

THE MYTH OF THE PAX MONGOLICA: RE-VISITING THE EVIDENCE OF EUROPEAN TRADE WITH CHINA IN THE MONGOL PERIOD

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Central to modern discussions of the Mongol period is the claim that Mongol rule benefited merchants and greatly increased trans-Eurasian trade. The claim made in the overwhelming majority of the modern literature that the Mongol conquests created a *Pax Mongolica* and so enabled greater long distance trading by land.¹ This claim has become central to the discipline of world history since William McNeill adopted the idea of an “era of Chinese predominance” from 1000 to 1500 AD.² Immanuel Wallerstein’s World System theory has been used to claim the existence of a Eurasia-wide economy based on China or India.³ As the Mongols themselves did not provide much evidence of what they thought their attitudes have to be reconstructed from the records of other peoples. However it is also a central feature of the modern literature that the writings of the peoples conquered by the Mongols are deemed to be biased. This is particularly true of the largest single source of materials on the Mongols written in Chinese. This is even more unusual because it has long been recognised that historians from the People’s Republic of China have been more positive about the Mongol period than were either

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- 1 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 206, Gavin Hambly, “The Mongol Empire At Its Zenith”, *Central Asia*, edited by Gavin Hambly, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 109, Charles J. Halperin, “Russia in the Mongol Empire”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Volume 43, Number 1, (1983), pp. 242-243, David O. Morgan, *The Mongols*, (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 130, Morris Rossabi, “Ming China and Turfan, 1406-1517”, *Central Asiatic Journal*, Volume 16, Number 2, (1972), p. 209; Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia from 1368 to the Present Day*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 21; Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His life and times*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 1-2, 122; Rossabi, “The ‘decline’ of the central Asian caravan trade”, *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750*, edited by James D. Tracy, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 351, 357; Rossabi, “The Legacy of the Mongols”, *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, edited by Beatrice F. Manz, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994a), pp. 28-29, 39; Rossabi, “The Reign of Khubilai Khan”, *The Cambridge History of China: Alien Regimes and Border States*, Volume 6, edited by Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, (Cambridge University Press, 1994b), p. 450. Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 291-315.
 - 2 William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power; Technology, Armed Force, and Society since AD 1000* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 25.
 - 3 Most notably by Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The world system AD 1250-1350*, (Oxford University Press, 1991).

Russian or Mongolian historians.⁴ Modern scholars from the People's Republic of China invariably celebrate the Yuan period as a glorious period for China.⁵

If the Chinese language material is unduly biased, the question is whether the other surviving sources support the idea of a *Pax Mongolica*. Therefore this article will examine how far the non-Chinese primary sources support the idea that the Mongol period saw a rise in trade between Europe and East Asia, with a special focus on the work of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti. Pegolotti was employed by the Florentine Compagnia dei Baldi in Antwerp from 1315 to 1317; in London in 1317, in Cyprus from 1324 to 1327, and again in 1335. Sometime between 1335 and 1343 he wrote the *Libro di divisamenti di paesi e di misuri di mercatanzie e daltre cose bisognevoli di sapere a mercatanti*, commonly known as the *Pratica della mercatura*.⁶ Due to its supposed description of the route between the Crimea and China, this work remains the strongest piece of evidence of trade between Europe and China during the Mongol period.

The accounts of people who actually dealt with Mongols are by no means supportive of the view that Mongols even understood the idea of trade. Actual trading is rarely found in the traditional sources. Many of the religious travellers complained that they were constantly pestered for gifts by the Mongols escorting them, which sometimes merged into theft.⁷ As Simon of San-Quentin pointed out,

Such greed consumes them that when they see something which pleases them, immediately they pull at it with great vehemence or carry it away by violence from the man who owns it whether he is willing or unwilling.⁸

Perhaps the best witness to the lack of security of travel and the difficulty of trade is Marco Polo himself. Describing how his two male relatives originally ended up in China, Marco Polo says they had visited Sarai on the Volga River only to find

4 See David M. Farquhar, "Chinese Communist Assessments of a Foreign Conquest Dynasty", *The China Quarterly*, Number 30, (April-June, 1967), pp. 79-92.

5 For a good example of this see Li Gan 李幹 *A History of the Economies of the National Minorities 民族经济史*, (Beijing, 北京: National Minorities Press, 民族出版社, 2010), 上 Volume One, p. 1. However Li's work is typical of literally hundreds of Chinese academics who praise the Mongol period. There is virtually no modern Mainland literature that criticises the Yuan period.

6 Allan Evans, "Introduction", Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica Della Mercatura*, edited by Allan Evans, (New York: Krauss Reprints, 1970), pp. xxvi-xxxix.

7 For example William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Mongke, 1253-1255*, edited by Peter Jackson and David O. Morgan. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), pp. 97, 98, 108, 114-115, 119-120, 179-180, 207-208, 273.

8 Simon de Saint-Quentin, *Histoire des Tartares*, translated by Jean Richard, (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1965) "Tanta vero in eis cupiditas exardescit ut cum aliquid quod sibi placeat vident statim aut nimia importunitate extorquant, aut violenter auferant ab illo cuius est, velit nolit." Denis Sinor ("Introduction: the concept of Inner Asia", *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, edited by Denis Sinor, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 5) points out that when Simon of Saint-Quentin said this he was speaking from bitter experience.

that fighting between the Golden Horde and the Il-Khanate meant “no one could travel without peril of being taken”.⁹ Forced to move deeper into Central Asia the Polos ended up in Bukhara where they “found they could neither proceed further forward nor yet turn back again” and so they had to stay there for three years.¹⁰ It was only in the entourage of some envoys from the Persian lands that they were able to move further east and so arrive in China a year after that. The envoys specifically said “in our company ye shall travel with perfect security and need fear to be molested by nobody”.¹¹ This strongly implies merchants could not travel unless under diplomatic protection. Their return journey was made easier by the gift of a golden tablet showing they were envoys on official business for the Mongol court.¹² The second attempt the three Polos made to go to China together took a further three and a half years although this time they were delayed by the weather.¹³ On this occasion the Polos appear to have tried the sea route first, but were put off by the flimsy boats used in the Persian Gulf. The route they chose took them as far from regions inhabited by nomads as possible, and they entered Xinjiang *via* the Wakhan corridor. This is perhaps the most physically demanding route available and the implication is that other routes over easier terrain were not safe.¹⁴ The departure of the Polos was just as difficult. Far from being free to travel about Eurasia, the Polos had to apply for permission to leave China, which was denied several times.¹⁵ They feared that if Khubilai Khan died they would never be allowed to go home. It was only when a Mongol princess required transport to Persia that the Polos were allowed to leave. This time they travelled by sea, supposedly for the benefit of the princess, and so avoided the land route altogether.

