

## Between Venice and Lisbon. The Seas and the Ocean in Fifteenth-Century Culture

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The analysis of a vast documentary corpus related to fifteenth-century cosmography (including *mappaemundi*, *portolani*, marine charts, travel accounts and treatises of natural philosophy) allows us to observe the multiplicity of meanings associated with the central topic of the workshop, «O Mar - patrimónios, usos e representações». Mid-fifteenth century Venetian documents in particular reveal one of the most complex reflections on the concept of «sea» and «ocean» in the crucial passage from the Middle Ages to early modernity. For this reason I propose a reading of the representation and perception of these concepts in mid-fifteenth century Venice through the interpretation of one of the most relevant *compendia* of knowledge of the earth and cosmos of the time: Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* drawn circa 1450 in the monastery of San Michele di Murano in the lagoon of Venice, on the basis of coeval Portuguese sources. Fra Mauro's monumental effort will also be discussed in relation to Benedetto Cotrugli's *De navigatione*, a cosmographical treatise written in Venetian vernacular circa 1460. Through an examination of literary, visual, and textual evidence, close reading of the text and images that form the *mappamundi* allows us to identify five principle semantic levels that interact in the formulation of the concepts «sea» and «ocean» in the culture of the time: I. The sea as an Aristotelian element within the so-called *quaestio de aqua et terra* in the context of natural philosophy; II. The sea as an ecumenical space «habitable» by man; III. The sea as a complex of commercial networks; IV. The sea as a metaphysical element representing the physical and metaphysical limits of space and human action; V. Finally, the sea as both a tragic element and narration. This paper aims to provide a reading of the composite networks of coeval knowledge (scholasticism, humanism, monastic culture, as well as more technical practices such as marine cartography and mercantile skills), investigating the way they combine in the epistemological unity of the documents being analyzed to structure the complex perception of the sea within the larger context of fifteenth-century culture.

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