

MEDIEVAL ETHNOGRAPHY¹

'We found the Tatars, and when I entered among them it seemed to me at once that I was entering a kind of other world [*quoddam aliud seculum*].'² In these words, William of Rubruck informed St. Louis of his encounter with the Mongols on 3rd or 4th June, 1253, and the sense of novelty and strangeness they convey is my central theme. Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans' mental horizons broadened with the gradually or fitfully expanding frontiers of Latin Christendom to take in a series of discoveries which must rank among the most remarkable and least remarked of history: the finding of pagan and 'primitive' peoples, whose apparent savagery and oddity constituted a radical challenge to prevailing notions about the nature and rights of man.

In about the twelfth century came the 'discovery', in the sense of detailed scrutiny and discussion, of what we might call Europe's internal primitives - the peripheral, pastoral and mountain folk, like the Basques, Welsh, Irish and Slavs, whose cultures inspired mingled awe and contempt. The thirteenth century followed with the bloody inructions into European aware-

¹ Abridged text of a paper read to a social anthropology seminar at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, on 2nd March, 1982. I have to thank the Trustees of the Leverhulme Foundation for awarding a Fellowship for work on this subject.

² A. van den Wyngaert, ed., *Sinica Franciscana*, (Florence), Vol. I (1929), p. 171.

ness of the Mongols, who came as an intellectual as well as a physical shock. In the fourteenth century the aboriginal Canary Islanders were found, cavorting pruriently and perplexingly in nudity and caves. In the fifteenth century - not for the first time but on a new scale - African blacks were ingested by European minds. And finally, at the end of the period, the American Indians revolutionised European man's views of others and of himself. This lavish accretion of anthropological material had diverse intellectual effects. Here I am concerned only with effects on ethnographical writings. I hope to suggest that recognisably scientific ethnography (though of course they did not call it that) was practised by some authors and approached by others in the late Middle Ages, and to characterise some of the perceptions of primitivism which such authors had.

I want, if you like, to turn the tables on anthropologists: we historians are used now to borrowing from your discipline to study our own. Today, instead of taking an anthropological look at history I am taking an historical look at anthropology, at what I believe are parts of the historical origins of that science.³ I do not mean to seek modern social anthropologists in the Middle Ages, or even ethnographers who acknowledged that they shared a distinctive discipline. My purpose is more limited and more realistic. I propose three criteria to identify recognisably scientific ethnography: accuracy of observation, reliance on genuine observation rather than hearsay, and attempted objectivity.

In what medieval sources might we hope to find such criteria fulfilled? Newcomers to the subject might turn in innocence to merchants' memoirs, travellers' tales and pilgrim handbooks, but such sources are, more often than not, sources of disappointment.

Expectations of merchant-memorists, for instance, are aroused by the false popular conception of Marco Polo. Now although European merchants were widely dispersed in alien climes in this period - as widely as Pietro Lucalongo who did business in Peking in the early fourteenth century or Antonio Malfante who was in the mid-Sahara in the fifteenth - not one of them has left an account of the peoples he met. I am not overlooking Marco Polo. He was a merchant only by birth and a functionary by adoption. The travels he described were undertaken in the service not of commerce but of the Khan. Nor was he a particularly accurate observer. His curiosity was certainly not scientific. The object of this male Scheherezade was to provide entertaining tales for the delectation of the master whom his other purpose was to eulogise. We can think of other reasons than objective interest for his descriptions of Tibetan sexual hospitality or practised evocations of the embraces of Chinese whores. His candid assurances of the existence of tailed men, men with dogs' heads and islands respectively of males and females who teamed up

³ This is the thesis of M. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Philadelphia 1964.

periodically to breed all justified his later medieval reputation as a travelling fable-monger.⁴

At least Marco Polo really did travel among some of the peoples he describes. Most travel literature was spurious, designed to satisfy the prevailing taste for sensational and salacious tit-bits. Authors like the notorious Mandeville or the anonymous writer of the *Book of Knowledge* travelled in the course of their work no further than the nearest book-cupboard.⁵ Indeed, I know of no authentic case of travel from disinterestedly curious motives by western Christians in this period. One travelled as merchant, pilgrim, administrator, ambassador, clerk or missionary - but never from the mere *vanitas* of curiosity.