Although Ibn Battuta had formed the desire to see the world, and so travelled by land to Sarai, the lands of the Golden Horde, and Central Asia, he did not even try to reach China by a land route, but went by sea via India. He did know someone who tried

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- 9 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated by Sir Henry Yule, revised by Henri Cordier, (Originally published London: John Murray, 1920, Reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1993), I:5 and Marco Polo *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, The Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, translated by Sir Henry Yule, (London: J. Murray, 1875), I:5.
- 10 Polo (1993), I:10; Polo, (1875), I:10.
- 11 Polo (1993), I:10; Polo, (1875), I:10.
- 12 Polo (1993), I:15-18; Polo, (1875), I:15.
- 13 Polo (1993), I:25; Polo, (1875), I:26. On each of the three occasions the Polos tried to walk the “Silk Road”, they were held up for longer than three years. This does not indicate the sort of “predictable” trip that Rossabi (1990, p. 357) claims was possible existed.
- 14 The Wakhan corridor is so high that horses cannot reliably foal there due to the lack of oxygen.
- 15 Polo (1993), I:31-32; Polo, (1875), I:31-32. This appears to have been a common practice as both William of Rubruck and John of Plano Carpini were also forced to ask permission to return to Europe. See Rubruck (1990), pp. 226-227; Anastasius van den Wyngaert, *Sinica Franciscana, Volumen I, Itinera et relations Fratrum Minorum saeculi XII et XIV* (Quaracchi-Firenze, 1929), pp. 289-290.

the land route but this man died before reaching China.¹⁶ Ibn Battuta also claimed that the region around the Great Wall was “occupied by wandering tribes of heathen, who eat such people as they can catch, and for this reason no one enters their country or attempts to travel there. I saw nobody in [Canton] who had been to the Great Wall, or who knew anybody who had been there.”¹⁷ One reason for this reluctance might be that Ibn Battuta often worked as a religious judge and so needed a community of Muslims to support him. The Central Asian Muslims may well have suffered during the Mongol conquests and so he preferred to travel along maritime routes instead. Returning to Morocco, Ibn Battuta was put off a land route by the fighting between various Mongol groups in Central Asia who had disrupted peaceful communications.¹⁸ There is evidence of this interruption in trade in other Islamic sources as well. Rashid al-Din claimed that when fighting broke out the dependants of rival Mongol Khans, which probably meant everyone involved in *ortaq* partnerships with them, were put to death and their goods seized.¹⁹ If such fighting did close the land route then the land route would have been closed for most of the Yuan period as Khubilai Khan was involved in fighting one or other of his relatives before he had even conquered southern China.

The Persian-born Il-Khanate official, Ala ad-Din Ata Malik Juvaini wrote “[f]or fear of [Chaghatai’s] yasa and punishment his followers were so well disciplined that during his reign no traveller, so long as he was near his army, had need of guard or patrol on any stretch of road”²⁰ This only implies that traders were secure in the immediate vicinity of one specific Mongol ruler committed to disciplining his soldiers and has little relevance to the rest of the route. Marco Polo himself was attacked by Mongols and only seven of the group he was with escaped while the rest were either enslaved

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- 16 See Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325-1354*, edited by C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti, translated by H. A. R. Gibb and C. F. Beckingham, Volume 3, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1971), p. 548.
- 17 Ibn Battuta, “Ibn Battuta’s Travels in Bengal and China”, *Cathay and the Way Thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, translated and edited by Sir Henry Yule, IV, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1916), p. 123.
- 18 Ibn Battuta, (1994), pp. 910-911.
- 19 Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan: Translated from the Persian of Rashid al-Din*, translated by John A. Boyle, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) p. 258. See also Thomas T. Allsen, “Mongolian Princes and their Merchant Partners”, *Asia Major* (1989), 3rd series, Volume 2, Number 2, pp. 83-126 and Elizabeth Endicott-West, “Merchant associations in Yuan China: The *ortogh*”, *Asia Major*, Third Series, Volume 2, (1989), pp. 127-154. Although space does not allow a proper discussion here, the *ortaq* represents a type of crony capitalism can only be evidence of a weak or declining merchant economy. Being forced to take a Saudi prince as a partner, for instance, is not a sign of the pro-business environment of modern Saudi Arabia. Since expelling Singapore, Malaysia has required ethnically Chinese businesses to sell a percentage of shares to *bumiputera*, usually people connected to the ruling UMNO Party. Starting from the same low base at independence, Singapore is now over three times richer than Malaysia (in PPP terms \$78,762 vs. \$25,833).
- 20 Juvaini, Ala ad-Din Ata Malik, *The History of the World Conqueror*, Translated by John A. Boyle, (Manchester University Press, 1997) p. 272.

or put to death.²¹ Both Rashid al-Din and William of Rubruck claimed many escaped slaves as well as nomads preyed on travellers.²² The Daoist master Changchun was delayed when travelling to Samarkand because local rebels had destroyed the bridges and so he had to wait until the following spring.²³ Even in a big city like Samarkand local “bandits” were powerful enough to force the Mongol governor out of the city and to close the roads for travellers.²⁴ This suggests that the Mongols did not properly pacify regions they had conquered and it is noticeable that in Khurasan and southern China the Mongols had to retake many regions.²⁵ Given the difficulty of governing these enormous and diverse territories with a relatively small Mongol population without a strong literary tradition, it is no surprise that the Mongols usually preferred to leave existing administrations in place. However this means that there could be few economic benefits from a unified administration.

Regardless of how safe the land route was at this time it was clearly not frequently travelled by European merchants. At no time did Ibn Battuta mention any European merchants in China even though he travelled widely. Nor did any of the early Catholic missionaries in the Mongol Empire report any significant number of European merchants in Mongol territory. William of Rubruck said the Nestorians would have accepted a Patriarch appointed by the Pope “if the routes lay open”.²⁶ John of Monte Corvino reported that fighting in 1305 meant that he had heard no news from Europe for the previous twelve years and had had no confessor for eleven.²⁷ As few medieval Catholics would pass up the chance to visit a priest before or after such a trip this must imply that not a single European reached what is now Beijing in those years. The lack of a confessor shows that Catholic missionaries did not travel within China with any frequency either. William of Rubruck was saved from starvation by the intervention of

21 Polo (1993), 1:99; Polo, (1875), I:100.

22 Bertold Spuler, *History of the Mongols: Based on Eastern and Western Accounts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, translated by H. and S. Drummond, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 155-156; Rubruck, 1990, 127-128.

