Did Marco Polo Go to China? (review)

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ently in this respect, and this might have provided further insight into the nature of the enterprise in the West.

As it is, Crosby's main concession to the rest of the world is to stress the importance for Europe of the adoption of Hindu-Arabic numerals, which included the challenging concept of zero. However, apart from a passing reference to al-Khwarizmi, he makes no attempt to trace the history of these numerals in either their Indian or Middle Eastern homelands. Nor do his passing references to China recognize that mathematicians active during the time of the Song dynasty were using numbers (and the zero) with algebra, measurement, and visualization in ways that were not dissimilar to techniques that he thinks were unique to Europe rather later. One mathematician worth quoting here might have been Li Ye (who is listed as Li Chih in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*). Around 1250 people were crowding to his lectures, so his interests were not just those of a lone genius. It is certainly true that such enthusiasm was not sustained under later dynasties. Crosby remarks too briefly that "cycles of advance and retreat" are "the norm of human history" (p. 17). He observes that intellectual advances and practical inventions sometimes have to survive through "demographic collapse, chronic war, impromptu ravagings, periodic famines . . . and tidal waves of infection" (p. 19). He might have added, too, that they had to survive the political reaction to such disasters, because in China under the Ming dynasty this may have been a factor. Indeed, one of the defects of nearly all conventional writings on the history of science and technology is that processes of loss of knowledge and skill are ignored in the triumphalist rush to chronicle "progress" and Western advance. We would be better equipped to face the future if historians were more ready to remedy this defect.

Alfred Crosby's synthesis with regard to narrowly European concerns is admirable, but it does not fulfill the aims set out in his preface, which seems to promise much more.

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Did Marco Polo Go to China? By FRANCES WOOD. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996. Pp. xiv + 188. $20 (cloth); $12 (paper).

Few books are as well known to world historians as Marco Polo's *Description of the World,* popularly known as *The Travels*. Prominently featured on world history reading lists, Polo's book is often used as a primary source in understanding thirteenth-century world history. Now

Frances Wood, head of the China Department at the British Library, calls into question the validity of the Polo book's authorship and, more astoundingly, asks whether Polo even traveled to China.

Drawing upon work undertaken by German Mongolist scholars in the mid-1960s, Wood goes far beyond their research in her painstaking analysis. *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* is divided into fifteen short chapters. The first four place Polo's alleged travels into historical context. After giving an overview of Polo's journeys in Asia, Wood examines why Maffeo and Niccolo Polo would have trekked across Central Asia and taken the seventeen-year-old Marco in tow. She discusses not only the familiar importance of spices and other exotic items in the growing Eurasian trade, but also the secondary role of the Polos as religious missionaries in a time when medieval Europe had little direct knowledge of the state of religion in the East. She ends her analysis of Polo's times by examining the legend of Prester John, believed by many in the thirteenth century to be a Christian ruler in either south or east Asia. (Marco Polo contributed to the legend by stating that Prester John ruled over a kingdom on the rim of Inner Mongolia.)

The remaining eleven chapters of Wood's work deal with the problems and inconsistencies found in the *Description*. Chapter 5 examines the nature of Polo's route to Asia, arguing that no one today could retrace the supposed route beyond Persia, as it jumps not only from place to place within China itself, but also elsewhere in Asia, without logical connections between places. Wood argues that because Marco Polo does not describe the Polos' city-to-city travel, the book is more akin "to a general geography than a travel record" (p. 29). Moreover, she believes that an almost total lack of personal references and of first-person accounts suggests that the *Description* was actually ghostwritten. The ghostwriter, a Pisan romance writer named Rustichello, shared a Genoese prison cell in 1298 with Marco Polo; it was to him that Polo ostensibly dictated his tale. Another significant difficulty related to the authorship of Polo's work is that the original manuscript does not survive and that the extant copies (about 150) may contain egregious additions by subsequent copyists. According to Wood, one such copyist, Giovanni Battista Ramusio (d. 1557), whom she calls Polo's "first fan," may have added many passages to his version of Polo's book in order to make it "fuller and more interesting" and to make Polo appear more heroic (p. 46).

