



1413 portolan chart by Mecia de Viladestes

Carte marine de l'océan Atlantique Nord-Est, de la mer Méditerranée, de la mer Noire, de la mer Rouge, d'une partie de la mer Caspienne, du golfe Persique et de la mer Baltique

Meccia de Viladeste was a Jewish cartographer in Spain who, like many others, converted to Christianity and undertook numerous research expeditions at the behest of the King of Aragon. He was ascribed to the so-called Majorcan school of cartography, which was predominant from the 13th to the 15th centuries and which produced a masterpiece of European cartography with the famous *Catalan Atlas of 1375* by Cresques Abraham (#235). This *Catalan World Atlas*, made for King Peter IV of Aragon, was gifted to the French King Charles V in 1380, which is why it is housed in the French National Library today. As a groundbreaking cartographic document, the sea chart of Mecia de Viladestes is no less significant.

The map on vellum has a size of 115 x 85 cm and is definitively dated 1413. The chart is signed and dated by Viladestes as *Meciá de Viladestes me fecit in ano MCCCCXIII* [Meciá de Viladestes made me in 1413], and its iconographic program includes abundant images of cities and monarchs, depictions of curious animals and rich explicative inscriptions, as well as various economic activities, like the hunting of whales in the northern Atlantic. It shows a region, which encompasses the northeast Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Black and Red Seas, as well as a part of the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and Baltic Sea. Wonderful illustrations supplement the numerous Catalan descriptions that cover the *portolan* chart. Alongside cities and oases, watering holes and mountains, Africa is especially adorned with representations of

camels, dark-skinned people, and four splendidly dressed African kings. Finally, the figure of John the Baptist kneels in the Nile Delta.

