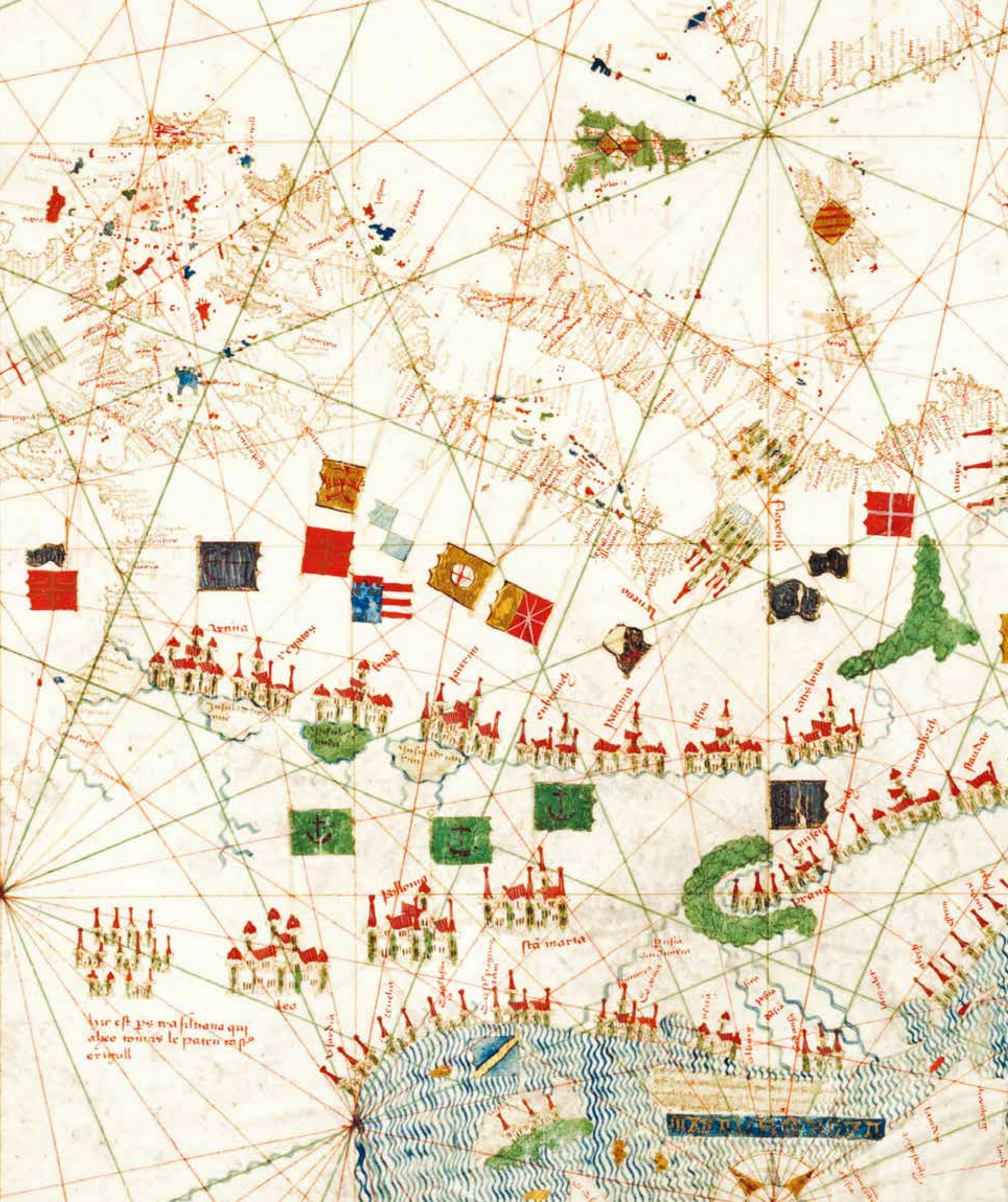

اطرونس
اولياس
طرش
امیوس
افرلسه للافرنج
موعونیه
للافرنج
بکاله
جالوس
حارطمس
مابص
قشطس
ابریر
ابوارس
بسرمندیه
بسرمایی
المایر
بنطیر
افلانادس للافرنج
لطوماغش
للافرنج
شنت ولریی
شنت اطریر
دباند
منقلات
طلدا
وادی شنت
دلس
هستیلب
سعام


Sol
Luna
Mercurius
Jupiter
Mars
Venus
Saturnus


Luna
Sol
Mars
Jupiter
Saturnus
Aries
Pisces
Aquarius
Capricornus
Sagittarius
Scorpio
Libra
Virgo
Leo
Cancer
Gemini
Taurus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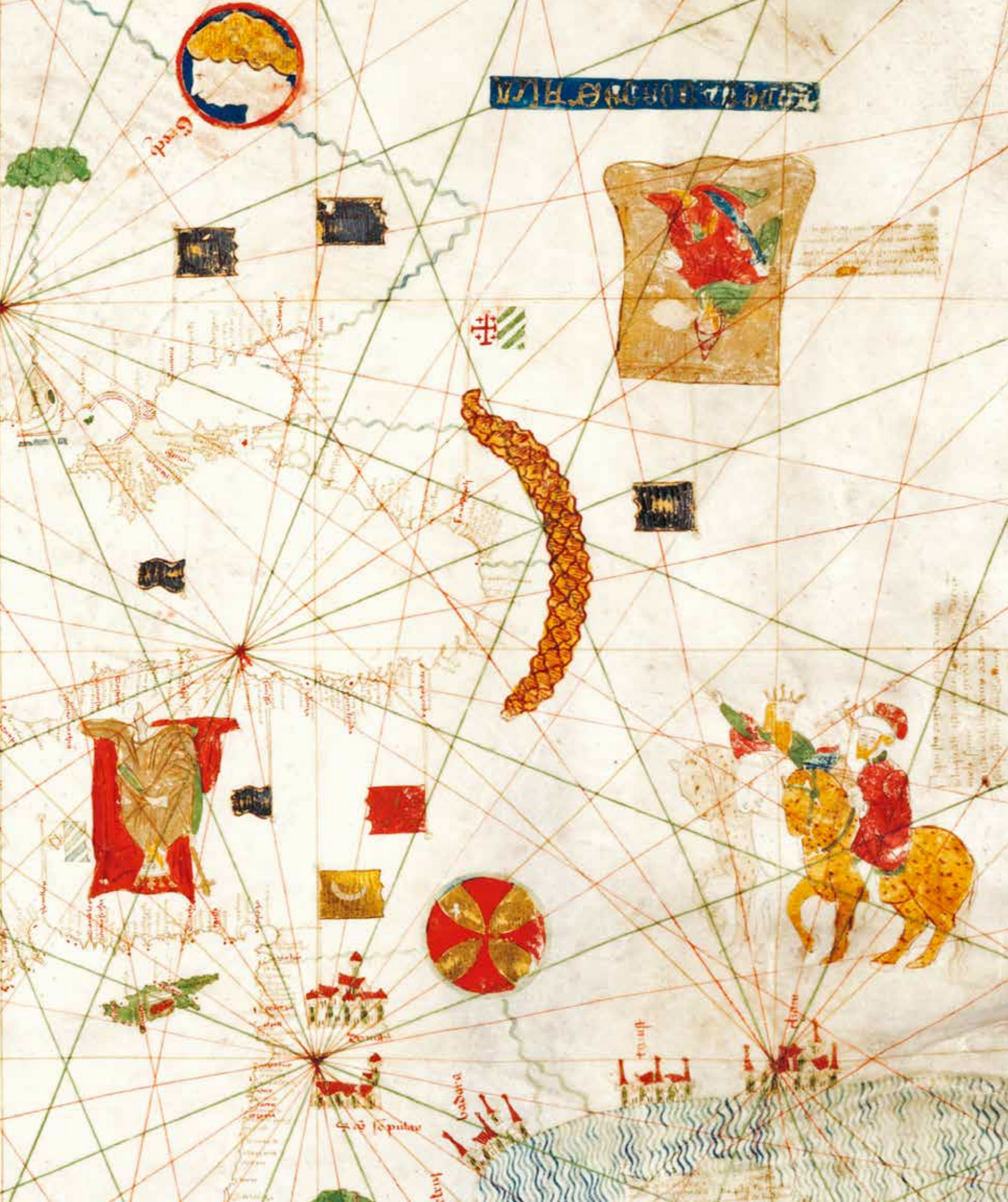


S Lazoro
S Andrea
LAVVLACA
ARSENALE
Porta liona de la Riua


Tempio
Almaratro
Coliseo de spiritu
Colona istoriata
Seraglio Vechio
Mon
te di Constant
Mosches
El mazzaro de la Piaza
Colona Serpentina
S. Tomas
Palatio Con
Arco trionfo di Settimo
S. Sophia
Seraglio Nouo doue ha gran Turcho
S. Luca Euangelista
Piaza Colona
S. Pietro


Gaūs fluuī.
hūc habitant amazones.
Orcobyles mons.
Hic sunt arimaspi.
Hic sunt multiplices gen' pigmeor'.
Hyrcanie silue.
Caspius mons.
Hic nascunt mulieres.
Hic sunt arbores.
Hic sunt serpentes.
Hic nulli habitant p̄ter leones.
Leo nobilissimus.
Tigris animal
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Jracusa ciuitas.

Indus fluuius

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Domus port regis

Vrsa ciuitas.

Copres fluuius.

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Montes parthor.

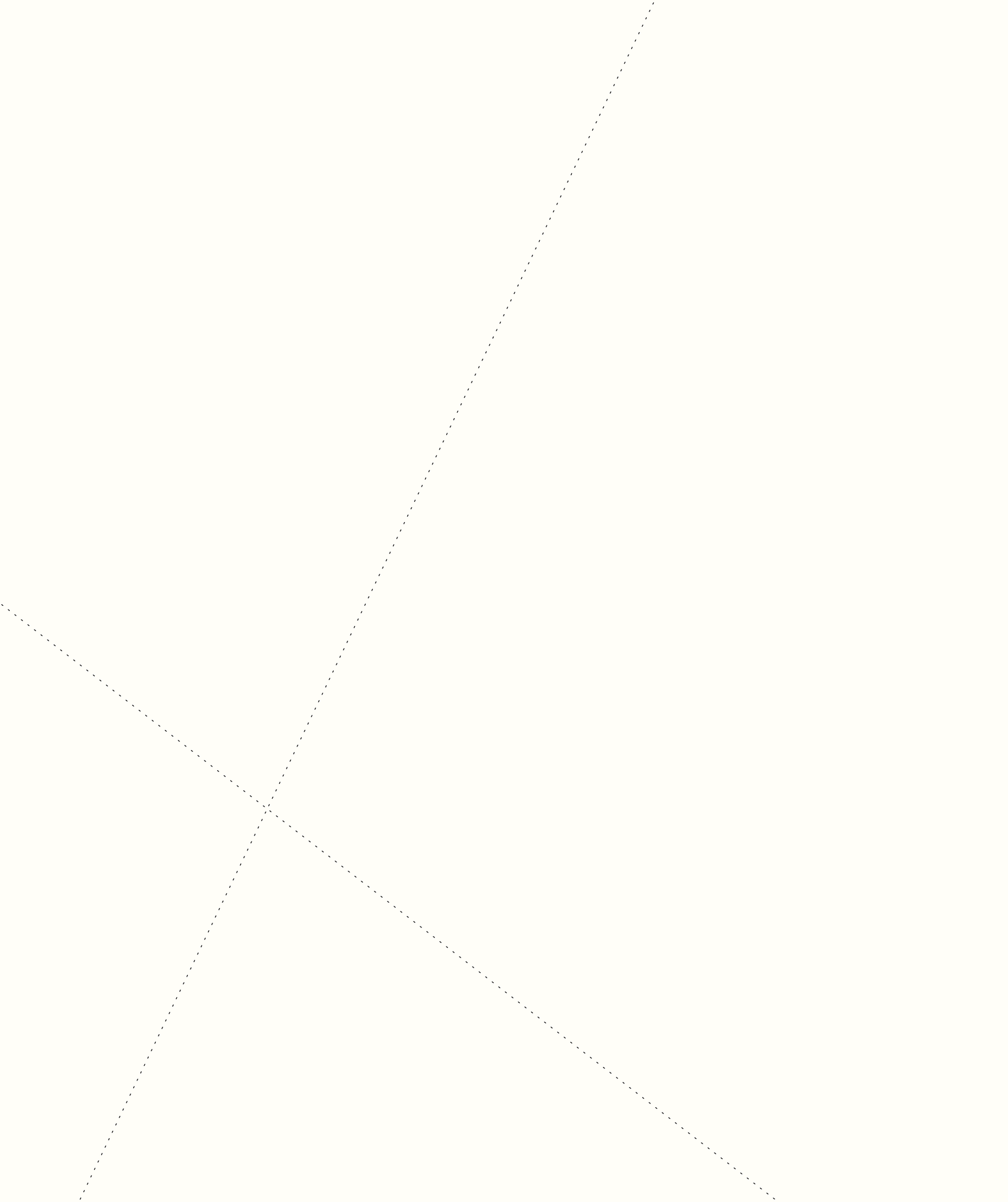
Hesepulchꝝ regis parthor a magno alexandro condi tum

Parthia ꝓ fer

Edited by Peter Frankopan & Jan Dumolyn

Connected Worlds of Bruges

BRUSK | HANNIBAL



FOREWORD

Bigger Picture: Connected Worlds of Bruges 900–1550 marks the opening to the general public of BRUSK, our long-anticipated artistic hotspot. The City of Bruges and Musea Brugge have deliberately chosen to stage a cultural history exhibition devoted to our city's past in the new venue's largest exhibition space. The BRUSK dynamic – atypical connections, old and new in dialogue – is perfectly reflected in the fact that this main event is accompanied by a solo exhibition in the second gallery, devoted to the important contemporary AI artist Refik Anadol. In this way, the past is carried into the present just as we turn our gaze to the future.

