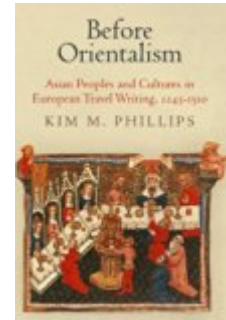


**Kim M. Phillips.** *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 328 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4548-6.



**Reviewed by** Liam M. Brockey

**Published on** H-Asia (August, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Historians have a variety of intellectual tools available for making sense of the past. Some, forged long ago, seem unfit for present tasks. Others, newly sharp, produce good results, if employed by skilled hands. And still others, laying atop the pile where many have access to them, have grown dull with overuse. Not long ago those tools were strong, too, but being applied to nearly every task has weakened them. Perhaps none have been so worn out as those bequeathed to scholars by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Intended by Said to critique a specific moment in modern European cultural and intellectual history, the concepts that he employed so insightfully have been brought to bear on virtually all of the European past by his epigones. The results have, for the most part, been unconvincing. Said's tools work poorly on problems other than those he originally had in mind; regardless, scholars continue to misapply them. Reaching far beyond the analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they invoke Said with polemical intent: At

the mere mention of European colonialism or imperialism, a strong whiff of sulphur is detected.

In *Before Orientalism*, Kim Phillips takes issue with this state of affairs, arguing against the application of Said's vocabulary to late medieval European writings on Asia. In advocating the notion of what she calls the "precolonial Middle Ages," she reveals that her impulse to do so came from Anthony Pagden (p. 199), in particular from a statement found in his 1993 *European Encounters with the New World*: "Europeans have always looked on their own culture as privileged, and upon all other cultures as to some degree inferior. There is nothing remarkable about this." [1] Reviewing the evidence of medieval descriptions of Asia (here, a capacious term including East, South, Southeast, and Central Asia), Phillips finds little evidence of the type of cultural attitudes that Pagden labels pervasive. Phillips's task in *Before Orientalism* is therefore to argue the negative—at least for the Middle Ages—against such essentialist claims about European attitudes, especially

those rooted in the overgenerous application of Said's concepts.

*Before Orientalism* intends an overview of medieval writing on Asia and an analysis of some of the themes found therein. The book is divided into two parts. Phillips begins by addressing the theoretical problems inherent in applying Said's terms to the Middle Ages, examining the various ways in which they are and are not applicable. She then turns to specific texts, discussing the range and content of medieval descriptions of the Mongols, Cathay, and India, primarily. Phillips confronts the further problem that is presented by the fact that some of the texts are travel narratives (those of the Franciscan emissaries to the Mongol khans, for example), some are compilations produced by authors who never visited Asia (such as Mandeville), and some are genuine accounts embellished by trained writers (in the case of Marco Polo's work with Rusticello). Her overview provides a useful bibliography of medieval and modern editions of these accounts, and short summaries of the major themes in each text.

The second part of *Before Orientalism* consists of thematic analysis of five topics: food and foodways, femininities, sex, civility, and bodies. These subjects, reminiscent of the ones that Phillips analyzed in her earlier studies of women and gender in the Middle Ages, seek to widen the scope of her previous analyses to include medieval descriptions of Asia. In each of these chapters, however, she reveals that her sources do not speak to her themes—or at least not in the ways to which scholars of modern literature and history are accustomed. The modes of analysis that have proved fruitful in other contexts, she asserts, are not productive when approaching medieval travel writing on Asia. Nevertheless, Phillips does find some themes that resonate with current scholarly preoccupations: cannibalism, widow sacrifice, polygamy, notions of “civilization,” the presence of monsters or monstrous humans. Each of these topics serves to demonstrate how the medieval

texts' preoccupations were different from those of later eras; how they were distinct from the cultural attitudes of subsequent generations of European travel writers. In Phillips's view, the specific conditions of medieval European society gave rise to particular interests on the part of travel writers: growing cities and the elaboration of courtly culture engendered fascination with other cities, other courts. And in light of the lack of any serious consideration of colonial enterprises in Asia, she argues, medieval European authors were not obliged to justify conquest by denigrating Asian peoples in their texts. The sources analyzed in *Before Orientalism* “have the power to unsettle any assumptions we may hold about premodern, pre-colonial European perspectives on Otherness, and that is their great value” (p. 188).

In each thematic chapter, Phillips extends chronologically into the sixteenth century, positing the gradual emergence of notions of cultural superiority in modern forms at the beginning of the 1600s. A smattering of authors from the early modern period such as Jean Bruyerin Champier, Ralph Fitch, and Gaspar da Cruz, are invoked in order to assert that the new era of discovery and conquest destroyed the medieval capacity for curiosity. Phillips takes Samuel Purchas's 1613 dismissal of Chinese civilization in his travel narrative omnibus as clear indication that an older tradition of curiosity about Asia had passed (p. 171). Disgust and deprecation, she contends, became the hallmarks of European views of Asia, ushering in an era for whose cultural products it is appropriate to use Edward Said's theoretical vocabulary. For the earlier period, however, a different analytical program is necessary. Phillips thus concludes her book by urging scholars to consider “a Precolonial Middle Ages” (pp. 199-201). She sees this period as one in which Pagden's “unremarkable” sense of European cultural superiority is absent, and suggests that such “precolonial” European views of foreign peoples will complicate his-

tories of the Middle Ages and European history more broadly.

To those familiar with the canon of European writings on Asia in the premodern period, *Before Orientalism* seems to be stating the obvious—at least with regard to medieval texts. Phillips’s account of her repeated failures to identify “colonial” views in medieval texts might otherwise be called “the Great Khan’s New Clothes.” Indeed, one should not look for traces of the urge to conquer in texts written, for example, by cowering papal emissaries seeking to be spared the wrath of the invincible Mongols; just as one should not look for attitudes of European cultural superiority among the superlatives used by Marco Polo to describe the court of Kublai Khan. But by the same token, one wonders at the choice of themes made by Phillips: Should we seek insights on sex and femininity in the writings of wandering Franciscan friars? Or should we search for deeper meanings about Asian foodways in the hodgepodge of exotica compiled by Mandeville (whose identity and even existence are still debated)? Phillips’s answers to those questions are far from convincing, since her sources are either silent or laconic on these topics. What, then, enralls her medieval authors? Religion, rulership, armies, ethnography, just to mention a few of the *loci classici* that pass largely without mention in *Before Orientalism*. Yet none of these topics fits well into the theoretical frames mentioned in Phillips’s study, whether those that she praises or those she dislikes. To acknowledge the main themes of these medieval texts would oblige her to jettison theoretical agendas entirely and appreciate the texts for what they contain, rather than for what they do not. Despite her urging new approaches, this is a step that Phillips seems unwilling to take.

#### Note

[1]. Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

**Citation:** Liam M. Brockey. Review of Phillips, Kim M. *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44361>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.