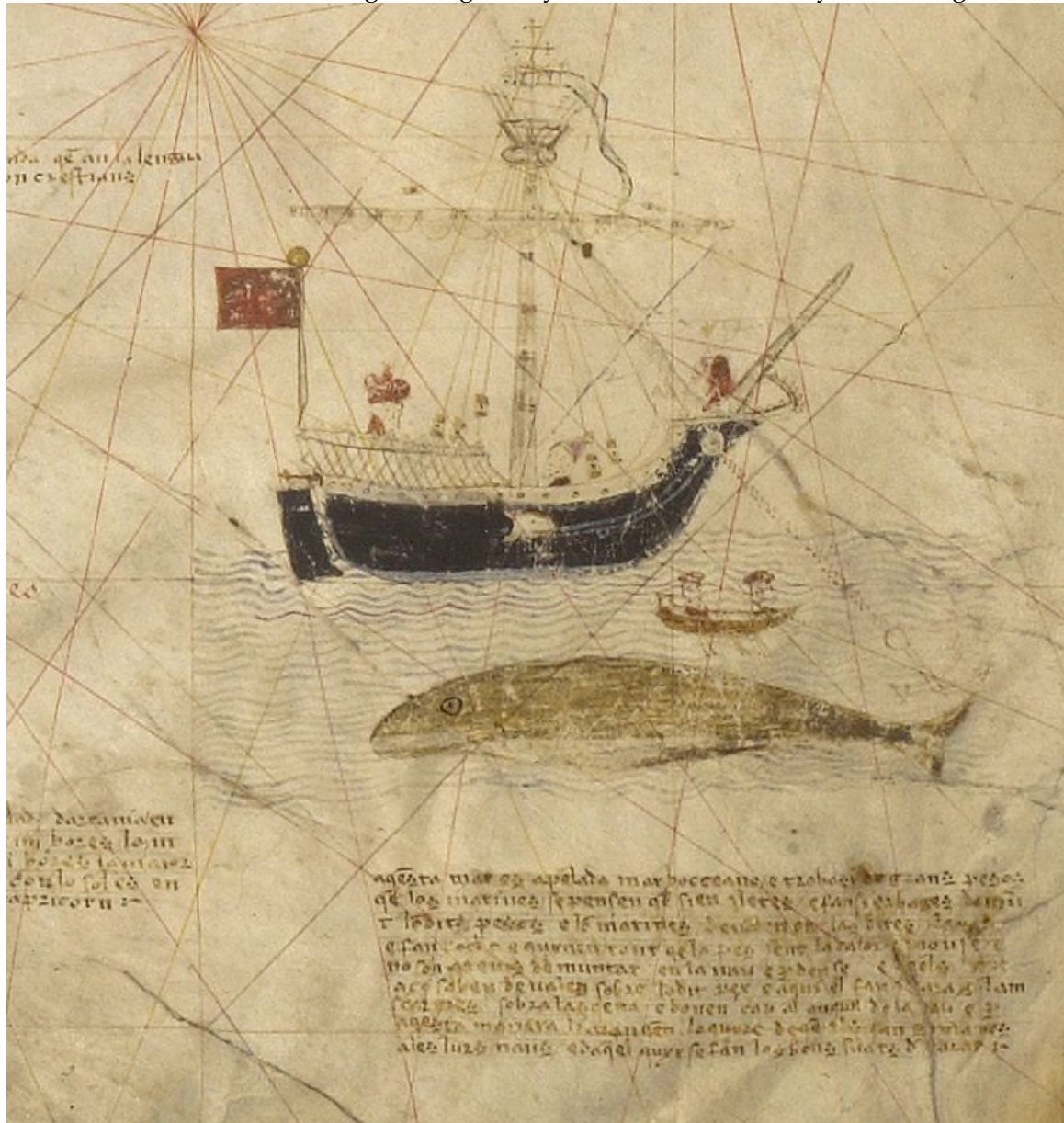


John the Baptist

Both in northern Africa and Asia, different kings and rulers are drawn, and the dominant religion of the regions and cities is marked by graphic elements drawn in the cities. Thus, the Christian territories are marked by towers with a cross on the top, while most of the regions of Africa and Asia have towers with crenellations or domes. The fascination with Africa that already existed at the beginning of the 15th century is visualized by the map of Mecia de Viladestes. In Viladestes' map, Africa