

The Book of Wonders of the World

The text of this beautiful manuscript of the Wonders of the World, of which **Siloé has produced an exact replica**, is the French version of a small part, book XIV, of the *Reductorium Morale* –Moral Compendium– of the French Benedictine monk Pierre Bersuire, also known as Petrus Berchorius, or also Peter of Poitiers. Originally these texts were better known and disseminated under the title of *Secrets of Natural History*.



Bersuire was born in 1290 in Saint Pierre du Chemin, in the Vendée region of France. A man of vast and encyclopaedic knowledge, he has gone into posterity mainly for his French translation of *The Decades* by Titus Livius, and for his two monumental works conceived as an aid to preaching: *The Repertorium Biblicum* and the *Reductorium Morale*. The latter, on which he began work in 1320 and which he completed no less than 23 years later, in 1343, **contains a whole series of fables, legends, prodigious facts and spectacular wonders from different parts of the world**, but all with an exemplary touch and perspective.

The Reductorium –and therefore the *Book of Wonders of the World*– is a natural history with a moralising and spiritual intention, as well as a preaching aid for monks and churchmen in general. As Bersuire himself says, his intention is to demonstrate the glory of God through the wonders of nature. It speaks of birds, fish and all kinds of animals, as well as trees and plants, and of the many wonders that occur around them and from which the corresponding moral lessons can be drawn. **This is the so-called *exempla* literature** which inspired preachers so much, as it helped them to embellish their sermons with diverse and striking stories which, in addition to their attractiveness and charm, allowed them to rely on precise quotations, which lent even more credibility to their accounts.

For Spanish readers it is interesting to point out that Bersuire, who had first joined the Franciscan order, by papal dispensation moved to the Benedictines of San Salvador de la Torre, in the Spanish diocese of Tuy, near Vigo. The Benedictine Order –richer, more powerful and influential than the Franciscans– would later earn him privileges that would allow him to travel to the papal court in Avignon, the nerve centre of religious and social life in those years.

It should also be noted that, in Avignon, Bersuire became friends with various French, Italian, German and English humanists. Among others, it is worth mentioning his close contacts with Petrarch himself.

The author of these wonders of the world seems to have been more directly inspired by *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, a sort of encyclopaedia of nature written by Bartholomew of England. In fact, the extensive and well-documented information that Bersuire offers us in book 14 of the *Reductorium*, which the French translator will later transfer to this book, is based above all on book 15 of *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, reducing, however, the 174 areas of the earth referred to there to only 56 countries or regions, each with its corresponding marvellous facts.

But in addition to his personal experience and his own knowledge, Bersuire not only relies on quotes from Bartholomew of England but also from a veritable cataract of authors from antiquity and the very Middle Ages. **Throughout his voluminous writings, he includes names that have left their mark on the history of culture forever.** Thus we find the most important philosophers –Aristotle, Plato, Socrates...–, or the most conspicuous geographers and historians –Herodotus, Plutarch, Ptolemy...–, with great poets and playwrights such as Ovid, Terence or Virgil, and Fathers of the Church such as Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine or Saint

Jerome, or later medieval authors who had also been a key element in the evolution of European cultural history such as Bede the Venerable, Saint Bernard, or Saint Benedict and his famous “rule”. He even includes the author of the *Pseudo-Turpin*, the historian of one of the books of the famous *Codex Calixtinus*.





There are also great naturalists like Saint Albert the Great, Avicenna, Averroes and Platearius. And, of course, among the travel chronicles, there are references to the famous stories by Marco Polo, almost contemporaries of his own, and which should not be confused with those in our manuscript, as they are also sometimes referred to as the *Book of Wonders of the World*. In any case, the range of readings proposed by Bersuire is so astonishingly broad that it leads us to think that he probably did not have enough time during his lifetime to read them all personally. He probably limited himself to reading their corresponding compendia, florilegios or epitomes.

The fundamental aim of Bersuire's work is to bring together classical wisdom and biblical morality, although his French translator, of whom we know very little, does not seem to have had such a clear intention. We do not even have an exact date for this translation, which, however, we can place between the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century. But, in fact, he translates from Latin with more of a bourgeois elite in mind, or aristocratic lay readers, than the preachers to whom Bersuire mainly addressed his writings to. The translator therefore eliminates the moralising tone of the monk and creates a work that is more dramatic and more attractive for an armchair traveller. Simplistically, we could say just that, that with the help of the translator, the traditional and pious pilgrim narrator is here installed more in the perspective of the naturalist eager to learn about other cultures and ethnographic spaces from the comfort and security of his living room.