This is not the first exhibition devoted to the story of Bruges, and a great many books have already been written about its history. But *Connected Worlds of Bruges* is different: it takes our historic city's relationship with the wider world as its starting point. Bruges rose to prominence thanks to its centuries-long contacts with the North, the British Isles, Italy, Constantinople and Jerusalem, and elsewhere, extending as far as the Near and Far East and the Atlantic world.

The City of Bruges and Musea Brugge have aimed *Connected Worlds of Bruges* at a large and diverse audience. BRUSK's exhibitions and programming aim to be a lively focal point for all, including international tourists and new visitor groups. We hope that both young and old will find something to their taste. For that reason, *Connected Worlds of Bruges* also features works of art and heritage pieces from prestigious collections in Europe and other parts of the world. But a substantial number of the featured items are drawn from Bruges itself and its municipal collections, something of which we are proud.

This book adds further depth to the *Bigger Picture: Connected Worlds of Bruges 900–1550* exhibition. We are especially grateful to its editors, the eminent historians Peter Frankopan and Jan Dumolyn, who assembled a distinguished group of specialists, each of whom has made an innovative contribution.

We hope this publication will inspire anyone keen to relive the exhibition, to learn more about the exhibits and their stories, or who has an interest in historical research, including archaeology and art history. May *Connected Worlds of Bruges* serve as a lasting reminder of a milestone for the City of Bruges and Musea Brugge: the opening of BRUSK, our state-of-the-art exhibition hall.

DIRK DE FAUW
Mayor of Bruges

NICO BLONTROCK
Alderman for Culture

KRISTL STRUBBE
Director, Musea Brugge

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Fig. 1

(Left page)
Portolan map, Piero Roselli, 1462 (detail).
Parchment, 530 × 830 mm. Paris,
Bibliothèque nationale de France

Introduction

Peter Frankopan

This book has been conceived as a companion to *Bigger Picture: Connected Worlds of Bruges 900–1550*, the inaugural exhibition at BRUSK from 8 May until 6 September 2026. However, it has ambitions that extend well beyond the gallery walls of the magnificent new museum located in the heart of Bruges. Like the exhibition itself, it invites readers to see Bruges afresh: not as a static medieval city preserved in the mists of the past, but as a dynamic urban centre that was shaped by people, goods, ideas and beliefs. The essays gathered here are rooted in the objects, spaces and stories on display, yet they are not confined to explaining what visitors see: instead, they open the viewer (and the reader) outwards, using Bruges as a lens through which to explore wider historical forces at work across the centuries between, roughly, 900 and 1550.

At the same time, this volume seeks to stand as a work of scholarship in its own right. Written by leading historians, archaeologists and scholars of the medieval and early modern worlds, it brings together new research and fresh perspectives on a formative period of European and global history. Its aim is not simply to recount what happened in Bruges, but to rethink how Bruges mattered: locally and regionally, across the North Sea and the Mediterranean, and along routes that stretched far beyond Europe itself. By placing the city within overlapping networks of trade, devotion, power and creativity, these essays propose new ways of understanding Bruges's rich past – and, more broadly, of approaching the interconnected histories of the world that took shape long before the modern age.

Between the middle of the ninth century and the middle of the sixteenth, Bruges became one of the most extraordinary places on earth. It was never the largest city in Europe, nor the seat of an empire, nor the home of an imperial court. Yet few places were as entangled with the wider world, or as adept at absorbing, reshaping and projecting influences that came from far beyond its immediate horizons. Bruges was, and remains, a pearl of a city. But its significance and importance lay in the fact that it sat within a series of networks: those of seas and rivers, of credit and commodities, of relics and ideas, and of connections that enabled the circulation of goods and the movement of people for trade, for pilgrimage, for diplomacy and for curiosity.

Bruges was not simply a city with connections; its prosperity, character and reach depended on them. Its history was and is inseparable from the wider worlds in which it was embedded, from the North Sea and the British Isles to the Mediterranean, the Near East, Africa and, by the end of the fifteenth century, the Atlantic and the Americas.

Fig. 2

21st-century view of the Belfry and the Church
of Our Lady from the Rozenhoedkaai

The city's rise was bound up with its maritime connections. Bruges today lies some distance inland, but in the early Middle Ages access to the sea was fundamental: from the ninth century, the North Sea was being transformed from a frontier of danger into a corridor of movement. Ships that had once carried raiders increasingly carried merchants, missionaries, pilgrims and envoys. The North Sea formed an interconnected world that linked the coasts of what are now England, northern France, the Low Countries, Germany and Scandinavia. Silver coins minted in the Low Countries circulated in England in the early Middle Ages in remarkable quantities. Textiles, wine, slaves and raw materials moved back and forth across the North Sea. Bruges began to grow within this world of exchange, first as a point within a regional system and then, as its hinterland and harbour structures developed, as an international hub.

The creation of the Zwin inlet after a storm surge of 1134 was decisive, opening up Bruges to the opportunities of long-distance shipping at precisely the moment when trade across both the North Sea and the Mediterranean was intensifying. Ports such as Damme, Sluis and Mude became gateways through which goods, people and information flowed into the city. Scandinavian traders brought stockfish, sealskins and suet; English merchants brought wool; German merchants arrived from the Hanseatic cities of the Baltic; Italians came with spices, silks and financial expertise.

By the thirteenth century, Bruges was attracting merchants from Iberia, from the eastern Mediterranean and from North Africa. In Muhammad al-Idrisi's global geography, *The Book of Roger*, composed in Arabic in the 1150s at the court of the Norman king Roger II in Sicily, Bruges appears as part of a deeply interlinked set of locations that were tied together across Europe, Africa and Asia, rather than as a remote northern outpost. It is a moment that captures something essential: Bruges was already intelligible as part of a connected world long before Europeans spoke of 'globalisation'.

Fig. 3

World map from the *Tabula Rogeriana*, a 16th-century manuscript with the complete geographical description and cartographic representation of the world by Muhammad al-Idrisi (1154). The maps show the then-known world from the equator to the Baltic and the Atlantic to Siberia, 1553. Paper. University of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, ms. Pococke 375, fol. 3b–4a

Performance and Sophistication

Local, regional and long-distance commerce transformed the city not only economically, but socially and culturally. Bruges was a place of encounter, negotiation and performance. Wealth was displayed through ritual, architecture, clothing and gift-giving. Counts of Flanders, dukes of Burgundy and later Habsburg rulers used the city as a stage on which to assert power and magnificence, where conspicuous generosity was an expression of rulership as well as an instrument of control. Accounts that record payments to musicians, painters, woodcarvers, servants and courtiers, alongside extraordinary 'gifts' that blurred remuneration and patronage, reveal a city in which money, power and culture were inseparable, and where exchange shaped relationships, identities and the performance of authority itself, as well as of markets and institutions.

At a civic level, Bruges perfected the politics of gift exchange. Wine, money, animals and luxury goods circulated between city authorities and princely representatives, between guilds and magistrates, between those who received and those who bestowed favour. These practices lay at the heart of how Bruges was governed, enabling the city, its rulers and its inhabitants to defend their own interests.

Fig. 5

Portrait of Charles the Bold, anonymous, c. 1460–80.
Oil on panel, diameter 38.7 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum,
gift of Kunsthandel G. Wildenstein

Fig. 4

Portrait of Philip the Good, anonymous, c. 1460–80.
Oil on panel, diameter 38.7 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum,
gift of Kunsthandel G. Wildenstein

Those interests were advanced by institutional sophistication. Bruges was not simply a market; it was home to a system. Foreign merchants were granted privileges and houses. Courts staffed by aldermen with expertise in mercantile law adjudicated disputes swiftly and with admirable regard for the merits of each case, rather than the standing of the disputants. Brokers and hostellers orchestrated transactions, matched partners and moved information as efficiently as goods. Italian bankers introduced bills of exchange, credit mechanisms and book transfers that reduced the risks of long-distance trade and vastly increased the volume of business that could be done, with accounts being settled through ledgers rather than using coin.

Bruges's success was such that it became a magnet for local populations as well as for those from further away. Urbanisation saw major investment in infrastructure, from civic buildings to churches, from housing to hospitals, from roads to water and sewage systems. The city grew to the extent that by 1300, perhaps 50,000 people lived in Bruges, an extraordinary demographic concentration at that time. Feeding that many mouths required careful planning and coordination that encompassed the management of land and water, the steady inflow of grain and other staples from beyond the city, and systems of production and exchange capable of sustaining an urban population on this scale. One could argue that there were many cradles of medieval capitalism in Europe. Bruges was certainly one of them.


FRETVM
CASSAND
Sluys
Oostburg
S Margriets

Fig. 14

Bust of Charles V, 1520-1530. Terracotta (sculpture) and wood (base and hat), 55 × 73.8 × 41 cm. Musea Brugge, Gruuthusemuseum

Downturn

This shift did not spell immediate disaster for Flanders. On the contrary, newly minted Iberian markets created new demand for northern manufactures, credit and expertise, while the political integration of the Low Countries into the Habsburg empire bound Bruges ever more closely to Spanish interests. The city was no longer at the cutting edge of expansion, but it remained enmeshed in the networks that sustained it.

Yet pressures accumulated. Prolonged wars of religion scarred northern Europe in the 1500s, disrupting trade, draining resources and unsettling civic life. Bruges's own independence and assertiveness – once a source of strength – became a liability as merchants and financiers sought more flexible, better-connected environments elsewhere, above all in Antwerp. Ecological change compounded these difficulties: the silting of the Zwin increasingly obstructed access to the sea, undermining the city's role as an international port.

Bruges's golden age did not end with a single catastrophe or dramatic collapse. Instead, its decline was gradual and inexorable, the result of shifting political, economic and environmental conditions that steadily favoured other centres. What endured was not its position at the centre of European commerce, but a gilded legacy: a city whose earlier achievements had helped shape the commercial, cultural and imaginative worlds that followed.

World City and City of the World

The story of Bruges is a brilliant one: a tale of adaptation, widening horizons and extraordinary sophistication. It is usually told, however, as a story that begins and ends within the city's walls, as if Bruges were a self-contained miracle. This exhibition sets out to do something different. It restores scale and perspective by placing the city within the wider worlds that shaped it and were, in turn, shaped by it. Bruges did not simply receive influences from afar; its citizens, merchants, pilgrims and rulers were active participants in multiple overlapping spheres that extended far beyond Flanders.

These then were the worlds of Bruges. There was the North Sea, binding the city to England, Scandinavia and the Baltic through trade, marriage, migration and violence. There was the world of pilgrimage and devotion, linking Bruges to Jerusalem and Constantinople, and drawing the Holy Land and Byzantium into the city's churches, chapels and rituals. There was the Mediterranean, where ideas, techniques, objects and knowledge circulated between Christian, Muslim and Jewish societies, shaping commerce, art and learning in the Low Countries. And there was the Atlantic, which from the late fifteenth century redrew economic geographies and reoriented flows of capital, people and power, even as Bruges remained deeply entangled with Iberian interests and imperial ambitions. Seen together, these worlds reveal a city that was never provincial, never inward-looking, but constantly negotiating its place within expanding systems of connection.

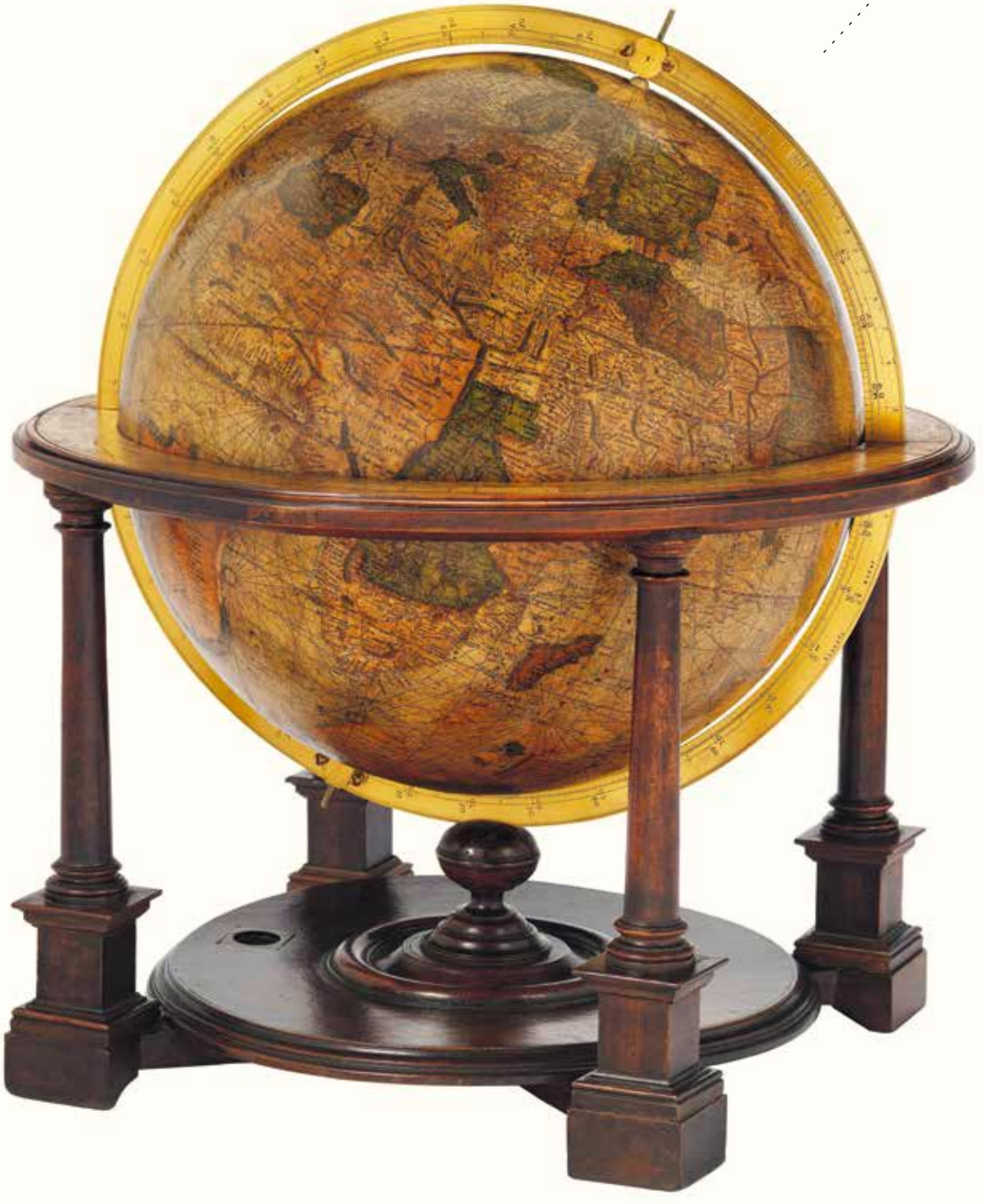
Today, Bruges is recognised as a global city because it welcomes visitors from across the world and because its historic centre enjoys UNESCO World Heritage status. Yet this global character is not a modern invention: it was ever thus. Bruges was a world city and a city of the world: a place where distant regions met, where objects carried stories of faraway lands, and where local lives were shaped by global currents.

