

Du Huan's 杜環 Perception of the *Ecumene* in the 8th Century

Victoria Almonte

Abstract: This chapter deals with a preliminary analysis of the journey that Du Huan 杜環 took toward Western countries, during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In particular, it investigates the perception of the Mediterranean area, conceived as a transcultural and transnational territory, as reflected in the eyes of a Chinese traveller of the 8th century. Du Huan is thought to be one of the first Chinese travellers to have visited and recorded his observations about the north-western coast of Africa and other territories, under the influence and the control of the Arab-Islamic empire during the 8th century. His work reveals a prominent interest in the customs and habits of the local populations, which he described with great ability. Unfortunately, his work *Jing xing ji* has been almost completely lost except for a few extracts found in the *Encyclopaedic History of Institutions* (known as *Tong dian*) written by Du You – a relative of Du Huan, which was compiled in 801 CE. Du Huan's manuscript gives a crucial contribution to the studies regarding China's contacts with the rest of the world, in particular about the historical exchanges between China and Africa, and China and the Arab-Islamic world. (Song 2011, 8; Smidt 2001, 3). Furthermore, his writings testify to the extent of the knowledge of the far West (intended as the Mediterranean area) that the Chinese already had in the 8th century, and reflect Du Huan's interest for new original aspects (never mentioned in earlier works), likely based on first-hand observations noted down by the author himself: for instance, the expressions related to concept of multiculturalism and to the perception of religion appears in Du Huan's description of the Arab-Islamic world, and in other sections.

Keywords: Du Huan; Perception; Western Territories; Mediterranean Area; Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

This chapter deals with a preliminary analysis of the journey that Du Huan 杜環 took toward Western countries, during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In particular, it focuses on the perception of the Mediterranean area, conceived as a transcultural and transnational territory, as reflected in the eyes of a Chinese traveller of the 8th century. The idea for this study emerged from research questions that arose through discussions with colleagues. Among these research questions were: did the Chinese know the Mediterranean area in ancient times, before the arrival of the Jesuits in China? How did the Chinese perceive this portion of the *ecumene* during the Tang and Song dynasties? These inquiries prompted me to delve into the past and examine one of the earliest travel works written in Chinese by a real traveller, thereby exploring how the Chinese image and representation of the Mediterranean territory evolved over hundreds of years.

Victoria Almonte, Tuscia University, Italy, victoria.almonte@unitus.it, 0000-0001-6948-9690

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One of the most important studies in this field was carried out by Yu Taishan 余太山, who collected and analysed Chinese references to the Mediterranean territory (including the Eastern Roman Empire) in ancient Chinese sources, labelled according to literary genre. He scrutinised dynastic histories, travel works, geographical treatises, Taoist and Buddhist works as well as supernatural writings (Yu 2013; Li and Yu 2009). He studied Du You's 杜佑 (735–812 CE) work, *Tong dian* 通典 (*Encyclopaedic History of Institutions*), which mentioned Du Huan's work several times, but he did not mention Du Huan's travel book, *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (*Memories of a Journey or Records of My Travels*).

Du Huan is thought to be one of the first Chinese travellers to have visited and recorded his observations about the north-western coast of Africa and other territories, under the influence and the control of the Arab-Islamic empire during the 8th century. His work reveals a prominent interest in the customs and habits of the local populations, which he described with great ability. Unfortunately, his work *Jing xing ji* has been almost completely lost except for a few extracts found in the *Tong dian* written in 801 by Du You – a relative of Du Huan. These fragments contain 1,513 Chinese characters and form just two out of 200 chapters (or scrolls) of the *Tong dian*. They reveal some very insightful observations of various places that Du Huan visited, and pioneering impressions about faraway places almost unknown to the Chinese in the 8th century. I tried to read Du Huan's work with an overall vision of his knowledge of the Mediterranean area (and regarding the *ecumene* as a whole), not focusing on one country at a time. This analysis will bring out how already in the very early geographical sources the Mediterranean area was seen as a transcultural entity and his perception went beyond all imperial, national and geographical borders.

Du Huan's work has been analysed and annotated by several Chinese scholars. Among them, Ding Qian 丁謙 (1843–1919), who wrote the essay *Jing xing ji dili kaozheng* 經行記地理考證 (*Philological Analysis of the Geographical Work Jing Xing Ji*), deserves a mention, as well as Zhang Yichun 張一純 who in 2000 compiled the *Jing xing ji jianzhu* 經行記箋注 (*Commentary on Jing Xing Ji*), a fully annotated version of Du Huan's work. Zhang's study includes a rich preface and has been inserted in the book series *Zhonghua jiaotong shiji congkan* 中外交通史籍丛刊 (*Series on Historical Contacts between China and the Rest of the World*). In more general terms, in 2011 the Chinese Arabist Song Xian 宋峴 wrote the history of the cultural relationships between China and the Arab empire (*Zhongguo Alabo wenhua jiaoliu shi hua* 中国阿拉伯文化交流史话) and largely quoted Du Huan's manuscript, since it can be considered one of the most relevant works about Chinese Arabic contacts (Song 2011, 11). In 2022 Xiao Chaoyu 肖超宇 wrote a very interesting essay, highlighting the ethnographical value of Du Huan's work, *Minzuzhi shijiao xia de Jing xing ji* 民族志视角下的《经行记》 (Xiao 2022).