23 Li Zhichang 李志常, *The Journey to the West of Master Changchun*, 长春真人西游记 (Beijing北京: Zhonghua Books中华书局, 1985) p. 13.

24 Li Chih-ch'ang, *The Travels of An Alchemist: The Journey of the Taoist Ch'ang-Ch'un from China to the Hindukush at the Summons of Chingiz Khan*, translated by Arthur Waley, (London: Routledge & Sons, 1931), pp. 93-96. Li (1985), p. 13. See also Bretschneider, E. *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources: Fragments towards the knowledge of the geography and history of Central and Western Asia from the 14th to the 17th century*, Volume 1, (First published by Routledge, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd in 1888, Reprinted Routledge, 2000), pp. 77-79.

25 V. V. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, translated by S. Soucek, edited C. E. Bosworth (Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 53, 99.

26 Rubruck, (1990), pp. 213-214; Wyngaert (1929), p. 280.

27 Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission. Mission to Asia*, (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press in Association with the Medieval Academy of America, First Published 1955, Republished 1980), pp. 224-227; Wyngaert (1929), pp. 347, 349.

East European slaves, not by visiting Italian merchants. When John of Plano Carpini wanted to provide witnesses to prove he had travelled as far as he claimed, he did not mention any Western European merchants trading in the steppe region. Nor did he meet any Eastern European merchants on the steppe. He only mentioned East European rulers travelling to pay their respects to their Mongol overlords, as well as Western merchants coming to trade with Kiev and the Russians.²⁸ Marco Polo did not mention any European merchants in China, instead insisting the older Polos were the first “Latins” Khubilai had ever seen.²⁹

Later Catholic missionaries in China do mention European merchants, but there are no indications of any numbers. In 1306 John of Monte Corvino mentions one European merchant by name, Peter of Lucalongo, who had travelled with him from Persia and India by sea.³⁰ However Peter of Lucalongo stayed in India with John of Monte Corvino for over a year before going to China where he waited at least twelve more years and may never have returned to Europe. This is unusual behaviour for a merchant who needs to make money. It is likely that the term “merchant” was a social rather than functional label and Peter was a lay member of the Catholic mission. Given there is no evidence he ever returned to Europe, even if he was a genuine merchant, his role in China could have been no more than a glorified shop-keeper. Odoric of Pordenone refers to many people in Venice who have been to China, but he does not do so in the Latin, French or most of the Italian versions of his manuscript, but only in the Minor Ramusian version.³¹ This version differs significantly from the others and only implies the existence of a patriotic Venetian copyist.³² As late as 1326 Andrew of Perugia implies that there was more than one Genoese merchant in the south of China, but gives no details.³³ The one known Venetian merchant who claimed to have gone to

28 Dawson, (1980), pp. 70-71; Wyngaert (1929), 128-130. The merchants going to Kiev from the West were from Vratislava, Poland and Austria. The most important of those going to Kiev from Constantinople are named as “Michael the Genoese and Bartholomew, Manuel the Venetian, James Reverius of Acre, Nicholas Pisani”. To travel to Russia from Constantinople they had to pass through nomad territory, but it does not mean they traded there.

29 He does mention a German at the siege of Xiangyang, but that might be a misprint for an Alan. Presumably all the earlier European deportees had died without issue. William of Rubruck claims his main purpose for going to Mongolia was to find some German slaves, but he did not find even a trace of them although he did mention a single female German slave. See Rubruck (1990), pp. 44, 144-146, 226, 145.

30 Dawson, (1980), p. 229; Wyngaert (1929), 352.

31 See Odoric of Pordenone, “The Travels of Friar Odoric”, in *Cathay and the way thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, Volume 1, edited by Henry Yule, (Cambridge University Press, c1866, New Edition 2010), p. 114.

32 In his edition of Odoric’s text, Henry Yule provides over 90 footnotes in the section dealing with China. Roughly 30 of those refer to issues with Ramusio or the Minor Ramusian text. Fewer than six refer to all the other versions combined.

33 Dawson, (1980), p. 236; Wyngaert (1929), 375-376. Note that their church was paid for by a wealthy Armenian, not by a European merchant.

China was known thereafter as Pietro Zulian del Cathayo.³⁴ It is obvious that in Venice travel to China was so rare as to be a mark of distinction.³⁵ A search of the Italian archives by Luciano Petech found fewer than a dozen merchants who claimed to have reached China.³⁶ Most of these did so in a single decade from 1335-1345, that is, in the years the Il-Khan state was descending into civil war.³⁷ Even if every single one of these people actually reached China, and even if they represent a tiny fraction of those who went but left no record, the economic impact on the West and East Asia would be minor. It is not possible that these ten merchants could provide an economic benefit greater than the losses caused by Mongol conquest all over China and the Middle East.³⁸

In 1346 or 1347, the religious envoy John de Marignolli visited southern China and mentioned the Catholic mission there, but not a single European merchant. He did mention a *fondaco*, or “warehouse”, run by the Franciscans.³⁹ Most authors have assumed this was for Western merchants, although de Marignolli did not state who stayed there.⁴⁰ A secular “national” purpose would be an unusual interpretation of both the nature of Christian charity and the Franciscan mission. In fact de Marignolli refers

34 Petech, Luciano, *Selected Papers on Asian History*, (Rome: Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), p. 170.

35 In Europe it is traditional to add place names to proper names to mark rare and exceptional achievements. Examples would include Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein and Nikolay Nikolayevich Muravyov-Amursky.

36 Needless to say, a claim to have gone to China is not actual proof of having been to China.

37 Luciano Petech, “Les marchands italiens dans l’empire mongol”, *Journal Asiatique*, Volume 250, Number 4, (1962), pp. 549-574.

38 The collapse of the population of northern China is widely doubted but well attested in the Chinese language literature. See Thomas J. Barfield “The Devil’s Horsemen: Steppe Nomadic Warfare in Historical Perspective”, *Studying War: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by S. P. Reyna and R. E. Downs, (Langhorne, Pa.: Gordan and Breach, 1994), Volume 2, p. 204. A good discussion in Chinese is Wu Hui 误慧, *A History of Chinese Commerce 中国商业通史*, (Beijing, 北京: 中国财政经济出版社, 2006), Volume 3, p. 308. Henry Yule doubted that Ibn Batuta had travelled to China because Batuta claimed (1916, p. 137) that in northern China “you find no regular cities, but only villages, and plains covered in corn, fruit trees, and sugar cane.” This is ironic because this is the only period in which northern China did not have sizeable urban communities and so this is strong evidence that Batuta did travel to China.

