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THE JOURNEY OF MYTHS FROM WEST TO EAST

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to deal with the myths about the East that medieval Europeans had before geographical discoveries. We will also see how these myths were shared by Orientals with Europeans that were defined as the barbarians of the West. European men of the Middle Ages imagined that India, the islands, and in general the fabulous East were inhabited by animals and men fictional, deformed, with certain physical parts more developed than others, for example men with dogs' heads, men with ears so big that you can use them as a blanket, men with one foot that could be used as protection from the sun etc.¹ These stories were based on medieval Greek and Latin sources; Authors such as Herodotus, (c. 484–425 BC); Megasthenes, (ca. 350 – 290 B.C.) and, especially, Ctesias of Cnidus who lived in the 5th century BC and of whom we analyzed "history of India", etc. had talked about giant ants, griffins, unicorns, etc; a series of imaginative geography reports that were later collected in a work known as the *Physiologus*² (third century AD) who had the merit of making known these myths to the people of the Middle Ages. The *Physiologus* became the source for the various "bestiaries" or "book of beasts."*

Keywords: *bestiary, sciapods, blemmyes, monocles, Shanhai jing, Wakan sansaizue, diffusion theory of myths.*

A **bestiary**, or **Bestiarum vocabulum**³ is a compendium, full of descriptions of animals, plants and rocks made popular in the Middle Ages in illustrated volumes that described various beasts and their stories usually followed by a moral lesson. This meant that every living thing had its own special meaning because it was part of God's creation. For example, the pelican, which was believed to tear open its breast to bring its sons to feeding with its own blood, was a living representation of Jesus. The bestiary, then, is also a reference to the symbolic language of animals in Western Christian art and literature.

What distinguishes these people from men living in Europe is mainly the area of origin. The monstrous races always live in distant lands, such as India, Ethiopia, Cathay, places with uncertain boundaries for medieval man, but whose name always evokes mystery and full of mysteries.

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¹ Wittkower R. *Allegory and Migration of Symbols*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1987 p. 12.

² *Il Fisiologo*, a cura di Francesco Zambon, Milano, Adelphi, 1975.

³ E. Giovanelli, M.C. Biella, L.G. Perego, *Il bestiario fantastico di età orientalizzante nella penisola italiana*, Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, Trento, 2013.

In the pictures below are some beliefs of deformed medieval men that were placed in India or China.

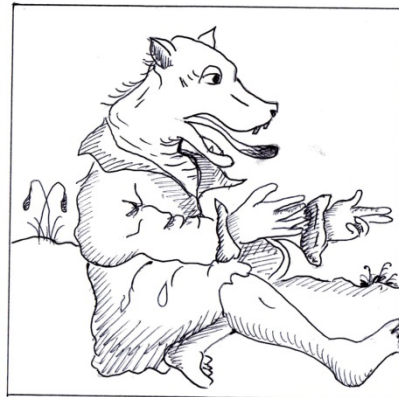
Monopods (also **sciapods**) are mythological creatures with just one large foot. These were described by Ctesias in his book *Indika*, a fragmented record of the view of Persians. This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of The Monopods contained in the "Nuremeberg Chronicle" by Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514), a native of Nurember in *Secunda etas mundi Folio XII*"



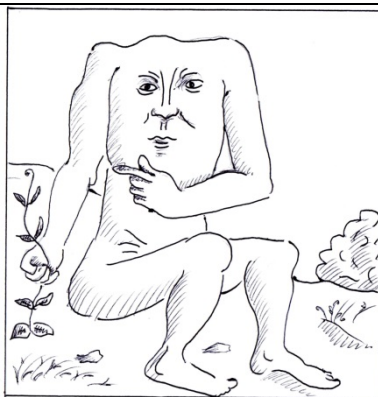
The **Panotti** (from the Greek words "all ears") were a mythical human race, described as possessing large ears that covered their entire bodies. These were described by Pliny the Elder In A.D. 77-79. This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of Panotti contained in the "Nuremeberg Chronicle" (1440-1514) in *Secunda etas mundi Folio XII*"



