, see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1965, Vol. 1, pp. 3–30.

33. On the "belated cultural situation" and the "medievalized classicism" of Manueline Portugal see José Sebastião da Silva Dias, *A política cultural da época de D. João III*, Coimbra, Instituto de Estudos Filosóficos, 1969, Vol. 2, pp. 845–855.

recognizing the cultural achievements of the Chinese. But more importantly it had to do with the spread of Renaissance cultural conventions. For Barros, the court chronicler chosen by John III to rework the memories of Portugal's Asian adventure after the death of Manuel I, the act of writing *as such* was profoundly imbued with aesthetic and moral obligations.[34] Barros invested heavily not only in the collection, but more importantly in the selection and organization of data in line with the agenda of humanism. His goal was not to deliver a maximum of practically useful data, but to give the nation's elite an edifying set of narratives based on carefully selected materials, if possible originating from other written sources rather than from eyewitness accounts. That is why, instead of incrementing the amount of information put into the main description of China (decade 3, book 2, chapter 7), Barros proceeded, in confrontation with older descriptions, to reduce it by eliminating all aspects deemed inappropriate. Details of crude violence, blunt military stratagems and all things commercial were simply cut out (the latter information was to inform a separate work dedicated solely to trade).

It is notable how little attention has been paid to these mechanisms as prisms that functioned not within the act of observing other cultures, but at the heart of how Portuguese humanists wrote about them. Jesuitic scriptural habits come to mind here, and indeed both Barros and Osório consulted materials produced by some of the earliest missionaries of the Society. All these men participated in an atmosphere of heightened attention to order and the power of order not only in literature, but also in art, architecture and the political imagination in general. In Barros' description of China, much prominence is given to the enviable ways in which the Chinese were able to keep the peril of corruption in check, a complete inversion of the narrative offered by the captives of Guangzhou. Barros is here holding up an extremely shiny mirror for the Portuguese elites to look into. By inverting the logic of previous accounts and placing China at the very top on a new scale measuring ethical behaviour and rationality, he incites the reader to take an example of this distant realm. Abuses of power were endemic in the Iberian sphere, and China of all places now seemed to prove that things could be done differently.

In creating a new textual order Portuguese humanists laid the foundations for a new image of China as a model of rationality, but also as a reflection of the Roman empire. Classicism made its reappearance in Portugal during the reign of John III. It had been first introduced under John II (r. 1481–1495), but later forced into a subaltern position under Manuel I, used and abused in eclectic fusions with other visual and literary forms during the first two decades of the sixteenth century. After Manuel's death in 1521, John III rejected the values sponsored by his father and adopted a more plainly classicist approach again. Whether this was primarily a royal initiative or responded to a more widespread aesthetic re-orientation of the Portuguese elite, especially among patrons of the high nobility, is not yet entirely clear. But the fact remains that the change in style was pronounced, if not radical, during the 1520's and 1530's. In architecture, the flamboyant Manueline combination of late Gothic elements with Renaissance additions was abandoned in favour of a stripped-down, clear and sober classicism that paved the way for an exceptionally plain national style known as *estilo chão*.[35] In literature classical forms became the norm, and court culture became imbued with a spirit of Greco-Roman revivalism. Politically, the Joanine approach to expansion in Asia placed its emphasis on consolidation, responding to military, financial and perceived moral challenges to the survival of a network that had grown very fast and far in little more than two decades.

34. Z. Biedermann, "Nos primórdios da antropologia moderna."

35. See George Kubler, *Portuguese Plain Architecture. Between Spices and Diamonds, 1521–1706*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan University Press, 1972.

Under John III the idea of the Fifth Empire cherished during the reign of Manuel I came to be seen as a sign of heterodoxy.[36] The new imperial ideology found its expression in a visual culture stripped of the "excesses" of the Manueline era, returning to the logic of an "international style, both homogenous and stable," as the art historian Rafael Moreira has put it. "Tumult," Moreira writes, "was succeeded by serenity in an anxious quest for unificatory concord, not seeking its inspiration in biblical dreams any more, but rather in the historically (not mythically) perceived model of the Roman empire at its Augustan apogee. Through art, an unshakable *Pax Lusitana* was established, even if the facts of external politics called this into question every day."[37] The new symbolic centre of the polity was not Manuel's riverside palace-cum-warehouse in Lisbon—the *Paço da Ribeira* with the *Casa da Índia* on its ground floor next to the custom house—but rather the quiet setting of Évora with its rich classical heritage set in a rural landscape of Portugal's southern interior.[38] Architecturally, the new fashion grew around the idea of visual simplification.[39] In Tomar, where Manuel had commissioned some of the most exuberant pieces of Manueline decoration, John III imposed a uniform, relatively simple and straightforward visual order based on the fundamental principles of classical harmony. The first new cloister to be built in Tomar under the patronage of the new monarch was a visually plain piece of undecorated Renaissance architecture (demolished later on grounds of structural problems, it gave way in the mid-1550's to the Mannerist cloister that survives today). The Joanine style emerged as early as the 1520's, and it may be possible to argue that, as the decades went by, it embodied in an increasingly severe manner the principles of the confessional state under construction. It constituted a congenial backdrop to a society increasingly anxious about cultural—and especially religious—diversity. The introduction of the Inquisition in 1536 is often cited as a sign of a shift in Portuguese society away from the initial fascination with the opening of new horizons towards a less tolerant, more institutionally mediated stance regarding cultural difference. This rupture may have been somewhat overemphasized by historians, but the king's austere self-fashioning and his increasingly introspective attitude (in close relation with the growing weight of successive tragedies in his family) do certainly point to a progressive deterioration. As André de Resende, one of the leading intellectuals at the royal court, put it:

