Braidense Ms. Castiglioni 5: An additional early illustrated copy of Niccolò da Poggibonsi’s Libro d’oltramare

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Niccolò da Poggibonsi’s eyewitness account of his travels in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt during 1346-1350 remains one of the most important documents in the history of both pilgrimage and the architecture of the Christian Holy Land. The Franciscan friar introduced an innovative level of descriptiveness to his first-person account of his experiences, rendering the cities and architectural spaces of the lives of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary a vivid presence within the imagination of his many readers. His book, initially known as the Libro d’oltramare (Book of Overseas), was frequently published in anonymous printed versions, totaling over sixty editions, from a first edition of 1500

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1 I would especially like to thank Edoardo Barbieri of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan who informed me of the existence of Ms. Castiglioni 5 at the Braidense Library, and who gave me the opportunity to present my initial interpretations of the manuscript at the international conference held jointly at the Braidense and the Catholic University in June of 2019: Raccontare la Terra Santa: narrazioni e guide di pellegrinaggio tra Medioevo ed Età moderna/ Talking about the Holy Land: Pilgrimage Guidebooks and Travellers’ Tales from the Middle Ages to Modern Times. I would also like to thank colleagues at Villa I Tatti in Florence, particular Daniele Conti, who assisted with the analysis of the manuscripts. The research for this article was supported by a Rush H. Kress Fellowship from Harvard University’s Villa I Tatti.
through the modern period.² About ten years ago, I identified four previously unknown illustrated manuscript copies, three in National Library of Florence and one in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library and presented them the basis of the illustrated printed books.³ Before this point, it was assumed that if Niccolò da Poggibonsi had created drawings during his journey, then any related illustrated manuscripts must have been lost. While the relationship between the illuminated manuscripts and the later illustrated printed books has been unanimously accepted, the question of the original circumstances for the creation of the manuscript illustrations has remained more difficult to resolve.⁴ Unfortunately we still know nothing about Niccolò da Poggibonsi beyond what he tells us in his book; no record of his birth or death has ever been identified. The only certainty is when his journey occurred, as reported by the author himself: over the course of four years, from 1346-1350. Yet, an

² Niccolò da Poggibonsi, Alberto Bacchi della Lega, Bellarmino Bagatti, A Voyage Beyond the Seas (1346-1350) (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1945). The Italian edition was published simultaneously as the English translation: Niccolò da Poggibonsi, Alberto Bacchi della Lega, Bellarmino Bagatti, T. Bellorini, and E. Hoade, Libro d’Oltramare, 1346-1350 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1945). The entire manuscript of Ms. Castiglioni 5 in the Braidense Library of Milan has been digitized and is available to view online: http://www.internetculturale.it/mms/iccuviewer/iccu.jsp?id=oai%3Awww.internetculturale.sbn.it%2FTeca%3A20%3ANT0000%3ACNMD%5C%5C000116680
additional early illustrated manuscript of the Libro d’oltramare, Ms. Castiglioni 5 of the Braidense National Library in Milan, omitted in all modern editions of the book, provides new evidence for both the role of the drawings in the initial conception of the book by Niccolò da Poggibonsi and the interrelation of the illuminated and unilluminated copies of the book.

Ms. Castiglioni 5 was given to the Braidense Library by the collector Daniele Castiglioni in 1942, having previously been purchased from the antiquarian bookshop Giraud-Badin in Paris. The paper manuscript is of a large format, measuring 351 x 270 mm. Ms. Castiglioni 5 is fragmentary, lacking the first folios that presumably would have identified the book, its author, and his motivations for the creation of the book, as described in other surviving manuscript copies: primarily, to make the pilgrimage experience available to those who could not make the journey. The first preserved (although still fragmentary) folio of the Braidense manuscript contains the description and illustration of the pilgrim’s departure from Venice by ship (Fig. 1). The manuscript is otherwise largely intact, with the exception of a couple of heavily damaged folios, continuing through the story of Fra Niccolò’s journey from Palestine to Syria and Egypt.