The Cynocephaly, or dog-headed people. The Greek traveler Megasthenes (350 – 290 BCE) claimed to know about dog-headed people in India who lived in the mountains, and that communicated through barking. This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of **Cynocephaly** contained in the "Nuremeberg Chronicle" 1 (1440-1514) in *Secunda etas mundi Folio XII*"



The **Blemmyes** (Latin *Blemmyae*) were a tribe described in Roman histories of the later empire. The Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC – ca. 24 AD) describes the Blemmyes as a peaceful people living in the East Desert near Meroe. This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of **Blemmyes** contained in the "Nuremeberg Chronicle" (1440-1514) in *Secunda etas mundi Folio XII*"



Antichthones, (Latin antipodes) in geography, are those peoples who inhabit the antipodes. The term is taken up by Aristotle (*De caelo* 308a.20), Strabo, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, and was adopted into Latin as antipodes. This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of **Antipodes** contained in the "Nuremeberg Chronicle" (1440-1514) in *Secunda etas mundi Folio XII*"



These myths survived up to the modern age because of two specific factors:
 1) One was the arrival in the West of the letter of Prester John.
 2) A second factor is that these beliefs were not only denied but will appear as reliable data in the reports of travelers in the Middle Age.

The Letter of Prester John⁴

The letter of John (or Presbyter Johannes) arrived in the West in 1165 addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Emanuel Commeno, which he then sent to Pope Alexander III and Frederick Barbarossa. The sender of the letter described

⁴ *La Lettera del Prete Gianni*, a cura di G. Zaganelli, Parma, Pratiche, 1990

himself as “John, Priest, King of Kings and Sovereign of sovereigns”. The letter described the kingdom of this priest located in the Far East. Prester John claimed to hold immense domains that contained also the earthly paradise and the kingdom of Gog and Magog (ancient people cited in the Bible), and described himself as “lord of the three Indies,” and said to live in an immense palace made of gems, nestled in gold, and had, every day, not less than ten thousand guests at his own table. Among his uncanny subjects were also elves, dwarves, giants, cyclops, centaurs, minotaurs, dog-headed beings, blemmyae, and so on.

After asking for tributes to the Western rulers, aimed to launch a crusade to free the sepulcher of Christ from his enemies. Neither the Emperor Emmanuel Comnenus nor Frederick Barbarossa replied, but the Pope, probably by pure charity (because Prester John declared himself a Christian, and a priest for more, and ready to collaborate in the crusade), replied by asking more detailed information and proposing the “sending of his bishop at the court of Prester John after it was determined exactly where it was.” It was an obvious fake (the era was abundant in fakes of various categories) by some scribe with an intention of propaganda against Byzantium, but it did not matter about its origin and authenticity on its reception: the moment that the Pope replied he validates the authenticity of the letter.

In a very long period of time that goes from the X-th century when Venice acquires a leading role with the trade with the East, and later, through the Mongolian pax (which favored the passage of the Europeans on the Asian territory interrupted by the VIII-th century because of the Muslim rule), until the XVII-th century, not only was it impossible to refute the Greek myths about the Orient, but they were confirmed due to the travel reports.

Among the many texts we decided to analyze these:

- 1) Odorico from Pordenone Travels;
- 2) *il Milione* of Marco Polo;
- 3) John Mandeville travels.

Odoric of Pordenone (real name Odorico Mattiussi or Mattiuzzi; c. 1286 – 14 January 1331) was an Italian late-medieval traveler. He visited China and was the first European to reach Lhasa.