Although the first complete translations only came to light very recently (in the last two decades as we will soon see), over the last two centuries various scholars dedicated articles to specific chapters of the work, providing useful annotated translations; moreover, short mentions of passages from *Jing xing ji* are

scattered throughout several other works and papers, such as H. Yule (1871), Hirth (1885), Chavannes (1903), Pelliot (1929),¹ and W. Smidt (2001) who focused on the section about Molin 摩隣 country (Smidt 2001, 4). It is worth noting that a very incisive graphic biography of Du Huan's life and journey is available online, provided by the Khan academy, that offers young readers an important tool for understanding Du Huan's value.²

Two annotated translations of Du Huan's manuscript are available so far: one published by Alexander Akin (2000) and one by Wan Lei (2017). Their works reveal remarkable differences: in describing the countries visited by Du Huan, Wan followed the order reported by Du You's *Tong dian*, whereas Akin preferred to follow an imaginary geographical line of Du Huan's journey from the East to the West and *vice versa* (his journey back to China).³ We will see this in more detail in the next paragraph. I am extremely grateful to all of the scholars who approached this work before me for inspiring me to further investigate Du Huan's *Jing xing ji*.

Du Huan's manuscript gives a crucial contribution to the studies regarding China's contacts with the rest of the world, particularly about the historical exchanges between China and Africa and China and the Arab-Islamic world (Song 2011, 8; Smidt 2001, 3). Furthermore, his writings testify to the extent of the knowledge of the far West (intended as the Mediterranean area) that the Chinese already had in the 8th century, and reflect Du Huan's interest for new original aspects (never mentioned in earlier works), probably based on first-hand observations, noted down by the author himself: for instance, the expressions related to the concept of multiculturalism and to the perception of religion that Du Huan mentions in his description of the Arab-Islamic world, and not only in this section.

This chapter offers an innovative interpretation of Du Huan's work, looking into it with a more open and flexible approach than the traditional method,

¹ H. Yule (1820–1889) mentions Du Huan several times, when he describes the Women country, quoted by Marco Polo (Yule 1871, vol. II, 684; vol. I, 518). F. Hirth (1845–1927) studies the identification of the toponyms Molin 摩隣 and Laobosa 老勃薩, used by Du Huan and in the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書: according to Hirth these two toponyms indicate territories on the Eastern coast of Africa (Hirth 1885, 204–205). E. Chavannes (1865–1918) translates the brief passage about Suiye 碎葉 country, in Central Asia (Chavannes 1903, 298, note). P. Pelliot (1878–1945) deals with Du Huan and his journey on his work regarding the Chinese historian Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) in 1929 (Pelliot 1929). Wang Guowei collected the quotations from the *Jing xing ji*, contained in the *Tong dian* by Du You, annotated by Li Yuanyang 李元陽 (1497–1580). Wang inserted the *Jing xing ji* in a group of four works, titled *Gu xing ji jiaolu* 古行記校錄 (including also the *Xishi ji* 西使記, *An Embassy Towards the West* written by Liu Yu during the Yuan Dynasty).

² See the pdf at <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/whp-origins/era-4-regional/43-a-dark-age-betaa/a/du-huan-graphic-biography>.

³ Akin adopts the order proposed by Chen Yunrong 陳運溶 (1858–1918) in 1911 in the work *Lushan jingshe congshu* 麓山精舍叢書, *Gu Haiguo yishu chao* 古海國遺書鈔, (1898–1911), pp. 42–46.

which confines his words within geographical borders. It presents a multicultural and transnational viewpoint of the *ecumene* as reflected in Du's accounts, aiming at grasping the extent to which his perception of the ancient world was global, globalised and cosmopolitan (Frankopan 2015, 28).

To address the previously proposed research questions, this chapter will examine not only Du Huan's narrative regarding encounters with the Mediterranean portion of the *ecumene*, but also the political landscape he described. His account of alliances and conflicts further emphasises the interconnected nature of ancient civilisations. These political dynamics frequently transcended regional boundaries, impacting multiple territories and peoples, thereby contributing to a globalised perspective.

