CHAPTER TEN

REVISITING CATALAN PORTOLAN CHARTS: DO THEY CONTAIN ELEMENTS OF ASIAN PROVENANCE?

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Several visual elements in two Catalan portolan charts of the fourteenth century can be understood only when placed in the context of diverse Asian cultures. In what follows, I compare these elements to images from various Asian societies (Byzantine, various Islamic, Turkic, Sogdian, Sarmatian, Uyghur and Chinese) that are present on different material (miniatures, murals, ceramics, metal works, ivories, glass works, and sculptures). This comparison shows that the iconography of fourteenth-century Catalan portolan charts was built on visual models used in Western Asia rather than on visual models of the Western Mediterranean Sea. This would indicate that these models go back in time and space to the Iranian and Turkic peoples of Central Asia and of the regions around the Don and the Volga rivers. The models would have traveled along the Silk Route, entered Iran and Anatolia, and from there moved to Italy and Mallorca. The arrival of the models in Mallorca via Italy seems to be the most plausible assumption since one of the cartographers is believed to have come between 1325 and 1339 from Genoa, where he already had been engaged in the art of portolan chart making and because major elements of the model are present in another portolan chart produced in the early fourteenth century by a Genoese monk.

The two portolan charts considered here describe complex spatial compositions that bring together physical aspects, religious beliefs, political concepts, and information about rituals and curiosities. Whether all the representations of these types of space embody visual knowledge remains an open question. The mapmakers combined elements of diverse origins in a way that became the norm during the fourteenth century. The model of knowledge and representation
they developed was so successful that portolan chart makers followed it until the second half of the sixteenth century.

Information on the physical geography of Western Asia seem to come from Herodotus, the Bible, Ptolemy’s Geography, maps adorning Byzantine copies of Ptolemy’s work, and Arabic maps. Evidence of an influence of Persian or Turkish texts or maps is missing. In addition to its diverse sources, mapmaking seems to have privileged the translation of the written and the calculated into an image, rather than integrating established visual components of geographical knowledge. Word and number evidently dominated, since they were the basis of several images of major geographical entities, such as rivers, lakes, gulfs, and mountains. In the case of physical space, this dominance leads me to argue that “visualization of knowledge acquired from abroad” is a more appropriate description of the process than “transmission of visual knowledge.” One instance differs, however, from this general approach to physical space: A set of two lakes and three rivers in Western Iran points, in its symbolic quality and conflict with nature, to an act of transmission as an image that may originally have described political rather than physical space. Thus creative patchwork—not systematic application of one type of knowledge—is what characterizes the iconography of physical space in the Catalan portolan charts.

In contrast, the iconography of political and religious spaces works with a much more homogeneous set of models. This set of models reflects thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Ilkhanid, Djalāyirid, Timurid, and Turkmen adaptations of elements previously used in Selçuk art. It also comprises certain components of much older origin in Sarmatian, Sogdian, and Turkic visual representations of rulers, nobles feasting at banquets, courtly costumes, furniture, and riding animals. As in the case of physical space, the visual representation of political and cultural space does not rest on models from Mallorca and Italy. The makers of the two Catalan portolan charts appropriated visual models from abroad. They did not translate knowledge about political or cultural aspects into images based on local conventions. It is here that the two Catalan portolan charts can be seen as artifacts incorporating visual knowledge transmitted along the Silk Road. The two mapmakers followed, however, different approaches. Whereas Angelino Dulcert (color fig. 10.8) decorated foreign visual models in his portolan chart of 1339 with Greek and Italian details, the creator of the Catalan Atlas of 1375 (color