> "He [the monarch] does not like games or any *divertimento*, he does not take away time from state business with feasts or by staying at the table too long […] He wears clothes that are […] black […] he was the first to abstain from wearing silk, which he has forbidden his subjects to wear, so that if you look at his dress, you will think he is a private person, however, if you observe carefully his attitude, gravity and the majesty of his face, you will at once recognize the king."[40]

36. L.F. F.R. Thomaz, "L'idée impériale manuéline," p. 100.

37. Rafael Moreira, "Cultura Material e Visual," in *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, Francisco Bethencourt & Kirti Chaudhuri (eds.), Lisbon, Temas e Debates, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 480.

38. *Cf.* Nuno Senos, *O Paço da Ribeira, 1501–1581*, Lisbon, Editorial Notícias, 2002, and R. Moreira, "A Arquitectura do Renascimento no Sul de Portugal. A encomenda régia entre o *Moderno* e o *Romano*," unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Lisbon, FCSH-UNL, 1991, Vol. 1, pp. 198–251.

39. The word "simplification" is used by R. Moreira, "Arquitectura," in *Os Descobrimentos portugueses e a Europa do Renascimento (XVII Exposição Europeia de Arte, Ciência e Cultura)*, Lisbon, Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 1983, Vol. 3, p. 312.

40. André de Resende quoted in Sylvie Deswarte, *Les enluminures de la* Leitura Nova*, 1504-1552. Étude sur la culture artistique au Portugal au temps de l'Humanisme*, Paris, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre culturel portugais, 1977, p. 5.

Barros was particularly partial to the ideal of imposing this type of serenity through writing. Other authors such as Damião de Góis, exposed to Northern European intellectual trends and capable of maintaining an Erasmian stance throughout his life, wrote their chronicles and treatises in a less preoccupied, more expansive tone than Barros. Góis' description of China, for example, bears the hallmark of classicism without repressing a fine authorial curiosity regarding local mores and a genuine fascination with religious diversity. This author certainly came closer to the spirit and the style of Montaigne than Barros ever would—but then again, Góis ended up in the arms of the Inquisition, and Barros did not.

The new uniform style of Joanine classicism was imposed rather quickly within the kingdom and in some of its overseas possessions. Around 1540, the late Gothic Church of the Rosary in Goa received portals replicating those of the Church of Graça in Évora, built a mere five years earlier in the Renaissance style.[41] Whilst the precise connections between Joanine politics and arts remain to be uncovered, there is little doubt that the two were closely interrelated, and that the new visual order went hand in hand with the recently inaugurated politics of containment. John III was adamant to restrain the rapid dispersion of Portuguese resources across the globe and place the empire on firm ground, both symbolically and practically. The change has been described as a progression from Manueline dreaming to Joanine realism.[42] Certainly the fact that so many solidly established empires and kingdoms were identified over the decades in Asia as potential impediments to the construction of the *Estado da Índia* led to some soul-searching on the Portuguese side.

During the reign of John III, the Portuguese realized how small and how exposed the *Estado da Índia* was militarily, socially and economically. The response to this realization relied very heavily on the mobilization of classical ideals. The *Estado* went through a phase of centralization that found one of its expressions in the Romanization of imperial visual culture. Nuno da Cunha, a man who had accompanied his father Tristão da Cunha during the great embassy of 1514 to Leon X and there succumbed to the attractions of classical heritage, laid the groundwork during his governorship in Goa (gv. 1529–1538) for the creation of a new capital that was to become the Rome of the East. Dom João de Castro (vr. 1545–1548), too, invested in the visual classicization of his governmental and military apparatus. The processions that he organized and had represented on splendorous tapestries in the style of Roman imperial triumphs exude a strong sense of how the exotic environment of Portugal's expansion in the East was to be brought under control symbolically and adapted to the parameters of Renaissance culture.[43]