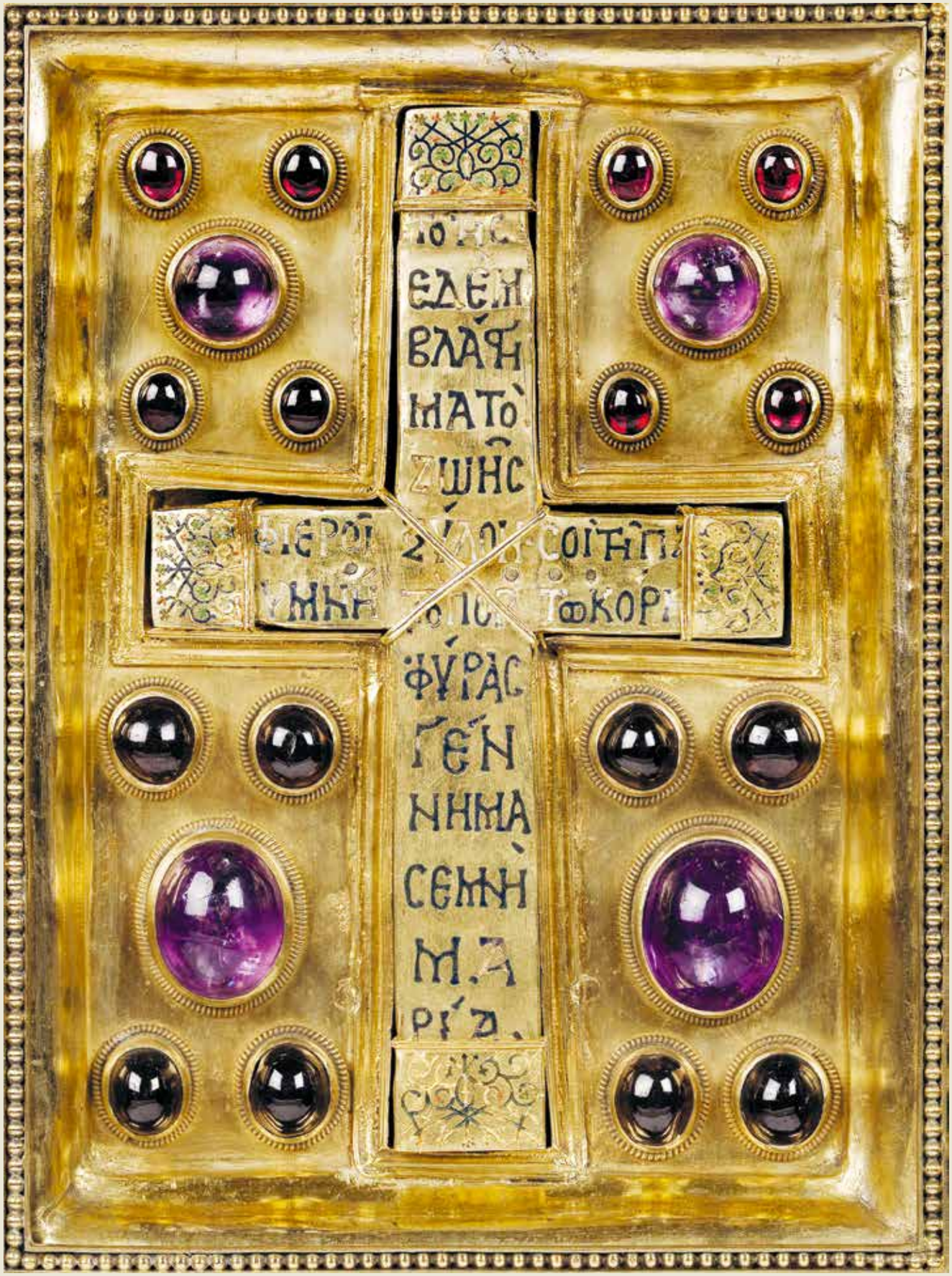
This exhibition brings these worlds of Bruges into view in their full richness and complexity. It invites visitors to see the city anew – not as a beautiful survivor of a vanished age, but as a pearl whose brilliance was forged through centuries of connection, exchange and imagination, and which still shines all the brighter when set within the bigger picture of the worlds it was a central part of for so long.

This publication therefore seeks not only to deepen understanding of Bruges itself, but also to offer a framework for thinking about how cities, regions and worlds were connected across the centuries covered by the exhibition. By bringing together perspectives that move between the local and the global, the material and the intellectual, it builds on the many contributions that have made both the exhibition and this book possible.

Fig. 15

Terrestrial globe by Gerardus Mercator, 1541. Papier mâché, plaster, ink, varnish, metal, brass, wood, cloth, paper, lead, copper plate engraved, hand-coloured, 62.5 × 58 cm, diameter 42 cm. London, Greenwich, National Maritime Museum

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CHAPTER 6

Bruges, Pilgrimage and the Christian East

Peter Frankopan

Early Christians developed ideas about pilgrimage soon after the time of Jesus Christ, drawing on Jewish traditions of travelling to Jerusalem and the Temple and on classical practices of visiting oracles and sacred shrines. Although Christians spoke of life itself as a journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem, the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity, and the celebrated visit of his mother, Helena, to Palestine in the fourth century gave enormous impetus to pilgrimage by identifying and monumentalising sites linked to Christ's life. The most important of these was the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which marked the site of Christ's crucifixion, and the tomb from which he rose on the third day.

Bruges and Early Ideas and Practice about Pilgimage

By the fifth and sixth centuries, Christian pilgrimage had expanded to include a host of other locations, including Rome, purportedly home to the tombs of St Peter and St Paul, and to shrines of saints and martyrs across the Mediterranean world. Over the centuries that followed, shrines began to spring up all over Europe that anchored civic identities through the veneration of local saints, often in connection with their relics.

The case of Bruges and Flanders was no different. In Bruges, the cult of St Donatianus was established in the middle of the ninth century after Count Baldwin I brought the relics of a bishop of Reims in the fourth century who had acquired a reputation for the strength of his religious convictions. A reconsecrated church in the fortified heart of Bruges became a focal point for liturgical feasts and local devotion – and, for Baldwin, an opportunity to bind his rule to the sacred presence of a bishop-saint, thereby reinforcing both his political legitimacy and spiritual protection over the community. The cult of St Donatianus quickly took root in civic and liturgical life. His feast days drew processions, gatherings and ritual celebrations, anchoring Bruges's identity around the saint's intercession and turning his shrine into a key site of devotion and civic pride.

Other sites nearby also benefited from the acquisition of relics. For example, St Bavo's Abbey in Ghent actively shaped pilgrimage by assembling prestigious relics and publicising them in the local community. In addition to St Bavo himself, a Frankish nobleman who had renounced his riches, the abbey acquired in the later tenth and early eleventh centuries a cluster of relics belonging to other holy figures, such as those of St Landoald and the pilgrim St Macarius, who died at Ghent in 1012. These provided new feast days as well as opportunities for pilgrimage and the chance to beseech a series of saints for their intercession and prayers.

It was a pattern repeated in many other places, including St Peter's Abbey in Ghent, which acquired major relics from Fontenelle in Normandy, and that of St Winnoc in Bergues, where miracle narratives with distinctive rites were promoted regarding both healing from disease and the blessing of agricultural production. The attractions of both were obvious to local populations.

By the early Middle Ages, Flanders was home to a dense network of holy sites connected to well-known saints and holy people. By this time, ideas were well established about pilgrimage as an act of devotion; about relics and saints as intercessors with the divine; and about religious sanctuaries as places that were not only supported by comital and monastic sponsorship but were also important local centres of prestige.

Fig. 1

(Left page)
Relic of the True Cross, anonymous,
first half of the 12th century.
Gold, enamel and cedarwood,
16 × 9.8 cm. Eine, Sint-Eligiuskerk

Fig. 2

(Previous pages)
Passion of Christ, Hans Memling, 1470–71. The scenes are set in Jerusalem, which commands much of the attention here. The patrons, Tommaso Portinari and his wife Maria Baroncelli, are shown in the lower corners. Oil on oak, 55 × 90 cm. Turin, Musei Reali – Galleria Sabauda

The Lure of Jerusalem

From around 1000, horizons and ambitions in Flanders began to expand towards Jerusalem and the Holy Places. This owed much to the profound socio-economic transformation of western Europe: increasingly intensive commercial, cultural and political links between different areas began to properly knit the continent together for the first time since the decline of the Roman empire. The impulse to travel far beyond familiar shrines reflected both intensifying devotion to Christ's Passion and a desire for remission of sins that local relics, however powerful, could not equal. In the eleventh century, the Holy Sepulchre and associated sites in Palestine acquired extraordinary prestige across Latin Europe, including in Flanders, thanks to reformist preaching, monastic networks and first-hand reports of those who had had undertaken the long journey and returned home safely.

Fig. 3

Pilgrim's badge depicting a pilgrim wearing a short cloak, with a satchel, staff and pilgrim's flask, 1300–50. Found in the Verdronken Weide nature reserve in Ypres. Pewter, height 3.8 cm. Vilvoorde, Depot Onroerend Erfgoed

Fig. 4

Seal of the Golden Bull of Baldwin II of Constantinople, 1269. Gold, seal diameter 4.3 cm. London, The British Library, Add Ch 14365

Motivations to travel east were varied. For some nobles, pilgrimage was an act of penance after violent careers or feudal conflicts, echoing the Carolingian tradition of pilgrimage imposed as judicial punishment. For others, especially those of high social standing, a journey to the Holy Places confirmed their status as defenders of Christendom and allies of reform. Flemish hagiographies began to weave in references to Jerusalem, amplifying its pull on the imagination.

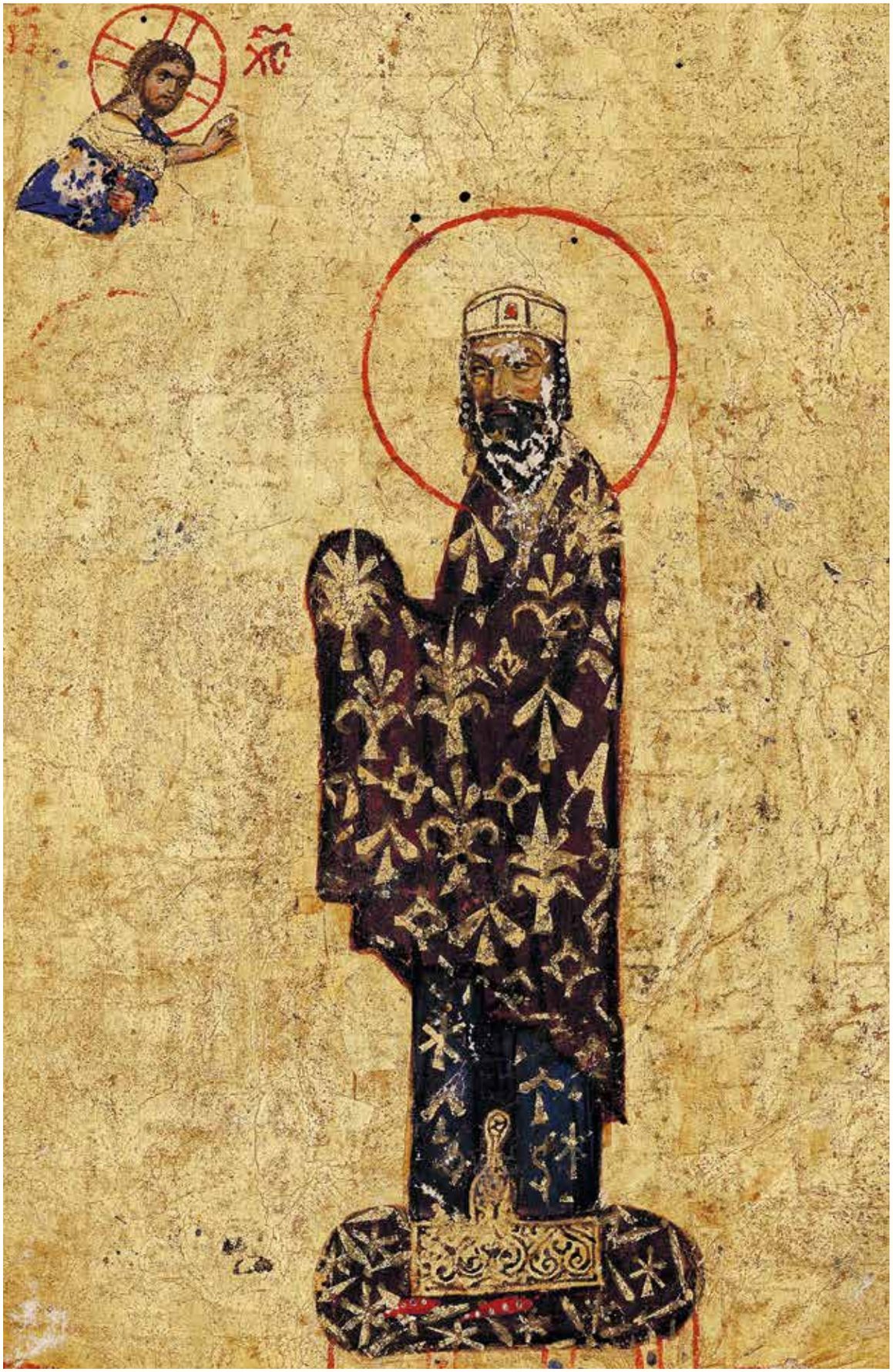
Among those who decided to travel to the Holy City were members of the aristocracy of Flanders as well as members of its ruling dynasty, who established deep ties with the east. At the end of the 1080s, Count Robert I made the journey, meeting Alexios I Komnenos, the ruler of the Christian Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) empire on his way back home – and sending several hundred knights to help shore up a rapidly deteriorating situation not only in the Balkans but also in Asia, where Turkish raiders were threatening to completely overrun the empire's eastern provinces.