39 John de Marignolli, “Recollections of Travel in the East”, *Cathay and the Way Thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, translated and edited by Sir Henry Yule, Volume III, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1914), p. 299. For a discussion of the *fondaco* see Olivia Remie Constable, *Housing the stranger in the Mediterranean world: Lodging, trade, and travel in late antiquity and the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

40 For example, Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 173; Robert Sabatino Lopez, “European Merchants in the Medieval Indies: The Evidence of Commercial Documents”, *Journal of Economic History*, Volume III, No. 2, (November, 1943), p. 165.

specifically to this institution being open to all merchants, and so the Franciscans may have run a semi-commercial business to support their mission, or they may have run a charitable foundation, but they are unlikely to have operated specifically for the benefit of the Italians or even Westerners in general.⁴¹ It is more likely they tried to attract non-Christians converts by offering cheap accommodation along with Christian preaching.⁴²

There is other evidence that conditions for merchants did decline during the Mongol period. In the face of violence from nomads some people have adapted by moving to offshore islands. The most famous example of this is Venice itself which began as a refuge from the Huns. The Korean government moved to the island of Kanghwa during the period of Mongol domination. After the Royal family decided to make peace with the Mongols, some elements of the Korean Army continued to resist based on the islands of Chindo and Cheju.⁴³ Similar phenomena can be seen in the Middle East. In the Mongol period, trade between the Middle East and India was concentrated on the two islands of Hurmuz and Kish. The rise of these ports dates to the second half of the thirteenth century coinciding with the period of Il-Khan rule over Iran. The entire city of Hurmuz moved to an offshore island site during the Mongol period even though it had no water supply. This has been explained by Mongol plundering on the mainland.⁴⁴ Both islands remained in local Muslim, not Mongol, hands with an administration dominated by merchants such as Ibrahim as-Sawamili.⁴⁵ Thus Middle Eastern traders accepted considerable difficulties and discomfort in order to escape the direct control of Mongol rulers.

The last two pieces of evidence are the tombstones of Katerina and Antonio Vilioni dating to 1342 and 1344 respectively.⁴⁶ The general opinion in the literature is that these provide evidence of a “small but apparently flourishing commercial community of Italians in Yangzhou, making a good profit.”⁴⁷ Yet there is no evidence of any of

41 Wyngaert (1929), p. 536. “Est etiam Zayton, ubi fratres Minores habent tres ecclesias pulcherrimas, optimas et ditissimas, balneum, fundatum, omnium mercatorum depositorium”.

42 The modern parallel would be with the Young Men’s Christian Association.

43 Carter J Eckert, Ki-baik Lee, Young Ick Lew, Michael Robinson and Edward W. Wagner, *Korea Old and New: A History*, (Seoul: Ilchokak, 1990) pp. 91-93.

44 Barthold, (1984), p. 145.

45 Eliyahu Ashtor *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*, (London: Collins and Son, 1976), p. 266 and Barthold, (1984), pp. 142-144.

46 See Francis A. Rouleau, “The Yangchow Latin Tombstone as a Landmark of Medieval Christianity in China”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, (1954) pp. 346-365 and Robert Sabatino Lopez, “Nouveaux documents sur les marchands italiens en Chine à l’époque mongole”, *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres*, (1977), pp. 455-457.

47 Jonathan Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 10.

these claims except that the community, if it existed at all, was small.⁴⁸ The tombstones do not indicate what their father, Dominic Vilioni, did for a living or where he came from. He might have been a Franciscan monk rather than a merchant. Their mother is unnamed, but she was more likely to have been a local than Italian.⁴⁹ While some European names are distinctly regional (for example Pilar, Thor, and Atilla all strongly imply a specific ethnic origin) there is nothing to suggest a national origin of these three people as the names as they appear on the tombstone (“Dominici”, “Katerina”, and “Antonius”) are generically European and written in common European-wide Latin rather than Italian.⁵⁰ Although there is no discussion in the literature about whether these three really were Italian, it is possible they came from elsewhere.⁵¹ Robert Lopez claimed their name was not Vilioni, but was written “Yilioni” which he took to be the name Ilioni. The justification for this claim is unclear. Latin only uses the letter “Y” to stand in for the Greek letter *upsilon*, which is absent in this Italian name. Nor does Latin need to add an extra letter to words that begin with an “I”, which are common in Latin, (in, for example, “Italia”). One possible influence on the Genoa-born Lopez may be that Vilioni is Venetian, whereas Ilioni is Genoese.

If the other European-language sources give little evidence of trade with China, that just leaves Pegolotti’s text. Given Pegolotti’s account derives from a single third-hand late fifteenth century manuscript it ought to be treated with caution. While Pegolotti claimed that the road to what most modern authors claim is China was perfectly safe, he never travelled it himself.⁵² Nor is there any reason to think he ever met anyone who did either, since much of his work is taken from other sources.⁵³ There are also some problems with the description of the road to China. The route he is supposed to have recommended involved a long detour to the south of the Aral Sea rather than directly across what is now northern Kazakhstan, thus avoiding traditional nomad territory. The obvious explanation for this is that the conditions in those grasslands were not safe. Pegolotti pointed out that when a Mongol ruler died the road was not safe for merchants until a new ruler was in power, and that since the route through nomadic territory was

48 While there may be something special about these two tombstones, if two names are selected at random from a community of a thousand, they would be unlikely to be siblings. If two names are selected at random from a community of a dozen, it is fairly likely. If two names are selected at random from one family, it is almost certain.

49 A name usually only implies some degree of descent through the male line. The South African-born cricket player Basil D’Oliveira is not, in the end, Portuguese.

50 These names are also the names of popular saints. Few Catholics would not have a Catherine, Dominic or Anthony among their immediate family.

51 It is even possible that “Vilionis” indicates the town where Dominic Vilioni was born, such as Vilnius in what is now Lithuania for example.

52 Francis Balducci Pegolotti, “Notices of the Land Route to Cathay and of Asiatic Trade in the First Half of the Fourteenth Century”, *Cathay and the Way Thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, translated and edited by Sir Henry Yule, Volume III, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1914), pp. 152.

53 Allan Evans, (1970), pp. xxvi-xxxix.

the least safe part of the trip he recommended travelling in a group of at least sixty.⁵⁴ Pegolotti also claimed that Mongols along the route from what is now the south-east of Turkey to Tabriz in the north-west of Iran would demand money amounting to a quarter of the expected costs of using the route.⁵⁵ Nor were these Mongols “raw” tribal Mongols, but the relatively well regulated soldiers of the Islamic Il-Khans, after many years of financial and administrative reform after the reign of Gazan (1271-1304).

The more important problem with Pegolotti’s account is that the text provides few details of the places between Iran and China or even of India. He does not discuss the wealth or sophistication of southern China as do the vast majority of other contemporary texts. While Pegolotti mentions the size of the capital, he does not refer to the wealth or sophistication of the commercial cities of the south such as Hangzhou.⁵⁶ This is made even more anomalous by the sheer scale of references to other places in Pegolotti’s book. Pegolotti provides the names of many obscure monasteries in Britain yet there is no mention of any place in China outside the three cities named on the trade route. It has been estimated that Pegolotti mentions between ten and fifteen thousand items including two hundred and eighty eight commodities for sale in Florence alone.⁵⁷ However he does not mention any good that could be obtained only in China such as tea, porcelain or any other typical Chinese product except silk which, by 1300, was being produced all over Eurasia.

