

Perhaps the knight should be "reverend" rather than "revered" if he belonged to one of the religious orders of knighthood like the Hospitallers and Templars.

I'd be tempted to compare him to the supremely tetchy English traveler Smollett, who earned the nickname "Smell fungus," if Smollett wasn't so much milder.

All the encounters so far have ended happily. Here, for variety, is the late 13th-century traveler al-'Abdari, who made the angry encounter into an art form. His journey to Makkah begins in 1289 on a sour

We shouldn't be too hard on al-'Abdari. In overcrowded, stressful Cairo he suffered the trauma of losing his mule. It was swept away before his eyes by the press of passing humanity, and never seen again.

And so on for five pages. Whatever its other merits or demerits, the Arabic is highly picturesque.

Finally, two encounters that are neither positive nor negative but, so to speak, reflexive. The first belongs to the corpus of legends that, over the course of many centuries and cultures, attached themselves to the life of Alexander the Great. Fictional it may be, as the narrator himself admits. But it shows how the idea of a New World haunted medieval minds centuries before Columbus. Perhaps, too, it invites us all to be

The early 14th-century Syrian polymath Muhammad ibn Abi Talib al-Ansari.

There was in the army of King Fulk, son of Fulk, a revered Frankish knight who had arrived from their land intending to go on pilgrimage and then return home. A close and affectionate friendship arose between us; he would address me as "my brother," and we enjoyed each other's company. When he eventually decided to set sail for home, he said to me, "My brother, I am going to my homeland, and my wish is that you will send with me your son" – my son being with me at the time, and fourteen years of age – "to come to my country to see our knights, and to learn reason and chivalry. He would then come back as a man of reason."

These words of his that rang in my ears were not, however, such as would come from the head of a man of reason. For even if my son were to be taken captive in battle, no worse fate could befall him as a captive than precisely that – to be taken away to the land of the Franks. So I replied, "By your life, this is exactly what I was hoping myself, except that something prevented from me from mentioning it. You see, the boy's grandmother loves him so much that she won't even let him go out with me unless she has extracted a solemn promise from me that I'll bring him safely back to her." The knight said, "And is your mother alive?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Then do not disobey her."

Fulk the Younger of Anjou, king of Jerusalem 1131-43.

note ("In this age of ours, the harvest of virtuous men is blighted") and rises to a crescendo of cantankerousness in Cairo. Among its inhabitants, he tells us in rhymed prose,

The generous man is meaner than a firefly with its light, / the brave more timid than a locust in a fright, / the learned man more foolish than a moth with a candle, / the eminent lowlier than a bug in a puddle, / the sedate more fickle than a gnat in a muddle. / Their handsome men look freshly risen from the grave, / their healthy men look far too sick to save, / their eloquent man's more tongue-tied than a callow lad, / their high and mighty man's more abject than a scrounging cad ...

The Alexander of legend was, among many other things, a marine innovator. In another tale, he is said to have commissioned a type of diving-bell. His historical self did in fact order voyages of exploration, but (as far as we know) only in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf.

open to encounters, even if we have to go that bit further than we thought.

Alexander, the story goes, having conquered the known world, decided to investigate the Encompassing Ocean: the great unexplored body of water that surrounded the Afro-Eurasian landmass. He fitted out a number of ships, "all but unsinkable in design," and ordered them to sail for a year on different fixed bearings. They were then to turn for home and report back to him. At the end of the year,

None of the crews had seen anything but the surface of the water and the gigantic creatures which emerge from it ... So they returned the way they had come – all except for one ship. The crew of this last vessel said to each other, "Let us sail on for another month. Who knows, we may come across something to whiten our faces before the king. We can always cut down on food and drink during the return journey."

They had continued on their course for less than the month when, there before them, appeared another vessel, with people on board! The two ships drew alongside each other. However, neither crew could understand the language

"To whiten one's face" often has the sense of "to show one's honest intentions." In this context, it also has an element of face-saving.