A devastating picture of the threats facing the Byzantine empire was painted by a letter purportedly sent by Emperor Alexios to Count Robert, begging him for further military assistance – one of a series of desperate attempts that the emperor undertook to galvanise support from the west. Even if some scholars are right that the letter is a forgery written a few years later, at the very least it bears witness to the perceptions if not the realities of the growing interest of elites in Flanders in both the Holy Land and the city of Constantinople.

This was one of the world's great metropolises. Founded by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great in 330 as a sister city to Rome, it had grown and flourished after the decline of the empire's western provinces. Constantinople became the imperial capital and the centre of the Roman world, one that became increasingly Christian after Constantine's own miraculous conversion. The city was

Fig. 5

Portrait of Alexios I Komnenos, from the *Panoplia Dogmatike* by Euthymius Zigabenus, 12th century. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana



In 1000, Bruges was having to make do with local shrines and regional connections; 200 years later, things looked very different. The comital court had long and deep ties to worlds far beyond – ones that gave not only the counts of Flanders, but those who lived within their lands, spiritual, political and economic prestige as well as new openings and prospects that were to transform Bruges and the surrounding region into an important regional power, one with significance in Europe and beyond.

Fig. 8

Model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, anonymous, c. 1640–80. Wood, ivory, mother-of-pearl and metal, 24.7 × 36.5 × 42.5 cm. Musea Brugge

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Fig. 16

The Death of Thomas Becket, miniature from the *Bowet Hours*, made in Bruges for the English market, 1410–20 (?). Parchment, 200 × 140 mm (text area). King Baudouin Foundation, on permanent loan to Bruges, Openbare Bibliotheek, ms. 736, fol. 9v

Fig. 18

Cross of Sibylla of Anjou, Countess of Flanders, wife of Thierry of Alsace, 1163. Ivory, 18.5 × 14 × 2.6 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre

Fig. 17

Illustration of two 'Saracen' women and three 'Saracen' men in Bernhard von Breydenbach's *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*, journal of a group visit to Egypt and Palestine. The *Peregrinatio* is the first printed and illustrated account of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Woodcut in printed book, Speyer, 1490. Leuven, KU Leuven Bibliotheken, Maurits Sabbebibliotheek

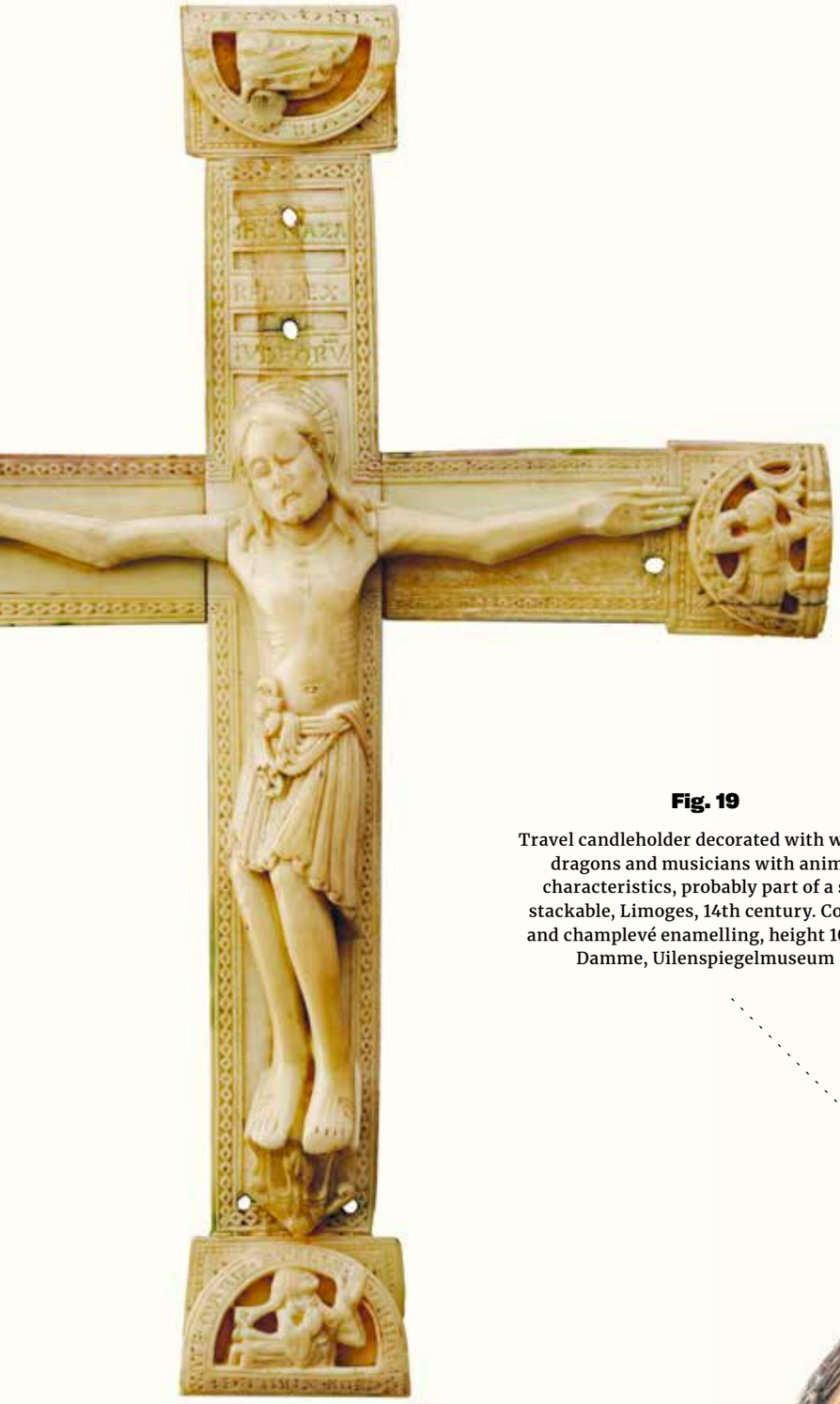

Fig. 19

Travel candleholder decorated with winged dragons and musicians with animal characteristics, probably part of a set, stackable, Limoges, 14th century. Copper and champlevé enamelling, height 10 cm. Damme, Uilenspiegelmuseum

Fig. 20

(Next pages)
Legend of St Roch, anonymous follower of Bernard van Orley (details). The painting shows episodes from the life of St Roch. He gives his possessions to the poor and prepares to make a pilgrimage to Italy. A servant holds his pilgrim's robe, staff and hat ready for him. When he arrives in Rome, Roch receives the Pope's blessing. Oil on oak, 100.5 × 63 cm. Musea Brugge

CHAPTER 9

Cosmopolitanism and Wise Kings in the Medieval West

Jo Van Steenbergen

In the late 1150s, the Arabo-Muslim scholar Muhammad al-Idrisi provided one of the earliest descriptions of medieval Bruges. He described it as 'a medium-sized town with all the attributes of a large one, enjoying significant resources and low prices, surrounded by contiguous vineyards and fields'.[1] Al-Idrisi included this account in his *Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands*. With its numerous depictions of a wide variety of places, regions and towns, *The Book of Pleasant Journeys* is recognised as one of the first comprehensive descriptions of Europe. However, al-Idrisi's book is much more than just that. Spanning more than 700 pages in the oldest surviving manuscript, it is an extraordinary work of universal geography and cartography. Written in Arabic by a Muslim scholar in Palermo, and commissioned by Roger II (r. 1105–54), the Norman Christian king of southern Italy and Sicily, it is still commonly known today as *The Book of Roger* (*Kitab Rujar* in Arabic, *Tabula Rogeriana* in Latin).

Given its Arabo-Muslim authorship and royal Christian patronage, al-Idrisi's *Book of Roger* is a prime example of the long-standing ties that, for centuries, have connected scholars, rulers and many others in the Afro-Eurasian West, from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean and the North Sea. Dimitri Gutas, one of today's leading scholars of the history of science, describes the long history of these ties as an ongoing 'conquest of knowledge from Alexander the Great to Mehmed the Conqueror', a highly politicised process of acquiring, transmitting and expanding sets of knowledge and related skills across linguistic, cultural and many other boundaries from antiquity to the late medieval period. This chapter presents a selection of moments from this long and complex process. These moments demonstrate that the closely linked pursuit of power and knowledge, whether in ninth-century Baghdad, twelfth-century Palermo, thirteenth-century Seville or fifteenth-century Constantinople, often fostered diverse yet interconnected manifestations of cosmopolitan ideas and practices. These manifestations are hallmarks of the medieval West and, as crucial nodes in complex webs of transcultural connections, they predate the hardening and ossification of many dividing lines from the sixteenth century onwards. Yet they remain all too easily overlooked.

The Cosmopolitan Court of Roger II

At the Norman court of Roger II, centuries-old traditions of knowledge had provided al-Idrisi's *Book of Roger* with a solid geographical and cartographical framework. These traditions were rooted in Greek and Hellenistic precedent, epitomised by the astronomer and geographer Ptolemy (died c. 170, Alexandria). They were Arabised and expanded between the ninth and eleventh centuries, particularly in Iraq and al-Andalus, including by Ptolemy's Arabo-Muslim counterpart al-Khwarazmi (died c. 850, Baghdad). In al-Idrisi's text, this classical framework was combined with more recent information about the different corners of the inhabited world. Recent scholarship suggests that al-Idrisi obtained this information from the archives and intelligence networks of the Norman court and its Muslim and Roman-Byzantine predecessors in Sicily. The introduction to the text also explicitly states that this information was obtained from informants, merchants and royal agents who were sent to explore, in particular, the lesser-known European continent. In fact, this fieldwork methodology and the merging of recent knowledge of European regions with traditional geographical scholarship is widely regarded as one of the most notable innovations of al-Idrisi's *Book of Roger*.

Fig. 1

(Left page)
Dagger, 12th–13th century, Syria. The hilt and sheath are engraved with decorative motifs, realistic animals, fantastic creatures and an Arabic proverb, all typical of the shared decorative repertoire of Christians and Muslims in Norman Sicily, the Latin crusader kingdoms and the Turkish courts in Syria, Anatolia and Iraq. Probably worn by a crusader or a prominent Armenian, Georgian or Greek person. Silver, niello and steel, length 38.5 cm. Vaduz, the Furusiyya Art Foundation

1 Bresc and Nef 1999, 429.

Adopting the Ptolemaic division of the inhabited world into seven zones, or climes, based on geographic latitude as its main organisational principle, al-Idrisi's text further subdivides each clime into ten longitudinal sections, presenting them in an order running from south to north and from west to east: from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Inner Asian steppes and from Ireland to China. Each section consists of a map, along with its textual explanation and interpretation. The sixth clime, stretching from Brittany to the steppes of the Turks, introduces 'Flanders' in its second section as 'extremely fertile, covered with villages and crops and owing its wealth to its towns'. 'The most important of these towns,' al-Idrisi explains, 'is Ghent', and he continues with a survey of the distances, in miles, between Ghent and the other towns of Flanders, including 'from Ghent to Bruges [...] 15 miles to the west'.[2]

In 1999, Henri Bresc and Annliese Nef published a modern French translation of the European sections of al-Idrisi's book with the apt subtitle *La première géographie de l'Occident* (The first geography of the West). In their introduction, the translators emphasise the centrality of Norman Sicily ('*la centralité sicilienne*') in al-Idrisi's text and in the Mediterranean of the twelfth century.[3] In *The Book of Roger*, in the second section of the fourth clime, al-Idrisi makes this claim of Sicilian central importance explicit when he presents the island as 'the pearl of this era thanks to its qualities and bounty, and [...] thanks to its towns and inhabitants'. Moreover, for the author, 'it brought together the benefits of all other countries', not so much as a consequence of its geography, but rather because 'the dynasties that have ruled this island are among the most noble, and the attacks that its kings wage against their enemies are among the harshest.' Al-Idrisi therefore concludes that 'these kings are the greatest in terms of their power, the esteem in which they are held, the nobility of their concerns, and the glory of their rank.'[4]

When al-Idrisi claimed Sicilian centrality in such highly politicised terms, he was naturally thinking primarily of his own king, Roger II. Starting out as Count of Sicily, Roger of Hauteville went on to annex large parts of the Italian mainland to his domains and obtained (contested) papal support to be proclaimed King of Sicily and southern Italy in late 1130. Over the following two decades, he consolidated and expanded his Norman kingdom, which encompassed not only southern Italy and Sicily, but also Malta and Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia and western Libya). This central position between the eastern and western Mediterranean resulted in an extremely diverse kingdom, where different regions, languages, religions, traditions and peoples met across Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities. The newly established royal personality and court of Roger in Palermo were at the heart of this diverse environment, and maintaining claims to this centrality was crucial for justifying and consolidating Roger's authority and power. Naturally, cosmopolitan ideas and practices were among the most important means of pursuing these claims. One