The chapter is divided into two sections: the first section provides some information about Du Huan's life and the events that led him to reach such faraway territories; the second section is focused on his work, *Jingxing ji*, and some interesting and noteworthy aspects about it, seen from a multicultural point of view.

2. Du Huan and His Lost Travel Record

We have very little information about Du Huan's life. While his exact dates of birth and death remain unknown, we know from Du You's writings that Du Huan was a Chinese soldier of the Tang dynasty army, who was involved in the Talas battle in 751, near the city of Ṭarāz, in what is today southern Kazakhstan. Most likely, he was born in Wannian 万年, near what is today the city of Xi'an, in Shaanxi province.

In the battle of Talas, the Abbasid military army, sent by the first Abbasid ruler Abu al-'Abbas al-Saffah (721/2–754, who ruled from 750 to 754) alongside their Tibetan allies, and the Tang military general Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝 (died in 756) fought for the control over the territories in Central Asia.⁴ The defeat of the Chinese army allowed Muslim soldiers to conquer a large portion of those lands and marked both the end of the Chinese western expansion and the Abbasid Caliphate's eastern expansion. Control of this region was economically beneficial to the Abbasid because it was important on the Silk Roads (Bo 1979, 547).⁵ Following the defeat of the Tang army, Chinese soldiers were captured; among them Du Huan, who embarked on a long journey through Arab coun-

⁴ In Arabic sources there is little information about the Talas battle: a brief description in the *Kāmil* by Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233), quoted by Sir Hamilton Alexander Gibb (1895–1971) in his work *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, Project Gutenberg, ebook 2020, pp. 95–6; al Fasawī (806–890 circa) better described the Chinese debacle (Dunlop 1965, 328–30). Even though nobody provided a precise description of the battle (Akin 2000, 98). The main Chinese source is the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*), volumes 215, 216 and 217, an historiographical work written by Sima Guang 司馬光 in 1084, which deals with the history from 403 BCE up to 959 CE.

⁵ About the control of the Silk Roads after the Battle of Talas see also Thubron, Navajas 1989; Tucker, Tozer 2003; Hannawi 2012; Liu 1995; Donvito 2015.

tries to Yajuluo 亞俱羅 (the ancient capital of the Arab empire, in Iraq, near Baghdad) (Smidt 2001, 4). After eleven years he returned by ship to the city of Guangzhou in Southern China in 762.

Du Huan travelled a long way through Arab countries from Talas up to the northern coast of Africa by land via the traditional Silk Roads, then he returned by ship via the maritime Silk Roads, to Guangzhou, in southern China (Xiong 2019, 89; Liu and Shaffer 2007). There he wrote his travel diary, titled *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (*Record of my Travels* or *The Travel Record*), which deserves to be considered one of the earliest works dedicated in its entirety to the description of the western populations, in particular the Arab empire and the Islamic religion in the 8th century (Song 2011, 8).

Unfortunately, the *Jing xing ji* was almost completely lost, except for a few fragments chosen by Du You as a portion of his 200-volume encyclopaedic work, *Tong dian*. The *Tong dian* is a well-organised collection of laws, regulations, and general events from ancient times to his own time. Du You was one generation senior to Du Huan and a member of the same clan, he was therefore familiar with Du Huan. Right from its publication, Du You's work represented a rich source of information for officers and literati in the Tang court. (Hoyland 1997, 244; Wan 2017, 8).

Du You mentions Du Huan first in volume 191, chapter 7, entitled *Bianfang dian* 邊防典 (*Border Defense*), sub-chapter *Xirong zongxu* 西戎總序 (*Summary of the Sub-chapter about the Xirong-Tribesmen of the Western Borders*). He writes:

Huan, a person of my clan, followed the military governor (Hucker 1985, 144) of the city of the West, Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝, marching westward. The tenth year of the *Tianbao* reign (about 751) they reached the Western Sea (Xihai). At the beginning of the *Baoying* reign (762), thanks to a merchant ship he returned to Guangzhou and there he wrote the *Jing xing ji*.⁶

3. The *Jing Xing Ji*

Du You's selections of the *Jing xing ji* all appear in volumes 192, chapter *Bianfang ba* 邊防八 (Border Defense Number 8), sub-chapter *Xirong si* 西戎四 (Western Border Tribes Number 4), and 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九 (Border Defense Number 9), sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五 (Western Border Tribes Number 5), and include fragments related to the following countries:⁷

⁶ The English translation is mine. The Chinese text is as follows: 族子環隨鎮西節度使高仙芝西征，天寶十載至西海，寶應初，因賈商船舶自廣州而回，著經行記。See the Chinese Texts Project: <https://ctext.org/tongdian/191/zhs>. Otherwise, the annotated version of *Jing xing ji* by Zhang Yichun (Zhang 2000, 2). Please compare with the English translation provided by Akin 2001, 78.