Empire, Mapping, and the Order of Texts: The China of João de Barros

Once Barros eliminated all things deemed inappropriate, he proceeded to create a new order for what was to become the reference description of China under John III. Whilst there is no doubt that Barros had access, in his daily routine of managing the royal entrepôt in Lisbon, the *Casa da Índia*, to abundant information on the Indies, it is important to underline how he avoided making

41. R. Moreira, "Cultura Material e Visual," p. 481.

42. A. Disney, *A History of Portugal*, Vol. 2, pp. 125–129.

43. On the transformation of Goa into a capital city, see Catarina Madeira Santos, *"Goa é a chave de toda a Índia." Perfil político da capital do Estado da Índia (1505–1570)*, Lisbon, CNCDP, 1999. On Castro's tapestries, see *Tapeçarias de Dom João de Castro* (exhibition catalogue), Lisbon, CNCDP, 1995. On Cunha, see Andreia Martins de Carvalho, *Nuno da Cunha e os capitães da Índia (1529–1538)*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, FCSH-UNL, 2006.

a direct and unfiltered use of the narratives he encountered. There is a clear distancing in his text from the practicalities of actually being in China, from the messy abundance of eyewitness accounts and hearsay, and from the very idea of directly putting thoughts and observations of captains, traders, and mariners on the paper. Lisbon may have been the greatest global hub of geographical knowledge transaction in the sixteenth century, but the *Decades of Asia* were to be read with containment and serenity. Barros made it very clear to his readership that to him Chinese books and maps imported along with an interpreter from the Far East were at least as important as the tales told by Portuguese travellers.

It is not just the elimination of certain types of information that strikes the modern reader: there is, above all, a new order in the text. In contrast with previous descriptions, much effort has gone here into presenting data in accordance with a system, a clearly laid out map, responding to a universally applicable set of intellectual preoccupations anchored in the classical tradition. This order was inspired by the sources that Barros most admired, Livy and Cicero,[44] but perhaps even more importantly Ptolemy and his erudite followers in Italy. The latter influence is reflected most potently in the systematic way the text works its way down from the general to the particular. It is mainly in this combination of newly obtained data on China and revived classical conventions that the originality of Barros' description resides:

Order of data given in Barros, *Ásia*, Decade III, book 2, chapter 7

Geographical situation of China – delimitation along the littoral, mirroring Europe – greatness of the land – the border with Tartary and the Great Wall – Chinese written sources on geography – units of distance and their conversion into European units – the global grid – division of China into 15 governorships – the suffix *-fu*, equivalent of the Greek *-polis* – hierarchy of cities-towns-villages – administration – royal envoys to the provinces – feeling of superiority among the Chinese, 'like the Greeks' – perfection in all domains of social life, metaphor of the 'two eyes' – a past of conquest and expansion – artillery – embassies – prudent retraction from overseas possessions – closing down of borders – precarious state of the Portuguese presence on China's littoral – description of *Cantão* – North-South relations in China – character of the Cantonese – foundry and artillery – women – cuisine and banquets – living conditions – rivers and navigation – physical aspects of *Cantão* – temple, fortifications – gates – order and control – all people have work – reference to *Geographia* for further information.

Barros proceeds from the general to the particular not casually, but systematically. In contrast with earlier descriptions, where the reader was made to enter China as if travelling on a ship, the text opens with the positioning of China on the global stage. The Far East as a whole is described by Barros as a formation symmetrical to Europe, its littoral running from Hainan to the Yellow Sea in a manner comparable to (*à maneira que*) that of Europe's littoral running from the island of Cádiz to the Baltic—the main difference being that China extends from 19º to 50º North, whilst Europe goes from 37º to 72º. This was not just about creating rhetorically a symmetry deemed curious in itself. It was about helping the reader to visualize the Far East as if it were on a map and, simultaneously, inserting China into the new grid of latitudes and longitudes that now covered the globe.[45] Barros mentions the presence of a grid on the general map of China he

44. *Cf.* António José Saraiva & Óscar Lopes, *História da literatura portuguesa*, (16th edition corrected and updated), Porto, Porto Editora, 1989, pp. 283–292.

45. True, Cristóvão Vieira had also opened the passage of his letter dealing specifically with the geography of China by mentioning the 15 provinces, and this may seem to anticipate the strategy of João de Barros, in the sense that it gives a general picture before going into any details. But there are substantial differences. The first

possessed, but also explains that this Chinese grid was merely a visual aid, not a reflection of a system of latitudes and longitudes. It was Ptolemy's grid and the homogenous, mathematically describable space coming with it that Barros spread so ostentatiously over Eurasia to include China. We are in the presence of a powerful, inextricable connection between the written word, a unifying idea of global space, and a new way of looking at geography and culture across the globe.

