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Go East, Young Man

A British historian finds much to be valued, and trusted, in the work of Marco Polo.

By JONATHAN SPENCE

In 1392, John Larner tells us in this erudite and highly personal book, a Florentine patrician on winter duty as mayor in an isolated Italian village decided to transcribe the whole of Marco Polo's travels, "to pass the time and to keep melancholy away." At the conclusion of the exercise, the patrician expressed his own views on Polo's manuscript: "What he says seems to me not so much lies as more than miracles. And yet what he speaks of could be true, but I don't believe it -- though in the world one finds very different things from one country to another. But these, it seems to me -- though I've enjoyed copying them -- are things not to be believed nor to give faith to, so it seems to me."

This sense of befuddlement mixed with awe is still true for readers of Marco Polo. Despite the opacities and repetitions of Marco's lengthy manuscript, the fact that almost nothing is known about him as a person and the knowledge that chances of finding any new information are slim indeed, Marco Polo resolutely refuses to go away. All we can be fairly sure of is that a Venetian merchant called Marco Polo, born around 1254, traveled to China by the overland route between 1271 and 1274, in the company of his uncle and his father. The three returned safely in 1295, bringing back with them some objects acquired in the Far East. A few years later, while under some kind of house arrest in Genoa, Marco Polo dictated a version of his adventures to a professional writer called Rustichello. Though the original manuscript is lost, various copies -- some distributed by Marco himself after his release -- began to circulate around 1307. He married in the period between his return to Venice and his stay in Genoa, and had three daughters. He died in 1324.
Virtually everything else has to be deduced, either contextually from what we know of the trade patterns and social customs of the medieval European world and the Mongols who ruled China at the time or from the raw contents of the different manuscripts -- which vary enormously. The result is a paradise for imaginative scholars, who are free to apply virtually any hypothesis to the sparse facts and ample wordage in front of them. A steadfast few further confuse the issue by denying that Marco Polo was ever anywhere near China. The harsh fact is that one cannot prove that he was in China; there are no Chinese or Mongol documents to substantiate his claim, no missionary letters giving even a glancing reference to him, no Arab travelers who ran into him. All one can do is take his manuscript at face value, and challenge the opposition to prove that he was not there.

Larner, a historian at Glasgow University, has a special expertise in the field of medieval and Renaissance geography, and "Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World" is an eloquent attempt to prove that Marco Polo's main importance was to the discipline of geography. This focus leads Larner to much creative rethinking of things that have puzzled many readers. For example, the attempt to recreate the exact route Marco took to China, as it is described in his manuscript, has absorbed scores of scholars, and countless maps have sought to record some version of "The Voyages of the Polos." But as Larner ingeniously argues, what Polo seems to be presenting as the route he traveled is not in fact a route that he himself traveled at such and such a time. "It is an organizing device, the route along which Marco and Rustichello lead their readers from west to east and then back from east to west, the route through the book." The book itself "is not a story of adventure and it is not a description of travels."

Nor is it any kind of merchant handbook in the sense of giving an accurate depiction of the trade flows of a precise area Polo visited at a specific time. It lists rare goods of many kinds and the huge volume of trade in various cities of China as a way of awakening a "sense of wonder" in Marco's readers for the extraordinary reach of the world that he now knew existed, and wanted to share. "The cumulative effect of these, for us, tedious repetitions, would have been to give the medieval reader an extraordinary vision of a whole hitherto unknown world of cities engaged in trade and commerce set within the East." Marco Polo was thus, in a sense, a missionary of geographical knowledge.

In Larner's analysis, Polo was a man with an unusual, indeed unique, vision, who knew that he had an astounding geographical story to tell but no skill at how to tell it. Larner intuits that Marco had sheaves of notes, mementos of his journeyings in the East, but they were jumbled and disorganized, and he had no idea how to bring order to them. He also concludes that Marco had only a peripheral interest in his own personal experiences. Rustichello, on the other hand, a man moderately well known in the later 13th century as a storyteller and writer of courtly romances, saw the narrative possibilities of Marco's material, but had a different set of priorities. Their fortuitous meeting in Genoa led to a hybrid
manuscript that is what has come down to us. In Larner's words, "What the modern reader is not looking for, but what he gets, is a work of geography which Rustichello has tried very hard to place within the transitions, formulas, dialogue and general rhetorical traditions of chivalric literature."

Larner adduces a grand range of sources to elaborate on this theme, and to trace the exact periods -- and even the precise atlases and globes -- in which we can find later Renaissance geographers seeing the value of Marco's work concealed within the Rustichello carapace. Much of this is fine scholarship, artfully argued. But Marco does have a way of running away with those who study him, leading them helter-skelter down the leafy avenues of inference.

This is especially true when scholars try to define his character and inner nature. Larner finds in one group of manuscripts -- a 1470 version known only in an 18th-century copy, and a version by the Venetian humanist Ramusio published in 1559 -- what he believes to be "a more personal authorial statement" by Marco, which included Marco's views on such dangerous topics as religious tolerance. He also tells us these manuscripts are "unquestionably authentic" -- though it appears to me they have much material that could easily have been inserted long after Marco's death. Marco's curious manuscript becomes "a mediation to the West of such Chinese geographical culture as has been absorbed by its Mongol rulers." Marco himself is given an identity, as "a minor Mongolian civil servant," a student of topography and human geography, customs and folklore and Mongol authority structures. "Then, having taken early retirement, he has sought an audience for his memories." The tone of Marco's book becomes for Larner that of a man whose "home was China," which explains why his book conveys no sense of "culture shock." Marco's return to Venice was thus not a homecoming so much as a "virtually enforced exile from Mongolian China."

Marco -- and this is high romanticism on Larner's part -- brought back with him to Europe not simply the treasured objects later inventoried in his will "but the whole of the East where he had spent most of his life and which he would now attempt to recreate in words." Marco was justified, Larner feels, in these grand hopes. His book turned out to give the European world "an unparalleled opening of horizons" and was a "triumph" for both him and Rustichello. Larner himself in conclusion reiterates his conviction that Marco's enigmatic book has "its own curious poetry, and the flavor of the author's own enigmatic personality."

To those less convinced, Larner is generous. For me, one of the grace notes in his study was the wondrous parody of Marco Polo found tucked in Boccaccio's "Decameron," quoted here: "So away I went, and after setting out from Venison, I visited the Greek Calends, then rode at a brisk pace through the Kingdom of Algebra and through Bordello, eventually reaching Bedlam." It is only the most gracious authors who can thus tease their subjects, their readers and themselves.
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