⁷ Actually, section number 6 does not deal with a specific country, but it is focused on three different religious creeds, as encountered by Du Huan on his western journey.

1. *Bahanna Guo* 拔汗那國: Ferghana valley, the territory to the north of Samarkand;
2. *Kang Guo* 康國: Samarkand in today's south-east Uzbekistan;
3. *Shizi Guo* 師子國: Ceylon, the island of Sri Lanka;
4. *Folin Guo* 拂林國: Roman Eastern Empire or Byzantine empire;
5. *Molin Guo* 摩隣國: Morocco or Eritrea;
6. *Dashi fa* 大食法, *Da Qin fa* 大秦法, *Xun Xun fa* 尋尋法: the law of the Dashi countries, the law of Da Qin countries and the law of Xun Xun;⁸
7. *Bosi Guo* 波斯國: Persia;
8. *Shi Guo* 石國: Tashkent territory, the capital of the modern Uzbekistan;
9. *Suiye Guo* 碎葉國: Tokmak in Kyrgyzstan;
10. *Dashi Guo* 大食國: Arab-Islamic empire;
11. *Molu Guo* 末祿國: Merv city in modern Turkmenistan;
12. *Shan Guo* 苫國: Syria.

These twelve sections appear in this order in Du You's work, and they are often combined with other information collected from earlier sources or travel books. Since Du You was a fine and conscientious philologist, he handled the quotation references with care, and almost always indicated where he copied *verbatim* Du Huan's work.⁹

It is worth noting that we have no way of knowing for certain the order and the structure of the original work. Although the order of Du You's selections does not seem to be the most congruent and fitting with Du Huan's theoretical route, I chose to follow the organisational scheme of *Tong dian*.¹⁰ It is extremely difficult to understand the motivations that led Du You to mention these territories in this order. The writer does not seem to have followed either a geographical criterion (from the nearest to the farther country taking Talas as point of departure) or a chronological criterion (from the first country Du Huan visited throughout Central Asia to the last one). If we assume that Du Huan followed this route on his journey, then we have to admit that his travel plans were haphazard, at best. He would have had much more time to travel from Kang Guo (Samarkand) to Sri Lanka Island, and then from there to Folin country (Roman Eastern Empire), or even more unlikely from Molu country (Merv in today's Turkmenistan) to Shan country (modern Syria).

⁸ Wan Lei's translation is as follows: Islamic Law, Nestorian Law and Zoroastrian Law (Wan 2017, 13–4). I prefer to use the original Chinese terms. Besides, Akin's translation includes this section in the description of Molin country (Akin 2000, 95–6).

⁹ Du Huan's quotation is always preceded by a sort of disclaimer, saying "Du Huan *Jing xing ji yun*" 杜環經行記云: "The *Jing xing ji* by Du Huan affirms", otherwise "Du Huan *ji yun*" 杜環記云: "Du Huan's memories affirm".

¹⁰ As already mentioned, the scholar Alexander Akin preferred the order proposed by Chen Yunrong, in which the sections order seems to have been restored and rearranged in the original sequence, on the base of Du Huan's real route, overland from Talas to the Arabs land and then back to China by boat via Sri Lanka (Akin 2000, 98). Chen's restored scheme is: Suiye, Shi, Kang, Bahanna, Zhulu, Shan, Da Shi, Bosi, Fulin, Molin, Shizi.

Du You probably organised his work following the typical structure of the encyclopaedic treatises about historical events and institutional issues: from the smallest details, up to the macrostructure. In fact, in the first chapter we find information regarding food and trade (all related to the subsistence of the people); then, in the second chapter, the selection of imperial officers, their careers, the rites related to the imperial administration, the music for the official ceremonies, military issues, laws and regulations, the administrative division of the imperial territory, and so on. In the ninth chapter, Du You finally deals with the border defence, and here he quotes Du Huan, since the latter was very familiar with many foreign countries.

Now two questions arise: how much of Du Huan's data did Du You use for his work? And how did he treat that information?

We can argue that Du You only used information that could be considered useful for his treatise: for filling in gaps about certain topics and for satisfying the knowledge requirements regarding foreign countries and customs. In my opinion, Du You's selection could have followed two different paths: in copying Du Huan's section, Du You may well have decided to leave out some details, including those considered unimportant and useless (or unsuitable, inappropriate) in his eyes; as an alternative, he could have decided to completely omit some "unnecessary" sections of the *Jingxing ji* (maybe because he already had other more accurate sources or because he gave more importance to some countries over others). Therefore, it is quite conceivable that Du Huan's work was much more complex and composite than those few sections copied by Du You. Additionally, it is plausible that those few sections were manipulated by removing some aspects, by re-elaborating sentences and by changing words in order to make them suitable for the encyclopaedic work compiled by Du You.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, most of the literati, devoting themselves to transmitting (geographical) knowledge, did not have the opportunity to travel beyond the empire's borders. Du You was not an exception in this sense. He probably only compared Du Huan's data with the previous dynastic histories, earlier geographical works and local gazettes, all of them compiled thanks to second-hand information.¹¹

