II

VARENIUS AS A TRANSMITTING AGENT OF KNOWLEDGE—JAPAN

VARENIUS ALS WISSENSVERMITTLER EINER FREMDEN WELT—JAPAN
The Sources of the Descriptio regni Japoniae

The *Descriptio regni Japoniae* is based on a number of sources in which Varenius found more or less suitable and up-to-date information on Japan. These works can be divided into three groups:

1. Surveys of geographical or Asian studies, which provided a geographical context for writing about Japan in the *Descriptio*,
2. Reports by Jesuit authors who were involved in the first Christian missionary work in Japan,
3. Reports by officials of the "Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie" (VOC) [United Netherlands Chartered East Indies Co.] in Japan.

In the first group Marco Polo's book (*Le divisament dou monde* 1298/99) is particularly noteworthy. Although the author had never set foot in Japan, the first news of those distant islands reached Europe through him. His *Zipangu* contains a number of fantastic aspects, but their meaning can be reconstructed. Here we find a blend of authentic information, folk traditions, European evaluations and literary attempts. From that time on, the island became an established part of the European world picture. Even drawings of regional maps were based on it.

After the discovery of Japan by Portuguese smugglers in 1543, merchants and missionaries regularly frequented the islands. Maps from the second half of the sixteenth century indicate that the knowledge of Japan had become more and more detailed and differentiated. It was particularly the missionaries of the Jesuit Order who wrote regular reports of their activities in an effort to obtain support. Owing to an elaborate missionary method, which was to a large extent adapted to local conditions, they acquired extensive knowledge of the mentality and the cultural traditions of the Japanese. The Portuguese Jesuit Luís Frois even drew up a catalogue of differences (*Algumas contradições e diferenças de costumes ante a gente de Europa e esta provincia de Japão* 1585), which, while adopting the rhetorical commonplace of ‘the world upside down’ (Herodotus), was also intended to serve future missionaries as a cultural orientation guide. Varenius took over some observations in order to describe the extremely foreign character of the Japanese civilisation.