5 Although the manuscript was not included in any of the modern editions of the Libro d’oltramare, it was published in a catalogue of the manuscript collections of the Braidense National Library. Sergio Samek Ludovici, ed., Mostra Di Codici Miniati: Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milano, 24 Giugno - 15 Luglio 1970 (Milan: Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, 1970), p. 43.
6 Ms. II IV 101, in contrast, measures 300 x 220 mm.
The manuscript contains 75 folios total that are dedicated to the Libro d’oltramare, the text of which is written in a single hand. Appendices, also in the same hand, include descriptions of non-Latin alphabets and the pater noster as spoken in the language of
the Tartars (tartarescha) and of the Hebrews (de gli ebrei) (Figs. 2-4). These translations of the pater noster, although identified with specific languages, appear essentially nonsensical. The alphabets are imitations of the letters of the Hebrews, Greeks, Armenians, Saracens, Arabs, Syrians, and Ethiopians, that vary in their accuracy. The

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8 Ms. Castiglioni 5, fols. 77v-78v.
Greek alphabet is the most accurate, while others, especially for Armenian, Arabic, and Ethiopian, include some of the true letters of those alphabets, but omit some letters, while a number of the alphabets also include invented forms.

The inclusion of the appendices on the variety of languages associated with the Eastern Mediterranean region is a key factor in evaluating the relationship of Ms. Castiglioni 5 to the other surviving illustrated manuscripts. The exact same alphabets (with the same identifications, number of letters, and letter shapes) and prayers in

Tartar and Hebrew are found in Ms. II IV 101 of the National Library in Florence (Fig. 5). This relationship to Ms. II IV 101 is especially significant, since I had previously identified this manuscript as the oldest of the surviving manuscript copies of the *Libro d’oltramare*. The appendices that are included in both Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101

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10 They are found on fol. 59v. See Moore, “Italian Copies of Holy Land Architecture,” 41 and Plate 16.
are not found in the unillustrated manuscript copies, with the exception of Ms. Riccardiana 2037, which has the corresponding transliteration of the pater noster in Mongolian.\textsuperscript{11} Ms. Riccardiana 2037 omits the alphabets and has additional transliterations of the pater noster into Greek, Slavic, and Persian that do not correspond to any known manuscript copy of the \textit{Libro d’oltramare}.\textsuperscript{12} This Riccardiana manuscript was finished in Florence in 1512. The first appendix, found throughout most manuscript copies of the \textit{Libro d’oltramare}, including Ms. II IV 101 and Ms. Castiglioni 5, is a list of the dedications of sanctuaries of the Holy Land.

Turning to the question of the illuminations in Ms. Castiglioni 5, we can say that they closely correspond to the pen drawings of Ms. II IV 101, but they have been supplemented with watercolor washes. Ms. II IV 101 is unique in having simple line drawings, in contrast to the other surviving illustrated manuscripts. Moreover, the roughness of the line drawings in Ms. II IV 101, together with the later assertion that the Franciscan author had created drawings incorporated into his book during his journey, had prompted me to suggest that the drawings of Ms. II IV 101 could have theoretically

\textsuperscript{11} Ms. Riccardiana 2037, fols. 326v-327r.
\textsuperscript{12} Ms. Riccardiana 2037 was among the manuscripts consulted by Alberto Bacchi della Lega for the first modern edition of the text of the \textit{Libro d’oltramare}. He cited a total of ten Florentine manuscripts as the basis of his edition: four Magliabechian and three Palatini in the Biblioteca Nazionale, and three Riccardiani in the Biblioteca Riccardiana. Niccolò da Poggibonsi, \textit{Libro d’Oltramare di Fra Niccolò da Poggibonsi Pubblicato da Alberti Bacchi della Lega} (Bologna: G. Romagnoli, 1881), xi. The manuscripts that Bacchi della Lega consulted included the illuminated copies yet his introduction to the text made no mention of the drawings. See Moore, “The Disappearance of an Author,” p. 368. He, and later editors of the \textit{Libro d’oltramare}, also did not make note of the unusual appendices in Ms. II IV 101 and Ms. Riccardiana 2037.
been created by Niccolò da Poggibonsi himself.\textsuperscript{13} The description of the original pilgrim having drawn the sacred places as he journeyed is found in both Ms. Spencer 62 and the printed editions, beginning with the first edition of 1500:

This voyage of the holiest Sepulcher of our lord Jesus Christ a worthy man wrote, who wanted to go with the help and willingness of the omnipotent God. And deliberately leaving from Venice, he wanted to write and at the same time draw all of the lands, ports, cities, [and] villages, from one place to the next through sea and through land. And at the same time he was drawing the churches and holy places that he found through all of his journey, with their indulgences and the remissions of places where conversed our lord Jesus Christ and his sweetest, glorious Virgin Mary and his holiest Apostles and holy disciples and other saints….\textsuperscript{14}

