

The Symbolic Importance of the “Exotic” in the Portuguese Court in the Late Middle Ages

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting the work in progress of our PhD thesis, entitled *Images of Power: The “exotic” in the Portuguese Court in the Renaissance*. It is generally accepted by the historiography that the Portuguese court seems to have been characterized by less complex and sophisticated forms of representation when compared to the French, Italian or Burgundian courts, which were undeniably more formal and refined. Our dissertation intends to evaluate the accuracy of this perspective. For this, we will focus on the importance of the “exotic” in ceremonial and politically relevant moments for the Portuguese monarchy.

We will start by analysing the presence of African and Asian animals, products and objects in gift-giving practices and in political and ceremonial rituals –such as weddings, parades and banquets– of the Portuguese Monarchy in the 15th and 16th centuries. The figures of Henry *the Navigator* and Kings John II and Manuel I will be particularly emphasized as figures of transition, who used these “exotic” elements as an intrinsically medieval form of symbolic representation. The famous embassy sent by Manuel I to the Pope Leo X in 1514, which included the Indian elephant Hanno, is the most ostentatious and significant episode, but other examples will be addressed. It is important to mention that this subject will be studied in close comparison to a broader European cultural context. However, instead of adopting the 17th century *Kunstkammern* of the Habsburgs as a term of comparison, we will look at previous practices of gift-giving and consumption, since we can identify a use of non-European animals as living heraldry and signs of power, ever since the Arab Abbassid Caliph Harun al-Rashid sent an elephant to Charlemagne. The main purpose of this paper is, thus, to underline the presence of “exotic” elements in the Portuguese court in the 15th and 16th centuries as part of a medieval cultural phenomenon, as opposed to an exclusively early modern tendency.

Key words: Exotic, marvellous, material culture, animals, courtly culture.

La importancia simbólica de lo “exótico” en la corte portuguesa a finales de la Edad Media

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende presentar el trabajo en curso de nuestra tesis doctoral, titulada *Imágenes de poder: Lo “exótico” en la corte portuguesa en el Renacimiento*. La historiografía acepta generalmente que la corte portuguesa parece haberse caracterizado por formas de representación menos complejas y sofisticadas en comparación con las cortes de Francia, Italia o Borgoña, indiscutiblemente más formales y refinadas. Nuestra tesis pretende evaluar la exactitud de este punto de vista. Para ello, nos centraremos en la importancia de lo “exótico” en el ceremonial y los momentos políticamente relevantes para la monarquía portuguesa.

Comenzaremos analizando la presencia de animales, productos, y objetos africanos y asiáticos en la práctica del regalo y en los rituales políticos y ceremoniales –tales como bodas, desfiles o banquetes– de la monarquía portuguesa de los siglos XV y XVI. Las personalidades de Enrique el Navegante y de los reyes Juan II y Manuel I serán particularmente destacadas como figuras de transición que usaron estos elementos “exóticos” como forma de representación simbólica intrínsecamente medieval. La famosa embajada que incluyó al elefante indio Hanno, enviada por Manuel I al papa León X en 1514, supone el episodio más ostentoso y significativo, pero abordaremos otros ejemplos. Es importante mencionar que enfocaremos este tema siempre en estrecha comparación con un contexto cultural europeo más amplio. Sin embargo, en lugar de adoptar las *Kunstkammern* de los Habsburgo del s. XVII como término de comparación, atenderemos a las prácticas de regalo anteriores, dado que ya en 801, cuando Harun al-Rashid envió un elefante a Carlomagno, podemos identificar el uso de animales no europeos como enseñas y signos de poder vivientes.

El principal propósito de este artículo es, entonces, subrayar la presencia de elementos “exóticos” en la corte portuguesa de los siglos XV y XVI como parte de un fenómeno cultural medieval, en oposición a una tendencia exclusiva de la temprana Edad Moderna.

Palabras clave: Exótico, maravilloso, cultura material, animales, cultura de corte.