The lack of porcelain is particularly unexpected as porcelain shards are robust enough to survive in archaeological sites and so consumption outside China is well attested. Chinese porcelain has been found in large quantities all around the Indian Ocean and down into East Africa.⁵⁸ It is well known that Chinese porcelain was desired

54 Pegolotti, (1914), pp. 152-154. Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World: Illustrative Documents Translated with Introductions and Notes*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 357-358.

55 Pegolotti, (1914), p. 164. Morris Rossabi (1990, pp. 356-357) arrived at a very different conclusion, but he has confused Pegolotti’s account of travel expenses between Europe and China (1916, p. 153) with his account of the duties levied on travellers between what is now south-east Turkey and north-west Iran (1916, pp. 159-164). Any estimate of the duties levied should be substantially greater, perhaps ten or twenty times greater. Rossabi claims (1990, p. 357) this was not oppressive, did not deter trade and did not add substantially to the merchant’s costs. The evidence Rossabi refers to does not support any of these three claims and, in fact, strongly suggests otherwise.

56 This is especially unusual compared to Odoric of Pordenone (2010, pp. 105-106, 113-115) who claimed that Guangzhou was “as big as three Venices” and had more shipping than the whole of Italy combined and that Hangzhou was the greatest city in the world with twelve suburbs each bigger than Venice. There is no credible reason why a European merchant would want to travel from the south to the poorer north.

57 Oliva Remie Constable, *Trade and traders in Muslim Spain: The commercial realignment of the Iberian peninsular, 900-1500* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 150.

58 Abu-Lughod, (1991), p. 327.

in the Middle East by wealthy Muslims.⁵⁹ Song Dynasty porcelain may have made it as far as Muslim Spain.⁶⁰ Porcelain should have been transported around Asia in the Yuan period and yet there is little evidence of it. David Whitefield has claimed that “we have no record of Chinese porcelain in Europe before the late 13th century and only two instances which are earlier than c. 1350.”⁶¹ However none of them are definitely Yuan pieces.⁶² There have been many finds of Song dynasty porcelain in Mongol Karakorum but almost no Islamic objects suggesting limited trade with Western Asia.⁶³ For the Yuan period, Michael Rogers writes, “before, we are lead to suppose, the overland route was largely supplanted by the sea route, we seem faced with an extraordinary blank....in the whole vast area of modern Turkey, I know of no recorded fragment of Chinese porcelain from a medieval site”.⁶⁴ The large collections of Chinese porcelain in Turkey at the Topkapi Palace and in Iran at the Ardebil Shrine contain virtually no Yuan period pieces and the vast majority of those come from the mid-fourteenth century when Mongol control of China was in decline.⁶⁵ An early examination of Fostat in Egypt turned up Tang and Song porcelain but very little that was Yuan. By way of contrast Ming porcelain in the Middle East is extremely common.⁶⁶ One author says “one cannot walk across the sandy approach to the Tombs of the Khaliphs[sic] without disturbing pieces of [Ming Blue and White] porcelain on the way”.⁶⁷ Given the demand, this lack of Yuan porcelain must be evidence of a lack of trade in the Yuan period compared to the flourishing trade both before and after the Mongols. A decline in trade is also supported by findings of Soviet archaeologists in the

59 See Te-k'un Cheng, *Studies in Chinese Ceramics*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), pp. 90-91, John Alexander Pope, *Chinese Porcelain from the Ardebil Shrine*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1956) and Takatoshi Misugi, *Porcelain Collections in the Near East: Topkapi and Ardebil*, (Hong Kong University Press, 1981).

60 Constable, (1996) p. 167.

61 David Whitehouse, “Chinese Porcelain in Medieval Europe”, *Medieval Europe*, Volume 16, (1972) p. 76.

62 The deposits from Lucera contained fragments from the Song dynasty (960-1279) although one bowl came from either the late Song or the Yuan. The will of Queen Maria contains no details that would even identify the porcelain as Chinese. See Whitehouse (1972), pp. 67-68.

63 Michael Rogers, “China and Islam”, in *Islam and the Trade of Asia: A Colloquium*, edited by D. S. Richards, (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1970), p. 69.

64 Rogers (1970), p. 70. Rogers also makes it clear that this is not because of a lack of scholarship or interest in the subject.

65 Misugi, (1981), Volume II, pp. 26, 33-84 TI-T30, Volume III, pp. 41, 43.

66 If it is true that the Ming government closed its doors to trade, it is odd that Ming, like Song, porcelain should be so common across Eurasia and yet Yuan porcelain is so rare. Compare with Nicola Di Cosmo, “Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A re-assessment of the Pax Mongolica”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Volume 53, Issue 1, (2010), p. 12.

67 R. L. Hobson, “Chinese Porcelain from Fostat”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Volume 61, Number 354 (September 1932), pp. 109-113.

Caucasus and Central Asian regions. While they found Song-dynasty porcelain, even from southern regions like Longquan and Jingdezhen, there is a lack of porcelain from, and a decline in urban centres during, the Yuan period.⁶⁸ Moreover within China itself the porcelain trade diminished, especially in the areas where the Mongol conquest was earliest. Margaret Medley has pointed out that, “after the Mongol invasion” Ding ware, for example, produced in Hebei under the Song and the Jin, “began to decline and the quality became noticeably worse” before closing down around 1300.⁶⁹ Even though Medley supports the idea that the Mongols protected a flourishing trade, she admits to the disappearance of virtually all the main porcelain producers in the North of China.⁷⁰

The lack of trade with China is also clear from the goods traded in the Crimea. Although Robert Lopez has claimed that Chinese silk was imported into Europe at this time, the legal records from Caffa he relies on do not once mention Chinese silk even by the generous interpretation of “Chinese” Lopez uses.⁷¹ Even if some genuine Chinese silk reached Europe there is no reason to think the Mongols were in any way responsible. Although Lopez claimed the first reference to Chinese silk imported into England occurred in 1304 there is evidence of Chinese silk in Britain well before the Mongol period. William Fitz Stephen (died c. 1190) listed Chinese silk as one of the products found in London around 1175.⁷² Conversely, there is little evidence of a large silk trade through the Crimea. Pegolotti’s book mentions silk as a product passing through Caffa, but it is mostly concerned with the traditional products of the Russian lands such as furs, hides, wheat and gold.⁷³ The price of silk in China was, according to the modern interpretation of Pegolotti, about 10 *aspri* for one Genoese pound. According to Lopez, Chinese silk sold in Europe for roughly three times the purchase price in China.⁷⁴ Yet according to Pegolotti the tax paid on silk at Tana alone was 15 *aspri* per Genoese pound. In other words if the combined costs, demands of

68 B. A. Shelkovnikov, “Kitaiskaia keramika iz raskopok srednevekovykh gorodov i poseleni Zakavkaz’ia, [Chinese Ceramics from the excavations of Middle Age cities and settlements of Transcaucasia]” *Sovetskaia arkheologiia* 21 (1954), p. 372. Ceramics from Longquan in Zhejiang and Jingdezhen in Jiangxi are unlikely to have moved over overland trade routes even if they existed.