stretches from West to East along the great rivers: the Senegal, Niger, and Niles. Caravans march through the desert to trade salt for gold with the desert tribes. This lucrative business was negotiated along top secret routes straight through the desert, which were only known to a few insiders. Viladestes knew these strictly secret locations in the desert

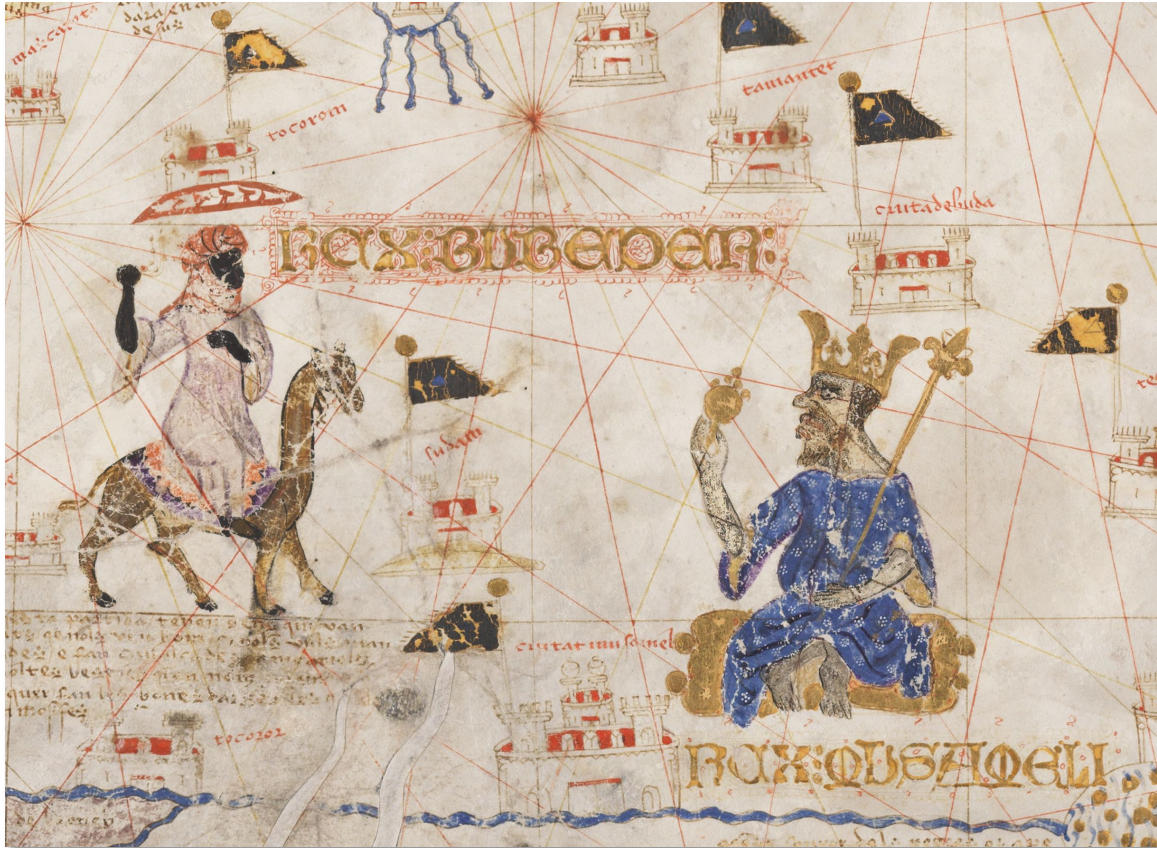
where the caravans traded gold for salt. On the lower margin of his map, Viladestes attached explanations for the stages of the journey through the Sahara.