Next, Wood focuses on the language of the text. She points out that most scholars believe the original work was written in some form of medieval French. Wood argues that Rustichello may have "Italianized" the French he used, and that subsequent translations have com-

plicated matters even more. One of the most interesting points she makes in this chapter is that Marco Polo made extensive use of Persian, Arabic, and Turkish proper names to describe Mongol and Chinese people and places, rather than using equivalent Chinese or Mongol terms. One explanation for this curiosity may be that the southwest Asian languages may have served as a kind of medieval lingua franca for Eurasian travelers and that Polo may have used them accordingly. Wood, however, offers a more convincing explanation. After an extensive analysis of Polo's use of personal and place names as well as place locations, she concludes that Polo may have borrowed his terms and locations from Persian and other sources.

The next four chapters (8–11) discuss the inclusions and omissions in Polo's work. Among the more familiar (and largely accurate) accounts of porcelain, coal, paper money, and daily life in Chinese cities, Wood notes Polo's glaring omission of Chinese writing. Chinese writing was found everywhere, appearing, for example, on paper money and in architecture. As Wood points out, "it is hard to conceive that in the country where paper money was invented and the written word revered more than almost anywhere else, a person, even a foreigner, could claim to have served in the government bureaucracy and either fail to notice the Mongol and the Chinese writing systems or consider them of little interest" (p. 70). Also noticeably absent from Polo's book is any mention of tea—a ubiquitous substance in China—or chopsticks. Nor does he mention foot binding. Wood admits, however, that this custom was not as common in Mongol times as it was before or after. Another curious omission is any mention of the Great Wall. Although she admits that the Great Wall as it now exists—with brick-faced walls added during the Ming period (1368–1644)—is more impressive than it would have appeared in the thirteenth century, Wood believes that the wall still would have made an impression on any traveler coming from the West. Its omission from Polo's book, she writes, "is telling" (p. 101). Another telling omission is that, despite Marco Polo's claim that during his seventeen-year stay in China he had frequent contact with the Great Khan, there is no mention of Polo in official or unofficial Mongol or Chinese records of the time.

There are many myths associated with Marco Polo. Wood devotes two chapters (9 and 12) to dispelling myths about the Venetian traveler. One myth concerns Marco Polo's connection to the introduction of pasta and ice cream to Italy from China. Pasta was an Arab invention, introduced into Italy in the ninth century, while ice cream, apparently a Chinese invention of the Tang dynasty (618–907), did not appear in Europe until some 300 years after Polo's death. A second myth is one

Polo created about himself, his father, and uncle: that they were the first Europeans to visit Qubilai Khan. Wood points out that the Polos may have been the first Italians in Karakorum, the Mongol capital, but that when they arrived the city already contained a thriving European merchant and missionary community. Another myth surrounds Polo's claim that he was a siege engineer and that he and his family aided in the pivotal Mongol siege of Xiangyang, a major stronghold of the Song dynasty. Not only do Mongol sources state explicitly that Persian engineers were consulted in the siege preparations, but also the successful siege of the city ended in 1273, a year before the Polos arrived in China.

After much excellent scholarly build-up, Wood draws her conclusions about the usefulness of Marco Polo's *Description of the World*. In a passage certain to raise the eyebrows of the most ardent Polo defenders, she states her belief that the Venetian never traveled beyond the Black Sea, and that his book is based on family stories and printed secondary material from other authors. But she argues that even though the book is not an eyewitness account, it still contains useful and accurate details of China during the thirteenth century and, consequently, "remains a very rich source" (p. 150).

Frances Wood has written an excellent and lucid analysis of an important topic and has made a significant contribution to scholarship in this area. Anyone interested in world history, or in the pitfalls of using travel narratives as primary sources, will want to read this book.

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Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles. By THOMAS T. ALLSEN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xv + 137. $49.95 (cloth).

An Economic History of the Silk Industry, 1830–1930. By GIOVANNI FEDERICO. Cambridge Studies in Modern Economic History, vol. 5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xv + 259. $59.95 (cloth).

Along with other key technological innovations, such as farming, the neolithic people (most likely women) who invented weaving gave more to history than protective coverings for their families. The weavers' craft became more important as production and variety of textiles proliferated. Cloth has been used as a trade good as well as a medium of