

Early Fifteenth Century Travels in the East

Nicolò de' Conti of Venice

Translated by John Frampton in the late sixteenth century¹

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From Ceylon to Sumatra and the Andaman Islands

[From] the ilande named Zaylan [Sri Lanka] ... he passed unto the famous ilande named Taprobana [Sumatra], which the Indians calle Scyamucera,² where is a noble Citie, and there he has a twelve month: it is sixe miles in compasse, and is a famous Citie, having greate trade of Merchaundise there, and in al that Island.

From hence he sayled with a prosperous winde, leaving on the right hand the iland Adamania,³ which is as much to say, as the Ilande of Golde, whyche is 800 myles compasse, wherein the Evitrofagitas⁴ doe live, and no straungers goe thyther, except it be for necessity of weather, and immediately those barabrous people hewe them in peeces, and eate them.

He sayde that Taprobana is 1600000 paces⁵ in compasse, the men are verye cruell, and of stubberne conditions, and the men and women have very bigge eares, laden with Hoopes of golde, and with precious stones. They do weare linnen and cloth of silke or cruell downe unto their knees: they take many wives: their houses are lowe, by reason of the greate heate that the sunne hath there. They are Idolatours, and have much Pepper named the greatest, and of the long Pepper, and greate plentie of Camphore and golde. The tree that maketh the pepper is like the Yedra, or Ivie tree, the berries are green lyke unto the Juniper berries, and redde,

¹ Frampton's text is reproduced here exactly as it appears in the 1579 edition. The present editors have added subject headings, however, as a guide for readers.

² Identified by Jones (1857: 8 n. 3) as Sumatra.

³ One of the Andaman Islands.

⁴ Cannibals.

⁵ 'He affirms that the island of Sumatra is six thousand miles in circumference' (Hammond 1963: 11).

and being mingled wyth ashes, they harden with the sunne: there is a greene fruite named Duriano, of the bignesse of Cucumbers. And there be some of them lyke long Oregies or Lemans, of diverse savours and taste, as like butter, lyke milke, and like curdes. In that part of this lande, whiche is named Bateth, ye Antropophagos⁶ dwel, and have continuall warre with their neyghbours, and eate the fleshe of their enemies that they doe take, and keepe their heades for treasure, and use them in steade of money, when they do buy anye thing, in giving moste heades for the thing that is most worth, and he that hath moste heades of the deade men in his keeping, is esteemed to be most rich.

Tenasserim

Having [departed] the iland of Taprobana, and sayling fifteene days, he arrived by tempest of weather, unto the entring of a river called Tenaserim,⁷ and in this region there be manye Elephants, and there groweth much Brasil.⁸

Bengal and the River Ganges

And goyng from thence travelling many dayes journey by land, and by sea, he entred at the mouth of the Ryver Gangey, and sayled fifteene dayes up the river, and came unto a Citie named Cernomen, very noble and plentiful.

Thys River Gangey is of such breadth, that Sayling in the midst, you shall see no lande on neyther side, and hee affyrmeth that it is in some places fifteene myles in breadth. In the armes and braunches of this ryver there be Canes⁹ of suche a marvellous length, and so bigge, that scarce a manne maye compasse one of them wyth both his armes: and of the hollownesse or pith of them, they do make things to fishe with, and of ye wood which is more than a spanne thicke, they do make boates to travell with upon the river, and from knot to knotte of these Canes it hath of hollownesse the length of a man.

⁶ Cannibals.

⁷ In Hammond's (1963: 12) translation, 'he arrived at the city of Tenasserim, which is situated on the mouth of a river of the same name'.

⁸ Sapan wood was often called brazil wood. Jones (1857: 9) mistakenly thought Poggio's Latin term referred to a bird and translated it as 'a species of thrush'.

⁹ Presumably Conti was describing a species of giant bamboo.

There be in this river certaine beasts, having four feete, named Crocodiles, which live in the day time upon the land, and in the night in the water: and there be many kindes of fishe whiche are not founde among us, and uppon the braunches of this river be manye fayre Gardens, habitations, and delectable grounde.

On eche side there groweth a kinde of fruite muche like unto a figge, whych is named Musa,¹⁰ and it is verye pleasaunte, and more sweete than honnye. Also there is another fruite, whyche we call Nuttes of India,¹¹ and manye other diverse fruites.

Going from hence uppe the ryver three moneths, leaving behinde him foure famous Cities, he came to a goodlye famous Citie named Maarazia, where there is great plenty of the trees called Alloes, and plentie of golde, and silvr, Pearles, and precious stones.

And going from hence he directed hys waye unto the mountaines of the Orient, for to have Carbuncles, and travelling thirteene dayes, he returned firste to Cermon and afterwarde unto Buffetanya.

Arakan and Crossing the Mountains to Ava

And after that, sayling a whole moneth by sea, he came unto the entring of the river Nican,¹² and sayling uppon it sixe dayes, he came unto the Citie also name Nican, and he went from thence seaventeene dayes journey throughe deserte mountaynes,¹³ and plaine countrey, the fifteene days of which the people of that countrey cal Clava,¹⁴ and sayling up this river a month, he came unto a famous great Citie called Ava, being 15 miles in compasse.