¹¹ Some of the sources used by Du You and quoted in chapters 192–193 and 194 were *Hou Wei shi* 后魏史 (or *Hou Wei shu* 後魏書), (The Book of the Northern Wei), the official dynastic history of the Northern Wei dynasty (Bei Wei 北魏, 386–534); *Xi fan ji* 西蕃記 (The Record of the Western Barbarians), written by the Chinese envoy to Central Asia, Wei Jie 韋節, during the reign of the second and last Sui emperor Yangdi 煬帝 (605–616); *Futu jing* 浮屠經 (The Buddhist Classic), one of the earliest works on the transmission of Buddhism in China, (orally) compiled by Yi Cun 伊存, an envoy from the country of Da Yuezhi, during the first century BCE; *Baopuzi* 抱朴子/抱朴子 (Master Embracing Simplicity) is a Daoist treatise written in the Jin 晉 period (265–420) by Ge Hong 葛洪; *Guang ya* 廣雅 (Extended [Er]ya), a glossary edited by Zhang Yi 張揖 during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE); *Suishu* 隋史 or *Suishu* 隋書 (The Book of the Sui), the official dynastic history of the Sui dynasty 隋 (581–618); *Weilüe* 魏略/略 (The People of the West), composed between 239 and 265 CE, by Yu Huan 魚豢 (see the translation online at <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/>)

Below, I highlighted the *Jing xing ji* sections that contain the most relevant statements on Mediterranean transculturality and transnationality as reflected in Du's eyes, providing:¹² a) sections titles, volume numbers, chapters and subchapters from the *Tong dian*; b) probable title of the related *Jing xing ji* sections; c) Chinese excerpts; d) a comment on Du Huan's transnational perspective reserved to these countries.¹³

Before delving into the text analysis and attempting to provide the most accurate analysis of Du Huan's perspective on the Mediterranean area, it is essential to note that Du Huan used the toponym Xihai 西海, literally "Western Sea," seven times in his descriptions. Scholars should carefully consider his choice of terminology, as the term Xihai in Du's context does not necessarily refer to the Mediterranean Sea, contrary to what later travellers and geographers might lead us to believe (as discussed in other chapters of this volume). Additionally, it is important to recognise that Du occasionally employed other toponyms to denote the Mediterranean Sea. For instance, in the section on Folin, he mentions not only Xihai (Western Sea) but also Nanhai 南海 (Southern Sea).

The sections in which Du Huan mentioned this toponym are: *Bahanna Guo* 拔汗那國, *Folin Guo* 拂林國 (twice), *Suiye Guo* 碎葉國, *Dashi Guo* 大食國 (twice) and *Molu Guo* 末祿國. Du Huan's use of the toponym Xihai consistently serves as a geographical reference point, indicating either a point of departure or a direction of travel. He never provides a comprehensive description of this sea. In my view, only the sections on Folin and Dashi, where the connections to the Mediterranean area are clear and undeniable, deserve a more accurate analysis.¹⁴ Additionally, two other sections warrant closer examination due to their descriptions of this area, despite Du Huan not mentioning the toponym Xihai: *Molin Guo* (the northern coast of Africa or Eritrea) and *Shan Guo* (Syria). Both regions bordered the Mediterranean Sea, and Du provided readers with substantial information about this geographical area. Therefore, these sections will be analysed in this context.

The following text analysis therefore focusses on the four territories or countries of 1) Folin Guo (Eastern Roman Empire), 2) Molin Guo (northern coast of Africa or Eritrea), 3) Dashi Guo (Arab countries), and 4) Shan Guo (Syria).

weilue/weilue.html); *Yiwuzhi* 异物志 (Record of Foreign Matters), an ethnographical treatise written by Eastern Han (25–220 AD) court advisor Yang Fu 杨孚, dealing with the people, fauna, rice cultivation and so on of the Lingnan area, South China Sea region.

¹² For the original Chinese texts see Zhang 2000.

¹³ As two scholars in recent years have already published the English translation of Du Huan extracts, as I already said previously (Akin 2000; Wan 2017), I have not provided one here. More specific considerations about some descriptions reported by Du Huan will be analysed in a forthcoming paper (2025), focusing on Du Huan perception of the multi-culturalism and of the several faiths he approached within the Mediterranean Sea.

