

## EIGHT ASIAN PARAGRAPHS

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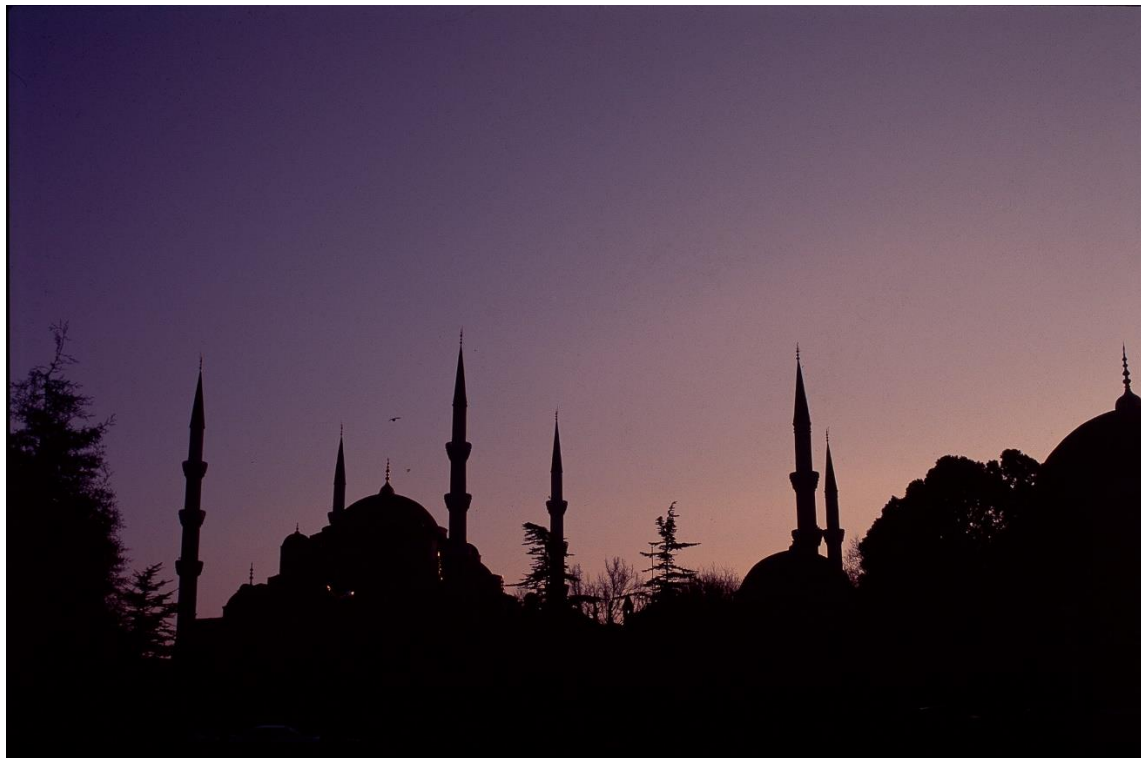
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*East: part of the sky where the Sun appears to us  
when it rises.*

Caldas Aulete & Santos Valente

*The sky does not have two suns, and Asia will not  
have two kings.*

Alexander the Great



At the gates of Asia, in Constantinople, the cathedral of Hagia Sophia survived... imprisoned by minarets.

I remember the first time I set foot on Asian soil. It was more than 30 years ago, and the soil I set foot on was Pakistani. In Pakistan, I saw little beyond the cities of Karachi and Lahore; as for the archaeological sites of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, I did not visit them, but I did see some of the surviving remains of these ancient South Asian cities in the National Museum in New Delhi. I did not know at the time (the year was 1994) the verses by the Florentine poet Fazio degli Uberti, a contemporary of Dante Alighieri and Marco Polo, in which he describes the Asian continent as one where all the threats and fears posed by land and water become reality – aircraft, as we know, did not yet exist in those distant times. In fact, this is exactly what we read in *Dittamondo*, a work inspired by Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, in which Fazio degli Uberti takes the Roman geographer Gaio

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Giulio Solino as his Virgil, to guide him through the world known to him at the time. Here is what his literary escort tells Uberti when they both arrive at the gates of Asia: “...così a dire prese la mia scorta; ‘noi siamo in Asia, là dove si vede ogni pericol ch’acqua e terra porta”.