This exceptionally detailed information about the African continent was appended by an additional special feature of Viladestes' sea chart. The Majorcan cartographer also depicted the northern regions of the Atlantic, whereof no maps were known in spite of the Hanseatic League. Viladestes integrated a wonderfully figurative scene there. Before Iceland, a small boat, having been unloaded from a large ship, nears an imposing whale in order to slay him with a harpoon. Upon closer inspection, a bishop can be recognized onboard the ship. This depiction could be of the legend of St. Brendan and thus interlink religious-legendary stories with the reality of whaling.

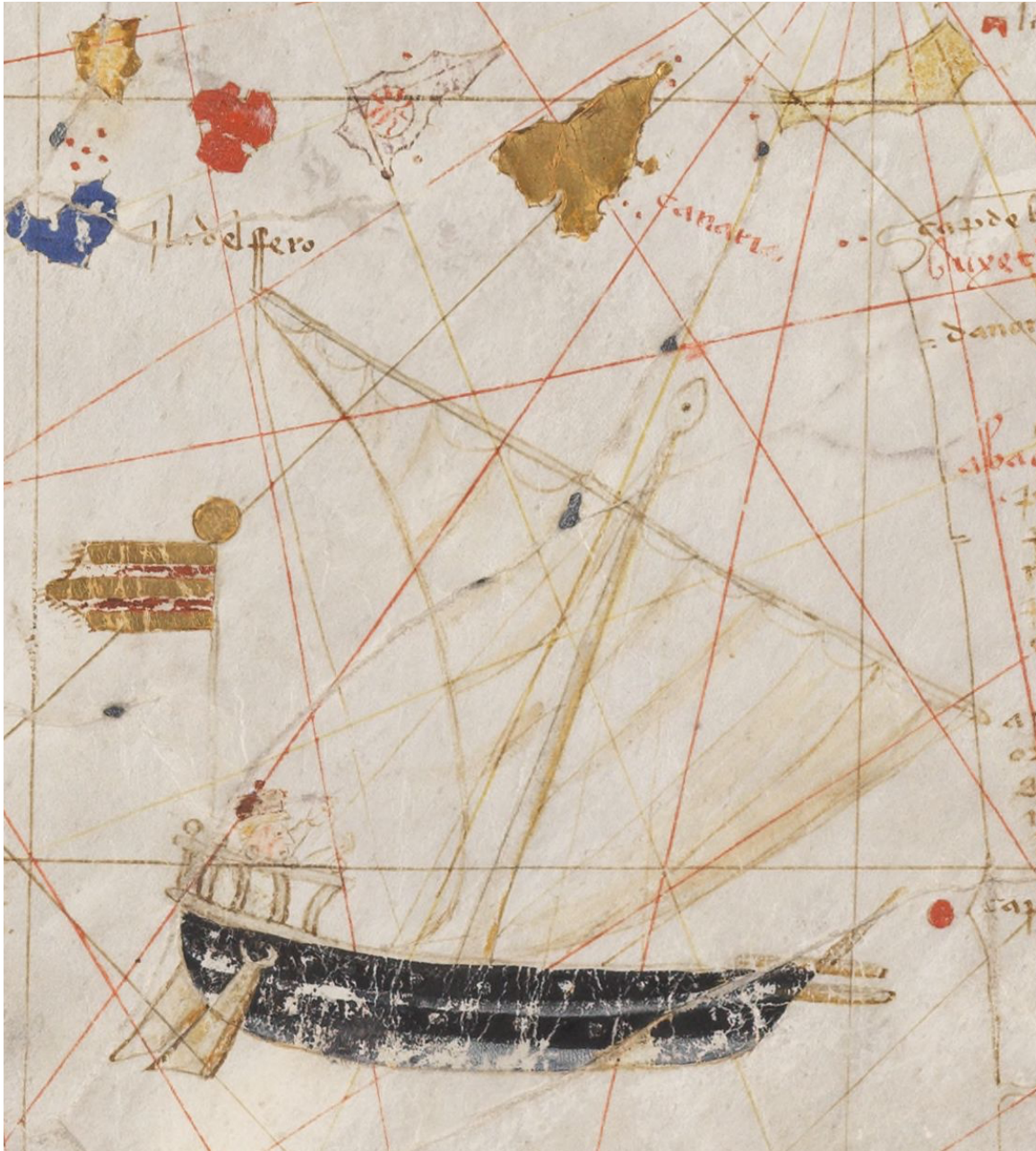


Mecia de Viladestes paid close attention to the islands in the Atlantic, which are depicted with great care and detail. There Viladestes distinguishes himself as an exceptional cartographer with the constant drive after the actualization of his knowledge

The sea chart of Mecia de Viladestes enchants in its entirety and in connecting with this variety of innovative notations. It is one of the most important maps from the famous and well known collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



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The typical Portuguese falua is beautifully illustrated in the Viladestes chart

The Portuguese like the other European nations began with a fishing fleet, whose simple vessels were progressively adapted to the new demands placed on them. Technically they were neither better nor worse equipped at the outset than the English, the French or the Dutch. The typical Portuguese *falua* is beautifully illustrated in the Viladestes chart of 1413. It was deckless, had one or two masts, was lateen-rigged, carried steering boards on the bows, and it was small enough to be rowed. A process of gradual modification saw this design evolve into the larger *caravel*, which was at least partly decked, and partly square rigged, and with small stern-castles.



The legendary Prester John shown in northern Africa

Africa and the Atlantic as the Portuguese knew them on the eve of the invasion of Ceuta: a detail from the Viladestes chart (1413). At the bottom right is Prester John. To his immediate left is the famed *River of Gold*, flowing west across the continent (a confusion with the Niger and Senegal Rivers). Offshore, from south to north, are islands both real and imaginary: the Canaries, Madeira, the Azores, *Brasil*, and *Saint Brendan's Isle*.

As it appears on the Catalan charts, Africa contains several instantly recognizable features, and all of them appear all on the Viladestes chart, drawn on the eve of the invasion of Ceuta. King Joflo of Portugal and his advisers almost certainly pored over a map very much like the Viladestes chart as they developed their plan of attack. South of the Mediterranean coast, past the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara: a series of portraits of

wealthy and powerful African kings. These kings ruled over a vast territory that was cut through from east to west by the *River of Gold*, presumed to be the source of the gold brought north to the Mediterranean coast by desert traders. Represented as a branch of the Nile, it forks south of Egypt on the map and flows across the continent until it reaches the Atlantic at an uncharted part of Africa's northwest coast, approximately at the latitude of the Canary Islands. This was, as one early Catalan chart put it, "the end of Africa and the western land."



The African kings displayed across north Africa, including ancient Mali's leader Mansa Musa and the legendary Prester John