This extension of Ptolemaic space into China is both a vehicle for the generation (or at least reformulation) of knowledge and a powerful agent of homogenization. Both aspects reveal a hegemonic gesture that does little to feed the optimism of earlier readings of Barros, where the Renaissance author is seen as accepting the civilizational superiority of China and engaging in the discovery of true Otherness—especially the above-mentioned, influential interpretation of *Da Ásia* produced by António José Saraiva.[46] Barros' project is not about praising and understanding China by exploring the depths of cultural difference. By construing the country as an entity that partakes in the same spatial reality as the West, Barros makes it utterly clear that he is on a quest for sameness, not difference. It is appropriate to quote Paul Zumthor here, who has identified the fundamental shift in Western ethnographical discourse as one leading from a High Medieval binary of presence *vs* absence to a Late Medieval emphasis on measurable distance: "*le contraire de la présence ne sera plus l'absence, mais l'éloignement.*"[47] Perhaps one should add that, in these geographies of the High Renaissance, what is at stake is a form of distance that can be sublimated intellectually into mathematical coordinates. We are faced with distance not as an extension of space to be traversed by the human body, but as an extension of space separating precise positions on the grid. If anything was to travel here, it was the human mind and its ally, the eye flying over sheet after sheet of paper.

In Barros's description two entire pages are dedicated to the uniformization of space across the hemispheres and to the precise delimitation of China within it. This includes an attempt at construing an equivalence between Chinese measures of distance (*lij*, *pu* and *ychan*) and Western ones (*estádio*, *légua espanhola* and *jornada*).[48] Commensurability in the most literal sense of the word is here made explicit, exposed to the reader's eye as the fundamental quality of global geography. The new description of China is anchored as firmly as possible in a continuous global space. The fact that China confines with Tartary, which in its turn extends to Muscovy, a neighbour of the Catholic West, is invoked at the very beginning of the description. This is in clear contrast with the maritime perspective of earlier texts and maps. A simple move subverts the order that we have identified earlier in the letters of Guangzhou alongside with the questionnaire of Manuel I (1508), the *Summa Oriental* of Tomé Pires (1510) and the *Livro* of Duarte Barbosa (1516).

Much in contrast with those descriptions, what connects the various parts of the world in Barros is not the water on which Portuguese ships travelled to Asia, but the surface of the globe as a whole: a mathematically conceived common ground on which any point can be described with reference to its latitude and longitude. This gesture has far-reaching implications. By deploying the grid, Barros reinforces his stance as an erudite geographer who follows the method proposed

provinces to be named are those "set along the sea." Approximate latitudes are given for *Nanquim* and *Pequim*, but they come in a context of a very summary textual description of the main directions of the Chinese littoral, and take the reader into a long passage describing waterways rather than the land as such.

46. See above, note 9.

47. Paul Zumthor, *La mesure du monde. Représentation de l'espace au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1993.

48. *Ásia*, III, ii, 7; fol. 45.

by Ptolemy: as a geographer he works on the image of the globe as a whole, and then descends into chorography (regional units of analysis) and topography (local units).[49] Connecting the global with the regional and the local, and clarifying the position of things described in relation to others by means of coordinates, are stances that distance Barros ostentatiously from other Portuguese authors of earlier decades—most visibly the *roteiro*-type (itinerary-like) commercial geographies of Pires or Barbosa—but also some of his contemporary rivals, including Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, the author of a chronicle that began to be printed in 1551, less than a year before the first volume of *Da Ásia* came out. If one accepts (with caution) the contrast proposed by some historians between two types of cartographic space—one where the position of anything is *in relation with* that something else, as happens in Portolan nautical charts, *roteiros* or certain travel narratives, and another type of space where, ideally at least, each place has an absolute, astronomically determined position on the grid, as in tables and maps following the method proposed by Ptolemy, and in most maps today—then Barros is probably the Portuguese author who most systematically sought to follow the second line.[50]

By deploying a new type of global isotropic space governed by the mathematical order of the grid, Barros inaugurated a shift from the concrete conquests proposed under Manuel I to an intellectual appropriation that, in the long run, proved infinitely more effective, especially once it became a pan-European enterprise. Nothing could have made more sense in a courtly environment where the messianic impetus of Manueline imperialism had been tamed through the subsequent classicist turn. Whilst the specific pioneering role of the Portuguese is at the heart of Barros' activity as a chronicler, his geographical stance is much more detached and, epistemologically speaking, cosmopolitan in scope. The inversion of the order originally followed by the questionnaire of Manuel and the early geographies of Pires and Barbosa responds to a wider tendency in Renaissance geographical writing. It bears similarity, for example, with the order used by Sebastian Münster in his *Cosmography*, most clearly in the Latin edition from 1552. But there is no need to pinpoint any source in particular, since this kind of structure was pervasive in the European Renaissance. Its roots extend back to the rhetoric of eulogy inaugurated in Italy with the *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* of Leonardo Bruni (*ca.* 1404), based in its turn on classical models, most notably Aelius Aristides' second-century *Panathinaikos* and the work of Menander.[51]

> Münster's order on 1552 title page of his Cosmographia
>
> Omnium habitabilis orbis partium situs, propriaeque dotes – Regionum Topographicae effigies – Terrae engenia – Animalium peregrinorum naturae et picturae – Nobiliorum ciuitatum icones et descriptiones – Regnorum initia, incrementa et translationes – Omnium gentium mores, leges, religio, res gestae, mutationes – regum et principum genealogiae.