Of all travellers, the group in whom inquisitive tastes and a need for realistic information went most closely allied were the pilgrims. I am not well versed in pilgrim literature, but it seems to me that the guides usually describe foreign races with conventional stereotypes. For instance, one of the richest guides, the twelfth-century *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, describes my own race, the Galicians, as 'more like our French nation than the other uncivilised races of Spain; but they are widely thought excitable and quarrelsome.'⁶ But when he comes to the Basques, whom he recognises as primitives - by which I mean he alludes to them in terms generally applied to peoples called 'barbarian' or some equivalent name - he treats us to a long, albeit (as we shall see) equally conventional, description:

Verily they dress filthily and eat and drink filthily....If you saw them eating, you would think them like dogs or pigs. If you heard them speaking, you would be reminded of the howling of hounds.... This is a barbarous race, unlike all others in customs and in essence, full of every malice, black in colour, evil of visage,...wild and sylvan....Basques even practise incestuous fornication - with cattle. A Basque is even said to fit a chastity belt to his own mare or mule, to prevent any one else getting at them.

The last sentence is best left in the decent obscurity of a

⁴ Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, ed. A.C. Moule and P. Pelliot, London 1938, Vol.I, pp.86, 270-271, 328-329, 376, 378, 424.

⁵ See M. Letts, ed., *Mandeville's Travels* (2 vols.), London 1953, especially Vol.I, pp. xxii-xxv; M.C. Seymour, ed., *Mandeville's Travels*, Oxford 1967, especially p. xiv; M. Jiménez de la Espada, ed., *Libro del conocimiento de todos los reynos y tierras y señoríos que son por el mundo*, Madrid 1877.

⁶ J. Vieillard, ed., *Le Guide du pèlerin*, Macon 1950, p.32.

learned language: '*Vulvae etiam mulieris et mulae basia prebet libidinosa.*'⁷

Having discounted merchants', travellers' and pilgrims' literature as sources of scientific ethnography, we are left with missionary writings. It is possible to find at least one writer with a real flair for ethnography who was not a missionary. In the twelfth century Gerald of Wales, a superb observer of the Irish and Welsh, built an original theory of social evolution on his findings.⁸ But his is perhaps an unique case: personal interest drew him to study his Celtic cousins. Missionaries form the only *class* of ethnographical writers.

The outstanding case of the combination of scientific observation with missionary purpose occurs in the work of the Franciscan, William of Rubruck. As he had continually to explain to an uncomprehending Khan, he was not an ambassador, as previous visitors had been, but only sought to proclaim the gospel. It is true that St. Louis asked him to purvey information to the court of France, and it is not hard to see that the king's interest was chiefly in military and diplomatic intelligence. But William goes beyond the usual description of Mongol tactics and grand strategy to give us the longest and most accurate Western picture of Mongol society to have survived from the Middle Ages. In fact, as a piece of anthropological fieldwork, Rubruck's book remained unsurpassed for nearly six and a half centuries. And it is remarkable how modern studies of Siberian ethnography confirm as well as extend Rubruck's observations. Two examples on matters of great interest to modern anthropologists - the layout of a Mongol dwelling and the practices of the shamans - show what a good observer William was.

The first is best introduced by referring to a comparison proposed by Rockhill. The way of life of steppe tent-dwellers has been so changeless over the centuries that the veracity of William's description of the layout of a Mongol *ger* can be tested against Radlov's account of the interior of an Altai Tatar *yurt*, published almost exactly six hundred and thirty years later.⁹ Both authors agree that the tent was set up on a north-south axis, with the entrance aperture at the south. Both note the division into two mutually exclusive moieties, the east side for the womenfolk, the west for the men, with the men's equipment near the entrance on the south-east circumference. In a

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 28.