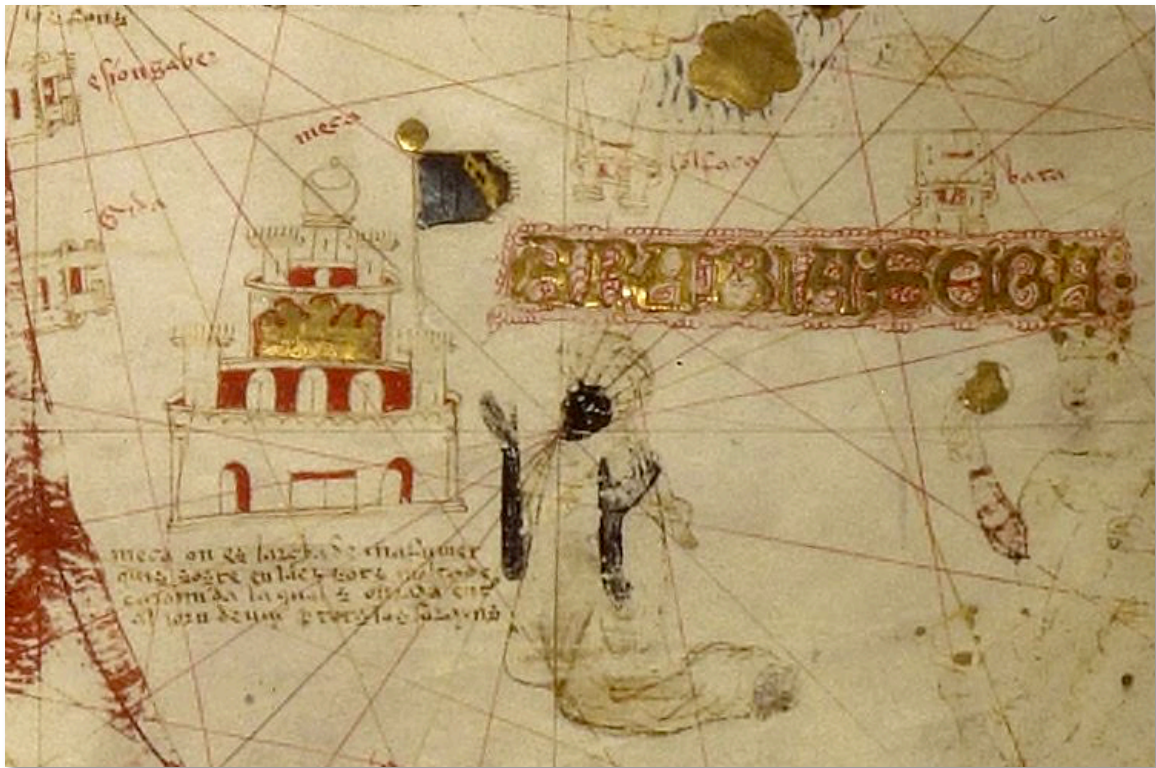
We can see important references to the Old Testament, such as Noah's Arch on the top of the Ararat Mount, and Mount Sinai with an inscription explaining that it was there where Moses received the *Tablets of Stone* from God, but there are also important places for Islam.

Thus, a prominent representation of the city of Mecca is drawn, with a black man kneeling, looking at the city, and praying. This is a very interesting example of the value of Meciá de Viladestes' chart as a reflection of the religious plurality in the geographic context of the 15th century.

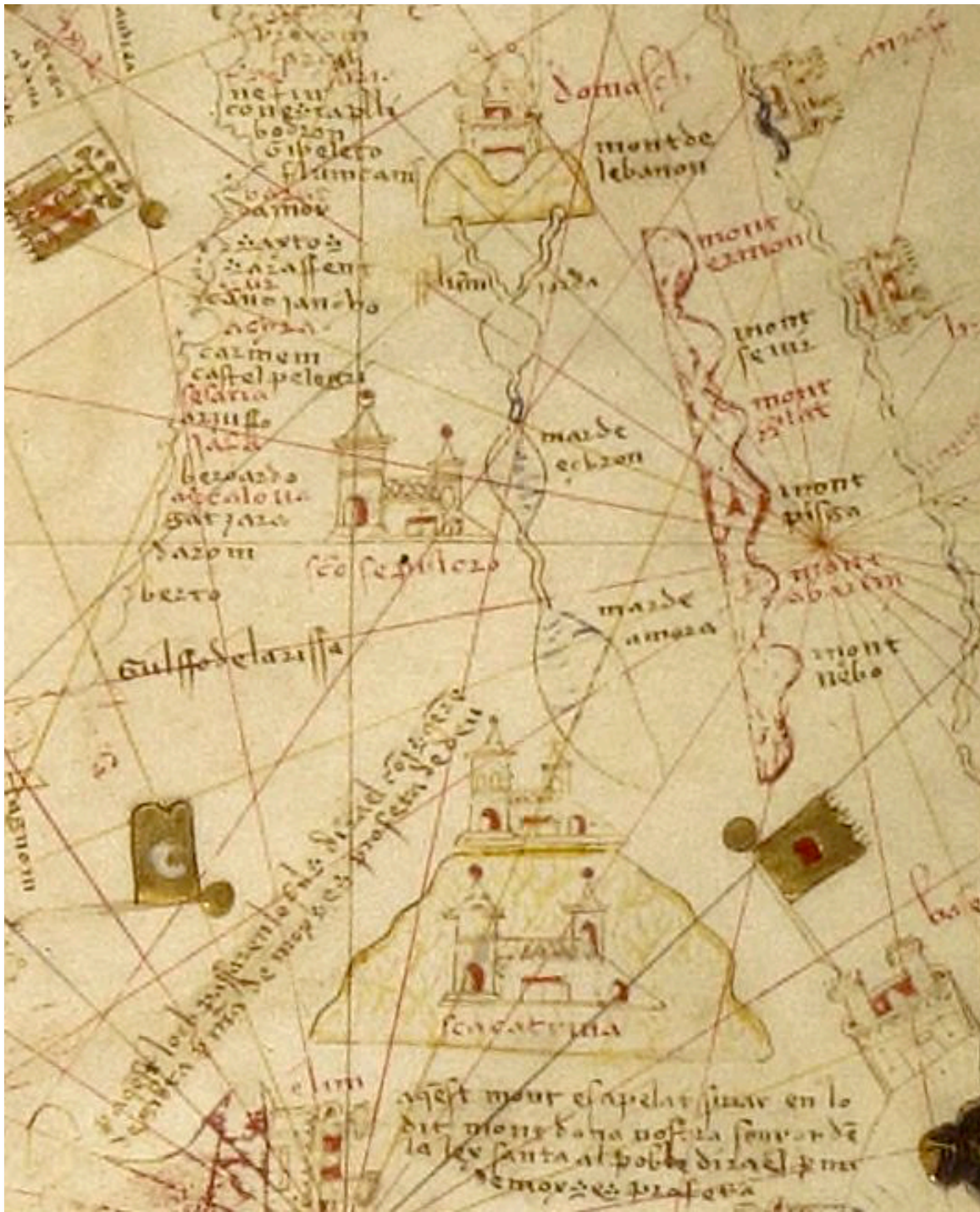
Regarding the chromatic features of the work, gold pigment is used for several islands and flags that mark the different regions. The Baltic Sea, the rivers, and the clothes of some of the sovereigns are painted a rich blue, and the Red Sea is colored in intense red.