No less than five thousand years old, Perge, in Asia Minor, is the birthplace of the famous mathematician Apollonius.

The etymology is almost pleonastic: the word Asia refers to what is situated East of Mesopotamia, that is, what is located West of the Land of the Twin Rivers, namely the Tigris and the Euphrates. In fact, “Asia” seems to come from the Akkadian word *asu*, which refers to the rising of the sun, while “Europe”, according to that same Mesopotamian language, may stem from the term *erebu*, i.e., “sunset”. This is how the ancient Greeks referred to Asia Minor, which in practice corresponds to the Anatolian Peninsula – a name that, in the language of Homer, means “rising sun”. Pliny the Elder was, perhaps, the first to expand the concept of “Asia”, giving it the meaning of a continent that comprises all the lands located East of Europe.



Lunar landscape, the setting for a fairy tale? No: Cappadocia, in Central Anatolia.

Another etymological perspective leads us to the toponym Assuwa, which emerged in the Bronze Age (c. 3300-c. 1200 BC) and originally referred to a small portion of Northwestern Anatolia, this natural bridge between East and West, the geographical location of many empires and countless wars and battles. The word appears in Hittite texts denoting a confederation of kingdoms; it also appears in Hittite records reporting how a confederation of Assuwan (i.e., Asian) states, including the famous kingdom of Troy, revolted against the Hittite king Tudhaliya I in circa 1400 BC. In Mycenaean documents from the same period, the term *aswia* appears and indicates prisoners originating from that same part of Anatolia.



Krak des Chevaliers: testimony of the failed attempt to reconquer the Holy Land during the Crusades.



About a thousand years later, Herodotus used the name *Assuwa* to designate Anatolia and the Persian world, so differentiating it from Greece and Egypt. According to the Father of History and Geography, the ancient Greeks understood that the name *Asia* derived from the wife of Prometheus, god of fire; the Lydians, in turn, attributed to Asies, son of the Thracian king Cotis, the fact of having passed his name to a tribe of Sardis, the capital of Lydia – anyway, Greek mythology sees “Asia” (Ἀσία or Ἀσίη) as the name of some deity of Lydian origin. Around the 9th or 8th century BC, Homer mentioned two Phrygians named *Asios* (i.e., “Asiatic”), as well as a certain region of Lydia that had the same name (Ἀσιος). Among the Romans, “Asia” referred to Western Anatolia, recalling, once again, that Pliny was among the first to call the entire enormous continent located East of Europe “Asia”.



Central Asia: whom or what are they hiding from?

The following lines were written by me in the 1990s, shortly after returning from my first trip to Asia, and I see that they fit this fifth paragraph of our article on the largest of all continents: “There are words that maintain ambiguous relationships with the things they designate. This is what happens between the small word ‘Asia’ and the immense continent that no other equals in size. ‘Asia’ is so tiny as a word that we hesitate when faced with the possibility of separating its component syllables: “A-sia”, “Asi-a” and “A-si-a” are all unsatisfactory solutions.