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49. See Jean-Marc Besse, *Les grandeurs de la Terre. Aspects du savoir géographique à la Renaissance*, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2003.

50. For an admirably clear summary on this matter, see Ricardo Padrón, *The Spacious Word. Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007. There is no doubt, however, that this scheme can and will be further complexified to adjust to various subtypes of cartographic discourse, as has been done for the various types of Renaissance perspective in the Renaissance; *cf.* Lucien Vinciguerra, *Archéologie de la perspective. Sur Piero della Francesca, Vinci et Dürer*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2007.

51. J.-M. Besse, *Les grandeurs de la Terre*, pp. 215–216.

Menander's descriptive order

Position of territory in relation to earth, sea and sky – nature of territory (relief, hydrography, vegetation, fertility) – position of the city (in relation to earth, sea, sky, territory, other cities) – nature of the city (seasons, terrain, port, fortifications) – origins of the city (founder, colonization, time of foundation, reasons etc.) – education – political regime – mores – actions and virtues (including *gesta*) – buildings and sights (temples, theatres etc.).[52]

In close association with this ordering strategy and the epistemic logic it embodies, Barros invested considerable efforts in creating for the reader the illusion of looking at things from above. The Great Wall is thus presented as an artifice to be grasped in its entirety through a single glimpse of the eye: a line running across the paper between the provinces of China and Tartary, visible in its total extension only from an imaginary vantage point high above the earth.[53] To achieve this, Barros mobilizes references to a Chinese cosmography and map, both of which he claims to have consulted in Lisbon with the help of his interpreter.[54] This simple gesture removes the description of the Great Wall from the realm of plain representation to that of *ekphrasis*. What Barros is describing is not what can be seen by looking at the wall or felt by touching it. It is what can be seen by looking at a Chinese representation of the wall brought from the Far East on a sheet of paper. The wall impresses by the way it runs through cartographic, not bodily space. It is really a line, not a wall:

> "I shall only mention one marvellous thing that this region of China possesses traversing its entire width, which is the length with regard to how we count the gradation of the Earth: between forty three and forty five degrees [North] extends a wall, which runs from the West, from a city called *Ochioi*, placed between two very high mountain ranges almost as if it were a pass and gateway of that region [of China] and runs to the East until it terminates at another mountain range, which touches that Eastern Sea in the manner of a cape, and which is more than 200 leagues long."[55]

A similar technique is deployed by Barros in the description of Guangzhou annexed to the general description of China. In contrast with Vieira and Calvo—and also with Castanheda, who let his readers approach the towering city walls by entering the river as if travelling on a ship—Barros makes sure that the reader gains a different, much loftier perspective. After establishing that the land on which Guangzhou is built is flat and briefly referring to a temple situated on a high mountain overlooking the city, he proceeds to mention a man called António Fernandes who, during one night in 1517, walked around the city along the top of its wall, measured it, counted ninety towers (each of them with a guard watching from above) and observed how the space surrounding the wall and the trench accompanying it was kept free of any buildings.[56] Whilst some of this information may already have been available earlier, it is here deployed in a way that serves a very specific purpose. The city presents itself from a quasi-aerial perspective to the eye of the reader, who is encouraged to envision it as a circular surface seen from above. Then, instead of describing the hustle-bustle of urban life, Barros offers us an abstract

52. J.-M. Besse, *Les grandeurs de la Terre*, p. 215.

53. *Ásia*, III, ii, 7; fol. 44v.

54. The first reference to a book of Chinese cosmography can be found in the First Decade (I, ix, 1; p. 337). In the main description of China in the Third Decade, Barros mentions a geographical map of China made by the Chinese, which he consulted along with a number of Chinese books (III, ii, 7; fol. 45v).

55. *Ásia*, III, ii, 7; fol. 44v.

56. *Ásia*, III, ii, 7; fols. 47v–48.

and depurated representation of a quasi-Utopian *civitas* neatly circumscribed by a circular wall. He delineates two main roads intersecting at the centre of this mathematically construed space, running from gate to gate and serving as the basic lines of reference to all other streets. Trees are planted along each street in a strictly rational order, lined up with absolute perfection: they appear "planted in good order so that, by standing next to of one of them, it is possible to see the trunks of all the others appearing in one straight line."[57] The vertical gaze is thus complemented with an equally idealized horizontal gaze invoking the laws of perspective and the possibilities of mathematically ordering space. A simple tree-lined street reproduces the principles invoked in the general description of China and the world.