Noah's Ark is depicted in the Middle East



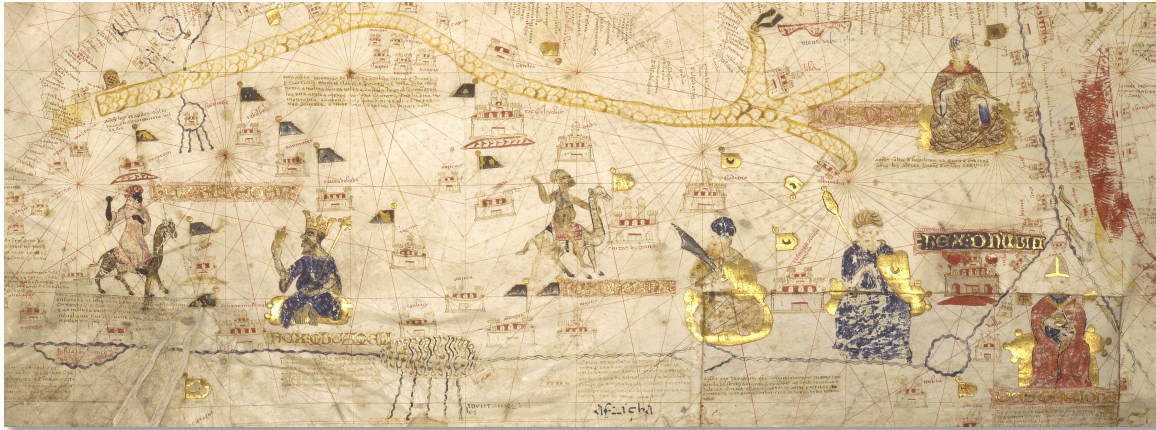
Mecca



Mount Sinai

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Both the abundant place names and textual information of the chart are written in Mallorcan dialect, making this work a very useful document for studying not only its geographic, artistic and cultural features, but also as a source for toponymical studies.



In 1806, the Spanish writer Joaquín Lorenzo Villanueva, in his work *Viaje literario a las Iglesias de España* [Literary Travel to the Churches of Spain], described a large and remarkable map, signed by the Mallorcan cartographer Meciá de Viladestes, which was held in the Carthusian monastery of Vall de Cristo, located near Castellón.

During the ecclesiastical Confiscations of Mendizábal (1836-37), one of the biggest liberal confiscations in Spain, the monks of the Vall de Cristo had to dispose of the goods of the monastery, and, after various vicissitudes, the map arrived in the National Library of France, where it is still located under the shelf mark GE AA-566 (RES).

Meciá de Viladestes was one of the most important Mallorcan cartographers of the first half of the 15th century. Of Jewish origin, he converted to Christianity and worked in Mallorca creating nautical charts, and contributing to the development of the Mallorcan school of cartography. He is the author of another famous chart, dated 1423 and located in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence with the shelf mark Ashb 1802.