⁸ See Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, ed. J.F. Dimock, (London), Vol.V (1867), pp.149-182, Vol.VI (1868), pp.179-217.

⁹ W.W. Rockhill, ed., *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World*, London 1900, p.57ff; V.V. Radlov, *Aus Sibirien*, Leipzig 1884, Vol.I, p.270; *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol.I, pp.172-175; cf. C. Humphrey, 'Inside a Mongolian Tent', *New Society*, Vol.XXX (1974), pp.273-275.

conspicuous position facing the entrance on the northern circumference, both observers place the master's couch but they differ slightly concerning the location of the *ongons*: according to William, these were suspended above the master's couch on the western side, with the images occupying positions related to the seating-places of the master and his wife on the master's couch. Radlov, however, sites the *ongons* clearly well to the host's right - that is, on the eastern side of the *yurt*. William places the servants on the women's side, but Radlov places them opposite the master. Radlov also assigns places to children and cattle, whose location William does not specify. But the earlier account is in some ways more circumstantial. William places on either side of the entrance images whose existence is confirmed by other contemporary accounts. He describes how a bench with milk for refreshment was set up nearby. He also tells how a cow's udder was suspended by the entrance on the women's side and a mare's on that of the men. No other authorities described the interior of the *ger* at all, though some noticed how it faced south and mentioned, with less detail than William, the ritual oblations which preceded meals.¹⁰

William is particularly good on shamanism because of his missionary's interest in native religion. He notices the shaman's responsibility for the care of the *ongons* (although omitting the crucial point that in these idols dwelt the ancestral spirits conjured by the shamans in their trances); he accurately describes shamanistic practices; the characteristic nocturnal oracular session he again relates in terms strikingly similar to Radlov's.¹¹

By contrast, Marco Polo utterly missed the point of the *ongons*, which he confused with images of a supreme deity. He noticed only the astrological and medical functions of the shamans and ignored the inside of a *ger*. It might be objected that Marco Polo was embroiled in the sophisticated Mongol court, which had abandoned the steppes. The century that opened with the doughty Chinghiz Khan closed with the gouty Qubilai. Where the founder of the dynasty needed only nimble ponies, Marco Polo's master had to be carried around by four elephants; and instead of a *ger* to house him, he decreed a stately pleasure-dome in Xanadu. But Marco had ample chance to observe the more primitive Mongols

¹⁰ See for example John of Piano Carpini and Benedict of Poland in *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol.I, pp.35-36, 136-137; Marco Polo, *Travels*, trans. R. Latham, London 1958, p.67; Rockhill, *Ibid.*, p.59n.; G.A. Bezzola, *Die Mongolen in abendländischer Sicht*, Bern 1974, pp.139-144.

¹¹ Rockhill, *Ibid.*, pp.xxxviii, 187-188, 246; Radlov, *Ibid.*, Vol.II, p.20ff; cf. C. Humphrey, 'Some Ideas of Saussure Applied to Buryat Magical Drawings', *Social Anthropology and Language*, ed. E. Ardener, London 1971, pp.271-290. I am grateful to Mrs. Shirley Ardener for references to Humphrey's work.

on his journeys. He had an unique opportunity to witness a shamanistic trance - something William was never allowed to do - and produced only a bald and frivolous description. One must also credit William, compared with Marco Polo, with scrupulous care to distinguish his own experience from hearsay. And while Marco Polo assures his readers for a fact of the existence of implausible prodigies, William's only reference to them is to say that he saw and heard of no evidence of monstrous races, 'at which', he confesses, 'I was most surprised.'¹²

