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Who Read Marco Polo's Book and Why?

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Introduction

When we start studying Marco Polo, we often read that the Venetian traveler was not taken seriously, that his book was considered to consist of fairytales or, worse, of lies. We are informed that on his deathbed he was asked to deny what he had told; others claim that it was his uncle to whom this was addressed. And that is given as a proof that nobody believed him, as much as the fact that he or his book was called “Milion”. Even great scholars spread these sorts of opinions:

The dissemination of Marco Polo's book is the result of a misunderstanding: the *Devisement* was taken for a fantastic tale.¹

That's particularly the case within the field of history of geography or cartography:

Marco Polo contributed such a vast amount of new facts to the knowledge of the Earth's surface, that one might have expected his book to have had a sudden effect upon the Science of Geography: but no such result occurred speedily, nor was its beneficial effect of any long duration.²

We can read quite the same opinion in a more recent paper of David Woodward on “Medieval mappaemundi”:

Apart from its influence on the Catalan atlas, it appears that the narrative of Marco Polo had very little effect on world cartography of the time – certainly much less than the novelty of its geographical information would lead us to expect.³

According to them (and some others as well), Marco Polo was not believed when he told the story of his travels, his book had no influence and has not been read, except by a few people, who considered it only as a book of marvels and fantasy. Even in our days some people do not believe Marco Polo that he was in China ...

When I began working on Marco Polo, I became rapidly skeptical about these opinions. I was particularly interested by the translations which had been made of his book. From the end of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century, twenty-six versions (translations and/or adaptations) have been made, in thirteen languages.⁴ Would it have been worth translating it so many times, in so many languages, if nobody had read it? The number of these translations is proof that the book was read and that people were interested in it. They also show the geographical diffusion of the book.

¹ Zumthor (1994), 810.

² Yule (1992), 129.

³ Woodward (1987), 315.

⁴ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 6, 17.

I will begin by asking the question of the readership of Marco Polo's book. We can answer this question following two ways, by using social categories, or geographical denominations. Then I will give examples of the reception of the book and of its use in other works.

Who Read Marco Polo's Book during the Middle Ages?

We could answer quite everybody, or, at least, almost every sort of people. As for social categories, we can find readers in diverse milieus and social positions. The book was read by kings. For example, King Charles V of France owned five copies of it in his "librairie" at the Louvre, of which only one is preserved.⁵ At the court of Aragon, we have several mentions of orders and exchanges during the time of the Kings Peter IV and his son John I. For example, between 1372 and 1374, Peter IV bought three copies.⁶ His son offered one copy to Gaston Febus, count of Foix, and another to Jean de Berry.⁷ We cannot know if some of these copies were the same or not.

Of course, we cannot be sure that these kings actually read the book. That is a problem for many manuscripts or inventory entries, as the presence of the book in a collection does not necessarily mean that it was read, with a lack of marginal notes, as is often the case with royal copies – and it is the same with copies owned by merchants, as we will see.

Similarly, the book was present in the papal library. We have hints that there were copies at the papal court in Avignon and that the book circulated in papal milieus there,⁸ but more surely the book was in their library in the fifteenth century, at least in the case of Eugenius IV, as recorded in an inventory in 1443.⁹ But the book is also mentioned in the close entourage of the popes. For example, cardinal Domenico Capranica ordered a copy in 1458, in one manuscript, written in Rome, which includes other travel narratives and works related to Oriental questions.¹⁰ At the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris is preserved a curious manuscript made for an acquaintance of four popes, Jacquet Finaris, who wrote personal notes about his service to these popes and about his family.¹¹

Other powerful or prestigious princes owned the book such as the Duke Jean de Berry, known to be a book-lover, who had three copies, including the famous *Livre des merveilles*, now at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.¹² At the court of the Este family in Ferrara, we can find at least two copies, probably one in Latin and one in Italian.¹³ The Latin copy appears in several inventories, from 1436 to 1495. For this copy, we can suppose that at least Duke Ercole I read it, or wanted to read it, because he asked for having this copy brought to his study.¹⁴ The Visconti, dukes of Milano, also had a copy of the book in their collection in the second half of the fifteenth century.¹⁵

We can even name several princesses: I have to begin with Mahaut d'Artois, who gives us the first testimony of the presence of the book in France, that is in 1312, when she orders not only a copy, but also the decoration and binding of a "Romant du grand Kam".¹⁶ At the Este court in Ferrara, not only princes were interested in the book, but also princesses: in 1457, Contessa Strozzi borrows a "Marcopollo" at the ducal library.¹⁷ Marie, daughter of Jean de Berry, inherited one copy from her father.¹⁸

⁵ Delisle (1907), 142.