Ambiguous Early Modernity: Writing and the Cartography of Space and Time

In both cases—China as a whole and Guangzhou as an exemplary part of it—the vertical gaze and the controlled descent to ground level follow the Ptolemaic idea of proceeding from the cosmographic and/or geographic through the chorographic to the topographic. After Barros has situated China on the global grid and descended from the cosmos to the country, he emphasizes the internal hierarchies of the country in space (from provinces to cities to towns to villages) and in administration (from imperial to local, from head of state to mandarins). Similar strategies can be identified in better-known Renaissance authors, as we have seen already, but also in the period's other great medium for the representation of space, cartography. I am inclined to see Barros' writing as profoundly cartographic not only on the surface, where the reader is presented with some descriptions invoking maps, but also in its deeper structures. Two at least out of the three main characteristics of early modern cartography (isotropy, orthogonality, cosynchronicity)[58] are clearly present in the geographical passages of *Da Ásia*.

We have seen already how Barros construed isotropic space—a space that is homogenous and has the same quality anywhere on the surface of the globe—by deploying and emphasizing textually the abstract, mathematically and astronomically defined Ptolemaic grid. Secondly, it is clear that Barros plays consciously with orthogonality. He construes vertical perspectives in the overall description of Eurasia, and then again with regard to more specific features such as the Great Wall or the outline of the city of Guangzhou. Strictly speaking, orthogonality in early modern maps involves not just one, but an infinity of viewpoints in the sky above the earth. Whilst such an infinity is impossible to fully transfer into writing—this is in fact an often overlooked aspect that complicates the notion of "cartographical writing"— Barros does hint at the notion of a multitude of viewpoints detached from the ground when he places guards in each of the ninety watchtowers overlooking the city of Guangzhou. The strict geometric outline of the city is thus anchored in three distinct complementary types of visual observation: the stable gaze of the individual standing at the foot of a tree, checking the linearity of a street; the moving gaze of an individual circling the city along the top of its defensive wall; and the multiple gazes of ninety Chinese guards surveilling the city from above.

Having covered isotropy and orthogonality, one wonders to what extent Barros dealt with the third fundamental characteristic of Early Modern cartography, cosynchronicity. At the heart of the mapping paradigm that emerged in the late medieval period and was further consolidated with the rediscovery of Ptolemy in the fifteenth century, stood the notion that one map should

57. *Ásia*, III, vii, 2; fol. 48.

58. David Woodward, "Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change," in *History of Cartography*, J.B. Harley & D. Woodward (eds.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, Vol. 3, pp. 12–13.

only depict things as they were in one particular moment. This was in stark contrast with most medieval *mappaemundi*, which included references to the earthly paradise and other features from the distant past.[59] Perhaps cosynchronicity was more of an ideal than a universal feature of early modern maps, but it does seem to have played a role in Barros' approach to history *through* geography. This may appear to be a rather far-fetched premise since Barros spent much of his life as a chronicler dealing precisely with forms of *histoire événementielle*. But the geographical passages of *Da Ásia* have a distinct temporality that sets them apart from the general narrative of Portuguese deeds. Whilst a chronistic engagement with the past comes along as the most natural attitude in much of Barros' known work, the same cannot be said of his chapter on China.

Most references to the past in Barros' description of China text are allusions to the classical past, a past that was an important part of the author's present in Joanine Portugal. The world of Greece and Rome appeared to humanists like Barros as a Golden Age transcending, with its perennial and universal values, the tribulations of history as well as geography. The China of Barros stands under the sign of an intense, pervasive classicism, emulating Greece and Rome without regard for gaps in space or time:

> "And like the Greek [who] with regard to themselves considered all other nations to be barbarous, in this manner the Chinese say that they have two eyes of reason to understand all things, and that we Europeans, since we have been in touch with them, have one eye, and all other nations are blind. And truly whoever shall see the manner of their religion, the temples dedicated to this sanctity of theirs, the religious men living in convents, the way of praying day and night, their fasting, the general studies where one learns all the natural and moral science […] and the caution they deploy in order not to incur corruption, and their knowledge of printing letters which is older than ours, and above all the government of their republic, the mechanics of all works of metal, ceramics, wood, textile, and silk: he [who sees all this] shall realize that these heathens have all the things for which the Greeks and the Latins are praised."[60]

Barros' China proclaims the resilience of the classical imperial model against the tribulations of time. Once the general position and shape of the country have been set out before the eyes of the reader and the space of mainland China neatly divided into 15 *governanças*, it is the turn of China's main cities to be bound up with the classicist logic of global geography, a logic that systematically suppresses not only the possibility of radical cultural alterity by deploying isotropic space, but also the possibility of change over time by squeezing the potentially uncanny specificities of Chinese civilization into the Greco-Roman template:

> "[China] contains two hundred and forty four notable cities whose names all end in this syllable *fú*, which means city: hence there is *Chincheufú*, *Nimpofú*, standing for the cities of *Chinchéu* and *Nimpo*, where our people go to trade. In which practice [of naming their cities] they are like the Greeks, who say *Constantinopolis* or *Andrino polis* to designate the cities built or renewed by the Emperors Constantine and Hadrian. Most towns [*vilas*] also bear a final syllable denoting that they are towns, which is *Cheu.*"[61]

59. See Alessandro Scafi, *Mapping Paradise. A History of Heaven on Earth*, London, British Library, 2006.

60. *Ásia*, III, 2, vii; fol. 46.

61. *Ásia*, III, fol. 45; *fu* designates in fact a district at the bottom of the hierarchy of territorial units in China, followed by the *zhou* (sub-prefecture), the *xian* (prefecture) and the *sheng* (province). The Western designations are taken from R. D'Intino, *Enformação*, p. 24, n. 125. But, as noted by Lach, this system underwent variations over the centuries. Barros' interpretation is not entirely wrong in the sense that the names of district capitals could include the suffix *-fu* (*Asia in the making of Europe*, I, p. 740).

This passage is not just about unifying and organizing space by deploying the global grid. It is also about creating a geography where imperial structures—and indeed imperial values deemed perennial and universal—withstand the discontinuities of history. China emulates a timeless classical ideal of empire, fully functional in a distant part of Eurasia regardless of thousands of miles of distance and millennia of history. In the new mathematically ordered global space of Barros, isotropic space was powerful enough to suppress discontinuities created by the passing of time.

In fact, the very usage of words such as *império*, *imperial* and *imperador* is of great significance here since most earlier Portuguese accounts had classified the country as a kingdom (*reino*) and not an empire. Barros multiplies his references to the "*Império da China*," to embassies sent by surrounding peoples to the "*grande Imperador*," and to a widely spread epigraphic heritage, destined to "perpetuate the memory of [China's] Empire."[62] Such references are evidently in tune with the intellectual atmosphere of Joanine Portugal. As we have seen already, the court of John III shied away from the chiliastic projects formulated under Manuel I, halting instead to find a more stable imperial template anchored in the classical tradition. Rather than proclaiming the imminence of the second coming of Christ, the text of Barros invokes the glories of the ever-present Greco-Roman past. It tells the tale of a resilient Fourth Empire rather than an unpredictable, messianic Fifth Empire. There is thus, one could say, a fair amount of nostalgia involved in the new imperial ideology of Barros. Our chronicler was the first in Portugal to study Asian history systematically, only to develop a strong sense of loss. The empire of Alexander had extended Greek culture through Asia Minor and Persia into India. Then the rise of Islam, dramatically brought to the reader's awareness in the very first lines of Barros' *opus magnum*, had disrupted the unity and unifiability of the *oikoumene*.[63] But if a major loss had occurred somewhere around the seventh century of the Christian era, Barros was also willing to fight the gloom. To compensate for the disruptive appearance of Islam on the world stage, Barros introduces the reader to a process of imperial expansion replicating symmetrically the campaigns of the Macedonians, but starting from the East under the *aegis* of the Chinese. This people, Barros argues, was entitled to be called a people of conquerors because

> " […] they have already followed this practice, conquering interior lands all the way to the kingdom of Pegu, where even today there are things made by them with letters [on them] stating it, such as some very large metal bells, and canon of the same sort and […] in the kingdom of Ava to the North of Pegu […] the ruins of a great city that they built there. And not only [did they conquer] the aforementioned kingdoms, but all those that are encompassed by the great kingdom of Siam, of which we have written earlier, including the kingdoms *Melitay*, *Bacam*, *Chalam*, and *Varagu*, which are to the North of Pegu, and others neighbouring them in the interior. All these do in some way observe and preserve the religion of the Chinese and their knowledge of the science of natural things […] Because at the time when those parts were conquered by them, the Chinese left the seeds of this doctrine […] And in recognition of these kingdoms having been conquered by this Empire of China, their kings would send their ambassadors almost down to our time […] But in this terrestrial conquest, as well as in their maritime [conquest] when they came to India (as we have already mentioned) they were more prudent that the Greeks, the Carthaginians and the Romans […] [and hence] on grounds of a decree from a prudent king […] they retreated again within the limits of their *Estado* […]"

62. *Ásia*, III, 2, vii; fols. 45v–46v.
63. *Ásia*, I, i, 1; Vol. 1, p. 5.

