

Images of the east

The process of the writing of history is a process of bracketing. Certain pieces of 'information' are included in what we receive, and others are excluded. This is partly done by the vicissitudes of history which leave us only partial records – which are not always the best ones. However, it is also done deliberately through the destruction of some documents (particularly by the Church) or the deliberate selection and promotion of others, particularly during the rise of European nationalism.

Most of us are accustomed to thinking that the West discovered China with Marco Polo (Polo 1938). Marco set out in 1271. However, he did not 'discover' China. On his voyage he went with his uncles, Niccolo and Maffeo, and this was their second trip. Their first began around 1260.

Even the senior Polos were not the first such voyagers, nor was Marco's the only book written about such travel. The year before Marco set out Jacob d'Ancona, a Jewish-Italian merchant also went on a 'trip' to the East (d'Ancona 1997). This work is unfairly stigmatised as it came from a Jew who came from a city (Ancona) that was on the losing side in the vicious wars of the renaissance Italy. Translations have only just become available.

D'Ancona travelled to Arab lands, to Malabar (in India) and Sri Lanka as well as China. In China his main destination is Zaitun (probably modern Quanzhou). His account is a personal diary that gives his thoughts and observations on the cultures he visits. Zaitun is a city of around 200,000, twice as large as even Constantinople and thus five times as large as the largest cities in Western Europe.

In many ways an even more important series of books was written by a group of Franciscan monks. One of these was by C. de Bridia (Skelton, Marston and Painter 1965). This was completed on 30 July 1247. De Bridia was a part of a mission from the Pope to the Mongol Court. His was one of three accounts of this journey. With the other monks, Friar John de Plano Carpini and Friar Benedict, de Bridia tells of their travels and, in particular the work of de Bridia concerns the history of the Mongols, their character, way of life, customs and religious beliefs. These three reports make up an intelligence brief on what was perceived as the greatest threat to Christianity.

Whilst the monks did not get to China proper, their mission was to the Mongol court at Karakorum. This was, at the time, the centre of the entire Empire that stretched from the Sea of Japan to the Baltic and had sent forces as far as the Adriatic.

The works of de Bridia, Carpini and Benedict (as well as others are summarised in several works. The best is probably *History of the Mongols* (Spuler 1968).

For many educated and travelled Europeans, 'the East' began at the Byzantine contact ports of Trebizond and Cherson (the first recorded European entry point for the Black Death). These were points where trade to and from the Eastern Empire had to pass. For the less well educated, the lands of the Emperor were also strange and foreign places. It was hard for a citizen of London, with a small population, muddy streets and surrounding impoverishment to believe stories of the Constantinople. It was even harder for them to believe that the Mongols (or Tartars), whom they were warned about from the pulpit as barbarian 'scourges of God', could also maintain a high civilisation. Much of the writing on the East, that was available, was relegated in the public mind to fiction, while fiction became elevated to fact. The legend of Prester

John, the Christian King in Asia who would save Europe from the Mongols and Muslims is of particular interest here (Baring-Gould 1987)

For a look at the totality of European contact with the East, varying from the Crusades to China, an excellent work is available, which is often set as a text in history courses (Phillips 1988). I commend this for its breadth and easy to read style.

Bibliography

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