⁶ Rubió i Lluch (2000), 165-166, 171.

⁷ Rubió i Lluch (2000), 165-166.

⁸ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2014), 304.

⁹ Fohlen (2008), 59, 357-358.

¹⁰ Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 7317.

¹¹ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 6244A; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 234-235.

¹² Delisle (1868), I 56-68; Delisle (1881), III, 170-194; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 136.

¹³ Capelli (1889), 16 and 23; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 138.

¹⁴ Bertoni (1903), 19 and 262.

¹⁵ Pellegrin (1955), 324.

¹⁶ Richard (1887), 101.

¹⁷ Bertoni (1903), 56.

¹⁸ Beaune and Lequain (2007), 51.

The book was in the hands of scholars too, professors at the greatest universities in Europe then. The oldest example, which is well known, is that of Pietro d'Abano, professor of philosophy and medicine at Padova.¹⁹ But we find the book also in Oxford as early as the 1330s, and these are the first mentions in England. The Franciscan John Ridewall and the Dominican Thomas Waleys, both lecturers of theology in Oxford, used it in their theological and mythological works at the beginning of the 1330s.²⁰ At quite the same time, maybe only a few years later, Thomas Bradwardine, theologian and mathematician in Oxford († 1349), mentioned Marco Polo in his theological treatise *De causa Dei*.²¹

Humanists too were interested in Marco Polo's experiences. It is important to note and to discuss this. It has often been said that humanists rejected Medieval authors and despised their Latin. This is not completely true as at least they showed an ambivalent attitude.²² Some of them, for example Eneas Silvius Piccolomini, neither mentioned nor used Marco Polo in his *De Asia*.²³ But some others made extensive use of it, like Domenico Silvestri and also Domenico Bandini, whom I suspect to be the translator into Latin of the LA version.²⁴ I would like to add that we have manuscripts of the book written by humanists, showing that it was diffused in this milieu too.²⁵

Merchants constitute a rather well represented category among the possessors of copies of Marco Polo's book. We find them principally in Tuscany and in Catalonia, and they owned mostly copies in Tuscan and Catalan languages. In Catalonia, we find the book, among other examples, in two inventories of merchants, Pere Girgos, in 1389, and Guillem de Cabanelles, in 1424, who had commercial activities with the Eastern part of the Mediterranean.²⁶ In Florence, we can give the examples of Filippo di Piero Rinieri, whose inventory was made in 1414, and of copies of the TB version, which were in the hands of members of the Peruzzi and the Bardi, famous merchant families.²⁷ Most of the Tuscan copies are written in mercantesca script, that is the script used in the milieu of merchants.²⁸

Religious men also possessed this widely diffused book, and we find men and places belonging to different orders among the owners of the book. Most of the time, we know that the book was in the shelves of a convent or an abbey, but not in one particular monk's or friar's hands – except in cases of monks acting as scribes of one of the manuscripts, like Oswald Nott in Tegernsee, who copied it twice, in two different versions.²⁹ The number of manuscripts owned by religious institutions and of relevant entries in their inventories are so important, that neither giving a list nor mentioning only a few examples would seem appropriate and efficient. Therefore, I would just like to highlight two contexts of the diffusion of the book in religious orders. The first one is the Dominican order. I am convinced that this order played an important role in the diffusion of the book, not only in Italy, but also across Europe. As I have shown in my book, Italian Dominicans, of the province of Lombardia, were soon attracted by the book and used it intensely.³⁰ It is no surprise that one of the Latin translations, the most wide-spread one, was made by a Dominican, Francesco Pipino, who was a member of the Lombardian province. I suspect that the Z version may be of a Dominican origin too, as a few hints lead me to think so, such as some additions – in contrast to other versions – and some marginal annotations, which may date back to the original manuscript.³¹ I am quite sure that a Dominican, probably Thomas Waleys, whom I mentioned earlier, is the man who brought the book to England.³² This interest that the Dominicans

¹⁹ Benedetto (1962), ccxii-ccxiv.

²⁰ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2016), 610-611.

²¹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2016), 608; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 120-121; Dutschke (1993), 1173-1183.

²² Bouloux (2017), 54.

²³ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 268-269.

²⁴ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 55-57; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2013), 141.

²⁵ For example, Vatican, BAV, Barb. Lat. 2687, Vat. Lat. 2035, Vat. Lat. 3153, Vat. Lat. 5260.

²⁶ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 127-128.

²⁷ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 143.

²⁸ Bertoluccio Pizzorusso (1975), 327-333.

²⁹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 92.