Fig. 2

Royal mantle of Roger II, 1133–34. Silk, gold, gemstones and pearls. Vienna, Hofburg, Imperial Treasury

very famous product – and illustration – of this cosmopolitanism was Roger's royal mantle, which was later used as a coronation cloak by the Holy Roman Emperors. It combined a dazzlingly eclectic set of materials, symbols and decorative features, including Byzantine woven silk and gold thread, precious pearls and gems from the Indian Ocean region, and an inscription band typical of Muslim Ifriqiya. In Arabic rhymed prose, this inscription explicitly expressed the wearer's claims to royal majesty and sovereignty, and explained that this artefact had been 'crafted in the august royal chambers [...] in the city of Sicily in the [Muslim] year 528' (1133–34).[5]

Another equally famous product of this cosmopolitanism was the place in Palermo (the 'city of Sicily') where the mantle was made and 'the august royal chambers' were located – that is, Roger's Royal Palace, and, in particular, its Palatine Chapel (Cappella Palatina), which features a blend of Byzantine, Norman and North African styles. As with Roger's mantle, this blend also incorporates Arabic inscriptions, particularly on the ceiling of the chapel's nave. According to Jeremy Johns, one

Fig. 3

Sicilian-Christian tombstone in four languages, originating from the church of San Michele Arcangelo in Palermo, 1149. Inscription in Hebrew above, Arabic below, Latin left, Greek right. The texts refer to the death of Anna, mother of a priest of Prince Ruggero (Roger), who died in 1148. Marble with decorative tesserae in marble and semi-precious stones, 33 × 40 cm. Palermo, Castello della Zisa

of the leading specialists in the art history of Norman Sicily, these inscriptions align perfectly with the many invocations of splendour and fortune found in Norman Arabic epigraphy in general. As with Roger's mantle, while these invocations are drawn entirely from what Johns defines as 'the standard Islamic lexicon', they all celebrate the sovereignty of the Norman Christian ruler.[6]

Al-Idrisi's Arabic *Book of Roger* was perfectly suited to this cosmopolitan environment, as well as to the royal claim to Mediterranean centrality and sovereignty that it supported. Indeed, by presenting this claim on a global geographical, cartographical and informational scale, the book endowed the Sicilian ruler with an aura of universal kingship. According to the translators Bresc and Neff, this aura links *The Book of Roger* directly to the ideal of the philosopher-kings. In this ancient perspective on kingship, the royal person was a central node and access point in networks of universal knowledge and cosmic justice, as exemplified by widely known and recounted examples, such as Alexander of Macedon (r. 336–23 BCE) and

2 Bresc and Nef 1999, 428.
3 Bresc and Nef 1999, 43.
4 Bresc and Nef 1999, 305–306.
5 Vernon 2018.
6 Johns 2006, 328.

The Philhellenic Courts of the Abbasid Caliphs

Interestingly, Doubleday draws a direct parallel between the artistic and intellectual splendour of Alfonso's court and 'the golden days of the [Abbasid] caliphate of Baghdad'[13] in ninth- and tenth- century Iraq. John Tolan, one of today's foremost scholars of medieval Christian-Muslim relations, similarly concludes that 'Alfonso sought to Hispanize Arab culture, just as the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun [r. 813–33] and his translators had Arabized Greek and Persian knowledge.'[14] Indeed, many direct lines exist between the knowledge and knowledge traditions studied at Alfonso's court and those sponsored by the Abbasid caliphs in late antique Iraq. Many of the texts translated at Alfonso's court and in Toledo, Salerno, Palermo and the other intellectual centres of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century western Mediterranean had previously been translated into Arabic from Middle Persian, Sanskrit, Syriac or Greek in the Abbasid palace city of Baghdad. Many of of these texts' original authors were Greek and Hellenistic scholars whose names continue to inspire awe, including Hippocrates, Galen and Dioscorides, Plato and Aristotle, Archimedes and Euclid, and Apollonios and Ptolemy. The names of many of these texts' Arabic translators, as well as those who expanded upon them or were inspired by them, also continued to circulate – albeit in Latinised forms – across the Mediterranean. Ptolemy's Arabo-Muslim counterpart al-Khwarazmi (also known as Algoritmus), who would later become a cornerstone of al-Idrisi's *Book of Roger*, was active in ninth-century Abbasid Baghdad. So too were 'the Philosopher of the Arabs' al-Kindi (died c. 873, Alkindus) and one of the most productive translators of the Abbasid era, the physician and medical scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873, Johannitius). The scholarship of the polymath Ibn Sina (d. 1037, Avicenna), which was referential in the fields of philosophy and, especially, medicine across the Afro-Eurasian West for many centuries, benefited from Iranian court sponsorship that remained strongly determined by Abbasid imperial sovereignty and precedent. Similarly, another famous polymath, al-Biruni (d. c. 1050, Alberuni), benefited from post-Abbasid Iranian court sponsorship to write many dozens of books in Arabic, particularly on astronomy and related sciences. Notably, he also wrote a book on the history and culture of the Indian peninsula, completed in 1030 after participating in several Indian campaigns of conquest with his royal patron.

Indeed, as with the Mediterranean cases of Roger II, his grandson Frederick II and Frederick's distant cousin and intended successor Alfonso X, court patronage played a significant role in the Arabic movement of translation and expansion of knowledge. As in the Mediterranean cases, the reasons behind this sustained patronage by caliphs and courtiers stretched far beyond the practical needs of imperial organisation, multilingual communication and intellectual curiosity. More than two decades ago, the historian of science Dimitri Gutas demonstrated in his seminal *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* that, in the Abbasid imperial case, the ancient philosopher-king tradition had taken on the cosmopolitan guise of

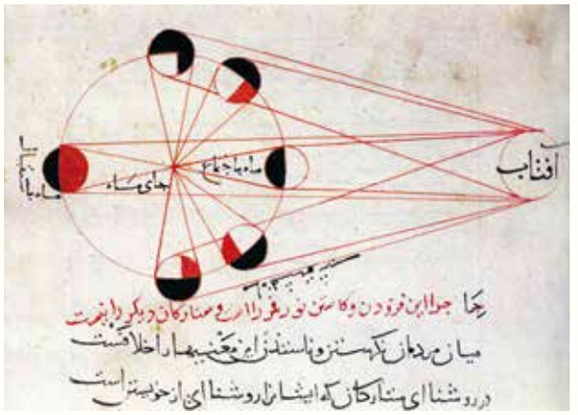

Fig. 10

Phases of the Moon, Persian translation by Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, 14th century. Tehran, Islamic Consultative Assembly Library, Museum & Documentation Centre, ms. 6565

13 Doubleday 2015, chapter 3.
14 Tolan 2012, 97.
15 Gutas 1998; Brentjes and Morrison 2010, 570.
16 Nucho 1969, 69.
17 Gutas 1998, 91–92.
18 Tolan 2013, 26.
19 Chann 2009.

a 'new philhellenic imperial ideology',[15] prompting Abbasid caliphs and their supporters to join forces with scholars such as al-Khwarazmi, who was originally from Transoxania in the east, the Arab al-Kindi and the Syriac Christian Hunayn ibn Ishaq. From the beginning of this imperial Islamic dynasty in the mid-eighth century onwards, successive Abbasid caliphs promoted the cultivation of ancient, and in the ninth century especially, Greek and Hellenistic knowledge, not only for its own sake, but also to bolster their claims to divinely ordained universal sovereignty in highly diverse and competitive contexts involving diverse communities of subjects, as well as preceding and contemporary rival dynasties and power holders. A telling illustration of these legitimising claims to cosmic wisdom can be found in al-Kindi's treatise *On First Philosophy*, dedicated to his patron, the Abbasid caliph of the time. In it, al-Kindi addresses this caliph as 'the son of the noblest master' and explains that 'he who adheres to your counsel shall be blessed in time and eternity.'[16]

In the case of the Abbasids, the model for this cosmopolitan tradition of royal wisdom and patronage was set by the Persian Sasanian dynasty (224–651), whose imperial centre in the Iraqi heartlands the Abbasids revived and emulated. In turn, these late antique Sasanian Kings of Kings considered this imperial tradition to be part of their divine mission to collect and reconquer the universal knowledge of their ancient Persian predecessors, which, in their view, had been scattered and lost or stolen since the fourth century BCE. According to the Abbasid 'new philhellenic imperial ideology', the universal knowledge that had been scattered and lost by the time of the Abbasids was mainly of Greek and Hellenistic origin. Those responsible were the Islamic caliphate's main regional rivals: the Roman-Byzantine emperors of Constantinople and their Christian supporters. Those whose divine mission it was to reconquer that knowledge were the Muslim caliphs and their agents, and those who finally lived up to that mission were the successive members of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258). A famous (but fictitious) account, which encapsulates this vision of Abbasid cosmic wisdom and legitimate rule from Iraq, is that of the transmission of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and medicine from Alexandria to Baghdad, which began circulating from the tenth century onwards. A twelfth-century version of this narrative, presented as a history of medicine, recounts how 'after Galen [died c. 216], the community of the Christians emerged from and prevailed over the Greeks' and how 'their kings cast away the care for medicine and failed to take care of its students.' As a result, and for a long time, this account continues (in a translation by Dimitri Gutas),

> the teaching [of medicine and the other ancient sciences] stood on shaky ground until [the Abbasid] al-Ma'mun [r. 813–33] became caliph, who revived and spread it and favoured excellent physicians. But for him, medicine and other disciplines of the ancients would have been effaced and obliterated just as medicine is obliterated now from the lands of the Greeks, which had been most distinguished in this field.[17]

From Alexander the Great to Mehmed the Conqueror

In a survey chapter on the rivalries, emulation and convergences that connected medieval Europe and the Islamic world, the aforementioned John Tolan reminds his readers that 'many medieval authors speak of the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of empire to the West's benefit', as well as of 'the *translatio studii*, the transfer of knowledge'. From this obviously Eurocentric perspective, Tolan continues, 'the European West, though at the margins of the [medieval] world, was said to be the heir, the new "decentered center," of legitimate power, spirituality, and learning.'[18] When al-Idrisi positioned his *Book of Roger* explicitly within this context of the transfer of geographical and cartographical knowledge from Ptolemy in Alexandria and al-Khwarazmi in Baghdad to the Norman court of Palermo and 'the first geography of the [European] West', he also aimed to enable his patron Roger II to draw on the powerful current of this knowledge transfer's ancient twin: the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of royal, or even imperial, power. The same ambitions evidently inspired the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and his distant cousin, the Castilian king and would-be emperor Alfonso X. Their remarkable cosmopolitan patronage enabled them to expand their realms of knowledge as well as power across unprecedented boundaries. Even when, in the mid-twelfth century, Rodolfus of Bruges listed both his hybrid scholarly pedigree and his patron in the above-quoted introduction to his treatise on the astrolabe, he similarly enabled his patron, 'his most esteemed lord Johannes David', to draw prestige and related social benefits from that ancient current.

Beyond the thirteenth century, the idea of a dual transfer continued to inspire many rulers as well as cosmopolitan moments. As the renowned Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) suggested over a century ago, this continuity helps to explain why Alexander of Macedon, as both conqueror of the East and enlightened pupil of Aristotle, played an important role in the fifteenth-century politics of representation and imagination of the Burgundian dukes Philip the Good (r. 1419–67) and his son Charles the Bold (r. 1467–77). However, contrary to the Orientalising assumptions of both Tolan's 'medieval authors' and earlier generations of modern scholarship, this was not at all a simple linear and goal-oriented history of transfers from the Orient to the Occident. In West Asia, the contemporaries of the Burgundian dukes were inspired by remarkably similar continuities. Thus, in the politics of representation and imagination of the sultans of Cairo (c. 1250–1517), an important royal title proclaimed them *Iskandar al-Zaman*, 'Alexander of the Age'. As with the Burgundian dukes in Europe, this historical qualification projected legitimating claims of conquest and wisdom, following in Alexander's footsteps. Moreover, the Alexander title was often used alongside the title *Sahib Qiran*, allegedly of Perso-Sasanian origin and meaning 'Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn'.[19] This astronomical and astrological qualification

Cy commence le viſ liure de-
quinte cure miſſe Dont le vie
premier chap & pluſſ⁹ rebelle
reduit a obeiſſance et ſubie
ction ambaſſade

Ferande apuit
reduite la mort
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il acquiſt moult
renom qui

renom il lui faulloit eſmar
ter et eſpandre ſon arme
pour contreſter a ſes aduer
ſaires et toutesfois
Son oſt departi en trois
routtes et bataillon fu en
pitaine dune Conte de
ſaintre et le roy preſidoit
au ſurplus mais toutes les
barbarins ne furent pas

Fig. 11

(Left page)
Miniature from a manuscript of *Des fais du grant Alexandre* by Quintus Curtius Rufus (*Historiae Alexandri Magni*, 1st century) in a French translation by Vasque de Lucène (d. 1512), commissioned by Isabella of Portugal (1397–1471) and dedicated to her son Charles the Bold, 1468. Parchment, 390 × 560 mm (open). Bibliothèque de Genève, ms. Fr. 76 fol. 189r

hints at the towering claim of 'millennial sovereignty', as has been suggested and studied in much detail by the modern historian Azfar Moin.[20] It was also assigned, especially from the fifteenth century onwards, to many of these sultans' Turkmen and Turko-Mongol rivals, peers and their early modern successors, in Tabriz, Herat, Samarqand, Agra and in other centres of dynastic power and intense cosmopolitan patronage of knowledge and the arts. Projecting the image of a divinely ordained reign of universal conquest and global wisdom and justice, this assertion of cosmic kingship was comparable not only to the grand claims surrounding the figure of Alexander, but also to those made in the Mediterranean during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Fig. 12

