

EXPLORERS IN THE MIDDLE AGE: MARCO POLO.

HE who has carefully studied the Middle Age knows that it was not the period of darkness which many suppose it to have been. He realizes that it was in this epoch that many of our most useful inventions were evolved; that many of our most prized institutions originated. Therefore he is not surprised when he learns that from the depths of the often alleged Cimmerian darkness there issued a genius, or rather an associated trio of them, who contributed more to geographical and ethnological science, than had resulted from all the voyages and conquests of the preceding thirty centuries. The children of the nineteenth century, sometimes reasonably and often preposterously complacent toward its wonders, may well exult over its geographical conquests, so brilliantly prosecuted by a Livingstone, for instance, or a De Brazza. But they seem to forget that from the day on which these explorers set forth on their expeditions, until they returned, their chief means of success were things which had originated in the Middle Age. From that needlessly pitied epoch were derived the bills of exchange which facilitated their travels until they had reached the limits of civilization. From the same source came the compass, with which they guided their course through arid desert and trackless jungle. Thence also came the gunpowder with which they were more than a match for numerically superior foes, and which enabled them to remove the otherwise insurmountable obstacles which nature had placed in their way. *Unicuique suum.* We propose, in this brief sketch, to introduce the reader to three of the most enterprising and intrepid explorers whom the world has known; and they were men of the thirteenth century. Before these heroes of science made their voyages, Europeans knew very little concerning the immense countries of eastern Asia. Many Catholic missionaries, notably the physician Philip, sent in 1177 by Pope Alexander III. to the "Priest-King" of Karait; the Dominicans sent by Pope Innocent IV. to Persia, in 1245; the Franciscans sent by the same Pontiff to the great Ghengis Khan; had furnished Europe with little information about the States which they had tried to evangelize. All remembrance of ancient geographical discoveries in the East—such as they were—had vanished from the West during that period of transition in which the Catholic Church was forming a new civilization out of the remnants of ancient Roman culture, the unpromising material exhi-

bited by our barbarian ancestors, and her own spirit. All honor, therefore, to Nicolao, Maffeo, and Marco Polo, who put an end to an ignorance of geography nearly as dense as that of Homer, for whom the Mediterranean was the greatest of seas, and the Pillars of Hercules the "thus far, and no further" of the world.

I.

Before giving any account of the travels of the three Poli, it may be as profitable as interesting to note one of the most romantic attempts of missionary enterprise, and therefore of geographical exploration, which the Christian world had hitherto seen. We allude to the matter of the Priest-King John, a personage whom some have regarded, with no good reason, as merely legendary. Until comparatively modern times, Abyssinia was supposed to have been the kingdom subject to this monarch; but now it is certain that his dominion was in Tartary, to the north of what is now known as China. From the very first days of their existence as a putrid branch, cut off from the mystic Body of Christ (year 431), the Nestorians had endeavored to propagate their tenets in the far East, despairing of any success in the West. That they succeeded, to some extent, during the seventh century, in planting the Cross in China, is evident from an inscription found in 1625 in Singan-fu.¹ In the early days of the eleventh century, these schismatics converted a king of Kerait, and ordained him to the priesthood.² This monarch then assumed the title of the "Priest-King," and his successors continued to glory in it. That the title was not merely honorific, but indicative of a real priesthood on the part of these successors, would appear from the recognition of it, given, as we shall observe, by a Roman Pontiff. In illustration of the real position of these Priest-Kings on the stage of life, we may adduce the deputation of Armenians, headed by a Syrian bishop, which waited upon Pope Eugenius III., then resident in Viterbo, in 1145. This deputation reminded the Pontiff that in the distant regions of Eastern Asia there was a powerful monarch, who was also a Christian priest. This sovereign, the bishop declared, claimed to be a descendant of one of the three Magi; and he then ruled, insisted the prelate, over the same territories which, accord-

¹ The best disquisition on this inscription is one inserted by Zaccaria in his valuable *Raccolta di Dissertazioni sulla Storia Ecclesiastica*, Rome, 1790.

² Among the missionaries sent by St. Louis of France into the East, was the Franciscan, Rubuquis, whose interesting narrative is given by Bergeron, in his *Recueil des Voyages en Asie*. This friar thought, and the Protestant Mosheim agrees with him, that the King-Priest was a Nestorian missionary who (and this remark reminds us of the Protestant so-called "missionaries" in the Sandwich Islands) seized the throne, and left the peculiar title to his descendants. But according to the legend which Rubuquis found current in the East, this supposition is ill-founded.

ing to the traditions obtaining among their peoples, had been governed by those holy first adorers of our Lord. The magnificence of the Priest-King of that day, continued the Syrian, was scarcely describable, but one could form some idea of it from the fact that milk and honey flowed freely in his dominions; that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were under his sway; that his palace was constructed on the model of that which the Apostle Thomas designed for King Gundafor of the Indies; that every day thirty-two bishops dined with him; that his chief butler was primate of the realm, and also a king; and that his chief cook was both abbot and king. And finally, the Pope might realize the power of the priestly sovereign from the fact that lately he had written to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel, commanding that ruler to pay him the homage of a vassal. If the reader smiles at this description, he may fear that his incredulity has been premature, when he reflects that the story made some impression upon Cardinal James de Vitry (b. 1207), a shrewd thinker, and author of one of the best historical works ever penned.¹ Writing to Pope Honorius III., his Eminence said: "Seraph, brother of King Corradin of Damascus, has retreated before an invasion by the king of the Indies. This shrewd, powerful, and victorious monarch, whom the Lord has raised up in our day to be a scourge to the Mohammedans, is David, whom the people style Priest-John. . . . He is, at present, distant from Antioch only a three days' march, and hopes to capture Jerusalem, after he has forced the sultanate of Iconium and the intermediate states to submit to the Christian law."² The great annalist, Baronius, records a letter of Pope Alexander III. to a king of Karait, who bore the title of Priest-John.³ This document was entrusted to a physician, named Philip, who had already visited Karait, and who was then ordered to return thither, as an Apostolic Legate. The Pontiff is careful to address the monarch as his "Most dear son, the illustrious and magnificent king of the Indies, and most holy of priests." His Holiness says that he has learned that the king is noted for his Christian charity, and that he desires to enter into communion with the Apostolic See, thereby professing the true faith; that he also wishes to have a church in Jerusalem devoted to the use of his subjects, so that they may be indoctrinated as to the discipline of the Holy Roman Church. Therefore, concludes the Pope, the physician Philip has been commissioned as Papal Delegate to the said Priest-King, with authority to grant all proper favors. Unfortunately, there are no documents to show what was the result of this embassy. The last of the line

¹ *Historia Occidentalis et Orientalis*, Douay, 1597.

² D'Achery, *Spicilegium*, vol. iii., p. 590.

³ At year 1177, Nos. 32 to 36.

of the Priest-Kings was conquered and killed in 1202, by Ghengis-Khan.

II.

In the year 1250, two Venetian merchants, Nicolao and Maffeo Polo, having disposed very advantageously of a cargo in Constantinople, invested the profits in jewels, and turned to the Orient to seek their fortunes. At the mouth of the Volga they were cordially welcomed by a khan named Barca, and sold their jewels for double their value. Then they travelled over deserts, finding here and there only nomadic Tartars, until they arrived at Bokhara, where they were forced to remain three years. At the end of that time there came to Bokhara an envoy of Kublai-Khan, the grandson of Ghengis-Khan, and sovereign of the Mongol Tartars. This dignitary conceived a great affection for the Latin adventurers, and invited them to accompany him to the court of his master. They assented, and after a journey of twelve months in a northeasterly direction, they found Kublai at Chemen-Fu. Intense was the joy of the Grand Khan when he embraced the sons of the Queen of the Adriatic. He displayed much anxiety to learn all about the Roman Pontiff and the organization of the Catholic Church; and when, twelve years afterward, the visitors took leave, he appointed them his ambassadors to the Holy See, charging them to procure for his veneration some of the oil from the lamp which hung before the Sepulchre of Christ. He also begged them to see that the Pope sent missionaries to his Tartar and Chinese subjects; for, he added, he could not hope to civilize them through any aid from the lethargic Eastern schismatics, and he had still less confidence in the Llamas of Thibet.¹ After three more years of travel, the Poli reached a port of lesser Armenia, called Laias; and thence they sailed to St. Jean d'Acre, the ancient Ptolemaide, from which place their further voyage was easy. When they arrived at Venice, after an absence of twenty years, they found it irksome to settle down again to the commonplaces of a cultured life, and soon yearned for more experiences of something exciting. Naturally they thought of returning to Kublai; but this they dared not do, unless they fulfilled that monarch's commissions to the Holy See. But the Papal Chair was then vacant, and the Conclave appeared to be in no haste to fill it. Therefore, these born explorers determined to depart at once, and to visit Palestine, on

¹ The reader may be surprised at the courtesy of Kublai toward his Christian guests, but all the earlier successors of Ghengis-Khan were just as favorable. This fact may be explained by the marriage of Ghengis to the daughter of the Priest-King whom he had killed; by the marriage of his son, Oktai, to another Christian; and by the conversion of his heir, Dschagotai, to Christianity, through the influence of these women.

their way, there to lay the khan's requests before the Papal Legate. But in this journey they took a companion.

On the arrival of Nicolao at his home, he had found that his wife, whom he had left with child in 1250, had borne him a fine, robust, and intelligent boy, who was called Marco. This was the youth who was destined to reveal to Europe the wonders of China, India, and Japan. It was a terrible time for a traveller in Western Asia and Northern Africa, when, in 1271, the three Poli started on the exploration which has rendered the name of Marco, at least, so famous.¹ That they carried their lives in their hands, is evident from the following letter, written in 1270 by the Mameluke sultan, Bibars, to King Bohemond of Antioch: "We entered Antioch, scimeter in hand, on the fourth day of the Ramadan. Why were you not there, to see your knights crushed under the hoofs of my horses, your palaces sacked and reduced to ashes, your treasures seized and weighed, your women sold, your temples burned, your crosses trampled under foot, your Holy of Holies profaned by your Islamite foe, your priests and monks slaughtered at the altars, your princes of the blood-royal dragged into slavery? Had you been there, you would have asked heaven to reduce you to dust." But the intrepid Venetians were not deterred by the state of affairs indicated in this ferocious communication. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they made known to Cardinal Theobald Visconti, the Papal Legate, the desires of Kublai-Khan; and while arrangements were being made to satisfy them, news came that the cardinal had been elected to the pontifical throne. Therefore it was Pope Gregory X., now venerated as Blessed, who appointed two Carmelite friars, men of artistic tastes and sound theologians, to carry the Cross into China.² Having bidden a long farewell to civilization for the second time, the two elder Poli encouraged the lad who was now making his first essay at exploration; but Marco needed but little incentive other than his own insatiable curiosity. As to courage, patience, and above all, resignation to the will of God, he proved himself even superior to his more seasoned relatives. Our adventurers passed safely through the countries subject to the savage Bibars, and May, 1275, found them at Kaiping-Fu, the summer residence of Kublai. Their four years of

¹ It is strange that Columbus never mentions, in his writings, the name of Marco Polo, especially since he often has passages which are evidently taken from that traveller's book. In the time of the great Genoese, the work of Polo had not yet become popular, for Ramusio had not yet taken it in hand. But probably Columbus learned Marco's experiences through the medium of the writings of Toscanelli, Nicola dei Conti, and Cardinal d'Ailly.

² These Carmelites soon became discouraged, and returned to Europe. In 1246, another Italian missionary, Piano Carpini, had entered China, but his narratives were very meagre.

travel had been fraught with peril of every kind ; but we are obliged to omit any account of their experience before their arrival at the court of the Grand Khan. If the reader is surprised at the length of time consumed by the journey of the Poli from Palestine to Kaiping-Fu, we can, perhaps, explain the fact by some information received at the time of our present writing, concerning a similar journey just completed. In the early part of 1891, two Calmuck Tartars, Buddhists in religion, left their homes in the Russian province of Astrakhan on the Volga, on a mission to the sacred city of Lhassa in Thibet. After incredible hardships, it took them, despite their knowledge of Mongol languages, three years to make the journey. Let us imagine, then, what the Poli had to endure before they rested at Kaiping-Fu.

The sovereign immediately invited his Christian guests to enter his service, and the offer was accepted. Kublai was especially attracted by the talents and engaging qualities of Marco ; and soon he promoted the youth, despite his inexperience in practical matters, to a seat in the Privy Council. Marco was employed, during the first few years of his service, in tabulating the statistics of the vast Celestial Empire ; and this important work entailed upon him what was to a man of his temperament the most pleasant of tasks, visits and protracted residence in the most distant provinces. He became well acquainted with Thibet ; far better, most probably, than any Caucasian of our day. He knew thoroughly the vast land of Yunnan, scarcely known at all by us. For three years he was governor of Yangchou. He witnessed and helped to procure the fall of the Chinese dynasty of the Sung ; and very much of the success of Kublai in that enterprise was due to engines manufactured by the Poli, machines which threw stone balls weighing three hundred pounds. When Kublai resolved to undertake the conquest of Japan, he relied chiefly upon the aid of his Venetian friends ; and it is very probable that he would have succeeded, had he not been forced to abandon his design because of rebellions at home and the destruction of his naval armament by a tempest. After a residence of fifteen years in China, the Poli signified to Kublai their wish to return to their beautiful Italy ; but the venerable sovereign hesitated to grant the permission. Finally, he became reconciled to what was a very reasonable wish ; and as he had just then received an embassy from the Shah of Persia, sent to ask for the hand of an imperial princess, and since the Poli had pronounced a voyage by sea to Persia to be feasible, he appointed them ambassadors to convey the lady to her new home. They bore with them two golden tablets inscribed with an imperial order that they should everywhere be treated like sovereigns ; and they also carried a letter to the Roman Pontiff, in which Kublai

said that he had learned to prefer the religion taught by Rome to his own. However, he manifested no intention of embracing the appreciated faith. Fourteen vessels, "each with four masts and twelve sails," bore the Poli, the princess, and their retinues—six hundred persons, not counting the sailors—from the port of Zaiton on the eastern coast of China. In three months they touched the coast of Java. Then they sailed to Ceylon, and afterward to the mainland, Hindostan, which Marco calls "Greater India." Madagascar was also visited, and the African continent, which is styled "Lesser India." Finally, after a voyage of eighteen months, during which their retinues had been diminished by sickness to eighteen persons, the Poli and the princess bade each other farewell at Ormus on the coast of Arabia. Our indefatigable travellers now set out overland for further adventures. Turning toward the Caspian, they visited Tauris, and remained there nine months. Then they stopped awhile at Trebizond, then at Constantinople, and at length arrived in Venice in the year 1295. The elder Poli had been travelling forty-five years, and Marco twenty-four, in countries which were, nearly all, hitherto unknown to Europeans, and they had never met with a serious accident.

When the Poli presented themselves at their olden residence in the Via di San Giovanni Crisostomo, they found it occupied by certain relatives, who, since the travellers were supposed to have attained immortality some time before, had entered upon the rights of the next of kin. When they declared their identity, they only excited an explosion of incredulous laughter. The idea of those haggard wretches in Mongolian clothing, and that in tatters, claiming to be Venetian gentlemen! And how could they dare to hope that their leathery skins, their goodness-knows what of the Mongolian in expression, the slantingness of their eyes, their purring and other cat-like manners, would ever be mistaken for Caucasian attributes? To jail with the impostors! But Marco soon convinced the doubting Thomases of the truth of his claims. He produced the money wherewith to furnish an elegant banquet to an immense assembly of those whom his father and uncle had known in the olden time; and when the guests had arrived, the Poli appeared in garments of gorgeous hue, the finest texture, and ultra-fashionable style. Then leading the way to the tables, they seated the company; and flinging off their trappings, they shone in garments of still greater splendor, and gave their previous clothes to the menials. Again they performed the lightning change act at the end of the feast; and the now good-humored relatives began to suspect that the eccentric hosts might be, after all, what they claimed to be. Finally, Marco produced the rags in which his party had come to Venice; and from many hidden pockets he

brought forth handfuls of precious stones of every kind and of such purity and size as had never before been seen in the West. Then indeed the bewildered guests swore that the claimants were true Poli, the Simon pure article.

An active and adventurous life was a necessity to Marco Polo; therefore it is not strange that we find him, in 1295, in command of a Venetian galley at the battle of Curzola, fighting against the Genoese. Here, together with 7000 of his countrymen, he was made prisoner, and held in close confinement for twenty-five years. But this terrible misfortune was a benefit to Venice, and indeed to all Europe; for it was in order to alleviate the torments of prison ennui that Marco composed the narrative of his travels. He obtained his liberty in 1328, and saw his eightieth year before the angel of death bade him relinquish his checkered career. The book written by Marco Polo, which soon came to be known as the *Millione*,¹ was long regarded by many as a mere collection of fables, worthy of no more credit than we now accord to the romances woven around the shadowy form of the mythical King Arthur, or to the legend of William Tell. And in modern times, the Protestant mania for a decrial of all good, and of nearly all science, in the age of faith, confirmed this notion. But the investigations of competent and impartial critics have shown that three centuries before the modern "emancipation" of humanity from the presumed thralldom of Rome, three mediæval travellers had traversed the entire width of Asia, described all its kingdoms and their institutions, even the then new court of Cambalu, now Peking. Polo is now regarded by the best judges as an authority in matters of olden Chinese and Persian history. He made men familiar with the rich manufactures, the immense cities, and the majestic rivers of China; he spoke of the gentle monks of Thibet;² he described the shining pagodas of Burmah; he dilated on the beauties of that Indian Archipelago which moderns do not yet know perfectly; he made men tremble with his pictures of the man-eating savages of Sumatra; he told of the precious gems of Ceylon, and of the supposed tomb of Adam in that interesting island; and he gave to the European world a very different idea of what occurred under the burning sun of Hindostan, from that they had derived from the Alexandrian fables. Ridicule was his portion when he described the wonders of the Polar regions, as he had heard them depicted by men from Siberia;

¹ In his prologue to the *Millione*, Ramusio tells us that the stories of Marco Polo about the wealth of Cathay and the magnificence of the Grand-Khan so constantly harped upon "millions" of ducats, that the name of *Messer Millione* was given to the narrator, and hence to his book.

² It is noteworthy that although Polo is merciless toward the schisms and heresies which distracted Christendom, he shows much sympathy for those peoples who have not heard the doctrines of Christ.

and let us not deem this ridicule blameworthy in his first readers, for while we are comparatively familiar with Polar bears, Esquimaux, trained dogs, and reindeer, our own almost immediate forefathers did not believe in them.