³⁰ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 165-184.

³¹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 100-101.

³² Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2016), 611-613.

showed for Marco Polo's book can be explained by a certain proximity between the traveler and the Venetian Dominican friars as it appears in the former's last will,³³ but also by the curiosity of the Dominicans for geographical knowledge and especially for information about Oriental lands.³⁴

The second context is the fifteenth century, in German lands.³⁵ We can trace copies of the book in several German monasteries or religious centers such as bishoprics. Many monasteries had undergone reforms there and then, and I have noticed that new copies of the book were made in that context, some of which can directly be linked to this movement of Reformation, as in the case of the abridged version of Pipino's translation.³⁶

Where Has Marco Polo's Book Been Read?

If we turn to the geographical point of view, we can say that the book has reached quite every part of Western Europe and even Central Europe. According to the analysis of manuscripts and of the many notes we can find in them, the book was present in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, England, Ireland, Poland, Bohemia, as well as the Netherlands and Portugal.³⁷

It may be interesting to link geographical locations to the different versions of the text, that is, to ask which version(s) was read in which part of Europe. Doing so will give an idea of the diffusion of some versions. Therefore, we will not only ask the question where did people read Marco Polo's book, but also how and in which version(s)?

The place where people had access to the most numerous versions is, of course, Italy. First of all, the great majority of the different redactions had been produced in Italy, so many versions were available here. But depending on the different parts of Italy, people did not have access to all the same versions. For example, the Tuscan redactions were primarily available in Tuscany, even though they could have reached a bigger audience, and the Venetian versions were mainly read in the Venetia. The Latin translations could *a priori* have been present everywhere, but some of them had a local diffusion, such as the Z version, which could be found only in the area around Venice, as it seems that it did not spread outside. Similarly, another Latin version translated in Italy, the LB version, appears to have stayed in Lombardia and more precisely around Milano.³⁸

On the contrary, the Latin version translated by Francesco Pipino was widely diffused through Europe as we can trace copies of it in almost every country which I had enumerated previously. This redaction assumed what we can expect from a Latin version: some sort of standardization and the possibility of diffusion to every place, notwithstanding the vernacular languages used there. Hence, this version was very widespread in England and was the main rendering in which English people could read the book.³⁹ In addition, they could have access to the French or the Anglo-Norman versions, although the number of manuscripts in these versions was certainly smaller. There was no English translation until 1573.

German and Flemish speaking lands were certainly only secondary in importance to Italy as regions where people could find several versions.⁴⁰ Several Latin versions found their way to these places: the Pipino translation, the abridged version of it, the LA and L versions, along with two German translations. This part of Europe is also a place to where an important number of other manuscripts can be linked. Most of this diffusion can be ascribed to the fifteenth century, yet it is nonetheless clear that there was an overall interest for Marco Polo's book in Germany and Flanders.

³³ Plebani (2017).

³⁴ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2023).

³⁵ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 280-284.

³⁶ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 91-93.

³⁷ I use modern names here for convenience.

³⁸ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 43-45.

³⁹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 120-124.

⁴⁰ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 280-282.

Why Has Marco Polo's Book Been Read?

After we have answered, although quickly, the question of who read Marco Polo's book, we should now ask why. This is not an easy question to be answered. If it is difficult to ascertain whether someone who owned the book actually read it, it is even more difficult to determine what may have interested him in it. Strangely, this question seems easy to many – or rather, they do not think of it as a question. It may appear obvious to them that merchants read Marco Polo because they could find information about spices, precious stones and trade roads in it and that they could use it as a merchant's guide. So, according to this opinion, merchants – all the merchants – would have read it as merchants.⁴¹ But what about physicians? Did they read the book for medical reasons, as a help for their practice of medicine? Among people who owned the book, we indeed find many physicians, some of them are quite famous, as Pietro d'Abano, whom I already mentioned, or Amplonius Ratinck, or Hartmann Schedel.⁴² Two physicians, Pietro d'Abano and the Venetian Giovanni Fontana have used Marco Polo's book in their own works, and this may help us to determine why or how physicians could have been interested in it. The answer is that they used it for its cosmographical and geographical information.⁴³ Hartmann Schedel is well known for his *Liber chronicarum* and his participation in the enterprise of the Behaim Globus, on which Marco Polo is widely cited.⁴⁴ In fact, most of the physicians who owned the book were not only physicians, but also astronomers, geographers, humanists, etc. So we have to be careful when we try to characterize the reception of the book by one category of readers.