The “exotic” in the Portuguese court in the 15th and 16th centuries

In the Early Modern period, the exploration of the African coast and the discovery of direct sea routes to Asia and the Americas introduced new products into European markets. Contacts with different cultures and natural contexts became more frequent and widespread. As a consequence, a global market was opened up, which led to an unprecedented consumption of exotic products, animals and luxury articles of various sorts¹. European royalty and aristocracy collected these commodities and used them as essential elements in the construction of their images of social and political power, because the rarity and high value of these products, objects and animals reflected distinction and status. In the Portuguese court, the “exotic” became a permanent element in everyday life, and it played a significant role in royal parades² and other ceremonial occasions³, in portraits⁴, and it was also profusely used in diplomatic gift-giving.

Portuguese royal parades were only significantly changed by the Discoveries in the reign of King Manuel I (1495-1521), when elements of the African and Asian exotic

¹ A. PÉREZ DE TUDELA and A. JORDAN GSCHWEND, “Renaissance Menageries. Exotic Animals and Pets at the Habsburg Courts in Iberia and Central Europe”, K. ENENKEL and P.J. SMITH (eds.), *Early Modern Zoology: The Construction of Animals in Science, Literature and the Visual Arts*, Leiden, 2007, p. 420.

² A.M. ALVES, *As Entradas Régias Portuguesas. Uma visão de conjunto*, Lisbon, 1986, pp. 25-49.

³ A.C. GOUVEIA, “La Fiesta y el Poder. El rey, la corte y los cronistas del Portugal del Siglo XVI”, *La fiesta en la Europa de Carlos V*, Seville, 2000, pp. 175-207; M.C.R. ANDRADE, “Artes de mesa e cerimoniais régios na corte do século XVI. Uma viagem através das obras de arte da ourivesaria nacional”, A.I. BUESCU and D. FELISMINO (coord.), *A Mesa dos Reis de Portugal. Ofícios, consumos, cerimónias e representações (séculos XIII-XVIII)*, Lisbon, 2011, pp. 134-147, and I.G. SÁ, “O rei à mesa entre o fim da Idade Média e o Maneirismo”, *ibid.*, pp. 188-207.

⁴ J.A. FRANÇA, *O Retrato na Arte Portuguesa*, Lisbon, 1981; A. JORDAN, *Retrato de corte em Portugal. O legado de António Moro, 1552-1572*, Lisbon, 1994; and P. FLOR, *A arte do retrato em Portugal nos séculos XV e XVI*, Lisbon, 2010.

were incorporated in these ceremonies. According to Ana Maria Alves, who wrote the most influential work on Portuguese royal parades and entries, with this monarch, these public rituals started to incorporate, not only the traditional emblems of the king of Portugal, but also the signs of his imperial project⁵. In fact, in the *Chronica do Felicissimo Rei Dom Emanuel*, Damião de Góis asserts that when Manuel I rode through Lisbon, he was preceded by a rhinoceros, several elephants and a Persian horse⁶, in a momentous ostentation of power, majesty and magnificence. Besides the animals, less explicit references to the Empire could be found in the Asian textiles used in the ornaments and in the clothes worn by the King and the royal family, which directly alluded to the luxury and wealth that came from the overseas possessions of the monarchy⁷. Later, with king John III (1521-1557), the parade became definitely a vital component of the royal propaganda, and the Crown was progressively more aware of the political importance of the luxury displayed in these rites⁸. The most striking change concerning the exotic is the inclusion of new non-European elements, namely of Chinese, Japanese and Brazilian provenance, which reflects a diversification of the taste for the exotic. However, it is essential to mention that non-European animals and references to the commerce with Africa and Asia are presented along with representations of mythical creatures like dragons and nymphs, as is stated in the descriptions of the wedding of Prince John, the heir to the crown, with Joana of Austria in 1552⁹. This shows an indissociable connection between the exotic and the marvellous that can still be identified in the Portuguese culture and taste in the 16th century.

Feasts were other important ceremonial occasions where material elements allusive to the Empire were used as a form a political representation in the 15th and 16th centuries. Throughout the Middle Ages, the royal table was a “metaphor of power”¹⁰, a place where political authority was demonstrated, and it constituted “an image of sovereignty through which the hierarchical order of the society was established and displayed”¹¹. Simultaneously, it was a place where political strategies were embodied, and where the rites and objects associated to the monarchy could be observed. Obvious instruments of political communication, feasts were splendid events where wealth and status were exhibited¹². One of the first allusions to the political

⁵ A.M. ALVES, *op. cit.*, 1986, p. 29.