It is also interesting to note how this beautiful *Book of Wonders of the World*, with its spectacular miniatures, is in line with the fashion of the great workshops of the mid-15th century to translate into French and illustrate the most successful Latin works.

The commissioner intended to show his exquisite taste and economic power, thus helping to fuel the industry of luxury manuscripts on commission and the proliferation of these great workshops in both France and the Low Countries.

Dated between 1480 and 1485, the manuscript reproduced here is by far the most illuminated and beautiful of the four surviving manuscripts with Bersuire's text. The first part, profusely illustrated, consists of 56 chapters in which, in alphabetical order, the 56 countries or regions into which the world is divided with their corresponding wonders are described. The 17 chapters of the second part, without miniatures, leave aside the geographical aspect to deal with subjects more typical of Natural History, i.e. the various creatures of the world, the human body, fire, stones, trees, poisons, as well as monsters, prodigies and omens.



The skilful miniaturist of our manuscript, Robinet Testard, was one of the most distinguished and interesting artists of the entire 15th century in France. Without being really innovative, Testard's style, which is evident in this manuscript, is notable for its sharp outlines and large figures. And while his colours tend to be soft and pastel, Testard is very skilful at creating contrasts and delightful combinations. Moreover, the abundant golds and silvers of the colourful scenes in this manuscript endow it with a rich variety and exceptional refinement, making it one of the most beautiful and memorable compositions of its time.

The Spanish reader will find the manuscript's references to the mythical islands known to the Greeks as the Fortunate Isles, in reference to the Canary Islands, on folio 24v, a kind of paradise for the rest and solace of souls whose ferocity is evidenced here by the abundance and variety of animals and plants, that is truly interesting and curious. We cannot resist reproducing here one of the paragraphs describing these islands and in which one can appreciate the spontaneity and narrative freshness typical of the manuscript that the reader cannot miss. It reads as follows:

The Fortunate Islands are islands so called because they are well supplied and endowed with goods of all kinds. There are apples, pears and fruits of all kinds in great abundance. There are birds of every species singing melodiously. There is an abundance of honey because of the great sweetness of the flowers, trees and herbs to be found there. There is



an abundance of milk because of the enormous number of beasts and the good pastures they have. There is also an abundance of cattle, cows, sheep and goats in large herds. There is an abundance of dogs. And because the islands are so fertile and abundant in riches, the pagans decided and said, as the ancient poets testify, that this was paradise on earth...

(We would like to take this opportunity to clarify that, contrary to popular belief, the name Canary Islands does not come from the birds, the canaries, but from the “abundant number of dogs” referred to in this paragraph, which were called canis in Latin).

In this line of charming stories, although somewhat naïve in style, in the section referring to Spain, in the image on folio 28v, we can see reflected the fiction of the mythical mares that became pregnant without stallions, just thanks to the effect of the wind.

Legends such as these, but of a considerable variety, are the ones that pepper the manuscript, captivating the reader's attention and interest, while at the same time recreating his sight with Testard's prodigious scenes. An innovative Testard **who did not hesitate to incorporate the very latest techniques of engraving**, even modifying them in the service of his exquisite and imaginative vision. Nor did he hesitate to incorporate the best of such curious artists as those who even excelled in illustrating decks of cards or tarot cards with the most evocative and suggestive scenes imaginable. See, for example, **the unique and spectacular battle of the flock of cranes against the pygmies on sheep**, found on folio 47, which is pure delight and undoubtedly inspired by the engravings of the well-known Master of playing cards.



But Testard reveals his exceptional qualities as an artist to us when we see him working on fantastic scenes in such a meticulous and elaborate manner that he really ends up not even relying on his graphic models, which he finally reinterprets and adapts masterfully in a new and original creation.

This is one of the richest and most exceptional sets of 15th-century miniatures. His inventiveness, ingenious and daring use of colour and love of detail sometimes lead us to be enraptured by the complex and seductive nature of the exceptional miniatures in this certainly “marvellous” book.

In the book of studies that accompanies the facsimile we offer for the first time the complete transcription and translation of the admirable text that once served as the perfect “pretext” for Robinet Testard's symphony of images.

We beg the reader to forgive the immodesty, if not the pride, with which we at Siloé approach this edition of one of the great treasures of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the *Book of Wonders of the World*. We have put all our passion and our knowledge into it so that the reader can delight in turning the beautiful pages of this manuscript. And although we would have loved to make the original available to everyone, this is completely impossible, so we have decided to offer everyone the chance to enjoy a faithful replica, so much so, that every bibliophile has the opportunity to thrill, to dream and even to feel for a few hours like a medieval man, one of those ancestors for whom the world was a veritable anthology of wonders.