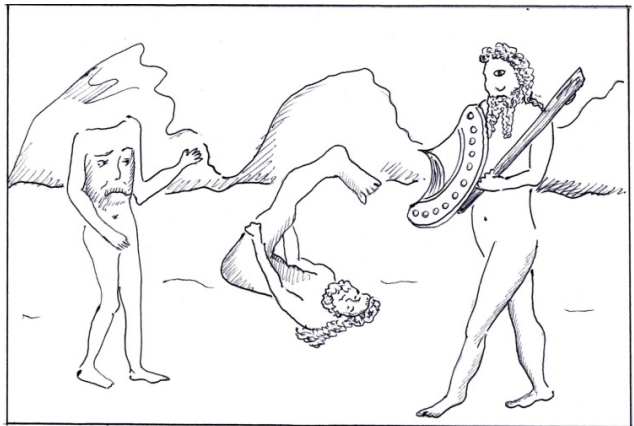
The story, as all the medieval reports, objective was in some paragraphs, replete with myths in others. He mentions pygmies, and the dog-headed, tree from whose fruit, when they are mature, come out lambs etc. We must also add that there are two versions of the same travel report: version A, more objective, and B version full of fantasy, and also the report is not of Odorico but was written by William of Solagna to whom Odorico told his memoirs.⁵

We can ask ourselves why medieval men have this lack of objectivity. There are several hypotheses. The men of the monstrous fabulous East had been established as a cultural knowledge for travelers and left them disappointed and surprised not to have met any. Therefore their location was moved to places that had not been visited by the narrator directly but were happy stories heard and repeated from others that

⁵ Sinica Francescana Vol 1, pag. 381-495, Frati Editori di Quaracchi, Firenze, 1929.

swore to have met them. Antonio Pigafetta, in the wake of Vasco de Gama (so that in a time in which it must have been open to serious exploration region) argues that there are men called Panotti not by his direct observation but because a sailor, whose words were always truthful, reported him.

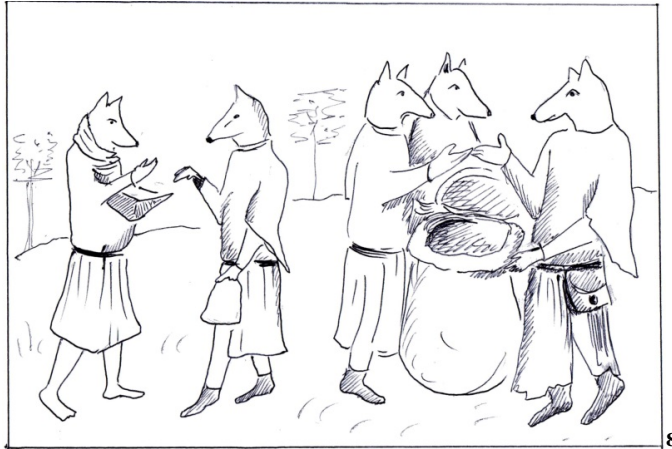
In the worst cases people believed to see what had been inculcated in their mind by conditioning. The traveler applied to the observation of a landscape completely unknown how much he had been told about it, bringing the unknown to something that was known and accepting in advance to be in a place certainly full of wonders that he identifies in things or places for which he hasn't the tools or cognitive categories suitable for grading. For example, Marco Polo, by saying that the unicorn is not that kind of animal it is said, but "a rough graceless beast with a big horn on his forehead." Apparently he had seen a rhino, but thought he saw a kind of Unicorn less beautiful than what is known. The art historian Rudolf Wittkower⁶ makes an interesting observation in analyzing a famous illustration of the *Million*, kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris known as No. 2810, built in the early fifteenth century, which related to many miniatures that tend to interpret freely and even to correct the text to make it consistent with traditional beliefs. In the chapter in which Marco Polo speaks of the inhabitants of Siberia, we are told only that it is a very wild race. But the miniaturist shows three samples of this people: one Sciapode, a Blemo and a Monocle.



When he speaks of the population of the Andaman Islands (Indian Ocean) Marco Polo says just that they have heads, eyes and teeth a bit similar to those of dogs. The illustrator represents them as dog-headed.