⁶ “Foi ho primeiro Rei christão da Europa a quem vieram Elephantes da India, dos quaes teue çinquo juntos, quatro machos, & hũa femea, que quando caualgaua pela çidade, ou caminhaua ihão diante delle, e a estes preçedia (tam afastada que se não viam) ha ganga, ou Rhinoçerota, & atras dos Elephantes iha diante del Rei hum cauallo acubertado persio, nas ancas do qual hũ caçador persio leuaua hũa onça de caça, que lhe mandara el Rei Dormuz (...)”, DAMIÃO DE GÓIS, *Chronica do Felicissimo Rei Dom Emanuel*, Lisbon, 1566-1567, book IV, chapter LXXXIV, fl. 105v.

⁷ A.M. ALVES, *op. cit.*, 1986, pp. 31-32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ M.A. MIRANDA and L.C. SOUSA, “A «mesa do rei» como metáfora do poder”, A.I. BUESCU and D. FELISMINO (coords.), *op. cit.*, 2011, pp. 382-405.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 382-383.

¹² M.H.C. COELHO, “A Mesa dos Reis – Acto e Teatro”, A.I. BUESCU and D. FELISMINO (coords.), *op. cit.*, 2011, pp. 6-7.

use of the “exotic” that can be found in the Portuguese sources refer to Prince Henry, *the Navigator*, and is associated to a context of ceremonial feasting. In his *Crónica do Descobrimento e Conquista de Guiné*, Gomes Eanes de Zurara –the official chronicler of the Portuguese Crown from 1454 to 1474– mentions an occasion when three rhea eggs were brought to the Prince’s table, and ends his short description of the episode stating that it is fair to presume that no other Christian Prince could display such delights at his table¹³. It is important to point out that these eggs were probably ostrich eggs, since they had African provenance, and the species which is nowadays called rhea (or, to use the Portuguese name, *ema*) only exists in the American continent, at the time yet to be discovered. Nonetheless, this reference reveals the importance attributed to the Prince’s table, and it also demonstrates that the products displayed at feasts served socio-political purposes, which made exclusive and exotic goods extremely valued.

Later, during Manuel I’s reign, sugar and Asian spices, such as pepper, sandal, incense, cloves and nutmeg had a considerable impact in Portuguese gastronomy and consequently in courtly banquets¹⁴. In fact, throughout the 16th century, the abundant use of sugar and spices was so overwhelming that other Europeans who visited the Portuguese royal court and the ducal court of Braganza found the food rather unpleasant to the palate¹⁵. It is also worth mentioning the “water from all over the world” that was included in the ceremonial feast thrown by Catherine of Austria in 1565 in celebration of the wedding of Maria of Portugal with the Duke of Parma. Although this may not seem a particularly exotic substance, this water of non-European provenance had a profound symbolic meaning, since it represented the power of the Portuguese crown over the seas and distant territories¹⁶.

However, in the first decades of the Discoveries the main expression of the taste for the exotic in ceremonial banquets was not only associated to the food itself, but also to the portable arts, namely goldsmith, silverware and ivory objects. In 1474, the Portuguese crown assumed the monopoly of the African ivory commerce¹⁷, and this year introduced a cycle of systematic acquisitions of commissioned ivory pieces “that combined European imagery and forms with African ornament”¹⁸. Spoons with intricate handles, saltcellars and hunting horns are the most common of these luxury

¹³ “E a allem dos negros que Antam Gilz recebeo daquela rendiçom, ouve ouro em poo, ainda que pouco fosse, e hũa darga, e muytos ovos dema, em maneira que vierom huũ dya aa mesa do Iffante tres iguaryas delles, tam frescos e tam bõos como se foram dalgũas outras aves domesticas. E bem he de presumir que príncipe xpaão nom serya em esta parte da xpíidade, que semelhantes iguaryas em sua mesa tevesse”. GOMES EANES DE ZURARA, *Crónica do Descobrimento e Conquista de Guiné*, Paris, 1841, chapter XVI, p. 97.

¹⁴ J.C. OLIVEIRA, “A alimentação”, J. SERRÃO and A.H.O. MARQUES (dirs.), *Nova História de Portugal*, vol. V, J.J.A. DIAS (coord.), *Portugal, do Renascimento à Crise Dinástica*, Lisbon, 1998, pp. 619-627, and M.P.M. LOURENÇO and R.F. PINTO, “A mesa das rainhas de Portugal (séculos XV-XVIII): etiqueta e simbólica”, A.I. BUESCU and D. FELISMINO (coords.), *op. cit.*, 2011, pp. 260-284.