¹⁰ Frampton was probably not familiar with the word banana, which was not yet widely established in English. He therefore used the Latin name for banana, from *Musa paradisiaca* or *Musa sapientum*.

¹¹ Literal translation of the Latin *nuces indicae* for coconuts (Jones 1857: 10 n. 3).

¹² Hammond's (1963: 13) transliteration is Rachan. Jones' (1857: 10) transliteration is Racha, and he identifies it as Arakan.

¹³ Jones' (1857: 10) identification is the Youmadoung mountains.

¹⁴ Jones' (1857: 11) transliteration is Dava; he identifies it as the Irrawaddy. Hammond (1963: 13) simply translates it as 'Irrawaddy'.

Specialty Shops with Lascivious Things

[In this city he said there were several shops of ridiculous and lascivious things, about which I have written for the fun of it; in these shops only women sell things which we call 'ringers' because they ring out like bells; they are made of gold, silver or brass, and are as big as a small nut. The men, before they take a wife, go to these women (otherwise the marriage would be broken) who cut the skin of the virile member in many places and put between the skin and the flesh as many as twelve of these 'ringers' (according to their pleasure). After the member is sewn up, it heals in a few days. This they do to satisfy the wantonness of the women: because of these swellings, or tumour, of the member, the women have great pleasure in coitus. The members of some men stretch way down between their legs so that when they walk they ring out and may be heard But Nicolò, scorned by the women because he had a small member and invited to rectify this, was not willing through his pain to give others pleasure.]¹⁵

Elephants of War in Burma

This province is named of the inhabitauntes Marcino.¹⁶ They have greate plenty of Elephantes, for their Kyng dothe keepe tenne thousand of them for the warres, and setteth upon every Elephantes backe a Castell,¹⁷ whyche may carrie eyghte or tenne men with Speares and Shields, or Bowes, or Crossebows.

¹⁵ The passage in square brackets is from Hammond (1963: 14), whose translation is the only complete one in English. Jones (1857) included the passage in his translation, but in tasteful Victorian fashion he veiled it in the original Latin, which he left untranslated. Frampton (1579) omitted it altogether. Purchas (1625: 11.396) included only a brief summary: '...they are much given to spend the Time in drinking and fellowship both Men and Women. There are certaine old women which get their living by selling Bels of gold, silver, brasse, of the bignesse of Nuts, which they put in mens yards betwixt the skin and flesh, when they are of age to use Women, and in short time cure the place; and the men much please themselves to heare the sound of them as they goe....'

¹⁶ Jones (1857: 11) transliterated the name as Macinus and thought it might mean Siam (which seems illogical in this context). Hammond (1963: transliterated the name as Macina but did not attempt to identify it.

¹⁷ Howdah.

Manner of Catching and Taming Elephants in Burma

He rehearsed that they toke the Elephantes in this manner, Plinie agreeth unto the like.¹⁸ They let the tame Elephants females goe unto the mountaynes, untill suche time as the wilde bee acquainted with them, for the male commonly doth content himselfe with the wild, by little and little, grasing, unto a small yard strongly walled, havng two dores, one to come in at, and another to goe out at. The female when she is in at the first gate, she goeth out at the seconde, and the male following hir, the two dores be locked againste him, and then having him within, by certayne loupe holes made for the purpose, there commeth in to the number of a thousand men, every one with his snare in his hande, and one of those men presenteth himselfe before the Elephant, which runneth, thinking to kill the man, and then all those men runne unto the Elephant, fastning those snares on his feete, and when they be fastened, with great dilligence, they do tye the snares unto a great post, which is set there for that purpose, and they left him alone so three or four dayes, till he be more feeble, and after the space of fiteene dayes, they give him a little grasse, in the whiche time he waxeth tame, and then they do tye him among other tame Elephants, and carrie him aboute the Citie, and in tenne dayes he becommeth as gentle as one of the others. Also he sayde, they did tame them in this other wise, that they had and drave them unto a valley compassed round about, where they did put unto them the females that were tame, and being somewhat feeble with hunger, they drave them into strayter places made for the nonce, where they be made tame, and these the Kings do buy for their owne use.

Some are fedde with Rice, and Butter, and some with grasse. The wilde Elephants feede upon grasse, and upon the trees in the fields. He that hath charge of them, ruleth them with a rodde of yron, or a ring whiche he putteth round about his head. The Elephants have so much providence, that manye with their feete, pull away the Speares from their enimies, for that they shoulde not hurt those that be upon their backes.

The King rideth upon a white Elephant, which hath a chayne of golde about his necke, being long unto his feete, set full of many precious stones.

¹⁸ Book 8, chapter 8, of Pliny (Jones 1857: 11).

Marriage, Tattooing, and Religion in Burma

The men of this Countrey have but one wife a peece. Both men and women of this Countrey pricke themselves, making divers markes, and of divers couloures, on theyr bodies.

They be all Idolaters, and assoone as they do rise in the morning, they looke unto the Orient, holding their hands together, and worship.