There are two respects in which modern scientific practice would find William wanting. He did not make a study of the Mongol language, though he did reduce his interpreter to silent fatigue in his eagerness to communicate.¹³ Nor did he have a system of classification, whereby to relate his data to what was known or postulated about the rest of mankind - if you like, to give his 'fieldwork' comparative significance. To some extent, both wants were supplied in the course of the next three hundred years. William's close contemporary, Albertus Magnus, was already plotting out a framework of classification, not only of mankind but of the whole of creation, based on the range of mental faculties supposedly possessed by different races and beings, their physical characteristics and the presumed relationship between physique, physiognomy, mind and behaviour.¹⁴

It was a wonderful scheme, but vitiated from the point of view of more recent anthropology by three shortcomings. First, it was built around the idea of a descending order of creation, the model with which every reader of medieval or early modern literature is familiar. As a result, almost the only interpretation of cultural relationships we find among late medieval writers is that of degeneracy¹⁵ - usually degeneration from civilisation to savagery, rather than the other way round. The noble savage is admired by only a few writers, to whom I shall return in a moment. It is more usual, for instance, to find Mongols explained as degenerate Jews, Canarians as degenerate Moors, Blacks as degenerate Whites and even, in one sixteenth-century Spanish writer, American Indians as degenerate Spaniards. And, of course, we find apes as degenerate men in a neat pre-

¹² Rockhill, *Ibid.*, p.199.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.88; *Sinea Franciscana*, Vol.I, p.196.

¹⁴ H.W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, London 1952, pp. 83-93. See also H. Balss, *Albertus Magnus als Zoologe*, Munich 1928, and *Albertus Magnus als Biologe*, Stuttgart 1947; P. Michaud-Quantin, *La Psychologie de L'activité chez Albert le Grand*, Paris 1966; J.A. Weisheipl, ed., *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences*, Toronto 1980, especially pp. 263-320, 501-535.

¹⁵ Cf. Hodgen, *Ibid.*, pp. 264, 378-382; Janson, *Ibid.*, pp. 94-99.

inversion of the theory of evolution. Civilisation is seen by most medieval writers as preceding savagery in a supposed historical sequence, just as men are seen as preceding apes in a natural history of devolution.¹⁶

The second problem with the available means of classification of mankind in the late Middle Ages is that it was not a system of classification of societies, only of mental faculties and physical types. Few people in this period had what we would acknowledge as a historical - much less a sociological - sense. Writers had to describe (and therefore distort) alien societies in the familiar terms of feudal organisation. The Canary Islands or the Congo seem from fifteenth-century sources to have been as densely crowded with kings, dukes, lords, knights, vassals, villeins and even bishops as the Europe of the time. Such comparisons were nearly always pregnant with disaster for the peoples concerned. In 1489, for instance, the aboriginals of Gomera, who knew nothing of feudalism, were slaughtered and enslaved as rebels against their natural *seigneur*. Natives of the Oaxaca valley were reduced to serfdom after Cortes' conquest. An Inca emperor was garrotted as a bad vassal.

Finally, in the absence of a useful classificatory system there was no doctrine of cultural affinities in ethnographical writings of the Middle Ages, except, as we have seen, that of degeneracy. But some suggestive if superficial comparisons were made - of Canarians with Moors, Amerindians with Jews, Mexicans with Egyptians, the Aztec pantheon with the Roman, Mongol with Mosaic law, until by the end of the sixteenth century speculations about cultural survivals, migrations and cross-currents became commonplace, though still unsystematic.¹⁷

In the context of linguistic studies it was by a missionary purpose that science was served. The importance of understanding thoroughly the culture in which one proposed to work as a missionary and of learning the natives' language, was stressed in the thirteenth century by Llull. Many missionaries to the Canary Islands were trained in a Llullian tradition, and probably mastered aboriginal tongues. None of their accounts of the islanders has survived. But the tradition survived - or perhaps was revived - in the sixteenth century, among Spanish missionaries in the New World. For example, Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan whose apostolate in Mexico lasted from 1529 until his death in 1590, was a zealous promoter of the study of the

¹⁶ See for example U. Monneret de Villard, ed., *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di frate Rinaldo da Montecroce*, Rome 1948, p.54; J. de Mata Garriazo, *El capítulo de Canarias en la 'Crónica de Juan II'*, La Laguna 1946; J. Zoraida Vázquez, 'El Indio americano y su circunstancia en la obra de Fernández de Oviedo', *Revista de Indias*, Vol.XVII (1957), pp. 483-519.

