

BOOK OF THE KNOWLEDGE

Analysis Summary & Key Findings

Modern English Translation Project — 6 Chapters

Executive Summary

This document summarizes the major findings from creating a modern English chapter-by-chapter translation of the 14th-century *Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms* (Hakluyt Society, 1912 edition) and the subsequent analysis of its structure, reliability, and historical context.

The core conclusion is that the book was unfairly dismissed by earlier scholars. It is a **hybrid work** — part genuine travel account, part collection of contemporary 14th-century geographic knowledge and marvels. While it contains legendary elements, these were standard features of medieval cartography and writing (as seen on the Hereford Mappa Mundi). The text shows a clear reliability gradient that improves significantly the closer the author is to familiar European territory.

Key Findings

1. Hybrid Nature of the Text

The book is neither pure eyewitness travel nor pure armchair compilation. It shows a clear pattern: strong, detailed reporting in Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and parts of Germany/Hungary, which gradually becomes more hearsay-based the farther the author moves from home (especially Chapters 5–6). This is consistent with a real traveler who collected reports aggressively.

2. Reliability Gradient (Visible When Read Backwards)

Reading the chapters in reverse order makes the decline in reliability dramatically clear. Chapter 6 is heavily second-hand and legendary. Chapter 1 is precise and personal. This gradient supports the view that the author was traveling rather than fabricating.

3. Marvels Were Normal in 14th-Century Geography

Elements such as the Golden Fleece (Colchis), Blemmyes (headless men), Labyrinth, and Alexander references were standard on major medieval maps like the Hereford Mappa Mundi (~1300). Including them does not discredit the author — it shows he was participating in the accepted intellectual culture of his time.

4. Calendar Discrepancy in Birth Date

The author states he was born on 11 September when the Christian year was 1304 and the Arab year was 706. Modern conversion shows this corresponds to approximately 9 Safar 704 AH. The two-year error in the Hijri date is most likely a transmission or copyist issue.

5. Cultural Difficulty Far from Home

When describing unfamiliar regions, the author struggles with precision and includes more legendary material. This is expected behavior from a genuine traveler encountering cultural distance. The six months day/night detail in Norway suggests he or his informants reached quite far north.

6. The Book Was Unfairly Dismissed

Earlier critics applied modern empirical standards to a 14th-century text. They treated the inclusion of marvels as a sign of unreliability. In reality, these were expected features of serious geographic writing in the period.

The Hereford Mappa Mundi Connection

Images from the Hereford Mappa Mundi confirm that many legendary elements in the book were standard medieval geographic features:

- Golden Fleece (Jason and the Argonauts) — shown on the Black Sea coast
- Blemmyes (headless men with faces on their chests) — widely depicted
- Labyrinth (Cretan Minotaur story)
- Camp of Alexander the Great
- Columns of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar

This demonstrates that the Franciscan author was not inventing. He was working within the accepted geographic framework of the 14th century.

Final Observation: Durability of Classical References

Many legendary elements have eroded over time:

- The Golden Fleece without the full myth of Jason has little remaining force.
- A Labyrinth without the Minotaur loses its central dramatic purpose.
- Alexander the Great's Camp loses meaning once Alexander is long dead.

What remains more durable is the **Columns of Hercules** at the Strait of Gibraltar — the same western boundary Plato used when describing Atlantis. This classical geographic marker has proven more resilient than the surrounding mythological narratives.

Conclusion

The *Book of the Knowledge* is a valuable transitional document. It sits between the older scholastic/Arabic geographic tradition and the more empirical knowledge that would emerge during the Age of Discovery. While imperfect, it preserves genuine contemporary information — especially regarding West Africa, the Atlantic islands, Persian politics, heraldry, and European geography — that deserves more serious scholarly attention than it has historically received.