¹⁴ The section on Molu Guo, which focuses on the Merv territory in modern Turkmenistan, reflects significant aspects of transculturality, fluid boundaries, and multifaceted interactions as perceived by Du Huan. Although it is not included in the main text analysis, it has been briefly analysed at the end of this chapter due to its unique characteristics.

3.1. Folin Guo 拂菻國

Tong dian: Da Qin 大秦 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xi-rong wu* 西戎五)

Ji xing ji: Folin Guo 拂菻國

Chinese excerpt:¹⁵ 杜環經行記云：拂菻國在苦國西，隔山數千里，亦曰大秦。其人顏色紅白，男子悉著素衣，婦人皆服珠錦。好飲酒，尚乾餅，多淫巧，善織絡。或有倅在諸國，守死不改鄉風。琉璃妙者，天下莫比。王城方八十里，四面境土各數千里。勝兵約有百萬，常與大食相禦。西枕西海，南枕南海，北接可薩、突厥。西海中有市，客主同和，我往則彼去，彼來則我歸。賣者陳之於前，買者酬之於後，皆以其直置諸物傍，待領直然後收物，名曰『鬼市』。又聞西有女國，感水而生。¹⁶

Comment:

At the beginning, Du stated that the country of Folin is situated to the west of Shan (Syria) and is also known as Da Qin. After providing extensive information about the inhabitants, their customs, and local products, he mentioned that Folin's military was capable of defending against the Dashi countries (the Arab Empire).

Syria, referred to as Shan Guo by Du, had been lost by the Byzantine Empire to the Muslim armies shortly before, specifically between 634 and 638 CE. Midway through his description, Du delineates the borders, using the verb *zhen* 枕, meaning "to occupy." He notes that to the west and south, Folin is bordered by the sea, specifically the Western Sea and the Southern Sea, while the northern part is connected with the Khazar Turkic tribes.

The Southern Sea (Nanhai) refers to the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, situated between Asia Minor and Egypt. The Western Sea (Xihai) likely denotes the Mediterranean as it curves westward of the Anatolian landmass, possibly the modern Aegean Sea, as argued by Akin (2000, 94). Towards the end of his section, Du elaborates on the barter system, known as the Ghost Market, describing it as a harmonious and widespread exchange of goods among people who could not communicate verbally. Notably, Du explicitly states that this market took place in the Western Sea.

Two primary aspects highlight and convey the notions of transculturality and transnationality for Du:

¹⁵ Due to space limitations, I did not copy Du You's section. Please see the Chinese Texts Project for the Chinese text. <https://ctext.org/tongdian/193/zhs>.

¹⁶ Folin country is described in the wider section focused on the Eastern Roman Empire, called Da Qin, to which Du You dedicates almost 1,000 characters. Du Huan in his description mentioned the toponym Da Qin as the second name for Folin country. After his description, Du You adds 200 characters dealing specially with Folin country, copied from the *Jing xing ji*. The scholar Song Xian affirms that Folin could be identified with modern Egypt or in some cases with the Byzantine Empire. (Song 2011, 9).

1. The Mediterranean Sea is depicted as a significant cradle of regional interactions, with Du Huan referring to the Western and Southern seas. He recognised it as a crossroads of civilisations.

2. The Ghost Market, as termed by Du, can undoubtedly be seen as an indicator of the maritime connectivity and cultural syncretism of the Mediterranean since ancient times. Despite the diversity of civilisations surrounding it, the Mediterranean fostered a shared maritime culture. This included common practices in shipbuilding, navigation, and maritime law, which facilitated smoother interactions and exchanges (Lopes 2010).

3.2. Molin Guo 摩鄰國

Tong dian: Da Qin 大秦 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xi-rong wu* 西戎五)

Ji xing ji: Molin Guo 摩鄰國

Chinese excerpt: 又云：摩鄰國，在秋薩羅¹⁷國西南，渡大磧行二千里至其國。其人黑，其俗獷，少米麥，無草木，馬食乾魚，人餐鶻莽。鶻莽，即波斯棗也。瘴癘特甚。¹⁸

Comment:

The precise identification of the country of Molin remains challenging. The debate regarding the exact location of Molin has drawn attention to several ancient African sites along the Mediterranean Sea coast, the Red Sea coast, and the Indian Ocean. The identification process could be aided by examining the toponym Qiusaluo 秋薩羅, which offers two distinct perspectives:

1. On one hand, Qiusaluo is believed to be situated in the ancient territory of Castille, in Southern Spain. According to Zhang Xinglang, Laobosa 老勃薩 (another name for Molin) is a transcription of Tuolemusen, located east of Morocco, specifically the city of Tlemcen, the capital of central Maghreb in North Africa (Zhang 2003, 45). This city was a significant centre for a large Christian population for many centuries following the Arab conquest in 708 CE. This historical context could explain Du Huan's depiction of the region as characterised by a multitude of religions, including Islam and Christianity.