The close relationship between the drawings of Ms. II IV 101 and Ms. Castiglioni 5 are particularly important from this perspective. Every drawing in Ms. Castiglioni 5 has a correlate in Ms. II VI 101. Ms. Castiglioni 5 also includes the drawings of the last part of the book on the cities, churches, animals, and plants of Syria and Egypt that are omitted from the two dated illuminated manuscripts: Ms. Panciatichi 78 (dated 1453) and Ms. Panciatichi 79 (dated 1481), both of the National Library in Florence.\textsuperscript{15} The full set of illuminations is additionally found in the anonymized manuscript of the New York Public Library’s Spencer Collection Ms. 62, which dates to some time around the

\textsuperscript{13} See Moore, “The Disappearance of an Author and the Emergence of a Genre,” p. 365.


second half of the 15th century. A closer comparison of the features of Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101 can help determine the relationships between the illustrated and unillustrated manuscript copies of the *Libro d’oltramare*.

There are some omissions in Ms. Castiglioni 5 that make the manuscript a less complete version of the book than Ms. II IV 101. The chapter headings of Ms. Castiglioni 5 are lacking after around the middle of the manuscript. The chapter headings that are copied are written in red ink, while after folio 34 blank spaces were left for those that were never copied. Both Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101 lack the elaborated initial letters of each chapter; special attention would have been given to these initial letters, since, as the author tells us, a series of them spell out an acrostic identifying the author’s full name and his Florentine identity. The pen drawings of Ms. II IV 101 are relatively rough and simplistic compared to the fluid lines of Ms. Castiglioni 5’s illuminations.

While the creator of the drawings in Ms. II IV 101 tightly embeds drawings within two columns, larger spaces have been left for an illuminator to add the drawings in the single column of text of Ms. Castiglioni 5. Ms. II IV 101 is also copied by a single hand.

There are two unusual passages at the beginning and end of Ms. II IV 101, that exhibit a

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17 Moore, “The Disappearance of an Author,” pp. 373-374. “[I]n order that nothing of my corporal effort be lost and that no person might claim for himself this said work, that I have made for the said book; and that no one might say to have made [this book] other than I brother Nicholaio of the Frati Minori of Saint Francis from Poggibonsi; and who would want to find my name and that of my father will find my name by reading beginning from this point forward the first capital letter of the chapter, and read until the big F and there begins my other name, and then you will find the other name of my father.”

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different script; they could theoretically be by a second hand. Whether by the same 
hand or a second one, these two passages seamlessly merge with the main text. Both 
passages are written in a more elaborate script, reflecting the content: first, the reference 
to the acrostic identifying the author on the first folio (Fig. 6), that draws attention to the 
significance of first letter of each chapter heading; second, in the appendix dedicated to 
the exotic alphabets. The passage referring to the acrostic identifying the author at the 
beginning of the book is lost in Ms. Castiglioni 5, along with the other introductory
The watermarks in both Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101 might also prove useful in ongoing investigation into our understanding of the earliest illustrated manuscript copies of the *Libro d’oltramare*. Three different watermarks can be found in

Figure 7 Tulip watermark of indeterminate measure from Ms. II IV 101, fol. 41r. National Library, Florence. Photo: author.
Ms. II IV 101 that belong to the general types of flower (tulip), triple mount, and star (Figs. 7-9). The watermarks of Ms. Castiglioni 5 belong to the general types of two circles, dragon, fruit, and triple mount (Figs. 10-13). The general types found in both manuscripts are associated with watermarks found in dated manuscripts of both the 14th and first half of the 15th centuries; however, because of damage to both manuscripts,
there are limitations to more precisely identifying the watermarks. The fruit watermark in Ms. Castiglioni 5 is exceptionally clear and can be compared to manuscripts dated to the 1330s and 1340s.\footnote{The specific comparisons are with Briquet 7345 (Bologna, 1336), 7346 (Torcello, 1338), and 7347 (Florence, 1341). Charles-Moïse Briquet, \textit{Les filigranes: dictionnaire historique des marques du papier des leur}
} The illumination that reveals the watermarks of Ms. II IV 101 also

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{watermark}
\caption{Star watermark measuring approximately 76 mm from Ms. II IV 101, fol. 4r. National Library, Florence. Photo: author.}
\end{figure}
reveals the prick marks presumably made to transfer the drawings to another manuscript (see especially Fig. 7). Ms. II IV 101 is the only known illustrated copy of the Libro d’oltramare with such prick marks.