69 Margaret Medley, *The Chinese Potter: A practical history of Chinese ceramics*, (Phaidon, 2006), p. 110.

70 Margaret Medley *Yüan Porcelain and Stoneware*, (London: Pittman, 1974) pp. 82-83. Margaret Medley, (2006) p. 103.

71 Lopez, (1977), pp. 448. Lopez claimed *catuxta*, *catuya*, *catewy* all referred to Chinese silk without providing any reason for this identification. See footnote 79 below.

72 Robert Sabatino Lopez, “Chinese Silk in Europe in the Yuan Period”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Volume 72, (1952), p. 74; C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, (1994), pp. 159-160; William Fitz Stephen, *Norman London*, (New York: Ithaca Press, 1990), p. 54.

73 Pegolotti, (1914), pp. 156-158.

74 Lopez, (1952) p. 75.

Mongol soldiers and other taxes along the route added up to just 5 *aspri* per Genoese pound, there would be no profit transporting Chinese silk to Tana. This basic fact was acknowledged by Lopez who drew the unusual conclusion that the silk trade must have been a large-scale enterprise. If the economics of the trade are so marginal it is more likely that the trade simply did not exist and the text does not refer to trade with China at all. This is also supported by the odd fact that “Chinese” silk was the cheapest on the market.⁷⁵ This consistent low price is explained in Pegolotti’s book by the fact that the silk was damaged in transit by rubbing against the ground and hedges.⁷⁶ This is highly unlikely as silk is a small-volume, high-value good and so it makes economic sense to take care of it and prevent damage. Lopez acknowledges this occurred, but does not explain why this was not enough to prevent damage.⁷⁷

The most likely explanation for these problems is that Pegolotti’s original text, if there ever was one, was altered during copying so that it appears to refer to China. There are two different terms used by Pegolotti that may refer to China: Ghattaiio and Cattua. The first refers to a country while the second is used to refer to a type of silk.⁷⁸ This suggests Pegolotti borrowed these passages from two different sources or they were intended to refer to two different places. Although the modern literature does not question whether these two terms refer to China, there are alternatives in the text. The most obvious are Gazaria in what is now southern Ukraine, or Cataria which Pegolotti used to refer to the region around Tabriz in north-west Iran.⁷⁹ Likewise “cattua” is likely to refer to a person or a product from “Cataria”.⁸⁰ The only detail that suggests Pegolotti intended to refer to China is the reference to paper money. Even this could have originally been a reference to the use of paper money in Iran.⁸¹

If Pegolotti was not referring to China, then he must have been referring to some other part of the world. There are parts of Pegolotti’s route that are too well established to be doubted. His route began at Tana (or Azov) on the mouth of the Don river and

75 Lopez, (1952), p. 74.

76 Lopez, (1952), p. 75. Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica Della Mercatura*, edited by Allan Evans, (New York: Krauss Reprints, 1970), p. 382.

77 Lopez refers to *scibetto*, a type of ox-skin used to wrap silk in transit.

78 Pegolotti, (1970), pp. 21-23, 41, 297, 300, 382. The references on pages 21-23 refer to the famous description of the route to China also translated by Sir Henry Yule. On page 297 “cattua” appears on a list of names for silks. On page 300 Pegolotti gives the tax on “cattua” silk. The only substantive reference is on page 382 which contains an improbable explanation of the low price for cattuan silk.

79 Pegolotti, (1970), pp. 29, 36, 41, 54. Gazaria is probably derived from the Khazars.

80 Pegolotti (1970), p. 29. Notice that if this identification is true Pegolotti’s text does not contain a single reference to China.

81 For the use of paper money in these regions see Karl Jahn, “Paper currency in Iran”, *Journal of Asian History*, Volume 4, (1970), pp. 101-135 and Sir Henry Yule’s comments in *Cathay and the Way Thither*, Volume III, (1914), pp. 149-150, note 2.

went to Gintarchan (Astrakhan at the mouth of the Volga).⁸² From there his route went up the Volga to Sara (Sarai) the Mongol capital and on to Saracanco (Sarachik, near the mouth of the Ural river). From this point Pegolotti's description becomes unusual if the roads are safe and the route is to China. Rather than moving East across the well-watered plains of Central Asia, the route goes south to Organci (Urgench on the Amu Darya river). From there he is traditionally supposed to travel to Oltrarre in what is now Kazakstan. From Oltrarre to Armalecco (traditionally interpreted as Kulja on the Ili river) would take forty-five days travelling by donkey. From Armalecco to Camexu (traditionally assumed to be Ganzhou in Gansu province) with donkeys would take seventy days. From Camexu to a "river" (usually assumed to be the Grand Canal) would take forty-five days by horse-back and this river would lead to Cassai (usually thought to be Hangzhou). It would then take another thirty days to reach Gamalecco (Cambalec, probably Khanbalik, "city of the Khan", usually assumed to be, roughly, Beijing).⁸³

The text itself gives inherently implausible details which suggest the route either does not refer to China or is based on a lack of detailed knowledge. Pegolotti recommended donkeys for the sections of the trip through the deserts of the former Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang. Donkeys are not well suited to cold deserts, do not carry heavy loads and are slow. In an arid climate where travellers might die if they failed to reach the next water source, the use of donkeys would pose special risks. Nor would fresh donkeys be available given Inner Asian nomads did not keep donkeys.⁸⁴ Donkeys have been used for trade in warm desert conditions, but they were replaced by camels.⁸⁵ Camels can carry about twice as much, travel roughly twice as fast and yet

82 A similar, but earlier account of this route is given in Robert-Henri Bautier, "Une Géographie des Courants Commerciaux Orient-Occident au Début du XIV^e Siècle (vers 1315?)", *Commerce méditerranéen et banquiers italiens au Moyen Age*, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), Part IV, pp. 311-320.

83 See Pegolotti, (1970), p. 21-23.

84 Barfield (1989, pp. 20-24), lists the animals commonly kept by Central Asian nomads as "sheep, goats, horses, cattle, camels and sometimes yaks". Donkeys are not mentioned. Nor are donkeys mentioned among the "five animals" kept by Mongols. See Bat-Ochir Bold, *Mongolian Nomadic Society: A reconstruction of the 'medieval' history of Mongolia*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Number 83, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), pp. 36-41.