2. On the other hand, Qiusaluo (or Yangsaluo 秧薩羅) may be identified as Jerusalem. Following this theory, Smidt posits that Laobosa can be easily identified as “al Habasha,” the ancient Arabic term for the Ethiopian highlands and its kingdom (Smidt 2001, 5–6).

In both scenarios, this passage enhances our understanding of the extensive knowledge Du Huan had amassed about the Mediterranean area as a transna-

¹⁷ The toponym could be transcript also as Yangsaluo 秧薩羅.

¹⁸ In the same above section, titled *Da Qin*, soon after Folin description, you find the extract about Molin country as well. It identifies the northern coast of Africa, under the control of Eastern Roman Empire. Du You copied 65 characters from Du Huan's work.

tional and transcultural territory. He provided significant ethnographic information, illustrating a world that was interconnected and diverse, with rich cultural exchanges. The presence of dark-skinned people, Persian dates, and the fact that even horses consumed dried fish (noting that coastal regions along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were described by Greek geographers as fish-eaters, as noted by Laufer 1919, 389) are all indicative of the region's multiculturalism.

3.3. Dashi Guo 大食國

Tong dian: 大食 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)

Ji xing ji: *Dashi* 大食

Chinese excerpt: 杜環經行記云：一名亞俱羅¹⁹。其大食王號暮門，都此處。其士女瑰偉長大，衣裳鮮潔，容止閑麗。女子出門，必擁蔽其面。無問貴賤，一日五時禮天。食肉作齋，以殺生為功德。繫銀帶，佩銀刀。斷飲酒，禁音樂。人相爭者，不至毆擊。又有禮堂，容數萬人。每七日，王出禮拜，登高座為眾說法，曰：人生甚難，天道不易。姦非劫竊，細行謾言，安己危人，欺貧虐賤，有一於此，罪莫大焉。凡有征戰，為敵所戮，必得生天，殺其敵人，獲福無量。率土稟化，從之如流。法唯從寬，葬唯從儉。郭郭之內，闔閭之中，土地所生，無物不有。四方輻湊，萬貨豐賤，錦繡珠貝，滿於市肆。駝馬驢騾，充於街巷。刻石蜜為廬舍，有似中國寶壘。每至節日，將獻貴人琉璃器皿、餘石瓶鉢，蓋不可算數。粳米白麵，不異中華。其果有偏桃人、千年棗。其蔓菁，根大如斗而圓，味甚美。餘菜亦與諸國同。蒲陶大者如雞子。香油貴者有二：一名耶塞漫，一名沒，（女甲反）師。香草貴者有二：一名查塞羣（蒲孔反），一名梨蘆芘。綾絹機杼，金銀匠、畫匠、漢匠起作畫者，京兆人樊淑、劉泚，織絡者，河東人樂環、呂禮。又以橐駝駕車。其馬，俗云西海濱龍與馬交所產也。腹肚小，腳腕長，善者日走千里。其駝小而緊，背有孤峰，良者日馳千里。又有駝鳥，高四尺以上，腳似駝蹄，頸項勝得人騎行五六里，其卵大如二升。又有薺樹。實如夏棗，堪作油，食除瘴。其氣候溫，土地無冰雪。人多瘡痢，一年之內，十中五死。今吞滅四五十國，皆為所役屬，多分其兵鎮守，其境盡於西海焉。

Comment:

The description of the Dashi territory is quite extensive, comprising approximately 607 characters. This indicates that Du Huan had a profound impression of the Dashi Empire. In this chapter, two aspects particularly warrant further investigation:

¹⁹ Du Huan used the toponym Yajuluo 亞俱羅 as second name to indicate this territory. It could stay for the center of Abbasid caliphate (near Baghdad in Iraq) according to Smidt (2001, 6), or the term that the Arabs used to call the Mesopotamia, according to Zhang (1998, 46). Yajuluo might correspond to the Arabic toponym Aqūr (Al Jazira) or Upper Mesopotamia.

1. Wealth and commerce: At the core of the description, Du Huan provides information about the wealth and abundance of various products available in the shops, stating that they come “from four directions” (*sifang fucou* 四方輻湊). This highlights the pivotal role of the Arabs during this period, especially as merchants along the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Indian Ocean trade routes.

2. Territorial expansion: Towards the end, Du Huan notes that the borders of this country encompass all the Western Sea regions. He writes that the Arabs conquered (*tunmie* 吞滅) forty or fifty countries, which all became its subordinates (*yishu* 役屬). They expanded their borders to the Western Sea. Indeed, the Arabian Empire controlled vast territories, including North Africa from the Pyrenees Mountains, Syria, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia.

