SSU-CHIA-LI-YEH 斯加里野:
The first Chinese description of Sicily

BY
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The first chüan of the Chu-fan chih 諸蕃志, written by Chao Ju-kua 趙汝适 in the first quarter of the XIIIth century A.D., contains a description of Sicily (and particularly of the Aetnean area) which, even under a somewhat fabulous appearance, reveals to be extremely exact in its details, both from a geographic and an historical point of view. This paper aims to follow a suggestion given years ago by Mr. L. Olschki: “...severare in questo curioso testo gli elementi greci, arabi e cinesi che lo compongono...”

Very little is known about the life of the author. In the eight chüan of the Chih-chai shu-lu chieh-t'i 直齋書錄解題, written around the middle of the XIIIth century by Ch'èn Chên-sun 陳振孫, we read:

“...The inspector of Foreign Trade in Fu-kien, Chao Ju-kua, records (in this book) the several foreign countries and the merchandise which come from them...”

The imperial catalogue Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao 四庫全書總目提要 adds that Chao Ju-kua was a descendant in the eight generation of the Sung Emperor T'ai-tsung 太宗 (A.D. 976-997), and that he was appointed Inspector of Foreign Sea-Trade (shih-po 市舶) in the province of Fukien. The town where

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3 See A. Wylic, Notes on Chinese Literature, Shanghai, 1902, p. 60.
4 See CJK, p. 35.
he held his office, even if not mentioned, was with no doubt Ch’üan-chou 蕗洲, the Zaytun/Caytun of M. Polo’s work. The date of composition of the Chu-fan chih 蕗貢記 remained for centuries a real puzzle to the commentators until 1901, when the great erudite Miu Ch’üan-sun 藕澐孫 rediscovered in his work I-fēng-ts’ang shu-chi 赖風藏書記 (chüan 3, f°12) a forgotten autographic preface by Chao Ju-kua. According to this precious document the author received most of his information from the foreign traders landing in Ch’üan-chou, and completed his work in the ninth month of the first year pao-ching 寶經, i.e. in A.D. 1225. In that period the Arab community living in Ch’üan-chou was prosperous and the town itself was the very outpost of the Islamic trade, having replaced in that leading position the city of Canton that had housed the main Islamic colony from the VIIIth up to the XIth century. Moreover, Ch’üan-chou held the monopoly of Korean and Japanese merchandise, and its customs were highly efficient, as we learn from the testimony of Sulaymān (A.D. 851), from the P’ing-chou k’o-t’an 萍洲可談 by Chu Yü 朱彧 (XIth century), and from M. Polo’s Milione.

The Chu-fan chih 蕗貢記 always remained a quite unknown work. After having been included in the Yung-lo ta-tien 永樂大典 (chüan 4262, under the rime fan 番), it was first published as late as 1783, in a collection called Han-hai 函海, by Li T’iao-yüan 李調元. Its consists of two chüan; the first (in 46 paragraphs) is merely geographical and contains a description of the various foreign countries known to the Chinese; the second (in 43 paragraphs) is a commercial vademecum, entirely devoted to the different kinds of merchandise and to their properties and origin, showing several similarities with the nearly

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10 See CJK, p. 21.