Miniature from a manuscript of the İskendernâme (*Book of Alexander the Great*), an epic poem by the Turkish poet Taceddin Ahmedi (d. 1413), completed in the early 15th century. It is the first rendering of an Alexander Romance in Turkish and also contains the oldest version in verse form of the history of the Ottoman dynasty. Manuscript written and illustrated in Edirne, and presented to Mehmed II, c. 1460. Paper, 256 × 660 mm (open). Venice, Biblioteca nazionale Marciana, Or. 90, fol. 256r

Fig. 13

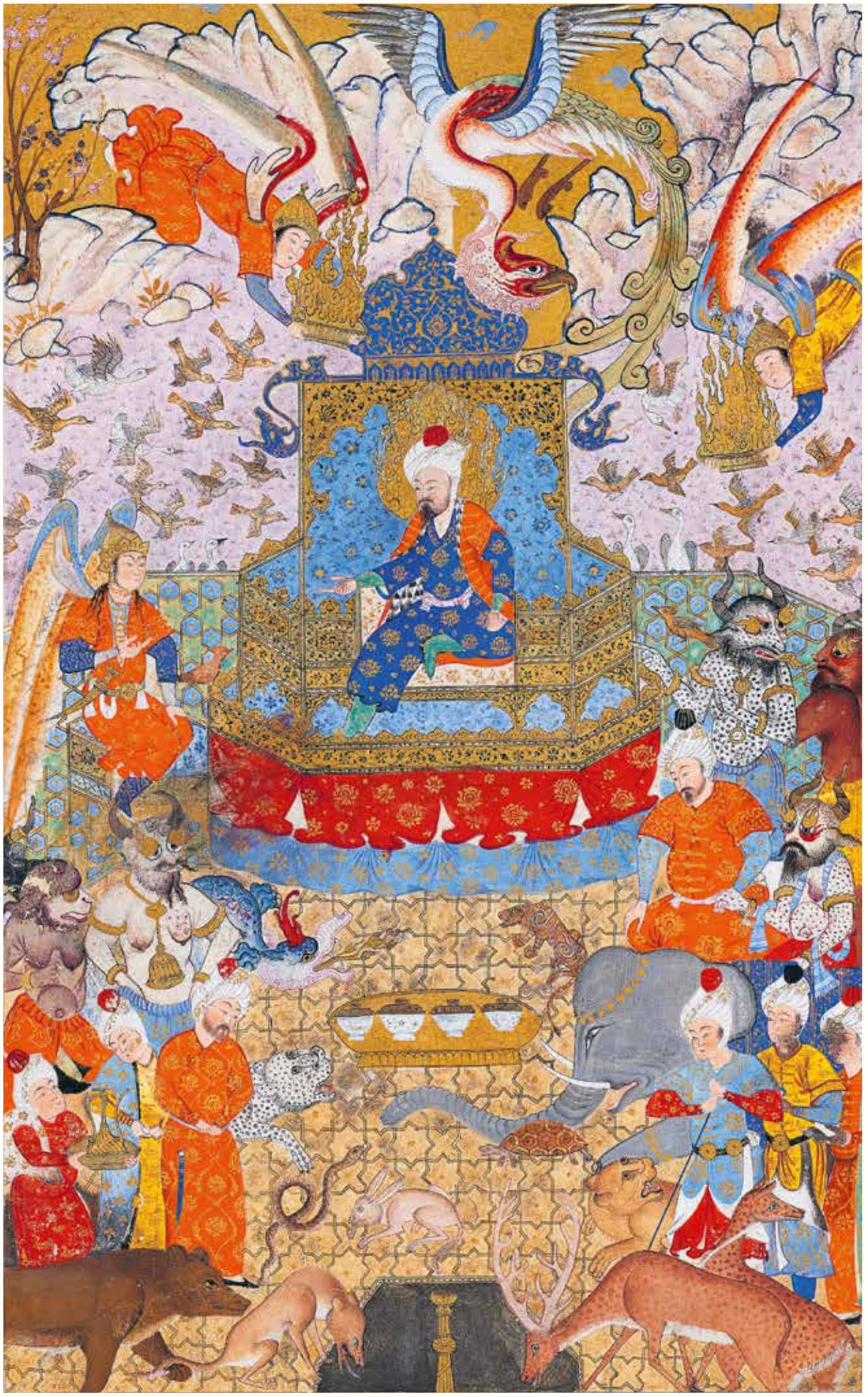
Birth of Alexander, miniature from a manuscript of the *Iskandarnâma (Book of Alexander the Great)*, Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209), an important Persian poet, Central Asia, 16th century. Paper, 235 × 175 mm (page). Copenhagen, The David Collection

One of the most prominent and spectacular contemporaries of the sultans of Cairo and the Burgundian dukes Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, who continued to be inspired by the very same cosmopolitanism, was the Ottoman sultan and conqueror of Constantinople, Mehmed II (r. 1444–46, 1451–81). In keeping with the best cosmopolitan traditions, a Greek chronicle of his reign, written around 1467, explained that the author wrote his chronicle, as paraphrased by the Ottoman art historian Nülrü Necipoğlu, 'to immortalise the fame of Mehmed's heroic deeds, so that Greek-speaking subjects and all philhellenic "Western nations" would know that his accomplishments are in "no way inferior to those of Alexander the Macedonian"'. Indeed, according to this chronicler, Mehmed had one of the classical biographies of Alexander read to him daily, as he wished to emulate him and 'be proclaimed sovereign of all the world and all the people; that is, a second Alexander'.[21]

20 Moin 2012.
21 Istanbul 2010, 265.

Fig. 14

The Clemency of the General, tapestry, mid-16th century. The general in this theme could be Julius Caesar, Scipio Africanus or, in this case, probably Alexander the Great. Wool and silk, 275 × 385 cm. Musea Brugge



Figs. 15 & 16

Solomon and Bilqis (Queen of Sheba) on the Throne, double frontispiece from a manuscript containing one of the most important and longest epic poems in Persian literature: *Shāhnāma (Book of Kings)* by the Persian poet Ferdowsi (940–1025). Iran, Shiraz, c. 1540–50. Paper, 372 × 232 mm (page). Copenhagen, The David Collection

Fig. 18

(Left page)
Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II, Gentile Bellini, c. 1480. Oil on canvas, 70 × 52 cm. London, The National Gallery, Layard Bequest, 1916

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Fig. 20

(Left page)
Portrait of a Lady, Titian (workshop), Italy, c. 1515–20. Her clothes allude to the Ottoman Empire, an exotic style of dress that was much in demand in Venetian circles at the time. Oil on canvas, 99.5 × 77.5 cm. Sarasota, John and Marble Ringling Museum of Art

Fig. 21

Portrait of an African Man, Jan Jansz Mostaert, 1525–30. The man, dressed in European clothing, is possibly Christoph le More, a soldier in the elite corps of Charles V. Oil on panel, 30.8 × 21.2 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

Fig. 22

(Next pages)
Details from double frontispiece of *Solomon and Bilqis (Queen of Sheba) on the Throne, Shāhnāma (Book of Kings)*, c. 1540–50 (Figs. 15 & 16)

Fig. 23

Dagger, 12th–13th century, Syria (Fig. 1). Detail of the back of the dagger, with rings to attach to a shoulder strap worn across the torso in the European manner

Fig. 24

Dagger, 12th–13th century, Syria (Fig. 1). Detail of the front of the dagger, with engraving of the dragon slayer (St George or St Theodore)

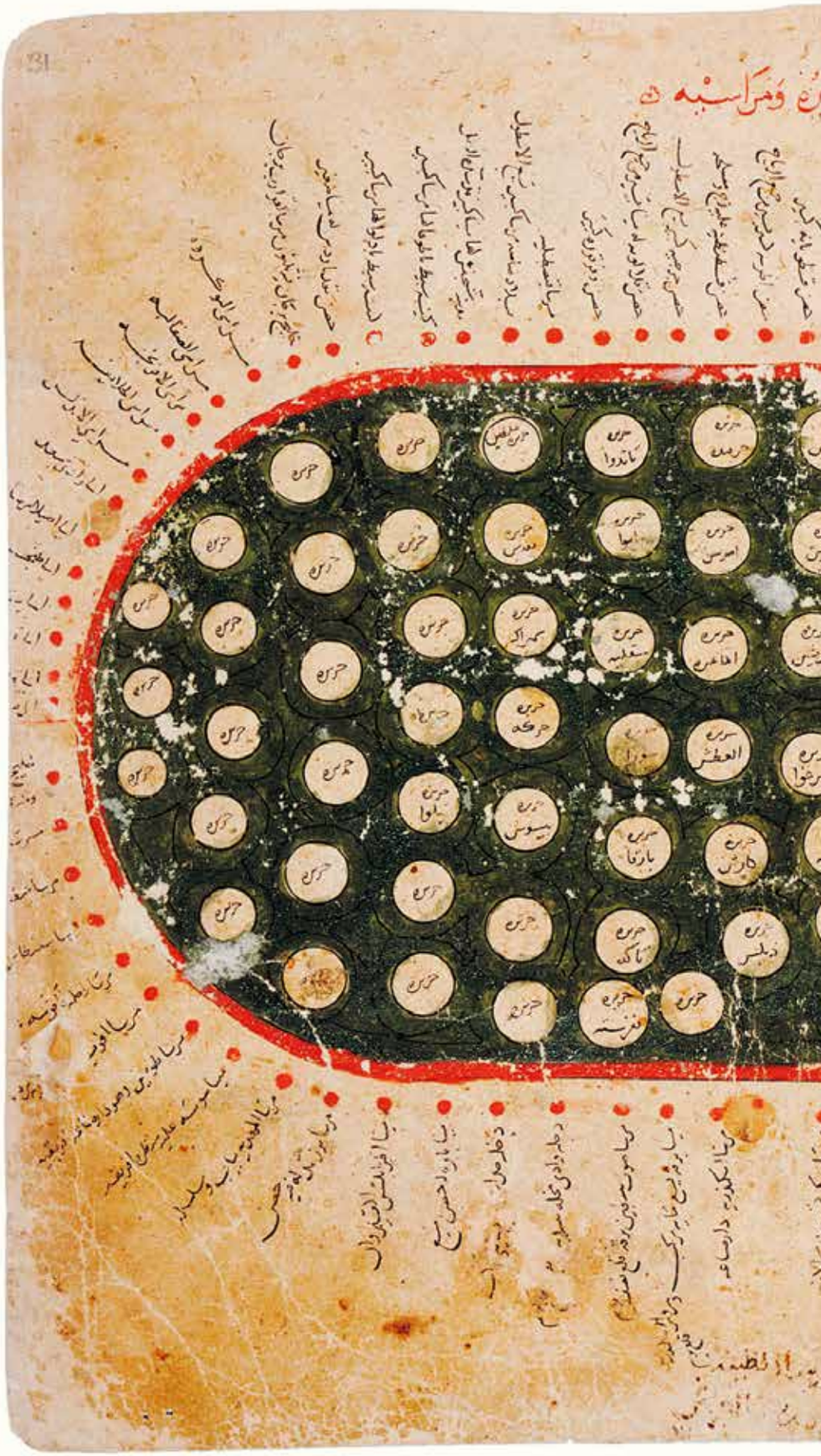


Fig. 31

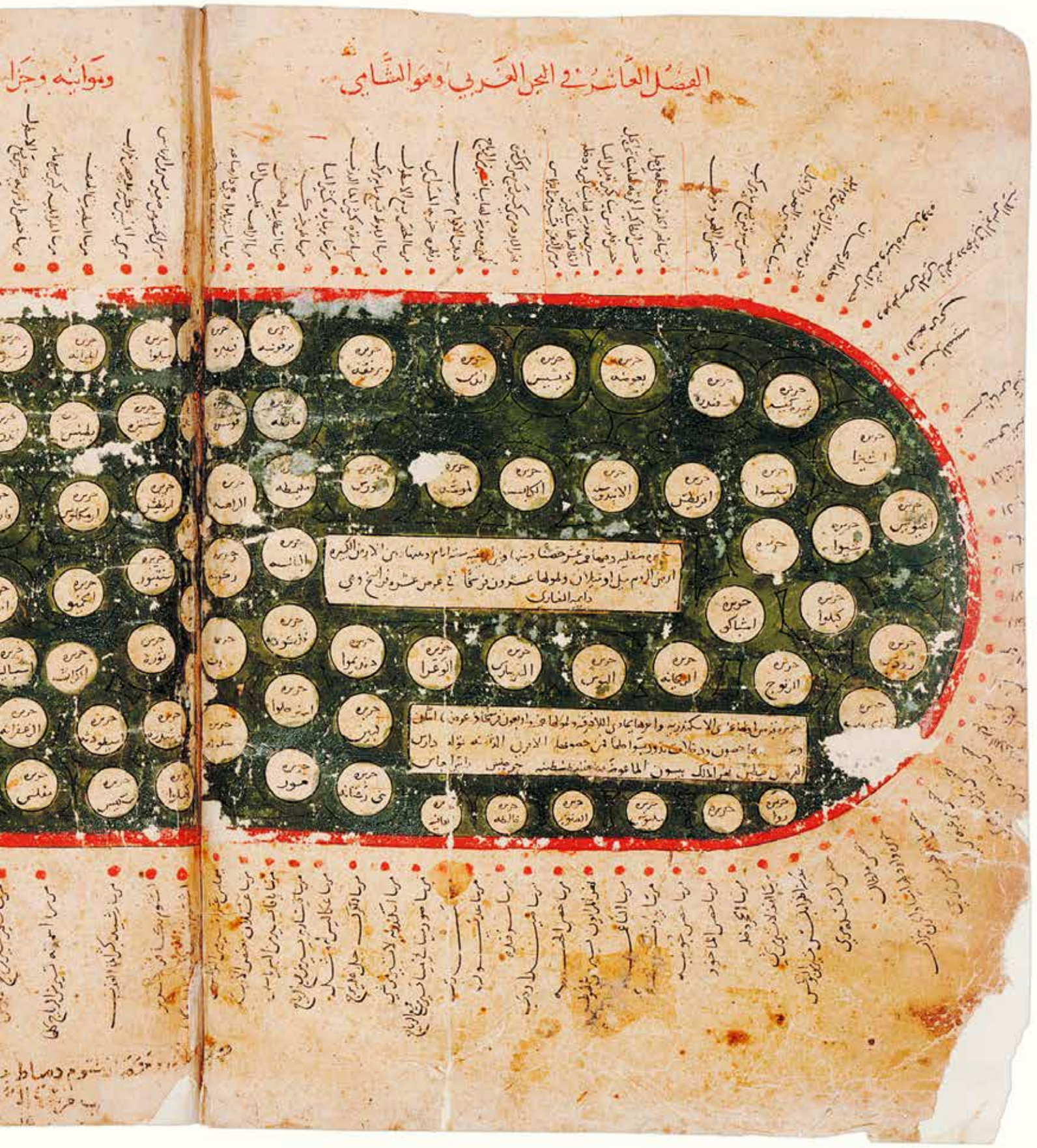
(Previous pages)
Detail of *The Clemency of the General*, tapestry, mid-16th century (Fig. 14)