Du Huan depicted the Dashi Empire as a vibrant and cosmopolitan centre. Alongside relevant ethnographical information about the beauty of the women and the Islamic faith (among others), Du Huan effectively highlighted the transnational flow of knowledge and the interconnectedness of different regions through trade routes, particularly within and around the Mediterranean Sea framework.

3.4. Shan Guo 苦國

Tong dian: 大食 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)

Ji xing ji: *Shan Guo* 苦國

Chinese excerpt: 又云：苦國在大食西界，周迴數千里。造屋兼瓦，壘石為壁。米穀殊賤，有大川東流入亞俱羅，商客糴此糴彼，往來相繼。人多魁梧，衣裳寬大，有似儒服。其苦國有五節度，有兵馬一萬以上，北接可薩突厥。可薩北又有突厥。足似牛蹄，好噉人肉。

Comment:

The section focusing on the region of Shan (modern-day Syria) is 100 characters long and once again demonstrates Du Huan’s extensive knowledge of largely unfamiliar territories. He reiterated the importance of the trade networks among merchants from various countries, stating: 商客糴此糴彼，往來相繼 (“Merchants buy grain here and sell it there, coming and going in succession”). He described a river flowing eastward into Yajuluo (previously mentioned in the section on Dashi countries), which may be identified as the Tigris or Euphrates. Additionally, there are references to two northern tribes: the Khazar Turks and, further north, another branch of Turks known for practicing cannibalism. In these lines, Du Huan refers to the Khazars, a semi-nomadic Turkic people who, from the late 6th century, established a commercial empire encompassing the southwestern part of modern Russia, southern Ukraine, and western Kazakhstan. The Khazars emerged as one of the foremost trading empires of the early medieval world, controlling the western routes of the Silk Roads and serving as a crucial commercial nexus between China, the Middle East, and the regions that include present-day Ukraine and southwestern Russia

4. Final Remarks

I am conscious that Du Huan's work and its historical value are certainly worthy of deeper investigation. With these limited notes I hope I can provide new insight into such a rich topic: Chinese knowledge about foreign countries and in particular, Du Huan's perception of the *ecumene*.

My intent is to emphasise that the relationship between Chinese and Arabs from the 7th century onwards should not be underestimated, given the circulation of knowledge (and goods) from East to West and *vice versa*.²⁰ Du Huan was one of the most representative characters of these contacts: suffice it to know that he was able to travel as far as the westernmost territories "thanks" to the encounter of the Arabs and Chinese in the Talas battle. His words reveal a very extensive knowledge of Arab-Islamic territories (and not only), and he was able to gather many pieces of original material (drawn from personal observations), reflecting his astonishing aptitude in seeing and perceiving the "Other" (foreignness) without prejudices. His curiosity about different characteristics related to the "Other" permeates his work. Indeed, he appears to be interested in various aspects of the foreign countries: the markets, the way people used to do commercial exchange (as in the section about Dashi), the richness of their cities, their religious creeds and so on. He did not waste words in describing military events (not even the Talas battle), and judging from the content of his words, one actually has the impression of a man much more interested in describing the ethnographic and anthropological features of the people.

Du Huan's work deserves further investigation, since it offers new insights into the circulation of geographical (and ethnographical) knowledge during the Tang period. Additionally, his bird's eye perspective is a precious source to assess the extent of Chinese geographical knowledge at the beginning of the 9th century and to what extent the Mediterranean came to be perceived as a transcultural space in China.

It suffices to read the Molu section (Merv in Turkmenistan). Although in this chapter I do not take in account the 320-characters long description about the country of Molu, I believe that this extract deserves more attention. Du Huan testified that in the area of the Mediterranean Sea (Xihai 西海), Dashi people and Bosi people (from Persia) live in a mixed manner (*congci zhi xihai yilai, dashi, bosi canza juzhi* 從此至西海以來, 大食、波斯參雜居止). I contend that this quotation could be considered, since the 8th century, the most representative idea of the Mediterranean area, described as a liquid region, that embraces many peoples, cultures and economies, which cannot be enclosed by the traditional concept of national borders (Abulafia 2011, xxiii).

Du Huan's work, when viewed through this lens, reveals an ancient world that was far more interconnected than traditionally perceived. His detailed observations and descriptions of various cultures, economies, religions, and po-

²⁰ See the toponym Yajuluo 亞俱羅, a clear transliteration of the Arabic toponym Al Jazira, the upper portion of Mesopotamia, in the section focused on Dashi countries.

litical systems illustrate a world where boundaries were fluid, and interactions were complex and multifaceted.

By adopting this innovative interpretation, we can appreciate the extent to which Du Huan's perception of the ancient world was global and cosmopolitan. His writings serve as a testament to the rich tapestry of human civilisation, woven together by countless threads of cultural, economic, religious, and political exchanges.

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