85 The early Egyptian and Mesopotamian states did organise donkey caravans, but not once the camel had become available. For donkey caravans in early Iraq see Postgate (1994), pp. 165-166, 208, 210, 212, 215. Donkeys were used at the battle of Kadesh to carry supplies for both the Hittite and Egyptian Armies. See Anthony J. Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt: The New Kingdom*, (Blackwell: 2005), pp. 105, 217 and particularly Figure 13.1, p. 218.

need half as many workers per ton.⁸⁶ The use of horses within China is also unexpected. The problems that horses have posed for the Chinese is well attested and China has always been a horse-importing region.⁸⁷ Although Pegolotti's text is assumed to refer to the Grand Canal there is no reason why the text would call a canal a river and the Italian text itself provides no details.⁸⁸ There are also problems with the length of time given for the trip. Pegolotti claimed it would take about 260 days from the Crimea to Hangzhou which would cover some 4,600 miles as the crow flies. This is implausible given the indirect route and is not consistent with the experience of travellers such as Marco Polo. It took Owen Lattimore 137 days to travel 1587 miles over some of the same terrain by camel caravan.⁸⁹ The text is also confusing in that there is no reason why visitors to China would enter from the North-West, but then travel south to Hangzhou, before travelling north again to visit Beijing.

Given that every aspect of Pegolotti's description is wrong - involving the wrong animals, carrying the wrong goods, and moving faster than appears plausible - his book is unlikely to actually refer to China. Pegolotti's original intent was more likely to describe an alternative route to Tabriz, the then capital of Iran. This route would go across the north of the Caspian Sea and then loop around to the east before turning westward across the south of the Caspian to reach Tabriz *via* Amul ("Armalecco"), Zanjan (originally called Shahin, later renamed Zangan, "Camexu"), and Kashan or Qasvin ("Cassai"). In the contemporary Italian literature the link between "Cassan" and "Kashan" is strong with at least half a dozen references by Western travellers of

86 According to Ralph A. Austen, a donkey could carry 70 kilograms 15 to 20 miles a day and needed 2.5 men per ton. A camel could carry 120 to 150 kilograms 20 to 40 miles per day and needed 2 to 1.3 men per ton. See Table 10.5 in Ralph A. Austen, "Marginalization, stagnation, and growth: the trans-Saharan caravan trade in the era of European expansion, 1500-1900" in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: long-distance trade in the early modern world, 1350-1750*, edited by James D. Tracy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 329. Richard W. Bulliet's monograph on transport in the Islamic world (Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975) does not even give donkeys an entry in the index although the text refers to them briefly. Donkeys clearly played no significant role in long distance trade in Inner Asia.

87 A very good introduction to the problems of obtaining, rearing, and keeping horses in Song dynasty China is Paul J. Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse: horses, bureaucrats, and the destruction of the Sichuan tea industry, 1074-1224*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991)

88 It uses the Italian word "dalla" which would normally mean "from" rather than "by". "...e di Camesu insino che vieni a una fiumana che si chiama so a 45 giornate di cavallo. E dalla fiumana te ne puoi andare in Cassai" That is, instead of travelling *by* the Grand Canal, it is advising travellers that once they have crossed the river, it would take an unspecified time to reach "Cassai" *from* the river. It is unfortunate that the name of the river has not been preserved.

89 Owen Lattimore, *The Desert Road to Turkestan*, (New York: Kodansha American, 1990), p. 360.

the period.⁹⁰ Tabriz was also the seat of the Il-Khans and so could be described as a “Khanbalik” in the same way that Constantinople used to be known as Tsargrad or Vienna as Kaiserstadt. Indeed near-by Soltaniyeh is simply the Persian form of the Turkic Khanbalik. It is far more likely that donkeys were used to travel in the mountains of northern Iran rather than for crossing the deserts of Central Asia, while horses would have been abundant on the plains of Azerbaijan.⁹¹ This reading would also give a degree of coherency to Pegolotti’s work. As it stands now, it consists of four parts: the journey to China, the world of the Black Sea, the route across Syria to Tabriz and a description of what is now Great Britain. If the journey does not refer to China, then the book would consist of a description of trade with the Il-Khanate (including the southern route to Tabriz through Syria and a northern route from the Black Sea, across modern Ukraine and the east coast of the Caspian Sea) as well as a description of Britain and so reflect those places Pegolotti knew from personal experience.

The most likely beginning for the tradition of assuming the text referred to China was when it passed through the hands of Giovanni Battista Ramusio (July 20, 1485 – July 10, 1557). Ramusio produced versions of Marco Polo’s book that differ in many important ways from other texts.⁹² His attitude to Marco Polo was also shaped by the success of other European countries to the West.⁹³ Ramusio compares Polo’s trip with that of Christopher Columbus and so compares Spanish achievements with Italian ones,

And often in my own mind, comparing the land explorations of these our Venetian gentlemen with the sea explorations of the aforesaid Signor Don Christopher, I have asked myself which of the two were really the more marvelous. And if patriotic delude me not, methinks good reason might be adduced for setting the land journey above the sea voyage. Indeed that the difficulty of travelling to Cathay was so much greater than that of reaching the New World, and the route so much longer and more perilous,

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- 90 There is no textual support for the identification of the cities along Pegolotti’s route from within Pegolotti’s text. See Giosofat Barbaro, *Travels to Tana and Persia, and a narrative of Italian travels in Persia in the 15th and 16th centuries*, edited by Henry Edward John Stanley and Charles Grey, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1:72; “The Travels of the Magnificent M. Ambrosio Contarini”, 2:129; “Travels of a Merchant in Persia”, 5:171; “Narrative of the Most Noble Vicentio D’Alessandri” 6:228. Odoric of Pordenone also refers to Kashan as Cassan. Odoric of Pordenone, (2010), p. 50.
- 91 There is ample evidence of donkeys among the nomads of Iran. See Fredrik Barth, *Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri tribe of the Khamseh confederacy* (Waveland Press, 1986), pp. 6, 13-15 Lois Beck, *Nomad: a year in the life of a Qashqa’i tribesman in Iran*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 481.
- 92 Yule (1993), pp. 96-102. Giovanni Battista Ramusio (July 20, 1485 – July 10, 1557) was not a scholar, but a Venetian official as well as a collector of early travel accounts. He is the sole source of much of what we think we know of Marco Polo. See John Critchley, *Marco Polo’s Book*, (Variorum 1992) pp. 36-37, 67, 130.
- 93 Ramusio’s work is a largely collection of great *Italian* explorers. So he is at pains to point out Christopher Columbus was Genoese and Amerigo Vespucci Florentine. See Critchley, (1999), pp.131-32

may be gathered from the fact that, since those gentlemen twice made this journey, no one from Europe has dared to repeat it....⁹⁴