To turn our attention back to merchants, their manuscripts are not annotated and we do not possess a work written by a merchant in which Marco Polo is cited or paraphrased. So, we have no evidence assuring us that they had read it for commercial purposes.⁴⁵

To answer the question of why, that is, in which way the book was used, it is helpful to take a look at the works in which the book is cited. I have tried to group them in categories, starting from the most evident to the most surprising.

In the first group, we find maps and geographical works. Contrary to what several scholars have written, Marco Polo's account has been used in many maps and geographical treatises.⁴⁶ Among the first ones, we can mention the Catalan Atlas made in 1375, Fra Mauro's mappamundi, made in the middle of the fifteenth century, or the Behaim Globe, made in 1492; these are the most famous, but not the only ones. Citations of Marco Polo's book are also numerous in geographical treatises or in geographical parts of other works. Pietro d'Abano has already been mentioned; I could add the *De insulis et earum proprietatibus* of Domenico Silvestri, the *Liber de figura mundi* of Luis de Angulo, or the works written by a monk of Sankt-Emmeran.⁴⁷ The translation of Ptolemy's *Geography* into Latin did not put an end to the interest for Medieval travel narratives, like Marco Polo's one, but, on the contrary, there was a fruitful confrontation of both works.⁴⁸ Marco Polo's book has played an important role in the context of the debates around the new geographical discoveries too.⁴⁹

The influence of Marco Polo on epic literature has long been recognized and this may have led some people to think of the book as romance.⁵⁰ We have rather to speak of influence, as in this sort of works we do not find exact and long quotations, but rather place names, motifs or anecdotes.⁵¹ Heroes of such stories as the *Entree d'Espagne* or *Orlando innamorato*, have adventures in Oriental lands, that may

⁴¹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2019), 82-84.

⁴² Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 144-146.

⁴³ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 225-226 and 264-268.

⁴⁴ Crone (1961), 123-124; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 317.

⁴⁵ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2019), 82-84.

⁴⁶ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 243-349.

⁴⁷ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 253-257, 258-263 and 285-286.

⁴⁸ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 268-277.

⁴⁹ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 319-348.

⁵⁰ Folena (1963), 146; Limentani (1992), 199; Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 157-161.

⁵¹ Holtus (1984), 712.

have been inspired by Marco Polo's own adventures.⁵² The role of this literature is not only to entertain readers, but it may have also played a role in making Oriental place names and topics more familiar to a broad public.

The third category is that of chronicles and histories. Many historians, such as Giovanni Villani, John of Tynemouth, Jacopo d'Acqui, or Jean le Long, have used the book to write the history of the Mongols and of the relations between Christianity and the East.⁵³ In some cases, the travels of the Polo family and the fact that Marco wrote (or dictated) accounts of his travels became historical events in themselves. That's partly the case in Jacopo d'Acqui and Jean le Long, but the most striking example is in the chronicle of Melsa abbey, written at the end of fourteenth century in Yorkshire, where the only words related to Marco Polo are about his writing of the book, after having spent 26 years in other parts of the world.⁵⁴ Marco Polo and his book are now both a historical character and a historical fact respectively. He is also included by Domenico Bandini in his list of famous men.⁵⁵

The fourth and last category is that of religious works. Inside this category, we can find theological treatises, such as the ones written by Thomas Waleys and Thomas Bradwardine, sermons and collections of *exempla*, as in the works of some Italian Dominicans,⁵⁶ hagiography (especially the vita of St Thomas) and spiritual treatises, as the *Oculus fidei*, written by a Carthusian monk of Colonia at the end of the fifteenth century.⁵⁷ All these examples show that Marco Polo's book was taken seriously enough to be used in a religious text. The use of the book in sermons may have contributed to diffuse knowledge about Asia to a broader audience, in a somewhat similar way as epic literature.

Conclusions

The great diversity of examples I have presented here – and these are only a few examples – could lead one to think that Marco Polo's book was a sort of Swiss knife: where you can find in it anything you need and use it as you like. This is not completely untrue. Medieval authors and scholars found many topics of interests in this book, as certainly did all other readers, who did not use it afterwards in their own works. The dissemination of Marco Polo's book is not the result of a misunderstanding. It is the result of a confluence of the originality of Marco Polo's narrative and the great amount of new information he provided, as well as the reader's and user's curiosity and desire to obtain knowledge. As a matter of fact, Marco Polo's book has been – and still is – widely diffused, largely read, and highly appreciated.

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⁵² Caramella (1923), 44-59 and 127-150.

⁵³ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 189-216.

⁵⁴ Thomas de Burton (1866-1868), 244.

⁵⁵ Bouloux (2002), 173.

⁵⁶ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 184-188.

⁵⁷ Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015), 293-315.

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