⁶ Wittkower R., *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, New York, 1987, pages 82-84

⁷ This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of illustration of the *Million*, No. 2810



However, there were those who managed to be objective as Giovanni from Montecorvino who declares in his reports: "About wonderful men and beasts, and about Eden, very much I looked for and asked; but nothing I've found."⁹ (But it seems that these truthful statements would not find favor with the public).

Among the travelers in conflict between making an objective account and say what is expected of the audience stands out the Englishman John Mandeville (? -1372) born in St. Albans. The report of his travels, published between 1357 and 1371, had a very large fortune, and helped to revive the curiosity of Europeans to the lands of the East. Anyway the author personally went up to the maximum in the Holy Land, while everything else is taken from different sources: Pliny, Isidore of Seville, the cycle of Alexander, the letter of Prester John, the Beasts, Giovanni from Pian del Carpine, Marco Polo, Odorico of Pordenone. In particular, the works of the last two, Polo and Odorico from Pordenone, have been the subject of plagiarism. As evidence of the success of his writings during the Middle Ages, of Mandeville's Travels manuscript copies are kept 300 against 119 of Marco Polo.¹⁰ The development of geographical knowledge led not so much to disprove the existence of the mentioned above people but their location, and if for a long time they had been placed in India and China, later they were moved to places still poorly understood like Japan, the extreme north and the New World.

The same myths present in China and Japan

In several Chinese documents, and among all the Shan Hai Jin¹¹, we can find monstrous populations highly coinciding with those fantasized by the Europeans depending on contacts occurred and relationships established over the centuries with the Oriental world.

⁸ This image was realized by the artist Silvana Arnò and reproduces, accurately enough, the existent drawings of illustration of the Million, No. 2810.

⁹ Sinica Francescana vol. I, pp: 335-355.

¹⁰ Boscaro Adriana, "Mirabilia" in *Occidente e Oriente*, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, Venezia, 1989, p. 12.

¹¹ *A Chinese Bestiary, Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Richard E. Strassberg (Editor), Richard E. Strassberg (Translator), University of California Press, London, 2002.

Shanhai jing (“Classic of Mountains and Seas”)

Shanhai jing is treatise composed in the late Han period, (206 BC – 220 AD), which collects geographic and ethnographic news. However, most of these data are fantastic and describe the "mythical" people lived on the border of China in that time. Really interesting are also the legends which clearly show the contacts occurred with the classical Greek world (Cyclops, pygmies who struggle with cranes), the trades along the caravan routes that connected East and West and also favored the transmission of news, and simple legends that could become amazing stories. By itself the Shan Hai Jin is very short and essential, but in these fantastic notions of countries not known many later writers of fiction would then draw freely.

280 The Demon People
(Guiguomin) 鬼國民:

“The land of the demon people lies north of the Corpse of Erfu. The people have human faces with one eye”. This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book *“A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 197.*



233 Xigtian 形天: “Xigtian and the supreme God "Di" came to this place and struggled against each for ultimate power. The Supreme God cut off Xigtian's head and buried him at Eternaly Auspicious Mountain. Xigtian's nipples then transformed into eyes, and his navel became a mount. He performs a dance with an ax and shield” This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book *“A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 171.*



286 Ring dog 環狗

(Huan'gou): "Ring Dog is a person with a beast's head and a human body. According to another version he is called Wei, and his form resembles that of a yellow dog."

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book "A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 200.



246 The People who hold up their ears 聶耳民(Nie'ermin):

"The land of the people who hold up their ears is located east of the land of the people without intestines".

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book "A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 177.



243 The flexible people 柔

利民 (Roulimin): "The land of flexible people is located east of the land of the One-eyed People. The people have one hand and one foot. Their knees are reversed and their feet bend upward. According to another version, their land is called the land of Liuli people, and the people's feet bend backward."

This image was realized by



Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book “*A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 176.