As for the question of where either Ms. Castiglioni 5 or Ms. II IV 101 might have been created, there is only circumstantial evidence. Niccolò was a member of the

Franciscan community at Poggibonsi, located between Florence and Siena, and the author introduces himself as a Florentine originally having the family name of Corbico. The additional surviving illuminated copies of the *Libro d’oltramare* have

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features suggesting that the book predominantly circulated within or near Florence.

Ms. Panciatichi 79 refers to Sant’Ambrogio in Florence and the year 1481. Ms. Spencer 62 includes unique appendices, including one dedicated to Fiesole. At least one of the unillustrated copies was certainly copied in Florence: Ms. Riccardiana 2037, dated 1512. There are no indications within the texts of either Ms. Castiglioni 5 or Ms. II IV 101 of where either manuscript might have been created.

Ultimately, the original circumstances for the creation of the Libro d’oltramare and its illustrations must remain an open question. I had argued that the close relationship between the eyewitness descriptions and the many amateurish drawings of Ms. II IV 101, as well as the close fidelity of later copies to these illustrations, suggested that the Franciscan author had created the text and drawings in conjunction. Fra Niccolò’s descriptions of buildings and cities associated with the lives of Jesus and Mary especially have a pictorial and experiential quality, and he exhorts his reader more than once to actively see and imagine described places as if immediately before the reader. In the absence of further evidence, it remains impossible definitively to say whether the drawings of the surviving illustrated versions of the Libro d’oltramare ultimately derive from Niccolò’s own work. However, Ms. Castiglioni 5 does provide an opportunity to revisit the relationship between the text and illustrations of the surviving manuscript copies in order to reconsider the larger question of the relative dating of the illustrated and unillustrated copies of the Libro d’oltramare.
If we look at some specific examples of the textual variations among the illustrated and unillustrated copies of the *Libro d’oltramare*, we will see more evidence that Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101 are closely related, and – more than just this – that many of the later unillustrated copies have corruptions within the text, suggesting that the illustrated copies preceded the unillustrated ones. These textual variations must be understood within the larger context of the unique features of Niccolò da Poggibonsi’s book: the emphatic visuality of his descriptions, his expressed desire to make his readers see and imagine moving through the cities and sacred buildings of the Holy Land, and the printed versions’ assertion that the pilgrim had created the drawings himself. The variations in the texts of the unillustrated copies, together with their later dates, should be viewed within this larger picture of the history of the book and the author’s intentions, which remain clear in his book even as name is lost in the printed editions.

There are two important examples of variations that suggest corruptions in the later unillustrated copies: one from the description of the Unction Stone inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and another in the description of the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. In both Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101, the Unction Stone is described as bordered by a pattern of alternating white and red like a chess board (*lavorato chome scacchi bianchi e rossi*).\(^\text{20}\) Ms. Castiglioni’s drawing of the

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\(^{20}\) Ms. II IV 101, fol. 6v. Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 7r.
Unction Stone (Fig. 14) incorporates the white and red pattern corresponding to the description. Similar descriptions and illustrations of the Unction Stone are also found in Ms. Spencer 62 and Ms. Panciatichi 78, while Ms. Panciatichi 79 is missing the corresponding folios. The unillustrated copies of the Libro d’oltramare tend to omit reference to the border of the Unction Stone or refer to the border being like a chess

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21 Ms. Spencer 62, fols. 11r-11v. Ms. Panciatichi 78, 9r. Uniquely, the description in the latter manuscript refers to the church having eight sides each of two columns, rather than stating that the church has sixteen columns and eight sides.
board yet omit reference to the red and white patterning. In the latter cases, the corruption seems to derive from a misreading of bianchi e rossi (white and red) as appresso (near), incorporated into the following description of two arches sheltering the tombs of the Latin Kings in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.\textsuperscript{22} The correct reading, corresponding to the text of the illustrated copies, is found in only one of the

\textsuperscript{22} Ms. Riccardiana 1279, fol. 6r: \textit{D’intorno alla detta pietra a due palmi si è lavorato come scacchi, et apresso del muro del coro, a due passi, sia’ due bellissime arche, cioè sepulture....}
unillustrated manuscripts: Ms. II IV 119 of the National Library in Florence. Ms. II IV 119 also contains the pilgrimage account of the Florentine Lionardo Frescobaldi made in 1384 and has been dated to the fifteenth century.23

