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Thinking in Islands

The Portuguese perception of the Indonesian archipelago and particularly of Sunda in early texts and charts

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses various early sources on the Indonesian archipelago. It starts with the status of knowledge before the first voyage of the Portuguese to the Moluccas from accounts of travellers to insular Southeast Asia in the Middle Ages and the picture on world maps European cartographers produced. Comparing that view with text sources and the resulting geographic material of the first expeditions by the Portuguese provides an insight into contemporary mechanisms of knowledge transfer. Certain effects can be traced and are repeated on different levels of access to the original facts mainly because most maps were drawn up in Europe but based on the geographic description provided by text accounts. An abundance and multiplication of failures and mistakes is evident and is partly related to the scarcity of sources and due to reproduction techniques.

KEYWORDS

Portuguese perception, Indonesian archipelago, Sunda, world maps, cartography, toponym.

INTRODUCTION

The first official mission of a European country to the so-called “spice islands” took place after the conquest of Malacca in 1511 by Albuquerque who subsequently sent Antonio de Abreu, Francisco Serrao, and the cartographer Francisco Rodrigues to the Moluccas. They started in Malacca, sailed along the northeast coast of Sumatra, passed the north coast of Java and went on to the southern Moluccas (Salentiny 1991: 134-135). With this expedition, the

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