Barros' passages on Chinese expansion are crucial not only as a complement to the description of China as a continental polity. They also function as a structural support for the overarching historical-geographical logic imagined by the author for the whole of Eurasia. China had left its imprint on Asia from Siam, Pegu and Sri Lanka all the way through the western littoral of India.[64] What they left behind is described in *Da Ásia* as an imperial heritage comparable to the traces left by Greece and Rome. In fact, it is rather striking how the Chinese empire is made to extend, in *Da Ásia*, about as far to the West as Alexander had been able to go to the East: for Barros, the two processes of expansion were symmetrical, and both had what we now know as India as their final horizon. It hardly bears spelling out that this was the very India that saw, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498, the rebirth of empire on a global scale, at the hands of the Portuguese. But what can we conclude from this?

Conclusion: Proclaiming an Empire Without Offending the Emperor

Together, all this suggested to Barros' elite readership that whilst big sways of imperial unification were possible and indeed desirable in Eurasia, they were most likely to take shape in the imagination. The political realities of the mid-sixteenth century did little to indicate that the Portuguese would play any significant role in the materialization of such a project. If imperial unification was a prospect at all, then it seemed much more likely to occur under the *aegis* of Charles V than that of John III. Yet Barros was there to celebrate the latter not the former. In his description of China, he thus consciously built on the tension between, on the one hand, the isotropic nature of the space he so ostentatiously spread across Eurasia and, on the other hand, a set of skilfully intertwined references to things occurring at very different moments in time. The reader is confronted simultaneously with the author's present, the apparently recent but never explicitly dated time of Chinese imperial expansion, and the simultaneously distant and perennial values of the Greco-Roman classical age. The articulation of these three temporalities generates a remarkably powerful trope. On the one hand, Barros takes China into the proximity of the Greco-Roman world through a combination of spatial, chronological and conceptual juxtapositions. The country's expansion is declared symmetrical to that of Greece and Rome. It may have occurred later, but the time gap is never addressed. And thanks to a dense web of textual connections between China and the Greco-Roman world, the former is made into an empire sharing the fundamental qualities of the latter. The chronological distance melts away, squeezed between arguments on the commensurability of space and culture.

This is significant not only because it reveals the extent to which Barros styled himself as a geographer rather than as a historian in key passages of his major surviving work. It is also important because, through the minimization of distances in time, space and culture, Rome could be brought not only into the presence of China but also, *through* this distant mirror, into the presence of a Portugal dignified enough to carry on the imperial flame: Portugal not as an old peripheral province of the Roman empire, but as an emerging global power, a power on the margins of the devilishly complicated European politics of empire, but suddenly at the centre of a global process, ready to exert an influence going far beyond the remit of the Sacrum Imperium. What Barros' description of China proclaims without ever having to spell it out is the rebirth of the Roman imperial project—*the* imperial project, that is—through a process of global reconnection controlled by Portugal. After the death of Manuel, John III proceeded not

64. *Ásia*, III, 2, vii; fols. 46–46v.

only to stabilize his empire in the East, including its fringes where the Spanish had not found the means to establish a foothold (the new monarch oversaw, during the early years of his reign, the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529, defining the counter-meridian of the Line of Tordesillas in the Pacific). He also came to control the flux of knowledge regarding the most remarkable of all civilizations (re)discovered by the Portuguese, China. As the patron of Barros, John III was by definition the first to gaze into this distant mirror and to find, once the chaos of the early accounts was swept aside, Rome. Looking into the Chinese mirror, the Portuguese monarch found Alexander, Augustus and Constantine. He had access to the *oikoumene*'s past, present and future at a single glance. The China he was able to hold in his hands showed and brought into the reader's present a distant past that, whilst it may have been invoked in manifold ways by humanists across Germany, Italy, Aragon and Castile, was only now really brought to life by the Portuguese.

The complex game of rearranging words along a new imperial order thus expresses, perhaps better than anything else, the freshly reformulated self-perception of a country that wished to be an empire but could neither put its fantasy fully into practice, nor quite spell it out. This was about as far as John III, at once a neighbour and a brother-in-law of the true *Imperator* of Rome, could go. After all, whilst Manuel I had played rather nonchalantly with the idea of proclaiming himself an emperor—he was indeed openly encouraged to do so by some of his subjects—John III needed to resort to a much more subtle and structurally elaborate rhetoric of imperial grandeur to stake his claims without explicitly challenging Charles V. To say that the literary achievement of João de Barros as the official chronicler of the Portuguese deeds in Asia was of limited relevance for the development of Luso-Chinese relations is perhaps not entirely wrong. But it would also miss an important point. The China of the Portuguese humanists is more than a simple, momentary reflection occurring on a distant shiny surface. It tells a tale of imperial ambitions played out in the deeper layers of Portuguese Renaissance culture and at the highest level of literary sophistication. Barros' writing on China, like that of some of his contemporaries, bears relevance for our understanding of the self-fashioning of the Portuguese empire in the sixteenth century. Incidentally, it also hints at the complexity of the concept of empire itself, at least as far as the early modern period is concerned.

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