242 The one eyed people
一目民 (Yimumin). “The land of one-eyed people lies to the east of bell Mountain. The people who dwell here have one eye in the middle of their face.”

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and reproduces accurately those contained in the book “*A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* [Richard E. Strassberg], 2002, page 177.



We can count in Japan:

Wakan sansaizue

The ***Wakan Sansai Zue*** (Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia) is a Japanese encyclopedia written by Terajima Ryōan, a doctor from Osaka, published in the Edo period, of 1712. 81 books of 105 collected volumes, describes and illustrates carpentry and fishing and many activities of daily life and also plants and animals, and constellations. As seen from the title of the book 和 (wa), which means Japan and 漢 (kan), which means China, Terajima's idea was based on a Chinese encyclopedia of the Ming times, namely *Sancai Tuhui* ("Pictorial" or "Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers") by Wang Qi (1607).

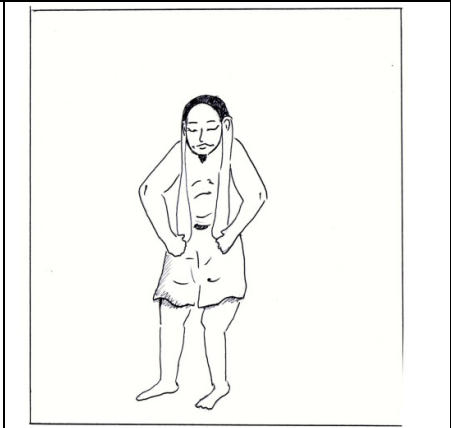
Land of the Dog-men. 狗國 (kokoku).

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and shows the images contained in the site “<http://record.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/wakan/wakan-jin/page.html?style=b&part=7&no=50>” where the Wakansanzazue pages in the 14th book have been photographed.



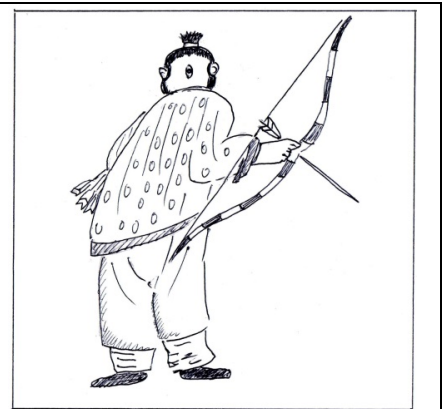
The land of the men who hold up their ears. 聳耳国 (setsujikoku).

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and shows the images contained in the site : “<http://record.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/wakan/wakan-jin/page.html?style=b&part=7&no=50>” where the Wakansanzazue pages in the 14th book have been photographed.



The land of the men with one eye on their backs. 後眼(kougan)

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and shows the images contained in the site “<http://record.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/wakan/wakan-jin/page.html?style=b&part=7&no=50>” where the Wakansanzazue pages in the 14th book have been photographed.



The land of pygmies 小人(kobito).

Here too, the presence of the Greek myths is quite obvious. It is impressive that the image not only depicts the pygmies but puts them side by side to cranes in their legendary struggle.

This image was realized by Silvana Arnò and shows the images contained in the site "<http://record.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/wakan/wakan-jin/page.html?style=b&part=7&n0=50>" where the Wakansanzazue pages in the 14th book have been photographed.



The fight between pygmies and cranes is represented in this manner on one of the red-figure Kraters from Volterra workshop (ill. 145).

Krater painting. Clay. 4th century B.C.

Florence, National Archaeological Museum

The original image has been reproduced by Silvana Arnò.



For almost a century ethnologists have worked on this with two antagonistic theories: the diffusion of techniques, ideas, concepts and art forms, against the spontaneous generation of culture in different parts of the world. Since the last century, "Diffusionism" is a research hypothesis accepted worldwide for advanced civilizations with literary tradition, while the independent convergence (or spontaneous generation) is related to primitive societies¹².