¹⁷ Hodgen, *Ibid.*, pp. 162-353.

Nahuatl language who regretted the excesses of enthusiasm that had destroyed so much Aztec culture. His great collection of ethnographic and linguistic materials was assembled with deep sympathy. And though his aim was the propagation of the faith rather than the satisfaction of scientific curiosity, in every other aspect of his work I am sure modern anthropologists would not be sorry to have his name associated with theirs.¹⁸

The writers I treat as early ethnographers, like William of Rubruck, Gerald of Wales and Bernardino de Sahagún, were *par excellence* the heroes of an epic struggle to comprehend the strange and new. But it was an epic in which the heroes were outnumbered by the cowards, who made no effort to modify their intellectual equipment in attempting to make sense of encounters with primitives. Historians are more interested in cowards, because cowards are more representative in any society. Mainstream medieval perceptions of primitives were formed, by definition, in unexceptional minds.

Newly found peoples were all too readily assimilated into any of three known categories. First, they could be equated with some race already familiar in the biblical, classical or historical panorama of mankind. Gog and Magog, the lost tribes of Israel, the progeny of Noah, the Saracens or Moors, the Scythians - all were particularly handy for this purpose.

Secondly, and more insidiously, savages could be relegated to the nether links of the chain of being, along with *similitudines hominis*, sub-men, beast-men, wild men of the woods, mythical mutations and apes. In Albertus Magnus' order of creation, the angels were succeeded by man and man by the hypothetical category of *homunculi*, physically monstrous, instinctual creatures, beast-men lacking reason and moral discrimination. Apes formed an independent category above the rest of the brutes, leaving the *homunculi* as a potential anthropological waste-bin for the classification of culturally inferior races. The criteria of such inferiority were sweeping. Nomadism was damning. So was collective nudism. So was a preference for raw food. So - very importantly - was failure to recognise what in Latin Christendom was regarded as natural law - which could include any sexual idiosyncrasy or religious quirk. And though medieval writers were, I think, culturally rather than racially discriminatory, physical appearance could constitute a problem. Albertus Magnus thought reason could only dwell in a normal physique. A simian resemblance was irredeemable. Excessive body hair was dubious. A flat nose, which, according to medieval psychology, denoted a

¹⁸ L. Nicolau d'Olwer, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, Mexico 1952, pp. 25-26, 135-36; W. Jiménez Moreno, ed., *Primeros memoriales de Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, Mexico 1974, pp. xiv-xv; M.S. Edmondson, ed., *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: the Work of Sahagún*, Albuquerque 1974.

sexually rampant disposition, was a dangerous possession on two counts.¹⁹

We have seen what the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* made of the Basques, freely deploying many of these prejudices. In the same period, Gunther of Pairis called the Poles

A people whose rites are crude, terrible of visage, with a fearsome brutality in their customs. They rage with a horrible sound. They are ferocious, threatening, quick of hand, lacking in reason, used to rapine. They scarcely behave like men. Their cruelty is worse than the horror of wild beasts. Impatient of laws, eager for slaughter, shifting, inconstant, hasty, slippery, deceptive, unaccustomed to keep faith with lords or love their neighbours, uninstructed in moving feelings of piety.²⁰

The author re-used many of the images and topics employed to denounce the Basques. Such descriptions were chosen not necessarily because they were germane, but because they corresponded to a stereotype. The Poles appeared to lack some defining human characteristics; they strongly resembled beasts; they were indifferent to natural law. Consistently with the psychology of the day, the nature betrayed in their customs was reflected in their faces.