A second example is from the description of the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. The majority of unillustrated copies, again with the exception of Ms. II IV 119, describe the interior of the church as columned and having eight sides. In Ms. Castiglioni 5 (Fig. 15) and Ms. II IV 101, as well as Ms. Spencer 62, the church is described more specifically as having sixteen columns and eight sides.24 As with the example of the Unction Stone, the unillustrated copies have lost some of the precise details in Niccolò da Poggibonsi’s descriptions of the pilgrimage churches. Although there are a number of minor textual variations among the manuscript copies of the Libro d’oltramare, these two examples most directly relate to the question of fidelity to the pictorial descriptiveness characteristic of Niccolò’s intentions as an author. They suggest that details in descriptions of architectural features like the Unction Stone or the Church of the Ascension were sometimes lost in the process of copying. I have not found any counter examples of details being added to the unillustrated copies. Overall,

24 Ms. II IV 101, fol. 17v-18r: …nello mezzo della chiesa allo diritto della grande finestra che di sopra siene una bella chapella tonda con sedici colonne e con otto chianti…. Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 20r: …e allo mezzo della chiesa allo diritto della grande finestra che di sopra siene una bella chapella tonda cholonatta chon sedici cholonne e chon otto chanti…. Ms. Spencer 62, Fol. 35r: …al mezzo della chiesa detta, al diritto della grande finestra ch’è di sopra, si è una bella cappella tonda, colonnata, con otto canti....
the corruptions or omissions in the unillustrated manuscripts suggest that the original version of the text is best preserved in the illustrated copies.

Figure 16 Ms. Panciatichi 79, fol. 88r. National Library, Florence. Photo: author.
Based upon the evidence of the surviving copies, the illustrated versions most likely preceded the unillustrated ones. In this context, it is also important to note that the modern editions of the the *Libro d’oltramare*, particularly Bacchi della Lega’s, ignored...
Ms. II IV 101, heavily favoring the manuscripts in the Riccardiana. Bacchi della Lega was certainly aware of the limitations of his own version of the text; he often replaced

the readings found in the Riccardiana manuscripts with more complete versions in what he called Codex C, that is, Ms. II IV 119. As we have seen, this unillustrated manuscript closely corresponds to both Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101, but clearly post-dates both of those illustrated copies.

The illustrations of Ms. Castiglioni 5, and more particularly their close correspondence to the other surviving illustrated copies, likewise affirm that the copying of the illustrated versions of the *Libro d’oltramare* did not entail fantastic pictorial invention. As the book was copied, the illustrations became more sophisticated, culminating with the brightly colored versions of Ms. Panciatichi 79 and Ms. Spencer 62. The new illustrations added to Ms. Panciatichi 79 are not of the sanctuaries or cities of the Holy Land, but instead of the dramatic events surrounding pirate attacks (Fig. 16) and the separation of Fra Niccolò from his fellow travel companion (Fig. 17) – the kind of events that Fra Niccolò would not have observed, but instead experienced.\(^{26}\) The only additional architectural drawing is of the Tomb of Muhammad.\(^{27}\) Fra Niccolò did not see this building with his own eyes, since he did not make the journey to Mecca, but instead relayed to his reader information received from another traveler. These additions to the illustrations of Ms. Panciatichi 79 were not included in the first printed edition of 1500, published in Bologna as the *Viazo da Venesia*


al Sancto Iherusalem, Et Al Monte Sinai, Sepulchro De Sancta Chaterina, or Voyage from Venice to the Holy Jerusalem, at to Mount Sinai, Sepulcher of Saint Catherine. In this first printed edition we instead find the same simple illustrations of buildings and cities that correspond to the oldest manuscript versions, Ms. Castiglioni 5 and Ms. II IV 101 (Fig. 18). It remains possible that yet another lost or yet to be found illustrated manuscript copy of the Libro d’oltramare was the immediate basis for the first printed edition. Of the surviving illustrated manuscript copies, it is still Ms. II IV 101 that most closely corresponds to the 1500 printed edition; Ms. Castiglioni 5 could not have on its own been the prototype for the printed edition, since it is missing many chapter headings. Despite this, Ms. Castiglioni 5 is an important document for the larger history of the creation and transmission of Niccolò da Poggibonsi’s Libro d’oltramare.

28 Niccolò da Poggibonsi, Viazo Da Venesia Al Sancto Iherusalem, Et Al Monte Sinai, Sepulchro De Sancta Chaterina (Bologna: Giustiniano da Rubiera, 1500).