The ultimate test of diffusion lies, of course, in the proved existence of definitely traceable roads of migration. Even in prehistoric time caravan roads existed bridging the vast expanses of the Asian land mass between China and Europe, a northern route via the Caspian and Black seas and a southern route via the highland of Iran and Syria¹³.

¹² Wittkower R. *Allegory and Migration of Symbols*, Ed. Thames and Hudson, New York, 1987 p. 10.

¹³ Wittkower R. *Allegory and Migration of Symbols*, Ed. Thames and Hudson, New York, 1987 p. 11.

The Hellenistic era

The first major step in opening the Silk Road between the East and the West came with the expansion of Alexander the Great's empire into Central Asia¹⁴. In August 329 BC, at the mouth of the Fergana Valley in Tajikistan he founded the city of Alexandria Eschate or "Alexandria The Furthest", later become a major staging point on the northern Silk Route. The Greeks remained in Central Asia for a lot of time with the establishment of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom. There are indications that he may have led expeditions as far as Kashgar in Chinese Turkestan, leading to the first known contacts between China and the West around 200 BC. The Greek historian Strabo writes "*they extended their empire even as far as the Seres (China) and the Phryni.*"¹⁵

Chinese and Romans

Chinese and Romans had mutual knowledge of the existence of the two empires as early as the Han era but probably even earlier. They started trade as early as the second century B.C. The Romans imported large quantities of silk from China, while the Chinese preferred the Roman products of glass. From the diplomatic point of view China and the Roman Empire approached gradually first with the embassy of Zhang Qian in 130 B.C. and then with a second embassy of the general Ban Chao in Rome around the year 100. Ancient Chinese historians recorded some Roman embassies to China, the first on record dates back to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and arrived in China in the year 166.¹⁶

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* or *Periplus of the Red Sea*¹⁷ (Latin: *Periplus Maris Erythraei*) is a Greco-Roman Periplus, an ancient document written in Greek, probably dating back to the first century, which describes the shipping lanes of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf and that in particular describes navigation and trading from Roman Egyptian ports along the coast of the Red Sea, and others along Northeast Africa and the Indian subcontinent. The text has been ascribed to different dates between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. The document consists of 66 chapters, where a number of ancient ports were described. The original *Periplus*, now lost, was written in Greek, probably by an Egyptian merchant from the Roman empire. The text was received to our day through a Byzantine manuscript of the tenth century, preserved at the Heidelberg University Library. Through these contacts it is easy to imagine that some of the

¹⁴ The Indo-Greek Kingdom or Graeco-Indian Kingdom was a Hellenistic kingdom covering various parts of the northwest regions of the Indian subcontinent during the last two centuries BC. (A.K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2003.)

¹⁵ Also several Greeks, such as the historian Megasthenes, followed by Deimachus and Dionysius, were sent to reside at the Mauryan (India) court. Presents continued to be exchanged between the two rulers: India and Greece.

¹⁶ Mario Bussagli, *Asia centrale e mondo dei nomadi in Asia centrale e Giappone*, Torino, 1970./ "The Roman Empire as known to Han China." A review article on *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*. D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner. Rome. Review by Edwin G. Pulleyblank. JAOS 119.1 (1999), pp. 71–79. JSTOR 605541/_Hill, John E. (2009). *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, First to Second Centuries CE*. BookSurge, 1996.

¹⁷ Casson Lionel, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text With Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Princeton University Press, 1989.

myths, of Greek origin, transported by merchants who loved telling stories, have reached China and then Japan.

Myth has always been part of Greek culture. The myth of the pygmies, that we also refer to, appears in the Iliad of Homer (eighth century BC) taking into account that the oldest written sources are Greek and we believe that their origin is Western.

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“Wakansanzue 14th book.”, in Museum Kyushu:

→<http://record.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/wakan/wakan-jin/page.html?style=b&part=7&no=50>