Advice for Merchants Traveling to Cathay

108 • Francesco Pegolotti,
THE PRACTICE OF COMMERCE

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

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS
1. What evidence is there that Pegolotti himself had not traveled to Cathay?
2. Considering that his advice is not based on firsthand experience, how
   knowledgeable does he appear to be on the subject, and what does this
   suggest?
3. Consider Pegolotti's advice regarding the types of interpreters the merchant
   will need. What language skills suffice to carry on this trans-Eurasian
   business enterprise? What does this suggest about the markets of northern
   China?
4. When and where could the trip be especially hazardous? What does this
   suggest about the Pax Mongolica?
5. What overall impression does Pegolotti give us of this journey and its
   rewards?

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

In the first place, you must let your beard grow
long and not shave. And at Tana¹ you should fur-
nish yourself with a dragoman.² And you must
not try to save money in the matter of dragomen
by taking a bad one instead of a good one. For
the additional wages of the good one will not
cost you so much as you will save by having him.
And besides the dragoman it will be well to take
at least two good menservants, who are ac-
quainted with the Cumanian¹ tongue. And if the
merchant likes to take a woman with him from
Tana, he can do so; if he does not like to take one
there is no obligation, only if he does take one
he will be kept much more comfortably than if
he does not take one. Howbeit, if he does take

¹The modern city of Azov on the northeast coast of the Sea
of Azov, which itself is an extension of the Black Sea. Tana
was the farthest eastern point to which a person could sail
from the Mediterranean.

²An interpreter fluent in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish.
³A Turkic people inhabiting the middle Volga.
⁴Modern Astrakhan, a city in the Volga Delta, just north of
the Caspian Sea.
the lord will take possession of all. And in like manner if he die in Cathay. But if his brother be with him, or an intimate friend and comrade calling himself his brother, then to such one they will surrender the property of the deceased, and so it will be rescued.

And there is another danger: this is when the lord of the country dies, and before the new lord is to have the lordship is proclaimed; during such intervals there have sometimes been irregularities practiced on the Franks, and other foreigners. (They call “Franks” all the Christians of these parts from Romania to westward.) And neither will the roads be safe to travel until the other lord be proclaimed who is to reign in place of him who is deceased.

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

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

Anyone from Genoa or from Venice, wishing to go to the places above-named, and to make the journey to Cathay, should carry linens with him, and if he visit Organci he will dispose of these well. In Organci he should purchase sommi of silver, and with these he should proceed without making any further investment, unless it be some bales of the very finest stuffs which go in small bulk, and cost no more for carriage than coarser stuffs would do.

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

Whatever silver the merchants may carry with them as far as Cathay the lord of Cathay will take from them and put into his treasury. And to merchants who thus bring silver they give that paper money of theirs in exchange. This is of yellow paper, stamped with the seal of the lord aforesaid. And this money is called balishi; and with this money you can readily buy silk and all other merchandise that you have a desire to buy. And all the people of the country are bound to receive it. And yet you shall not pay a higher price for your goods because your money is of paper. And of the said paper money there are three kinds, one being worth more than another, according to the value which has been established for each by that lord.

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1The European term for the Byzantine Empire.
2Khanbalik (City of the Khan), modern Beijing.
3Sara on the Volga, the capital of the Il-khans of Kipchak (also known as the Golden Horde), who ruled Russia and Kazakhstan.
4Uzgench on the Oxus River in Central Asia.
5Sommi were weights of silver. Each sommo was equivalent to five golden florins, the standard coin of Florence. Pegolotti calculated that the average merchant would carry merchandise worth about twenty-five thousand florins, and the expenses for the merchant, interpreter, and two personal servants would amount to a combined sixty to eighty sommi or three to four hundred florins.