Fig. 32

The Book of Curiosities, incomplete copy of an anonymous geographic, cosmographic and cartographic work, illustrated with maps and schematic representations. These pages show the Mediterranean region with coasts, islands, anchorages and navigation instructions. Compiled in Egypt between 1020 and 1050, when Egyptian merchants dominated maritime trade in the Mediterranean. The copy, possibly also Egyptian, is late 12th/early 13th century. Paper, 324 × 245 mm. Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, ms. Arab. c. 90

Fig. 33

(Next pages)
Textile border with St Theodore the dragon slayer on horseback and a rosette, each in a medallion, Egypt, 6th–7th century. Textile, 12 × 28 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst (Bode-Museum)



CHAPTER 10

Was Medieval Bruges Capitalist?

Jan Dumolyn

In the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Bruges increasingly became a location that attracted traders from far away. Merchants from Cologne were already present in the 1160s following the opening up of the Zwin in 1134. Imports and exports of food, drink, ore, animals, utensils and weapons were taxed at the small outport (subsidiary port) of Litterswerve, the future Damme. Merchants from Bruges also dealt in wool and cloth from England, although Arras, Saint-Omer, Ghent, Ypres and other towns initially played a larger role. The city also traded by land with Flemish fairs in Lille, Ypres, Torhout and Mesen, which acted as links with their counterparts in the Champagne region. Italian traders were drawn to these places to source valuable Flemish woollen cloth. Merchants from Bruges and other cities clubbed together to form the Flemish London Hanse and the Hanse of the Seventeen Cities for trading in Champagne.

An Exceptional Trading City

The role of the merchant guilds ended around 1300 and it was through 'passive trade' that Bruges achieved real success. The city's merchants travelled much less often, while the civic authorities and prince provided foreign traders with the necessary infrastructure and a favourable commercial climate. From the thirteenth century onwards, German, English, French and Iberian merchants found their way to Bruges in their hundreds, with some opting to remain for lengthy periods. A network of outports grew up in the Zwin estuary, with Damme joined by Hoeke, Monnikerede, Mude (Sint-Anna ter Muiden) and Sluis. The harbour area and the city formed a secure zone, while the count's benches of aldermen efficiently oversaw mercantile law. Bruges also boasted two exchanges, a crane and other commercial facilities.

The Flemish economy was open and featured an extensive division of labour and specialisation in agriculture and crafts. Production focused on export, but the services sector was important too. Food was imported to feed the large urban population: 30% of the county lived in cities in 1300, compared to an average of 10% elsewhere in Europe. Bruges probably numbered around 50,000 inhabitants at the time. Craft output in the Southern Netherlands – especially woollen cloth for export – grew rapidly between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Ghent and Ypres were the largest production centres, while Bruges became the leading export port for cloth from Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut and northern France.

In addition to the cloth industry, the production of garments, durable consumer goods and luxury items thrived in the city by the Zwin. The balance of trade was kept in equilibrium as Bruges also imported raw materials, wood, ore, food, fish, spices, furs and luxury articles through intermediaries such as the Genoese and the Venetians. Growing military insecurity around 1300 diminished the importance of fairs in Champagne, which in turn bolstered Bruges's position as a meeting point for Mediterranean and North Sea trade.

In the late Middle Ages, Bruges developed into an exceptional trading city, comparable to Venice, Genoa, Florence, Barcelona, Cologne and London. The Count of Flanders now began to grant privileges to foreign merchant 'nations' – associations of Castilians, Genoese, Scots, Portuguese and others who banded together in Bruges to defend their interests. They were often headquartered in a 'nation house', where internal disputes were sometimes settled according to their own laws.

From the late fifteenth century, Bruges ceded its position to Antwerp in response to economic, political and ecological factors. These included the rise of the Atlantic trade; competition from fairs in Geneva, Antwerp and Bergen op Zoom; the import of English cloth into Antwerp after it was banned in Bruges; the revolt of Bruges's citizens against Maximilian of Austria; and increasingly difficult waterborne access to the city.

Fig. 1

(Left page)
Oldest drawing of the 'Oosterlingenhuis', the headquarters of the German Hansa in Bruges, anonymous, 1550. Pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 287 × 197 mm. Musea Brugge

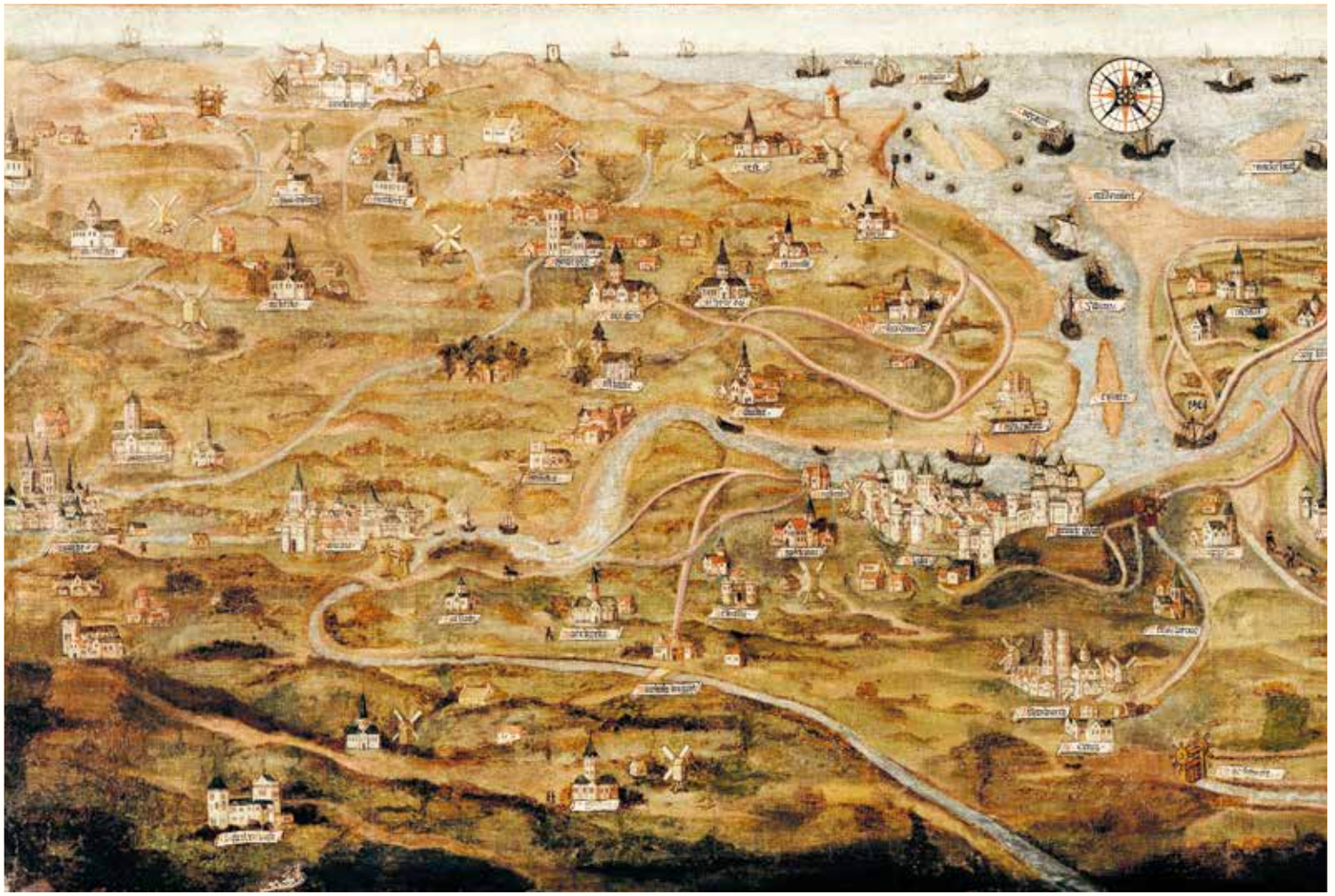


Fig. 2

Map of the Zwin region (fragment), Jan de Hervy, 1501. The map shows Bruges's unique system of outports along the Zwin, which provided the city with its maritime connection to distant trade networks. Oil on canvas, 43.5 × 108.5 cm. Musea Brugge

As the sixteenth century progressed, Antwerp grew larger than Bruges and came to play an increasingly central role as a port. This occurred, however, within the context of a new era: the growth of a world system of capitalist trade and colonialism. Bruges owed its prosperity to an earlier phase; the city remained a medieval metropolis, having permanently relinquished its status as a major city.

A Commercial Revolution

Bruges's historical role should certainly not be underestimated and ought, perhaps, to be given even greater emphasis. In 2005, the American historian James M. Murray published the book *Bruges, Cradle of Capitalism, 1280–1390*. He was inspired by the earlier work of Raymond de Roover, a Belgian-American businessman and pioneer of medieval financial history, who argued that a 'medieval commercial revolution' took place in Europe between around 1160 and 1330.

Trade flourished in the Mediterranean region from the eleventh century onwards, with Westerners once again beginning to play a role after centuries of Byzantine and Muslim dominance. Trading firms arose in cities such as Venice, Amalfi, Pisa and Genoa, with family members jointly investing in a *compagnia* to undertake commercial voyages. From the twelfth century, a growing number of merchants stayed in their home towns, where they invested as silent partners in a *commenda* and shared in the risks. Genuine trading firms arose in the second half of the fourteenth century, with branches in several cities. Maritime insurance and other forms of collaboration were established.

Fig. 3

Cope of David of Burgundy, dean of St Donatian's in Bruges and bishop of Utrecht. Venetian velvet, silk and gold embroidery, 133 × 102 cm. Liège, Trésor de la Cathédrale

Fig. 8

Goblet, Syria, first half 14th century. Enamelled glass, height 27.4 cm, diameter 24 cm. Liège, Musée Grand Curtius

Fig. 9

Perfume sprinkler (qumqum), possibly from Syria, 11th–mid-13th century. Glass, height 4.8 cm, diameter 4.7 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 10

'Zutphen' quadrant, c. 1300. This instrument was usable between the 51st and 63rd degree of latitude, which is precisely the extent of Hansa territory between Flanders (Bruges) and Norway (north of Bergen), in which merchants from Zutphen were active. The quadrant is therefore likely to have been used on a medieval cargo ship. Instruments of this kind are exceedingly rare. Brass, radius 6.2 cm, thickness 0.1 cm. Zutphen, Stedelijk Museum

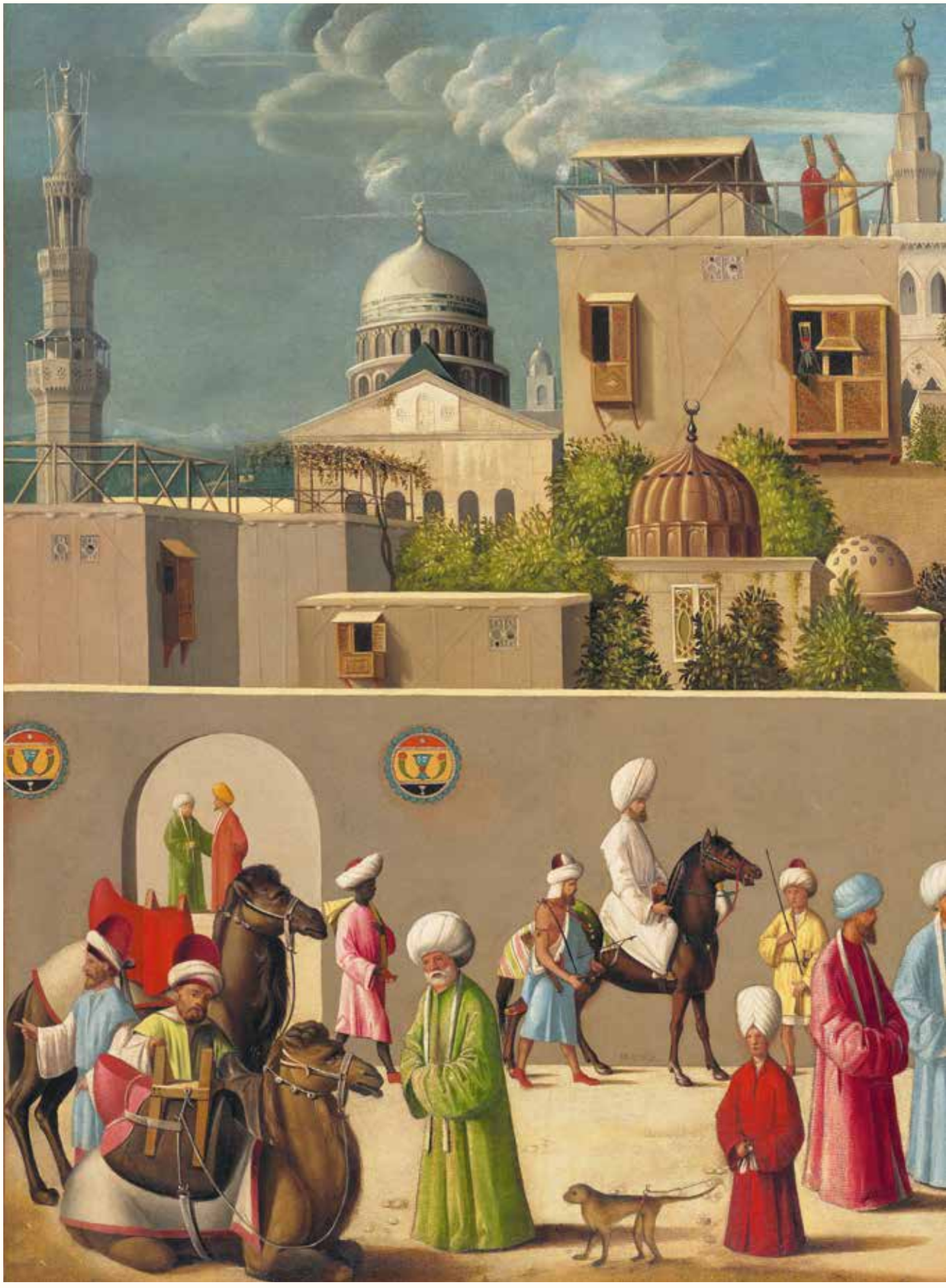


Fig. 18

Reception of a Venetian Delegation by the Governor of Damascus, anonymous (Venice), c. 1511. Oil on canvas, 120 × 200 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures

CHAPTER 14

Bruges: The Sunset Years?