¹⁵ GIOVANNI BATTISTA VENTURINO, “Viagem do cardeal Alexandrino”, A. HERCULANO (ed.), *Opúsculos*, t. IV, *Controvérsias e Estudos Históricos (tomo III)*, Lisbon, s/d, pp. 49-90.

¹⁶ I.G. SÁ, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 189.

¹⁷ M.C.R. ANDRADE, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 134.

¹⁸ J. HECHT, “Ivory and Boxwood Carvings, 1450–1800”, *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York, 2000 – http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/boxw/hd_boxw.htm (October 2008).

objects, which were characterized, not only by having ornamental and ostentatious functions, but also by serving specific utilitarian purposes in the courtly daily life¹⁹. From Manuel I onwards, the so called “Indo-Portuguese” saltcellars, Chinese porcelains, and a variety of artefacts produced with exotic materials like crystal, coral and jasper were added to the previous African ivory pieces and extended the diversity of non-European material culture associated to the act of feasting²⁰.

Although the political use of the exotic was noticeable in courtly ceremonies, as royal parades and banquets, diplomatic gift-giving is probably the first courtly practice in which the allure of the exotic was demonstrated in a systematic way. In 1440, King Alfonso V (1438-1481) offered a lion to the duke Phillip of Burgundy²¹, and only two months later, Peter, the duke of Coimbra, sent him a lioness²². Again, one of the first references in the Portuguese sources refer to Prince Henry, *the Navigator*, who, according to the Venetian Cadamosto, offered an elephant’s leg and tusk to his sister, the duchess Isabel of Burgundy. These trophies were brought to Henry by Cadamosto himself, after one of his exploratory voyages to Africa at the Prince’s service in the 1450s²³, and this episode clearly demonstrates that many years before the development of the first *Kunst and Wunderkammern*, in the mid-sixteenth century, this kind of rare and marvellous gifts were already perceived by the elites as a source of prestige, and as signs of power. Some years later, in 1477, king Alfonso V offered an elephant to René of Anjou, inaugurating a series of magnificent presents from the Portuguese monarchy to prominent European rulers²⁴. However, it was once again Manuel I who introduced an exacerbation of this tendency, namely with the splendid mission of obedience that was sent to Rome after the election of Pope Leo X, in 1513. This famous embassy, led by Tristão da Cunha, included numerous presents: sumptuous brocades embellished with expensive pearls and precious stones, several pieces of silverware, a Persian horse, a jaguar and an Indian elephant named Han-

¹⁹ M.C.R. ANDRADE, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²¹ “Audit Henry [du Vivier, varlet de chambre et garde des lyons et lupart de monseigneur a Gand], la somme de soixante cinq livres quatre solz parisis, monnoye de Flandres, qui deue lui estoit par monseigneur et que ledit receveur [de Flandre] lui a paicee par commandement et ordonnance de mondit seigneur et par vertu de certaines ses lettres patentes donnees a Quesnoy, le xije jour de may l’an mil CCCC. quarante et ung, rendues a court par le compte precedent (a) en semblable chapitre pour le gouverne des quatre lyons d’icellui seigneur, a lui presentéz, assavoir les deux par les bonnes gens de sa ville de Gand, et les autres deux : l’un par le roy de Portugal et l’autre par le seigneur de la Vere, comme it appaert par ledit compte precedent (...)”. J. PAVIOT (ed.), *Portugal et Bourgogne au XVIe siècle*, Lisbon – Paris, 1995, p. 313.

²² “A Ferrandiennes, portugaloiz, pour don a lui fait par mondit seigneur quant il luy a presenté en la ville de Bruges une lyonne de par l’infant de Dompecte (*sic*), regent de Portugal, xvij^e £ xv s (mandement, Le Quesnoy, 9 avril 1441)”. J. PAVIOT (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 314.

²³ “Também [esta] grande pata [de elefante] a apresentei ao sobredito senhor Infante, com um dente de elefante que tinha 12 palmos de comprimento e [era] bem feito; o qual dente, com a dita pata, mandou o dito senhor apresentar à duquesa de Borgonha como grande presente”. J.M. GARCIA (ed.), *As Viagens dos Descobrimentos*, Lisbon, 1983, pp. 129-130.

²⁴ C.D. CUTTLER, “Exotics in Post-Medieval European Art: Giraffes and Centaurs”, *Artibus et Historiae*, 12, 23 (1991), p. 163.

no, who according to some descriptions kneeled before the Pope²⁵. Despite the fact that the official and main purpose of this mission (and others alike) was to formally recognise the new Pope as head of the Church, it was simultaneously a privileged occasion for a King to show wealth and the achievements of his state. Therefore, it served as a demonstration of Manuel I’s power and his imperial project before the whole Christendom²⁶.

Although John III continued his father’s policies of gift giving, his presents are less emphasised in the coeval sources, which seems to suggest that this king had a more modest action as a donor and as an acquirer of luxurious commodities²⁷. On the other hand, for his wife Catherine of Austria, giving exotic presents was a constant activity, sustained by her frequent acquisition of Asian and African objects and products²⁸. For example, the Indian rock crystal and gold elephant with a salt receptacle (nowadays at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna), which was acquired by the Queen in 1550 and offered to her son’s wife, Joana of Austria in 1553, is probably one of her most well-known presents.

It is also important to mention the inclusion of non-European elements in the Portuguese sixteenth-century portraits, another manifestation of the political use of the exotic by the monarchy. Some of these elements are the jewels, which profusely ornamented the portrayed individuals. Besides, the figure of the African page boy, depicted in Cristóvão de Morais’ portrait of Joana of Austria (1553), became a frequent artistic element in the later Spanish portraits of the 16th and 17th centuries. In this particular painting, its representation is on the one hand, a contrasting element, used to highlight the social prestige of the princess, and on the other hand, a reference to the Empire, since the Portuguese had been the first to systematically explore the West-coast of the African continent in the previous century²⁹. Finally, one non-European artefact that becomes recurrent in Iberian portraits of female personalities is worth mentioning: the fan, a Japanese object of restricted access, whose presence is a symbol of power, prestige and distinction.

The exotic in Medieval Europe

As the previous paragraphs clearly demonstrate, the Discoveries gave the Portuguese Crown a privileged access to non-European animals, products and objects which became an indissociable part of the courtier splendour in the Renaissance. However, part of these “exotic” animals and products were not at all unknown in Europe by

²⁵ DAMIÃO DE GÓIS, *op. cit.*, 1566-1567, book III, chapter LV, fls. 99v-101; S.A. BEDINI, *The Pope’s Elephant*, Manchester, 1997; A.C. GOUVEIA, *op. cit.*, 2000, pp. 199-202; J.P.O. COSTA, *D. Manuel I. Um Príncipe do Renascimento*, Lisbon, 2007, p. 241, and I.G. SÁ, “The uses of luxury: some examples from the Portuguese courts from 1480 to 1580”, *Análise Social*, XLIV, 192 (2009), p. 598.

²⁶ On this subject, *vid.* P. LOPES, *Um Agente Português na Roma do Renascimento*, Lisbon, 2013.

²⁷ I.G. SÁ, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 599.

²⁸ A.I. BUESCU, *Catarina de Áustria. Infanta de Tordesilhas, Rainha de Portugal*, Lisbon, 2007; A. JORDAN, *A rainha colecionadora. Catarina de Áustria*, Lisbon, 2012.

²⁹ A. JORDAN, *op. cit.*, 1994, pp. 74-75.

the 15th and 16th centuries. In fact, there was a cultural predisposition in favour of the “exotic” in the Middle Ages, which was undeniably one of the factors that stimulated the Discoveries and dictated their commercial success³⁰. Before the wave of Iberian expansionism, non-European commodities were already valued and seen as emblems of distinction, and the elites already used them as a symbolic display of majesty in the construction of images of personal and dynastic power³¹.

Although elephants and other exotic animals were rarely imported before the 15th century, there are several records of their presence in Europe in previous centuries. In 1255, Louis IX of France brought an elephant from the Seventh Crusade, and later sent it to his cousin, Henry III of England. Once in the British Isles, the animal was drawn by Matthew Paris, and is depicted in one of the illustrations of his *Chronica Majora*³². This kind of gifts was recurring in diplomatic relations ever since the Antiquity and one of its most celebrated medieval examples is the elephant offered by Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne in the beginning of the 9th century³³. Henry I of England had a small zoo, which, according to the description by William of Malmesbury, included lions, leopards, lynxes and camels³⁴. In the 13th century, Emperor Frederick II ordered an elephant from India and exhibited it in Cremona, and gave three leopards to Henry III of England, “in honor of his noble coat-of-arms”³⁵. The Popes kept lions in captivity in Rome since the 12th century, as did the cities of Florence and Venice, and also King Charles V of France in the 14th century³⁶.

These examples demonstrate that knowledge on African and Asian animals, far from being a result of the 15th and 16th century Discoveries, was already a reality in medieval Europe. The presence of these animals in the medieval imaginary can be found in works like the *Etymologiae*, produced in the 7th century by St. Isidore of Seville, who based his research on the classical authors. The Bestiary, a form of medieval literature that developed in the 12th century, interpreted animals and mythical creatures as entities that had spiritual and symbolic characteristics as well as intrinsic flaws and merits. This interpretation, associated to a hierarchy where animals like lions, dragons and elephants had more value and prestige than other animals, like the domestic ones, influenced heraldry and the animals that were chosen for diplomatic offers. The elephant, for instance, was considered as an intelligent, chaste, spiritually uncorrupted animal, and enemy of demonic beasts³⁷, which is probably one of the

³⁰ E. RINGMAR, “Audience for a Giraffe: European Expansionism and the Quest for the Exotic”, *Journal of World History*, 17, 4 (December 2006), pp. 376-377.

³¹ H. NICKEL, “Presents to Princes: A Bestiary of Strange and Wondrous Beasts, Once Known, for a Time Forgotten, and Rediscovered”, *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 26 (1991), pp. 129-138.

³² C.D. CUTTLER, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 163; M. PASTOUREAU, *Les Animaux Célèbres*, Paris, 2008, pp. 140-150.

³³ M. PASTOUREAU, *op. cit.*, 2008, pp. 118-124.

³⁴ B.D. BOEHM and M. HOLCOMB, “Animals in Medieval Art”, *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York, 2000 – http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/best/hd_best.htm (originally published October 2001, last revised January 2012).

³⁵ C.D. CUTTLER, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 163, and H. NICKEL, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 129.

³⁶ C.D. CUTTLER, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 161.

³⁷ M. PASTOUREAU, “L’animal”, *Le Moyen Âge en Lumière*, Paris, 2002, p. 84. On the symbolism of the elephant, *vid.* G.C. DRUCE, “The Elephant in Medieval Legend and Art”, *Journal of the Royal Archaeological*

reasons why it was such a distinct protagonist in gift-giving practices and ceremonial rituals, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

As for the material culture itself, from the 10th to the mid-14th century, African ivory carved pieces arrived in Europe with relative frequency³⁸. Throughout the Middle Ages, luxurious products from the Islamic Near East, like soap, sumptuous textiles, glass and inlaid metalwork filled Venetian markets, and from there, reached many other European cities. Chinese porcelains were introduced in Europe in the 14th century, and from the beginning were highly prized objects³⁹. In the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, artefacts as unicorn horns (which were actually narwhal whale horns), coral branches and bezoar stones were searched for and collected “as wonders and as antidotes against poison”⁴⁰. Eastern stones and gems were also thought to have “marvellous powers”, which were addressed and systematised in medieval lapidaries, a form of literature that became rather popular in the late Middle Ages⁴¹.

Even spices were already demanded in Europe during the Middle Ages, and not only because they were associated to a more sophisticated, interesting and flavour-some type of cuisine. In fact, it was believed that spices had medicinal properties; they were also burned in religious ceremonies and used to produce perfumes and cosmetics. Furthermore, the aura of mystery that surrounded them, due to their strange and ambiguous provenance and high prizes turned them into symbols of material prosperity and social status, just like exotic animals and non-European portable arts, and “fueled the expansion of Europe” in the Early Modern period⁴².

