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ZOOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR AN INTENTIONAL FALSIFICATION OF TRAVEL REPORTS BY CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Many often used to refer to Columbus' lifelong conviction that the countries which he had discovered, were a part of India or China. In the same way, the idea of an almost refound paradise emerged in his reports. In a time lapse of several years after the discovery of America, both convictions were, face to face with mounting facts, difficult to maintain, and were eventually one of the causes of a decline in the Admiral's prestige. With respect to the fact that in fixed ideas the line between an outward delusion and self-deception is not quite distinct, Columbus' tendency to interpret American realia as if they were Asian eventually disembogued into „touching up“ his travel reports with details excerpted from travels of the period.

As a side product of historical studies, which were to clarify some lesser known aspects of domestication and the spread of Muscovy ducks, evidences, indicating with the highest probability to be an intentional excerption from the travel report of an Franciscan monk Odoricus de Pordenone¹ concerning a journey to India and China, have been found. His travel report, written in Latin, concerning a journey to the Orient, had been written shortly before his death in 1331 immediately after his return from his travels. In the time of Columbus, that report was widely read and well known, and it represented one of the few sources of information about these countries. The author mentions the Chinese town Fuço (Fuzhou, Fujian province) in the chapter XXII (1), where are the greater cocks than in the world. As for the hens, they are as white as snow, but they have only wool like sheep (... maiores galli qui sint in mundo. Galline vero sunt albe ut nix non habentes pennas, sed solum lanam sunt portantes ut pecus). So called Silk fowls that were also later imported to Europe, are evidently mentioned there. Written in Jamaica, and besides containing references of animals seen in Central America, Columbus' report from his 4th voyage² also mentions the hens, great and of the feathers as wool (Gallinas, muy grandes y la pluma como lana). While the first case is an authentic reference concerning the occurrence of Silk fowls in China, a circumstance had been already reported by Marco Polo in the „Million“ (chap.

¹ *Odoricus de Pordenone: Relatio*. In: E. Schmidt (ed.): *Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* 20, Berlin 1968, 1–135.

² *Colón, C.: Carta a los Reyes Católicos* (en jamaica, a 7 de julio de 1503), pp. 41–48. In: J. D. Cereceda (ed.), *Exploradores y conquistadores de Indias, relatos geográficos*. Biblioteca Lit. Est. 16, Cons. Sup. Inv. Cien., Madrid 1964.

155), any model for such a statement in the American continent is missing, and it evidently goes for a falsification inspired by the Odoricus' text.

In the same way Odoricus also describes in chapter XX (3) a white form of the Chinese swan goose from a present Canton (Guangzhou, at Odoricus Censcala): greater and more beautiful geese ... all white like milk, having one bone above its head of the size of an egg coloured like blood (... maiores et pulciores anseres ... totus albus ut lac, habens unum os super capud, unius ovi quantitate, quod talis coloris qualis sanquis est ...). C. Gesner, referring to the recently imported Muscovy ducks in the supplements to his book³ on page 768, cites some Columbus' report without further specification that there in Haiti are geese whiter than swans but for the red head (In Hispana insula ... invenimus, anseresque oloribus albior, capite tantem rubeo). Despite an intensive investigation, it has not been ascertained from which of the numerous Columbus' reports (Columbus was in Haiti during all his four voyages) the Gesner's citation is. However, considering Gesner's scrupulous accuracy and conscientiousness (he became known not only as a zoologist, but also as a bibliographer), a considerable distortion is out of question. That report, which Gesner interprets as a mention about the white domestic form of the Muscovy duck and which similarly was also further cited, was nevertheless almost certainly inspired by Odoricus as well, and furthermore, the report is also compressed in a similar way.

No animal freely living in Haiti conforms to the description, and the probability of the occurrence of the white domesticated Muscovy ducks on the island is, in the light of other sources, very improbable in Columbus' days.

Sometimes zoology of domestic animals can cast light on such a seemingly unrelated field as Christopher Columbus' „creative imagination“ of in writing his travel reports. Both cases give reasons for the assumption that the Odoricus' report served for Columbus not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a source of intentional falsifications.

³ *Gesnerus, C.: Historiae animalium libri III, qui est de avibus. Tiguri 1555.*