Peter Frankopan

When the well-travelled Spanish historian Pero Tafur visited Bruges in the 1430s, he described it as 'one of the greatest markets of the world',[1] a place where it was possible to buy the best fruits from Castile, the finest wines from Greece, and spices and all kinds of treats from the Middle East and beyond. It was a wonder – for those who were wealthy; but, he added, 'It is no place for poor men.'[2]

By this time, Bruges was famed as one of the leading emporia in Europe – if not its leading commercial centre. Tafur, for one, thought it was an even more important marketplace than Venice. Others, such as the English writer John Gower, placed the city alongside not only Venice, but London, Paris and Florence. Philip the Good said that the products and traders that filled the city made Bruges the most famous city in the world. By the 1480s, the three parliamentary bodies of Bruges, Ghent and Ypres claimed that the city's port at Sluis was 'one of the three most important harbours in the Christian world'.[3]

Fig. 1

(Left page)
Portrait of Margaret van Eyck,
Jan van Eyck, 1439. Oil on panel,
41.5 × 35 cm (including original frame).
Musea Brugge, Groeningemuseum

Virtuoso Painters

In the second half of the fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth century, Bruges went through a blistering and spectacular cultural efflorescence that matched its commercial success. The city became a centre of artistic brilliance, as well as mercantile innovation and political transformation. The beating heart of European trade networks, the city dazzled with its painters, printers and financiers, whose work drew kings, merchants and humanists from across the continent. As the de facto financial capital of northern Europe, Bruges had branches of the major Italian banking houses such as the Bardi, Medici and Portinari, which managed loans for the Burgundian dukes and traded in bills of exchange. The city archives record substantial municipal revenues in this period derived from customs, tolls and property taxes. All contributed to continued investment in civic architecture and common goods, such as hospitals, schools and almshouses, as well as the maintenance of canals, quays and public squares that reflected both civic pride and the prosperity of its citizens.

Thanks to its wealthy patrons with disposable incomes and competitive instincts, Bruges became home to some of the most brilliant artists of the late Middle Ages. The legacies of Jan van Eyck (c.1390–1441) and Hans Memling (1430–1494) shaped an entire generation of painters. *Portrait of Margaret van Eyck* (Jan's spouse), painted in 1439, is one of the earliest-known European portraits of a painter's wife. It is clearly the work of a supremely gifted artist, able to capture a variety of textures, from the fur lining of Margaret's garment to the folds in the fabric to the details of her elaborate headdress. It shows not an idealised likeness, but the artist's wife as she was.

Memling was one of the city's most popular and famous artists. His *Triptych of the Moreel Family* reveals both the wealth of his patrons, the merchant Willem Moreel and his wife Barbara van Vlaenderberch, and their deeply personal piety. The Moreels commissioned not only art but also charitable foundations, including hospitals and almshouses, that testified to the civic virtue of Bruges' patrician class.

Many artists who flourished in Bruges in this golden age became members of the Guild of St Luke, the painters' confraternity, which flourished in the Renaissance. Its members numbered virtuosi such as Gerard David (c. 1460–1523), whose magnificent altarpieces include *The Virgin among the Virgins*, which he made for the Carmelite nuns of Sion in Bruges. Others included Lancelot Blondeel (1498–1561) and his son-in-law Pieter Pourbus (c. 1523–1584), who carried the city's artistic reputation into the sixteenth century and ensured continuity even as tastes and patrons evolved. Blondeel's spectacular

1 Tafur 1926, 200.
2 Tafur 1926, 200.
3 Van Uytven 2011, 259–260.

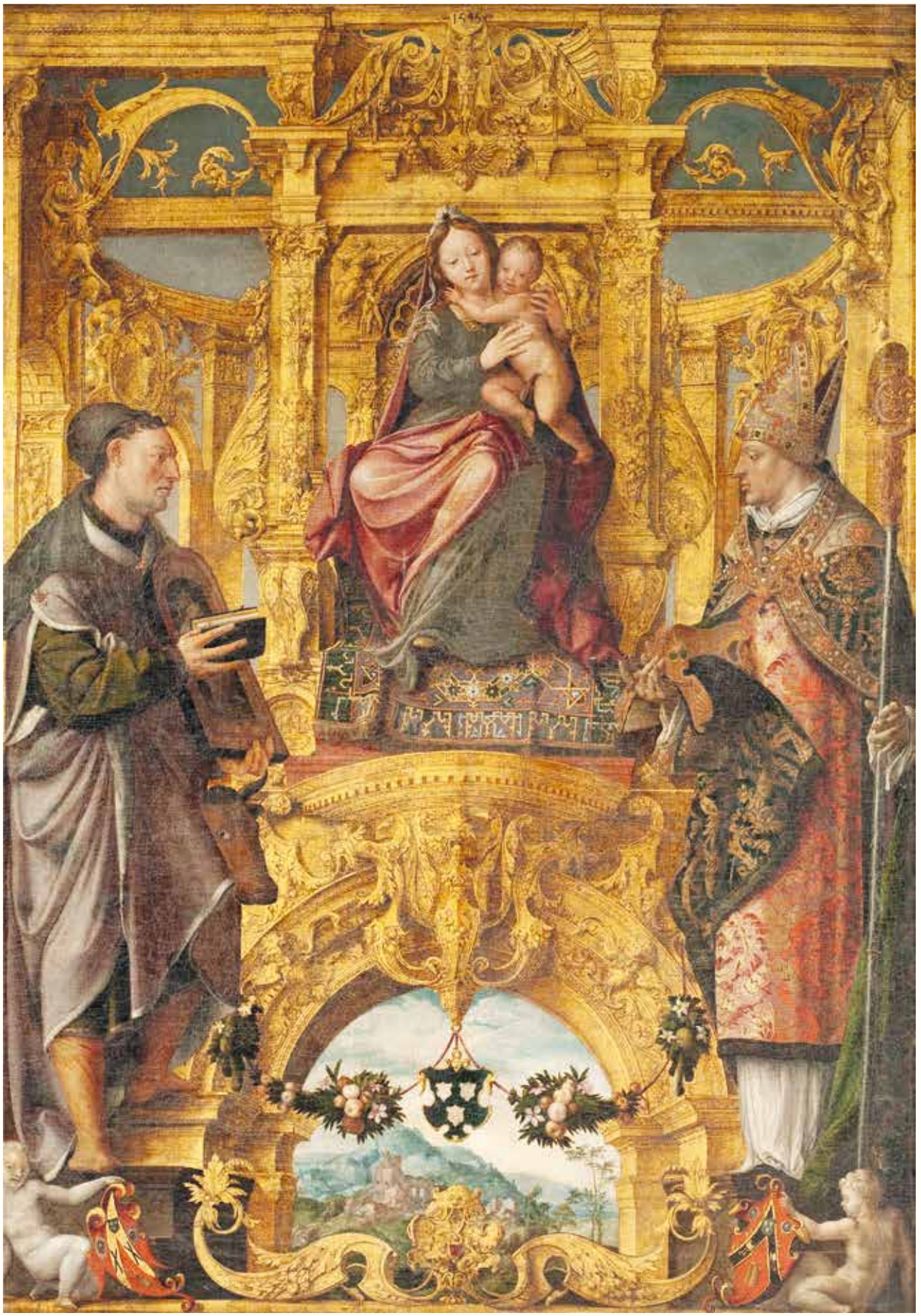


Fig. 5

(Left page)
Madonna Enthroned with Saints Luke and Eligius, Lancelot Blondeel, 1545. Oil on canvas, 138 × 98 cm. Bruges, St Saviour's Cathedral

Madonna Enthroned with Saints Luke and Eligius, created for the Guild of St Luke in Bruges (the city guild for painters and artists) was a statement both of technical accomplishment and of the civic prestige that Bruges' artistic community wished to project, while Pourbus's *Bruges Fishmongers' Triptych*, commissioned by the Guild of Fishermen of Bruges in the 1570s, demonstrated the graceful refinement, subtle realism, religious devotion and mercantile pride that characterised the art being produced in Flanders at this time.

Flourishing Literary Culture

Bruges also nourished a vibrant literary and intellectual culture. For example, the poet Anthonis de Roovere (1430–1482) wove moral instruction and religious devotion into polished, vernacular (Middle Dutch) poetry that resonated with the city's elite and guild communities alike. Cornelis Everaert (c.1480–1556) wrote plays that exposed hypocrisy in public life and championed civic virtues such as honesty in office, charity towards the poor and loyalty to the common good, and helped to shape a distinctive literary culture rooted in urban pride and moral instruction. Eduard de Dene (c.1500–1578), author of the *Testament Rhetoricael*, a vast collection of poems and songs, carried this tradition forward by blending satire, piety and humanist learning to admonish vice and praise good government, guild solidarity and responsible citizenship. Through allegory, festive verse and public performances associated with Bruges's chambers of rhetoric, these writers ensured that literature served not only to entertain but also to guide behaviour and reinforce the ideals that sustained the city's identity as an exemplar for others to aspire to.

It was no coincidence, then, that Erasmus of Rotterdam corresponded with scholars in Bruges including Frans van Cranevelt, the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives and the Englishman Thomas More. Henry VIII sent More to the city in 1515 as part of a diplomatic mission to negotiate trade and settle financial disputes not only with merchants in the Low Countries involved in the English wool trade and the powerful Flemish cloth industry, but with the confederation that made up the Hanseatic League as well as with the Holy Roman Empire.

It was while on his mission to Flanders that More wrote his most famous work, *Utopia* (1516); evidently his time in the region made him think about ideal forms of government and the obligations of rulers to promote justice, virtue and the common good. Observing the prosperity and disciplined civic life of the Low Countries sharpened his reflections on how a well-ordered society might function. That Bruges stood at the intersection of commerce, humanist learning and public authority offered a living laboratory for contemplating how wisdom, law and public duty might be better aligned.

New Horizons

It is not surprising that Bruges, as a cultural and intellectual powerhouse, was also quick to adopt new technologies that allowed ideas to be disseminated faster and more cheaply to all corners of Europe. This included the printing press, pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-1400s and adopted by the English printer William Caxton, who worked in Bruges in the 1470s under the patronage of Margaret of York. Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* – printed in Bruges around 1473 – is widely regarded as the first book printed in the English language. Caxton's collaboration in Bruges with Colard Mansion, who had trained as a scribe and an illuminator, was crucial in spreading not only books but also literacy and access to knowledge and information across Europe.

One reason why this was significant was because of a series of dramatic upheavals and changes – not only in Europe but around the world. In the 1490s, expeditions led by Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama opened up new routes towards India, across the Atlantic and around the southern tip of Africa, respectively. It was the latter that promised, at least at first, to deliver greater opportunities.

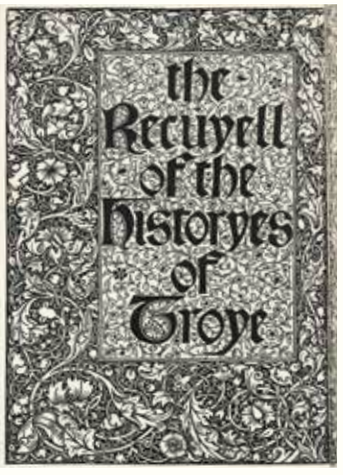


Fig. 6

Title page from *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, Raoul Lefèvre, c. 1460, translated and printed in Bruges by William Caxton in 1473–74, in the William Morris edition for Kelmscott Press, 1892. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division

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Portrait of Margaret van Eyck, Jan van Eyck, 1439. Oil on panel, 41.5 × 35 cm (including original frame). Musea Brugge, Groeningemuseum

Profile Portrait of Sultan Süleyman, Titian or circle of, Venice, 1530–40. Oil on canvas, 99 × 85 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

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Passion of Christ, Hans Memling, 1470–71. Oil on oak, 55 × 90 cm. Turin, Musei Reali – Galleria Sabauda

Reception of a Venetian Delegation by the Governor of Damascus, anonymous (Venice), c. 1511. Oil on canvas, 120 × 200 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures