Pre-print

"Travel and Travelers in Medieval Eurasia"

This is an unedited manuscript version of an essay written under a tight deadline for a *Historical Atlas of Central Eurasia* in 2006. The book is supposed to be published by Cynthia Parzych Publishing. Each essay is to introduce several maps drawn specially for the atlas. Since the maps have not yet been drawn, none are included here; since it is not at all clear that the book will ever see the light of day, I decided it would make sense to post this essay as a "pre-print." No effort has been made to update it.

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Travel and Travelers in Medieval Eurasia

Pre-modern travelers in Central Eurasia were numerous, but few left a record of where they went and what they saw. The purposes of travel—economic, political, or religious—were eminently practical and might not require that the results be documented in the way we expect of modern exploration. Of necessity, our focus here is what we can learn from written accounts which open but a narrow window into the larger world of Eurasian travel.

When should we begin our narrative? The archaeological record attests to active exchange across Eurasia going back several millennia. Lacking written materials we can only hypothesize about patterns of exchange possibly involving long-distance travel but more likely a series of linked interactions over shorter distances. The written record, when it appears, informs us first of all about the peripheries of inner Asia. For example Herodotus' account concerning Western Asia in the fifth century BCE describes interactions on the ill-defined borders of Central Eurasia and the cultures of the steppe peoples with whom the Greeks dealt. Alexander the Great's conquests in the late fourth century BCE provided new first-hand information about the western half of Asia and created the mechanisms for the penetration of Hellenic culture even to the towns in the Tarim Basin. Active Roman trade with the East in succeeding centuries along caravan routes through Mesopotamia and in the Indian Ocean expanded knowledge of the products of Asia and their places of their origin. However, little was yet known about inner Asia and the Far East. There is no solid evidence of direct relations between Rome and Han China, least of all by overland routes.

The view from East Asia about the lands along the roads to the West is not dissimilar from the western prespective. Our main written source about early inner Asian nomads is the Chinese annals, which filter personal observation and official records through the lens of sedentary biases. Diplomatic missions brought ambassadors and marriage partners into the steppes north of China proper, and representatives of the nomadic Xiongnu came to the Han capital of Chang'an. Conventional histories of the "Silk Road" linking East and West begin with this interaction. Indeed the Han era (ca.

200 BCE to 200 CE) provides one of earliest instances where we can document long-distance travel. Sent in 138 BCE to build a coalition against the Xiongnu, Zhang Qian survived captivity and returned twelve years later with first-hand observations of the peoples, towns, and products as far away as the Tien Shan Mountains, Sogdiana and the Ferghana Valley. On the basis of indirect information, he also reported about the Parthians and the Roman Orient. His assessment, transmitted by the "grand historian" Sima Qian and later dynastic histories, emphasized the "Western Regions'" strategic and economic value. Han administration extended for a time into Central Asia, but the narratives of military campaigns rarely provide us with the kind of descriptive detail we would hope to obtain from travel accounts.

Nonetheless Chinese sources continued to be important for their information about the inner Asian nomads. For example, much of what we know about the Uighurs in the 9th century comes from the T'ang Dynasty annals, even though the Uighurs had a written language and developed their own cosmopolitan urban culture. Apart from official annals, we have a variety of literary sources reflecting the experience of those who left behind the Chinese sedentary world to travel into Inner Asia. Some of the most poignant examples are verses describing the experience of Chinese princesses who were the pawns in the exchanges with the rulers of the steppe and whose fate inspired vivid paintings both within China and later in the Middle East.

Economic exchange between China and its steppe neighbors tended to be in the hands of Central Asian go-betweens, first Sogdians and later Muslim merchants. As early as the fourth century the Sogdian networks extended from their homeland in Transoxania into central China and in various directions south and west. The Sogdians were caravan leaders and communicated in writing with their far-flung compatriots, but the sources reveal little about individual travel. The paintings in Sogdian Afrasiab (today, Samarkand) and Panjikent attest to international connections with, among others, China and the Turk Empire which occupied the northern steppes in the sixth-eighth centuries. Embassies came and went, products were exchanged, and dancers and musicians traveled in an era when foreign exotica became the rage among the T'ang Chinese elite.

Apart from economic exchange, travel for religious reasons was important in almost every region of Central Eurasia, beginning with the spread of Buddhism from

South Asia along both overland and coastal routes. In the early centuries of the Common Era Buddhism became the most prominent religion in many inner Asian oasis towns. Among the Buddhist travelers were many central Asians, who brought their language skills from places such as Kucha on the northern Silk Road or Dunhuang at the western tip of the Gansu/Hexi Corridor to the Chinese capitals and there translated Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist travel between China and India, often by the overland routes, became quite common and can be documented even as late as the early Ming period ca. 1380. One of the earliest travel narratives is from ca. 400 CE by Faxian, who conveys some of the drama of crossing mountain passes in blizzards and teetering along the gorge of the upper Indus. He returned home by sea.

The most extensive such account is by another Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, who completed a round trip to India between 629 and 645. He visited the holy sites and studied for several years in the Buddhist homeland before spending his remaining days translating in the T'ang capital, Chang'an. His epic journey of more than 11,000 km. took him along the northern Silk Road, across the Tien Shan, through Samarkand and down into India through Afghanistan, where he records seeing the great Buddha statues at Bamiyan. He returned by a more southerly route. As is typical of travelers who have a religious purpose, he focuses on the evidence of Buddhism along the way, but he also provides information on landscape, products, local rulers and much more. We experience the drama of his near death in a desert sandstorm. He provides a rare verbal picture of the khagan of the Western Turks and his entourage.

Xuanzang passed through Central Asia about half a century before the first Arab invasions, which would have a significant impact on travel in Eurasia and the written record concerning it. Between 716 and 758/9, the Chinese records mention at least 19 embassies from the Arabs (perhaps not from the Caliphate but from local administrators in Central Asia). There is a cryptic account of an Arab embassy to the Uighurs in 821 by one Tamim Ibn Bahr, intriguing for its depiction of the flourishing Uighur capital of Karabalghasun in the Orkhon River valley in Mongolia, but providing so little other information it is difficult even to be certain of his exact route. Arab missions to China can be documented for the next several centuries down to the Mongol conquest.

Beginning in the late eighth century, Abbasid Baghdad became a major center of scientific inquiry, among the disciplines being descriptive geography. Arab scholars mined the written legacy of India and the Greeks, enlisted local Iranians, and added much new information based on personal observation and the interrogation of travelers. Often the syncretic nature of the material makes it difficult to distinguish between current observation and literary sources of an earlier century. However, some compilations intended for current administrative purposes stand out for the thoroughness with which they draw upon travel informants. The best-known example is the guide to routes connecting the Caliphate with its neighbors, complied in the middle of the ninth century by the Abbasid director of posts Ibn Khordadbeh. The text provides details about specific itineraries and the distances between towns, information which at best only schematically seems to have been incorporated into Islamic maps.

Over time, many of the important original accounts disappeared, leaving us with condensations or smaller fragments of what may once have been very extensive descriptions. An example is the writings of al-Djayhani, a vizier of the Samanids in Bukhara, who drew upon Ibn Khordadbeh, traveled extensively himself, and collected other travelers' accounts. His book of routes and countries, composed ca. 900 CE, has survived only in its often unattributed quotations by later authors such as the compiler of the anonymous *Hudud al-alam* and Marvazi. *Hudud al-alam*, compiled in northern Afghanistan in 982-3 and written in Persian, describes first geographic features (rivers, mountains etc.) and then regions, frequently providing little more than names but often adding interesting information on local products. Marvazi's geographical observations are contained within a larger work on "The Natural Properties of Animals" (ca. 1120 CE). He includes a quite detailed account of China and parts of inner Asia, much of which could only have come from eye-witness material, including information brought by a Qidan embassy to Mahmud of Gazna in 1027.

One of the few early Arab travel accounts preserved as a separate entity is that of Ibn Fadlan, sent as an ambassador to the Volga Bulgars in 921-922. He traveled from Baghdad up to Transoxania and then skirted the Khazar territories on the east to arrive at the bend of the Volga. He is best known for his lurid, culturally biased depiction of a funeral of one of the Scandinavian Rus chieftans who had come to Bulgar. While Ibn

Fadlan's account is clearly authentic, the claims of another traveler, Abu Dulaf, that he accompanied a Uighur embassy back to China in 941, have been doubted, given his confusion about the geography of the Turkic steppe regions.

The rich legacy of Islamic geography reached its peak during the eleventh century in the work of authors such as al-Istakhri and al-Muqaddasi (d. ca. 1000 CE). While they often relied on obsolete information from Sassanian times, they also incorporated material from recent travels into their often detailed descriptions of major towns. Important as they are, the Islamic geographies remained largely inaccessible to the non-Muslim word until more recent times. Even though the Crusades put Europeans in direct contact with Muslims in Syria and Palestine beginning in the late eleventh century, their purpose in being there was not to appreciate the great intellectual achievements of the Islamic world. It was the rare European who would venture beyond the Holy Land.

An exception is rabbi Benjamin of Tudela in Spain, one of the few Jewish travelers who left us an extensive travel record from his visit to the Holy Land, Syria and Mesopotamia over thirteen years starting around 1160. He sketches connections to more distant parts—Central Asia, India, and even China—although he did not visit them. His description of cities in the Middle East, especially Baghdad, are substantial and surprisingly sympathetic to the Caliph, although in every case he took pains to note the size of the local Jewish community and the identity of its leaders. Benjamin reminds us how far-flung and important were the Jewish communities, which kept in contact through extensive correspondence analogous to that of the Sogdians several centuries earlier.

The rise of the Mongol Empire in the 13th century dramatically changed the opportunities for travel across Eurasia: for the first time we encounter those who traveled its full length and then returned home to narrate what they saw. The best-known accounts from the 13th century are those of the Franciscans John of Plano Carpini, who undertook a Papal mission to the court of the Great Khan in Mongolia in the 1240s, William of Rubruck, who arrived in Mongolia via a different route a decade later, and the Venetian merchant's son, Marco Polo, who spent nearly two decades in the service of Khubilai Khan in China. Although not unbiased, the Franciscans were trained as careful observers. Rubruck's narrative is especially valuable, ranging over many aspects of nomadic culture and beliefs and including the only contemporary eye-witness description of Karakorum,

the Mongol capital located in the Orkhon River valley. Both accounts show how the Mongol postal relay system, the first such to encompass the length of Eurasia, facilitated travel. This did not mean travel was easy, as we sense from the corpulent Carpini, who stoically endured the cold and the physical privations.

The establishment of a Catholic bishopric in China at the end of the 13th century for a time increased missionary travel along the tracks and sea routes to the Far East. Once there they encountered resident Italian merchants, some of whom even had their families with them. Yet none of the 14th century accounts (the best being those by Odoric of Pordenone and John of Marignolli) are as rich as those provided by the 13th century friars. Marignolli tells us little about his long traverse of the "northern Silk Route" but a great deal about Sri Lanka, where his main concern was the possible location there of the Garden of Eden. Odoric traveled to the Far East via Persia and the southern sea route.

Had it not been for the accident of his meeting in a Genoese prison in 1298 Rustichello, a writer of popular romances, we likely would know nothing of Marco Polo's Asia or the fact that his father and uncle had previously visited the court of the Khan and returned with him to China ostensibly on a papal mission. Unlike the Franciscan accounts, written while their journeys were fresh in mind, a good part of what Marco recounted and Rusticello embellished, was imperfect recollection of events a decade or more old. We cannot always be certain of his itineraries, which took him through Persia and Afghanistan to Kashgar and then south of the Taklamakan Desert on his way to Beijing in 1271-1275 and later involved extensive travel in China in the Khan's service before his return by the sea route to the Middle East. It is often hard to know whether his narrative is adventure fantasy or descriptive geography. Marco mixes cliched descriptions of large cities and their products with detail that reflects an eyewitness encounter with the Mongol elite in China. The fact of his moving in Mongol circles there explains his silence about what some assume he *should* have described regarding Chinese culture. Yet that and the many errors in his text of themselves are insufficient reason to doubt Marco was there.

Some of his contemporaries and readers in the 14th and 15th centuries felt he had invented much of what he described, even if they lacked the basis to distinguish

fictionalized wonders from sober fact about unfamiliar cultures. Popular as Marco's work was in its various translations, the fictionalized and exotica-filled travels attributed to one John of Mandeville (who plagiarized Odoric of Pordenone's genuine account) were the most widely read of all the European travel accounts about Asia in the late Middle Ages. Nonetheless, Marco Polo's book had a profound impact on European knowledge about Asia.

As it did for Europeans, Mongol rule had an impact on some Asians' knowledge about Central Eurasia. There are records of several journeys to the West by imperial functionaries, among them the important Qidan Yeh-lü Ch'iu-Tsai who went as far as Afghanistan in 1218-1227. One of the most intriguing travel accounts is that of a revered Daoist, Ch'ang Ch'un, who was summoned by Chingis Khan when the latter was campaigning in Central Asia. In 1220-1222 the elderly monk traveled first to Mongolia, then north of the Tien Shan Mountains, before making his way south to the Khan's camp in northern Afghanistan. While the Khan had hoped to learn from Ch'ang Ch'un the secret of prolonging life, he had to be satisfied with advice on healthy living. The account of Ch'ang Ch'un's travels, written by his disciple Li Chih-Ch'ang, is one of the most substantial contemporary records of the landscapes and challenges of travel along routes in inner Asia.

The next important instance of Asian monastic travelers under the Mongols involves two Nestorian monks, Rabban Sauma (an Onggut or Uighur; d. 1294) and Markos (d. 1317), who left Beijing around 1275 on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Syrian missionaries had brought Nestorian Christianity to China in the late seventh century. The faith had some appeal amongst the inner Asian nomads; when William of Rubruck visited Karakorum, he found the Nestorian church well established there. Converts included members of the Mongol elite, among them Khubilai Khan's mother. The narrative of Rabban Sauma and Markos' travels to the West via the southern route around the Taklamakan Desert is thin until they reached Ilkhanid Persia and Iraq. There they became enmeshed in Nestorian internal politics and the Church's relations with the Mongol rulers. On the death of its Patriarch, the Nestorian Church rather abruptly elected Markos as his replacement, in part due to his knowledge of languages and the Mongols. The Ilkhanid ruler sent Rabban Sauma on a mission to negotiate in Europe an alliance

against the Mamluks. We learn details of the visits to Rome and France by this first individual to have traveled all the way from Beijing.

Some of the most valuable accounts of Mongol Eurasia are not travel narratives as such but were informed by travelers' information. Noteworthy examples are the Persian histories by 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, a learned Khorosanian who worked at the Mongol court in Karakorum in the 1250s and then returned to the Ilkhanate. Juvaini clearly learned a lot while traveling and by interrogating those who traveled, often in the company of the Mongol armies. His fellow Persian administrator and historian Rashid al-Din, who himself never traveled to Inner Asia, had as an informant a learned Mongol official, Bolod, who had been sent west by Khubilai Khan and then remained in the Ilkhanate. Rashid al-Din's *World History* is full of detail about Mongol campaigns and undoubtedly drew upon material Bolod had brought with him concerning China.

Although the Mongol Empire was already disintegrating when he set out from Morocco on the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325, Ahmed Ibn Battuta took advantage of the cultural unity of the Islamic world to surpass all other pre-modern travelers in the extent of his itineraries over the next quarter century. He ranged across the Middle East, western Eurasian steppe, Central Asia and India. After spending some time in India as a judge, he seems to have followed the well-established sea routes to southeastern China. On his return home he then visited the African interior before finally dictating his travels to a younger scribe, who fitted them into the genre of travel for the benefit of Islamic learning. Thus he emphasizes how he interacted with learned men and visited shrines in the Islamic communities, a pattern already familiar to us in the Buddhist focus of the Chinese monk Xuanzang or any number of Christian pilgrimage accounts of Biblical sites in the Holy Land. Ibn Battuta's inquisitiveness and remarkable memory went well beyond his faith, however, and he provides substantial detail about the cultures and peoples he encountered. For example, thanks to him we know a good deal about the court of Khan Özbeg of the Golden Horde and the flourishing commercial culture of its cities. Granted, Ibn Battuta does not always get his facts right, and at times we cannot be sure he really visited some of what he describes. Yet the compass of his work has no equal among the medieval travel accounts of Eurasia.

The civil wars which fragmented the Mongol Empire hindered overland travel and contributed to the decline of the caravan trade. However, important overland exchange between China and the Timurid Middle East continued in the late 14th century. One of the best travel accounts from that period is by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, an ambassador from Spain to Tamerlane's court in 1403-1405. Clavijo provides a careful description of one of the standard routes from the west into Central Asia, via the Black Sea and northern Iran, and devotes pages to Tamerlane's flourishing capital of Samarkand, where a Chinese embassy had just arrived and there was much evidence of trade with China.

While the Ming successors to the Mongol rulers of China managed only to offend Tamerlane, a series of embassies in the reign of his son Shah-Rukh restored good relations. Between 1407 and 1424, the Chinese sources record some 20 missions from the Timurids. Two of the exchanges, a Chinese mission to Shah-Rukh's capital Herat and a Timurid embassy to Beijing, have left important records of travel and observation of the other's culture. While we learn little of what he saw along the way, the Chinese ambassador Ch'en Ch'eng in 1414 described quite accurately everything in Herat from buildings to food to products in the bazaars. His phonetic transcription of Persian words allows for easy recognition of their originals. The account by the artist Ghiyathuddin Naqqash, who accompanied Shah-Rukh's embassy to China in 1419, tells us more about his route, which lay along the "northern Silk Road" and through the Gansu Corridor. He writes at length about the Ming court and official functions in which the embassy participated. These embassies are but a small reminder of the immensely important cultural and economic exchange between the China of the early Ming and the Middle East, much of it thanks to the several large flotillas sent through the Indian Ocean with huge cargoes of Chinese goods for Western markets.

One final example of a fifteenth-century travel account in inner Asia reminds us of the importance of trade routes to the north which would continue to be frequented in later centuries. Prior to Afanasii Nikitin's journey to India in 1466-1472 there had, of course, been a great deal of Russian travel in inner Asia. Russian princes, including the famous Alexander Nevsky, were required to go all the way to the Mongol court in Karakorum, and Russian craftsmen had been forced by their captives to re-settle there.

During the peak of the Golden Horde in the early 14th century, Russians were resident in its capital Sarai, and the princes were frequent visitors to the court of the Khan. But none of this left any real travel record. Nikitin, a merchant from Tver, wrote a curious account about the difficulties for a Christian merchant who traveled down the Volga, across the Caspian, and through Muslim Iran to the Persian Gulf and on to India. It seems likely he converted to Islam to save his life and facilitate his trading activity, and he even advised his readers who would wish to trade in Asia to do the same. Nikitin was unusal among his fellow Russians in that he wrote at all and had the curiosity to provide a relatively detailed description of what he witnessed in India. His decision to record his journey may well have been occasioned by his guilty conscience after he had reaffirmed his Orthodox Christianity but still could not get the Muslim prayers out of his head.

The European "Age of Discovery," which within two decades of Nikitin opened the sea routes to East Asia, often is blamed for the end of the overland "Silk Routes." Indeed much important trade now followed the Cape route, but there is ample evidence that overland routes of local and long-distant commerce continued. Arguably the real pioneers of that travel continued to the local nomads, merchants and caravaneers who could be counted on to lead the way across the next mountain pass or guide the traveler to the next well and oasis town. To a considerable degree, the written record we have of the overland routes owes its existence to those local experts. Thus the patterns of pre-modern travel in Central Eurasia for religious, commercial and political reasons survived and eventually merged with explorations undertaken for scientific as well as political reasons in modern times.

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