Patriotism may make for poor scholarship as it would only take a little wishful thinking while looking at a difficult handwritten text to see Marco Polo's "Cassai" rather than Odoric's "Cassan". Once Ramusio's interpretation became dominant, it has persisted even when scholars refer to the older Frescobaldi text.⁹⁵ Modern scholars seem to have uncritically adopted apologetics aimed at the Spanish and Portuguese, as well as struggles for prestige between different Italian regions, most notably Genoa and Venice.⁹⁶

If the *Pax Mongolica* is rejected as a theory, some other explanation of the exchanges in this period is required. What is clear is that there is a long history of trade between the Mediterranean and Asia that pre-dates the Mongols. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, people from the Mediterranean world had few problems travelling to India and on to China.⁹⁷ However during the Middle Ages, Western references to China become rare until the Portuguese managed to sail around the Cape of Good Hope. By contrast there is ample evidence of Muslims and Jews from the Arab world trading by sea as far as China even with mundane goods such as dried figs.⁹⁸ Although

94 Yule (1993), pp. 3-4.

95 For instance, Yule uses the 1472 Frescobaldi text but does not question the link to China.

96 Ramusio also seems to continue a feud with Genoa that Polo himself does not. See Critchley (1999), p. 36.

97 For a brief mention of an Indian embassy to Trajan see Dio Cassius *Roman History* (First Published by Loeb, 1914-1927, Reprinted, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 388-389. The famous Roman work, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (see Casson, 2012, pp. 75, 81, 85) also mentions regular trade with India mainly through Egyptian ports on the Red Sea. Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* contains many references to China such as a famous complaint about the expense of importing Chinese products such as silk. He also mentions Roman merchants who had been to China and even the import of bulk commodities such as Chinese iron. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A selection*, translated by John F. Healy, (Penguin, 2004), pp. 64, 68, 169, 320, 377. Ammianus Marcellinus mentions Chinese merchandise being "regularly" brought to Batne on the Euphrates "in great abundance" as well as a possible mention of the Great Wall. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (First Published by Loeb: 1935-1940, Reprinted Harvard University Press, 1989), XIV:3:3, I:24-25; XXIII:6:64, II:384-385. For other examples see Andre Tchernia, "The Dromedary of the Peticii and Trade with the East" in *Crossings: Early Mediterranean contacts with India*, edited by Frederico Romanis and Andre Tchernia, (New Delhi: Manohar: 1997), pp. 238-249, Lionel Casson, "Rome's Trade with the East: the sea voyage to Africa and India", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), Volume 110, (1980), pp. 21-36.

98 Oliva Remie Constable, *Trade and traders in Muslim Spain: The commercial realignment of the Iberian peninsula, 900-1500* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 59, 220. Shelomo D. Goitein makes it clear that Europeans did not take part in the Indian trade. See S. D. Goitein, "Mediterranean Trade preceding the Crusades: Some facts and problems", *Diogenes*, Number 59 (1967), pp. 47-62. Claims of Jewish merchants travelling to China depend on one single source. See Norman A. Stilman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), pp. 163-164. Stilman also records an account of the massacre of the Jewish Banu Qurayza (c. 627 A.D.) in Medina that refers to a Chinese mirror.

often his views are often disputed, the inability of Europeans to go to China between the Roman period and Vasco da Gama was explained by Henri Pirenne as a result of the Muslim invasions of North Africa, which cut the Mediterranean world into two:

The cause of the break with tradition of antiquity was the rapid and unexpected advance of Islam. The result of this advance was the final separation of East from West, and the end of Mediterranean unity. The Western Mediterranean, having become a Musulman[sic] lake, was no longer the thoroughfare of commerce and of thought it had always been.⁹⁹

While Pirenne's political and cultural arguments may be problematic, his economic theory works well as an explanation for this period. Since the rise of Islam, Christian merchants had not been able to travel freely through Muslim lands. The merchants who had traded with Asia under Rome likely continued to do so after the rise of Islam, but they had converted and now identified as Muslim Arabs.¹⁰⁰ For a short period the still-animist Mongols wanted European help against the Muslims states of the Middle East and so were willing to adopt a pro-trade policy likely to impress the merchants of Europe.¹⁰¹ Thus in this period Europeans were able to travel about the Persian lands with a tiny number striking out towards India by sea. As the Mongol successor kingdoms converted to Islam, Europeans became confined once more to the ports of the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. Thus the Mediterranean-wide civil war between Islam and Christianity, as well as the endemic violence of Eurasia's nomads, are most likely to be responsible for the lack of direct trade between Europe and East Asia from the rise of Islam to the Da Gama Era, including the Mongol period.

Even though some very ambitious theories have been erected on the basis of Pegolotti's writings, this is unjustifiable as it does not appear to refer to China at all. Far from providing a safe passage between China and Europe, there is simply no evidence that the Mongols allowed the land routes they controlled to be used for trade. This is especially true of the northern land route through traditional nomad territory, now part of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Russia. Although this northern route might have been intermittently open for diplomats, the overall impact appears largely irrelevant to trade as no Western merchant seems to have travelled along it. Such contacts did exist, were

99 Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, (Originally published London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954, Reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 2001) p. 284.

100 As good examples of this, Niccolò de' Conti (1395–1469) and probably Afanasy Nikitin (d. 1472) could travel to India and beyond once they had converted to Islam. Both travelled by boat rather than among nomads. Nikitin in particular suffered a great deal of violence from nomads in the Caspian region.

101 Although Nicola Di Cosmo (2010) implies that the Mongols were interested in trade, what he does show is the interest of Venice and Genoa in trade agreements with the Mongols. William of Rubruck discusses the Mongol's traditional view of peace as total surrender as well as their willingness to partition the Middle East with the Europeans. Rubruck (1990), pp, 185-186, 248. Discussions of European-Mongol diplomacy are common, but a very good introduction is Igor de Rachewiltz, (1971).

mostly involuntary, as in the case of the slaves taken back to Mongolia, or religious and diplomatic, and so, either way, unconnected with merchants and commerce. In short although the Mongol conquests resulted in the mass transfer of populations about Eurasia and allowed a few Europeans missionaries to reach East Asia, it did not result in any particular degree of regular and safe contact, let alone commerce. There is no evidence of European trade with East Asia except what appears to be few Italian manuscripts altered by patriotic hands. There is simply no evidence of a *Pax Mongolica* in the surviving literature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help of a wide range of people in producing this article. Chen Zhinan and Pang Fan and the Library Staff at UNNC led by Lulu Qiu were all outstanding in obtaining rare documents. The support of my former Head of School Catherine Goetze was vital to this work. Yana Grebennikova provided help with the Russian sources. Earlier drafts benefited from comments from Anne Geddes formerly at the University of Adelaide and Sergey Radchenko now at Cardiff University.

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