The same topics are found in descriptions of other peoples. The Mongols thought of themselves as a *Herrenvolk* but to Western onlookers they were *Untermenschen*. They practised incest, sodomy, bestiality; they knew no law but were ruled by instinct; they had flat faces and broad noses. They looked like apes, bellowed like bulls, howled like wolves and fed like lions off the raw flesh of dogs and men. They hated cities (that, at least, was quite true). They drank from the gutter, esteemed drunkenness and honoured vomit. In short, as a Rhineland annalist summed it up, 'Of this barbarous race we hear many things

¹⁹ See for example Monneret, *Ibid.*, p.41; J. Richard, ed., *Simon de St Quentin: Histoire des Tartares*, Paris 1965, pp. 31-38; Janson, *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 79-88; *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores*, (Hanover), Vol. XXVII (1885), p. 474, Vol. XXIX (1892), 548-549, 591, 601, 604-605; Seymour, *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 215; J.H. Elliott, 'The Discovery of America and the Discovery of Man', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LVIII (1972), pp. 101-125. I collect and analyse the images applied to the Canary Islanders in a forthcoming study.

²⁰ J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae eursus completus series latina*, Paris 1855, Vol. CCXII, col. 405. I am grateful to Mr. Rob Bartlett for pointing out these lines.

which are incredible and altogether inhuman.²¹

Similar or more monstrous images recur in all later accounts of encounters with primitives. Canarians were depicted as sciapods in one source, and dismissed as wild men of the woods in Italian and Portuguese accounts or 'beasts in human form' by a German writer. The wild man image was used of Blacks, though many observers thought it too flattering and preferred to deny them any sort of humanity. Even in the late sixteenth century, woodcuts and a persistent cartographical tradition showed headless and cynocephalic Amerindians. Dreary refrains of 'more like beasts than men' or 'relying on instinct more than reason' echo through our authors.²²

One might suppose that misconceptions of this kind would be dispelled by contact. More often, however, it was first impressions which were most favourable. One has only to compare the eulogies of the Arawaks framed by Columbus on his first voyage with the unfavourable opinions he voiced on his second, when he found how the supposedly peaceful natives had massacred his men, and that the cannibal, whom he had dismissed as a fable, really existed. Another familiar example is what one might call the curious cartographical phenomenon of the lengthening penis of the Mansa Musa of Mali. In the fourteenth century, when the empire of Mali was at its height, but known to Europeans only through Arab and Jewish intermediaries, mapmakers drew its monarch black in colour but bearded and arrayed in robes of state with orb and sceptre. Familiarity, however, bred contempt and in the next century, when his power was declining and direct European knowledge increasing, the Mansa's image was stripped of his robes and somewhat more crudely represented.²³ This sort of thing is perhaps not surprising. The brutalisation of men's images of alien cultures is yet another example of a well-attested phenomenon - 'the inability of fellow-citizens to conceive strangers in the same way as themselves.'²⁴

This brings me finally - since I promised a return to the noble savage motif - to a third model which medieval writers had at hand for the interpretation of primitive society. This could be seen as a divinely-ordained source of moral lessons for Latin Christendom or as an embodiment of the classical legend of the Age of Gold. In either case, it was the innocence of the savage - in contrast to the inhumanity of the beast-men - that claimed the writers' attention. This model was more used by

²¹ Bezzola, *Ibid.*, pp. 134-144; *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores*, Vol. XXII (1872), pp. 535-536.

²² Jiménez, *Libro del conocimiento*, p. 50; Hodgen, *Ibid.*, pp. 410-417.

²³ E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, London 1968, p.91.

