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Advice for Merchants Traveling to Cathay



84 ▼ Francesco Pegolotti, THE PRACTICE OF COMMERCE

Around 1340 *Francesco Balducci Pegolotti*, an agent of the Bardi banking house of Florence, composed a handbook of practical advice for merchants. Pegolotti, who served the Bardi family's mercantile interests from London to Cyprus, drew upon his years of experience to produce a work filled with lists of facts and figures on such items as local business customs, the taxes and tariffs of various localities, and the relative values of different standards of weights, measures, and coinage. In other words, the book contained just about everything a prudent merchant would want to know before entering a new market. In addition to these catalogues of useful data, Pegolotti included a short essay of advice for merchants bound for China.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What evidence is there that Pegolotti himself had not traveled to Cathay?
2. Considering that his advice is not based on firsthand experience, how knowledgeable does he appear to be on the subject, and what does this suggest?
3. Consider Pegolotti's advice regarding the types of interpreters the merchant will need. What language skills suffice to carry on this trans-Eurasian business enterprise? What does this suggest about the markets of Central Asia and northern China?
4. When and where could the trip be especially hazardous? What does this suggest about the *Pax Mongolica*?
5. Describe the type of merchant for whom this advice was written. Were these small-time traders? Big-time entrepreneurs? What inferences follow from your answer?
6. What overall impression does Pegolotti give us of this journey and its rewards?

THINGS NEEDFUL FOR MERCHANTS WHO DESIRE TO MAKE THE JOURNEY TO CATHAY

In the first place, you must let your beard grow long and not shave. And at Tana¹ you should furnish yourself with a dragoman.² And you must not try to save money in the matter of dragomen by taking a bad one instead of a good one. For the additional wages of the good one will not cost you so much as you will save by having him. And besides the dragoman it would be good to take at least two good manservants, who are acquainted with the Cumanian³ tongue. And if the merchant likes to take a woman with him from Tana, he can do so; if he does not like to take one there is no obligation, only if he does take one he will be kept much more comfortably than if he does not take one. If he does take one, it would be good if she were acquainted with the Cumanian tongue as well as the men.

And from Tana traveling to Gittarchan⁴ you should take with you twenty-five days' provisions, that is to say, flour and salt fish; as for meat, you will find enough of it at all the places along the road. And also at all the chief stations [along the way]. . . . you should replenish yourself with flour and salt fish; other things you will find in sufficient quantities, especially meat.

The road you travel from Tana to Cathay is perfectly safe, whether by day or by night, according to what the merchants say who have used it. But if the merchant, in going or coming, should die enroute, everything belonging to him will become the property of the lord of the country in which he dies, and the officers of the lord

will take possession of all. So also if he dies in Cathay. But if his brother is with him, or an intimate friend and comrade calling himself his brother, then they will surrender the property of the deceased to this person, and so it will be rescued.

And there is another danger: this is when the lord of the country dies, and before the new lord who is to have the lordship is proclaimed. During such intervals there have sometimes been irregularities perpetrated on the Franks, and other foreigners. (They call "Franks" all the Christians of these parts from Romania⁵ westward.) And the roads will not be safe to travel until another lord be proclaimed who is to reign in place of him who died.

Cathay is a province that contains a multitude of cities and towns. Among others there is one in particular, that is to say the capital city, to which merchants flock, and in which there is a vast amount of trade; and this city is called Cambalec.⁶ And the said city has a circuit of one hundred miles,⁷ and is all full of people and houses and of dwellers in the said city. . . .

You may reckon also that from Tana to Sarai⁸ the road is less safe than on any other part of the journey; and yet even when this part of the road is at its worst, if there are some sixty men in your company you will go as safely as if you were in your own house.

Anyone from Genoa or from Venice, wishing to go to the places above-named, and to make the journey to Cathay, should carry linens with him, and if he visits Organci⁹ he will dispose of these at a profit. In Organci he should purchase *sommi* of silver,¹⁰ and with these he should pro-

¹The present-day city of Azov on the northeast coast of the Sea of Azov, which is an extension of the Black Sea. Tana was the easternmost point to which a person could sail from the Mediterranean.

²An interpreter fluent in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish.

³A Turkic people inhabiting the Middle Volga.

⁴Present-day Astrakhan, a city in the Volga Delta, just north of the Caspian Sea.

⁵The European term for the Byzantine Empire.

⁶Khanbalik. See source 83.

⁷Compare this with Odoric of Pordenone's account (source 83).

⁸Sarai on the Volga, the capital of the il-khans of Kipchuk (also known as the *Golden Horde*), who ruled Russia and Kazakhstan.

⁹Urgench on the Oxus River in Central Asia.

¹⁰*Sommi* were weights of silver. Each *sommo* was equivalent to five golden florins (see source 83, note 8). Pegolotti calculated that the average merchant would carry merchandise worth about 25,000 florins and that the expenses for the merchant, interpreter, and two personal servants would amount to a combined sixty to eighty *sommi*, or 300–400 florins.

ceed without making any further investment, unless for some bales of the very finest textiles of small bulk, and that cost no more for transportation than coarser textiles.

Merchants who travel this road can ride on horseback or on asses, or mounted in any way that they choose to be mounted.

Whatever silver the merchants might carry with them as far as Cathay the lord of Cathay will take from them and put into his treasury.¹¹ And to merchants who bring silver they give that paper money of theirs in exchange. This is

of yellow paper, stamped with the seal of the aforementioned lord. And this money is called *balishi*; and with this money you can readily buy silk and all other merchandise that you desire to buy. And all the people of the country are bound to receive it. And yet you shall not pay a higher price for your goods because your money is of paper. And there are three kinds of paper money, one being worth more than another, according to the value which has been established for each by that lord.¹²

¹¹The Chinese (and Mongol) policy of demanding silver for paper money resulted in a significant flow of silver from the West to China before, during, and well after the fourteenth century.

¹²See source 83, note 7.

Long-Distance Travel Beyond the Mongol Peace

Important as the Mongol Peace was in facilitating movement and trade across Eurasia, it was not the sole factor behind the general upsurge of long-distance travel and cultural exchange after 1000. Religious motives and ties were equally important driving factors, and this was especially true for the ecumenical community that called itself *Dar al-Islam* (The House of Islam). Educated Muslims, no matter their ethnic origins or native tongues, shared a sacred language — Arabic — and could communicate with one another. They also shared the obligation of *hajj*. The pilgrimage routes that enabled African, Spanish, Turkish, Iranian, Indian, and East Asian Muslims to travel to Arabia's holy sites equally served as important avenues of cultural and material exchange. Moreover, merchants and scholars spread Islam to such faraway regions as sub-Saharan Africa and the coastal lands of Southeast Asia. Once the faith had taken root, there was even more reason to maintain contact with these societies, many of which were quite distant from Islam's Southwest Asian birthplace.

In addition to religious devotion, other factors fueled long-distance travel and commerce for both Muslims and non-Muslims before and after the breakup of the Mongol Empire. Arabs, Persians, East Africans, Indians, Southeast Asians, Chinese, and Western Europeans had taken to the seas with increasing zeal long before the rise of Chinggis Khan and continued their interests in seafaring and naval technology throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and beyond. Chinese and Western European seafarers were in the forefront of the effort to build more seaworthy craft capable of bigger payloads and safer transportation. Borrowing extensively from the Arabs and other maritime cultures, Chinese and