This term, when pronounced, is likely to evoke the stable sonority of a plainchant melody. The Asian continent, in turn, although it has flat regions in Siberia and Iran, reveals, in the Himalayan Mountains, one of the most rugged reliefs on the planet. Linguists and geographers see Asia with different eyes. Perhaps seeking harmony between those who investigate the languages and those who study the shape of the Earth, the Providence wanted that, at least in one Asian city, the name should fit like a glove. I am talking about the small town of Leh, part of the ancient Silk Road and capital of the district of Ladakh – a Buddhist kingdom that once maintained allegiance relations with Tibet and is now part of the territory of Indian Kashmir. To the ear, ‘Leh’ almost sounds like a sigh. To the eye, Leh is so small that its residents invented a strange comparison: they say that the time needed to walk along its main street is equivalent to the time it takes to write ‘Leh’ in Tibetan characters on the snow which accumulates in every corner of the citadel during the long winter that whitens the whole of the Himalayas.”<sup>1</sup>



Church of Saint Francis Xavier, the Apostle of Asia, in Vietnam.

Who, after all, are the Asians? Let us start from the biblical perspective, since it is there that we find the first ethnographic record on that matter. We are talking about the passage from the Book of Genesis that lists Noah's descendants. It is all about the repopulation of the Earth after the Flood, a reference recorded in the traditions of several cultures besides Judaism and Christianity, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China and pre-Columbian cultures. Shem and his descendants were responsible for populating the Near East, becoming the ancestors of the Semitic peoples. Ham, the son whose blood line was cursed because of his disrespect towards Noah's nakedness, and his descendants spread throughout Africa and the Near East. Japheth and his lineage, in turn, were given the task of populating Europe and Asia in general. It is even thought that Japheth, son of Noah and progenitor of humanity in the post-diluvian world, and Iapetus – one of the twelve Titans of Greek mythology, son of Uranus (the Sky) and Gaia (the Earth), who, according to Hesiod, had travelled through much of the emerged lands – are one and the same person. The basis for this identification lies in the similarity of the names and in the ancient tradition reported by Flavius Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*. Patriarch of the Japhethites, Japheth/Iapetus may be the ancestor of practically all European peoples and most Asians.

<sup>1</sup> João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *Índia submersa*, Rio de Janeiro, 2004, pp. 72-73.





On the outskirts of present-day Baghdad, we see what appears to be left of the Tower of Babel.

The episode of Babel – which occurred between the end of the Flood and the birth of Abraham (son of Terah, descendant of Shem), father of Isaac, the patriarch of the Jews and ancestor of Jesus Christ (cf. Gn 3,5) – is not limited to being a disobedience in the sense of “reaching the heavens”, much like “you shall be as gods” (Gn 3,5); it is also about disobeying God’s order to populate all the corners of the post-diluvian Earth. The confusion of languages that occurred during the construction of the Tower of Babel (which means “Gate of God” in Akkadian [bab-ilu], already translated from the Sumerian expression “Ka-dingir”) was not only the punishment chosen by God for another sin of disobedience, but also the expedient chosen by Him for spurring the post-diluvian humanity to repopulate the world. In this process, the Japhethites were given the greatest responsibility, since they inherited almost all of Eurasia as a territory to populate. The inheritance of Shem and Ham concerned places where their descendants already lived (the Near East) or that were near to it (Africa).



Remnants of the Kingdom of Urartu, in Northern Mesopotamia.

With the confusion of languages in Babel, customs and traditions were differentiated: cultural diversity was established with its pros and cons. On the border between Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Saint Augustine (354-430) said that “the signs present in the Bible were given to us in a supernatural way and communicated by

its authors through words. He seems to consider the use of different languages as a reflection of the discord that has existed in the world since the construction of the Tower of Babel, a living metaphor for the obstacle to human relations and for human presumption (cf. *De civitate Dei*, XIX, 7)". Globalism, in its paranoid desire to make everything equal, is nothing more than a kind of Babelism in reverse: equally radical, equally disrespectful to God, equally harmful to Asians and all the other descendants of Noah's three sons, heirs of the post-diluvian globe.<sup>2</sup>



Heart of Imperial China: The Forbidden City.

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni da Salara. *Inverno global. A Nova Ordem Mundial: ordem nova, ideia antiga*, Rio Bonito, Benedictus, 2022, pp. 10-11.