The allure of the non-European in the Middle Ages was closely connected to the relation between the Marvellous and the Indian ocean, imagined “in the medieval culture as a receptacle of dreams, myths and legends”, largely by influence of the Antiquity texts⁴³. In fact, India remained more or less unknown in spite of the accounts written by merchants, travellers and missionaries, who often replicated the fantasies of ancient sources. India and its marvels had a very complex cultural meaning in the medieval mentality: they are a constant presence in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* and in all of the works influenced by them, and the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville, which were extremely popular in the Late Middle Ages, contributed immensely for the embellishment of the Indian myth⁴⁴. The continuous arrival to Europe of exclusive luxury goods, such as spices, silks, inlaid metal pieces and precious stones and woods, made it obvious for the European men that the world of wonders was found in the East. Consequently, India represented on the one hand, a world of endless and

Institute, 76 (1919), pp. 11-73.

³⁸ J. HECHT, *op. cit.*, 2008.

³⁹ A. JORDAN, “Rarities and Novelties”, A. JACKSON and A. JAFFER (eds.), *Encounters. The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*, London, 2004, p. 34; J. MUNGER and A.C. FRELINGHUYSEN, “East and West: Chinese Export Porcelain”, *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York, 2000 – http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ewpor/hd_ewpor.htm (October 2003).

⁴⁰ A. JORDAN, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 34.

⁴¹ L. DASTON and K. PARK, *Wonders and the Order of Nature. 1150-1750*, New York, 1998, p. 41.

⁴² P. FREEDMAN, *Out of the East: spices and the medieval imagination*, New Haven, 2008, p. 2.

⁴³ J. LE GOFF, “O Ocidente Medieval e o Oceano Índico: Um Horizonte Onírico”, *Para um Novo Conceito de Idade Média: Tempo, Trabalho e Cultura no Ocidente*, Lisbon, 1980, p. 265.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271; P. LOPES, “Os livros de viagens medievais”, *Medievalista*, 2, 2 (2006), pp. 1-32.

extravagant wealth, and on the other hand, was associated to an “image of fantastic exuberance” populated by monsters and freaks who kept the treasures envisioned and desired by the medieval men⁴⁵. Essentially, the East and the Indian Ocean were, for many centuries, object of an ideological construction which (at least partially) explains the symbolic power and meaning of everything that came from there. Animals, spices and elements of material culture were not only appreciated because of their intrinsic value, but also because of what they represented and evoked, which made them fit for being used as *regalia* and as signs of power. This means that in the Renaissance, the animals and elements of the African and Asian material culture used by the Portuguese monarchy did not represent mere symbols of the Empire, but something far more powerful. They represented a world that was idealized and desired for centuries, and the domination over this world.

Finally, it is important to mention that unlike the concept of marvellous or *mirabilia*, which suggests a symbolic meaning and value, when the term “exotic” was introduced in European languages, in the 16th century, it simply described something that was or came from outside, as etymologically indicated by the prefix “exo-”⁴⁶. In the Portuguese literature, for instance, the word was used in the 16th century by the humanist Damião de Góis as an adjective with this meaning. And it not only referred to non-European products but also to European ones, namely German and French wheat⁴⁷. This clearly demonstrates that the word was only associated to the idea of an exterior provenance, and could be used to qualify anything decontextualized from its place of origin. Therefore, it is reasonable to use the word “exotic” as an operative term, but since it lacks ideological and symbolic depth, in our approach it is absolutely indissociable from the concept of “marvellous”, profoundly connected to the senses, and to a variety of images and metaphors related to the sight⁴⁸, and which evokes fantastic and idealized perceptions of the Other and of the unknown. It is only through a discourse that comprehensively associates these two concepts, and which analyses the allure of the non-European from the Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages that the cultural and political importance of the “exotic” in the Renaissance can be fully understood.

⁴⁵ J. LE GOFF, *op. cit.*, 1980, pp. 274-278.

⁴⁶ C. KNELLWOLF, “The Exotic Frontier of the Imperial Imagination”, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 26, 3 (Fall 2002), p. 10, and R.P. LOCKE, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*, Cambridge, 2009, p. 1.

⁴⁷ DAMIÃO DE GÓIS, *Hispania*, in *Obras de Damião de Góis*, vol. III (1541-1549), *Da Hispania ao segundo cerco de Diu*, M.C. MATOS (ed.), translation by M.P. MENESES, Lisbon, 2011, pp. 135-137.

⁴⁸ J. LE GOFF, *O Maravilhoso e o Quotidiano no Ocidente Medieval*, Lisbon, 2010, pp. 15-16.