The first Jesuit missionaries to China (year 1584) surprised Europeans by their account of the coal burnt by the Chinese, "a bituminous stone which kindles easily, and furnishes a stronger and more lasting heat than that emitted by carbon." Three centuries before this was written, Polo had told his countrymen about "black rocks which are found in veins, and which are used exclusively by the people of Cathay for heating and cooking." He also showed the Westerns how the Chinese used what we know as paper money. "The imperial money factory is in Cambalu, and one would credit the Grand-Khan with a knowledge of magic, for his money is made of strips of bark. Each piece is stamped with the names of different officials, and having been thus authenticated, it must be received by all as good, under pain of death." It was, in all probability, through the narrative of Polo that the art of printing was finally disseminated in Europe. For whether that art was practiced first by Castaldi of Feltre, or by the Dutch priest Coster, or by that priest's disciple, Gutenberg,¹ it is more than likely that the idea of printing with movable types was first excogitated by men who had seen the xylographic prints which Polo brought from the Celestial Empire. Polo's description of Peking, as he saw it, is interesting. The imperial palace, built by Kublai-Khan, formed a square, each side of which was a mile in length. The walls of most of the rooms were covered with gold and silver, and there were "many beautiful sculptures, illustrating tales of knights and ladies, and many of the sculptures were of birds and beasts." In the grand hall, 6000 persons often dined at the same time. On the outside, the palace was covered with paint of vermilion, purple and green hues, and the varnish shone like crystal. Through the luxuriant gardens of the palace flowed a wide river, "so netted, that no fish could escape." The reader is informed that when the emperor hears of any especially fine tree, no matter how tall it is, and how far off it is, "it is transplanted, branches and all, to the imperial gardens, elephants being used for that purpose." The capital was twenty-four miles in circumference, and its walls were pierced by ten openings, in which hung brazen gates, and near each one of which was a splendid palace. At nightfall, a tremendous bell was rung thrice, and from that moment until sun-

¹ We leave Faust out of the question, for he seems to have been merely an adroit speculator, who appropriated the plans of Gutenberg which this enterprising man had perfected from the ideas of Coster; if, indeed, he had not learned the secret, as the *Chronicles of Feltre* assert, from the humanist, Panfilio Castaldi.

rise, "no person could leave home, unless to summon a physician for a lying-in woman or for some other person dangerously ill." When the Grand-Khan was in residence, 40,000 men took all their meals in his palace. "And you must know that when he dines, great barons are the waiters, and their mouths and nostrils are covered by beautiful silk napkins, so that their breath may not taint the viands of their sovereign." Perhaps Shakespeare had been reading Polo's book, just before he thought of putting on the lips of Denmark's king an order for plenty of noise, because his Majesty was about to drink to Hamlet. For the Venetian says that "whenever the Grand-Khan drinks, all the musical instruments, and there are very many, are sounded." And no persons, even of the most exalted rank, could stand or sit while their dread lord was imbibing. "All fall on their knees with great humility." When the birthday of the emperor was celebrated, the imperial tunic was "of beaten gold, and each one of the 12,000 barons and knights in attendance wore similar, though not so costly, apparel." It is well to know, however, that "all these garments, as well as the cinctures of gold, were imperial gifts," and that Kublai distributed them to all his courtiers thrice a year. We have observed that Marco Polo carefully tabulated the statistics of the Celestial Empire. Excluding Corea, which was, even at that early period, an independent state, save only in the matter of a small tribute, he calculated the population as 59,000,000. If we observe the rate at which the population of Western countries has increased since the thirteenth century, we need not wonder that many think that the Celestials now number nearly five hundred millions.

After one has read the quaint, but carefully penned recital of Marco Polo, which often appears to have come down to us from the author of the "Arabian Nights," he is not astonished when he learns that the traveller's friends besought him, when he was at the point of death, "to retract his lies, for the good of his soul." But time has verified nearly all his assertions; and if we consider the inadequacy of the means at his disposal, we must pronounce him the peer, at least, of any explorer of modern times.⁴

REUBEN PARSONS, D.D.

⁴ As an illustration of the manner in which the narrative of Polo was at first received, we cite the following commentary subjoined to a codex of the fourteenth century. "Here ends the book of Messer Marco Polo of Venice, transcribed by me, Amelio Bonaguasi, with my own hand, while I was magistrate in Cieretto Guidi, in order to drown melancholy and to pass the time. The contents appear incredible to me; not that they are necessarily lies, but because they seem so miraculous. They may be true, but I do not credit them; although, of course, it is certain that things are different in different countries. While copying these tales, they certainly interested me, but I deem them unworthy of belief. At any rate, that is my opinion. And I completed this copy at Cieretto aforesaid, on Nov. 12, 1392."