Fruits of Burma

There is in that Countrey a certayne kinde of fruite, like unto the Orenge, whiche they doe call Cyeno,¹⁹ full of juice and sweetnesse. Also, there is a tree whiche they doe call Tall,²⁰ whereupon they do write, for in all India, except it bee in the Citie of Combahita, they doe use no paper, and it beareth a fruite like unto the Turnep, but they are greate and tender like unto Gelly. It is pleasant in eating, but the ryne is more pleasant. There be in that Countrey daungerous Serpents,²¹ of sixe cubites in length, and as thicke as a man, having no feete. The people of that Countrey, have great delight in eating of those Serpents rosted. Also they do eate a certayne redde Ante as bigge as a crabbe, eseeming it much drest with Pepper. Also, there is a certaine Beast,²² having a head like unto a Hogge, the tayle like unto an Oxe, and a horne in his forehead, like unto a Unicorne, but smaller by a cubite. He is in couloure and bignesse like unto the Elephante. He is an enimie of the Elephant. The utter part of his hornes is good for medicines against poyson, and for this cause he is had in great price and estimation.

Buffaloes and Oxen in Upper Burma

At the end of this Region towards Catay, there be Oxen both blacke and white, had in great estimation. They have a mane and a tayle lyke unto a Horse, but more

¹⁹ In Hammond's (1963: 16) translation, 'a kind of apple very similar to a pomegranate.' Jones (1857: 13 n. 1) thought this was a reference to the jamboo apple, *Eugenia jambos*, but is probably mistaken, since that fruit contains almost no juice at all.

²⁰ Tall refers to the fan palm called *tal* or *tala* in Pali: the palmyra (*Borassus flabelliformis*). Palm leaves for Buddhist manuscripts are made from the fronds.

²¹ Identified by Jones (1857: 13 n. 3) as pythons.

²² Rhinoceros.

hearie, and reacheth unto their feete. The heares of their tailes be very fine, and like unto feathers, and they be sold by weight, and therof they do make Moscaderos or Table clothes, for the Altares of their Godds, or for to cover the Table of their King, or for to trimme them with gold and silver, to cover ye buttocks or breasts of their Horses, for beautyfulnesse, and they esteeme then for principall ornaments. Also, the Knightes hang of these heares fast by the yron of their Speares, in token among them of singular nobilitie.

Cathay

Beyond the sayde Marcino, there is another Province more principal than the others, which is named Cataya,²³ and he is Lord of it that is named the great Cane,²⁴ whych is as muche to saye in their tong, as Emperoure, and the City royall, which is 28 miles in compasse, four square, is named Cymbalechya.²⁵ There standeth in the middest thereof, a very faire and strong Pallace, that serveth for the King. At every corner standeth a round fortresse of 4 miles compasse, which serve for houses of all manner of armoure, and necessarie engines for the warre, and combat against any Citie. And from the Pallace royall there runneth a wall with arches unto every one of these foretresses, whereon the King may go unto any of them, if in case they would rise against him in the Citie. From thys Citie fifteene dayes journey, there standeth another Citie newly edifyed by the great Cane, and is named Nentay.²⁶ It is in compasse thirtie miles, and is most populous of all the rest. And this Nicholas affirmeth, that the houses and Pallaces, and all other policies of these two Cities, seemed much like unto those of Italy, the men being modest and curteous, and of more riches than the other be.

Departure from Ava

Going from Ava upon a small river seaventene dayes journey, he came unto a Haven Citie, being ver greate, named Zeitano,²⁷ and from thence he entred into another River:²⁸ and in tenne dayes, he came unto another greate and populous

²³ Identified by Jones (1857: 14 n. 1) as Cathay, referring to part of present-day China.

²⁴ Khan, a title of the Mongol rulers of China in the previous century.

²⁵ Kanbalu, an ancient name of Beijing as described by Marco Polo (Jones 1857: 14 n. 2).

²⁶ Identified by Jones (1857: 15 n. 1) as present-day Hangzhou.

²⁷ Hammond's (1963: 18) translation is 'a port called Xeytona'.

²⁸ Jones (1857: 15 n.2) presumed this waterway was the Pegu River.

Citie, whiche is in compasse 12000 paces,²⁹ whiche is called Paconya, where he remayned foure moneths. In this Citie he founde Vines though they were few, for all India lacketh Vines and Wine, nor they make no wine of the Grapes. This grape groweth among the trees, and after the Grape is cut, the first thing of all, if they do not sacrifice with it unto their Gods, it is by and by avoyded out of their sight. Also, there be in this Countrey Pines, Aberrycocks, Chestnuttes, and Mellons,³⁰ although they be small and greene. Heere is whyte Sandalos or Saunders,³¹ and Camphora, or Camphire.

[Conti goes on to describe parts of the Indonesian archipelago and visits to Java, Borneo, and possibly Champa, before sailing back to the Malabar Coast and later to Europe.]

²⁹ Hammond's (1963: 18) translation is '12 miles'.

³⁰ Hammond's (1963: 18) translation is 'pineapples, oranges, chestnuts, melons'.

³¹ Sandal wood.