²⁴ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, London 1969, p. 46.

commentators than observers. One cannot but feel that Roger Bacon's or Ramon Llull's choice of Mongols as symbols of simple, innocuous ignorance was not very appropriate, or that Peter Martyr used American Indians to evoke the Golden Age because he had never had to live with them, or that the illustrator of the Vienna Codex of the *Roman de la Rose* chose - I suspect - the Canary Islands as the *mise-en-scène* of Saturn's kingdom because he had never been there.²⁵

But there were some eye-witnesses who affected to see golden, sylvan innocence among the primitives. At the start of our period, Adam of Bremen praised Scandinavian pagans for 'desiring nothing more than nature grants' and 'sharing everything with great charity' and the Prussians for despising gold, silver and furs 'as dung', he says, 'much to our condemnation'. Almost the only profound thing Marco Polo ever wrote was that civilisation had brought degeneracy to the Mongols. And if the 'Golden Age' and 'innocent savage' conventions were usually coloured by literary traditions or didactic purpose, the smack of real experience certainly comes through Pero Vaz da Caminha's account of the Brazilian Indians in 1500:

This people is good and of pure simplicity. Moreover, our Lord gave them fine bodies and good faces....One of the girls was painted from head to foot with their paint and so well proportioned and shapely, and her lack of shame so charming, that many women of our own land, seeing such attractions, would be ashamed that theirs were not like hers.²⁶

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Even after only a very selective romp through the sources, it will be apparent that there were isolated instances, rather than a continuous tradition, of scientific ethnography until the sixteenth century - tentative approaches, rather than a fully-

²⁵ Roger Bacon, *Moralis Philosophia*, Turin 1953, p. 192; R. Sagranyes de Franch, *Raymond Lulle: docteur des missions*, Schönek-Beckenried 1954, pp. 62, 137; N. Daniel, *Islam and the West*, London 1960, pp. 59, 149; Bezzola, *Ibid.*, pp. 201-209; Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *Epistolario*, ed. J. López de Toro, Madrid 1953, Vol. I, p. 242; E. Armstrong, *Ronsard and the Age of Gold*, Cambridge 1968, plate II.

²⁶ *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. CXLVI (1853), cols. 633, 637-638; Moule and Pelliot, *Ibid.*, p. 174; C. Malheiro Dias, ed., *História da colonização portuguesa do Brasil*, Oporto 1925, Vol. II, 86-99.

fledged discipline. Ethnography developed more or less *pari passu* with other sciences, particularly botany, with which it is often combined in sixteenth-century writings on the New World. This slow parturition was lengthened in part by the circumstances I have mentioned: lack of 'fieldwork' or of disinterested curiosity, the tenacity of traditional models, the reading public's low-brow demands, the absence of a useful classificatory system, the ease with which primitives could be dismissed as bestial. One other restraining influence must be added: the prevalence of juridical pre-occupations which required primitive peoples to be classed according to anthropologically useless criteria - such as whether they possessed sovereignty, whether they could legitimately be attacked or enslaved, whether they could be forcibly or peacefully converted. Indeed, probably the biggest single category of late medieval allusions to primitives occurs in the work of jurists. I have excluded their writings from this paper because they were not direct observers. But it is important to remember that their language was influential outside the ranks of their own profession. The frequency with which sexual perversions and other similar offences are deplored in accounts of primitives reflects the doctrine that infringements of natural law deprived transgressors of its protection, rendering them liable to the attacks of conquistadors and the depredations of slavers.²⁷

When scientific ethnography did emerge, it was among mendicant missionaries with a tradition of sympathetic, pains-taking evangelisation, who were prepared in the course of their work to make an effort to understand the peoples they worked with, and who rejected the attraction of received stereotypes. The discovery of primitive pagans literally in their millions in the New World was a decisive stimulus to the triumph of this new approach, but, as we have seen, it had been pre-figured much earlier in the Middle Ages. There is a case for tracing the 'Renaissance Discovery of Man', like so many Renaissance themes, back to the twelfth century. Many of the pejorative images and prejudices to which the American Indians fell victim, and which have continued to influence 'cultural contacts' or race relations to our own day, can be traced back to the literature I have described. In studying medieval ethnography, we can perceive the origins not only of a modern science, but also of many modern myths.

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²⁷ See J. Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers and Infidels*, Liverpool 1979, pp. 10-12, 21, 48.