

Editorial Introduction to Nicolò de' Conti's Account

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Nicolò de' Conti did not write about his extensive travels. Our knowledge of him has been filtered through the works of two men to whom he recounted his adventures. A Spanish nobleman, Pero Tafur, was visiting the seashore near the monastery at Mount Sinai in 1437, when Conti arrived there, on his way back to Europe from Asia. Conti was accompanied by his wife, whom he had met and married in India, and by his four children, who were born in the course of his travels. Tafur travelled with the Conti family by caravan to Cairo and then set out for Crete. The wife and two children died in an epidemic in Egypt, and Conti returned with his remaining children to Venice, his native town. In 1439 he went to Florence during a papal visit to that city, and at that time he related the stories of his travels to the papal secretary, Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini.

Conti's Information and His Times

It seems likely that Conti told Tafur a lot more than he told Poggio, because the two men were constant companions during the fifteen-day trek to Cairo and for another several weeks while seeing the sights of Cairo. Tafur's style of writing led him to choose and describe the unusual people, animals and sights that Conti had seen, but mostly at random and without placing the stories in any particular geographical context. The version of Conti's travels that appears in Tafur (1926: 84-95) is therefore of relatively limited use for research about Asia, although it provides helpful biographical notes about Conti.

Poggio was a different kind of writer, with an analytic mind and a special interest in the affairs of the East. His composition, in Latin, tells Conti's story not only as a continuous chronology but also in an orderly geographical sequence. He placed this relatively short essay at the end of a much larger work titled *De Varietate Fortunae* (The Vicissitudes of Fortune). The first three parts of that work are unrelated to Conti. The subject of the first part, for example is the Roman Empire and its downfall. The fourth part of Poggio's manuscript, based on Conti's information, was published in 1492 by Cristoforo da Bollate for one of the

purposes that Poggio had intended: as an introduction to the countries of southern Asia, about which Europeans knew little at that time.

Conti lived from about 1395 to 1469. His quarter century of travels took him across the Middle East and India and as far as Java, Borneo and possibly Champa, on the central coast of present-day Vietnam. Considering the extensive network of Muslims trading among the ports of southern Asia, Conti arrived on the shores of the Indian Ocean well prepared for his voyages. He lived as a youth in Damascus (where he acquired a knowledge of Arabic) and he travelled with a caravan to the Euphrates and the Persian Gulf (where he acquired Persian). These languages and his familiarity with Islamic cultures made it easy for him to live in Muslim trading communities in various places around the Indian Ocean and to travel from place to place on ships owned by Muslim merchants.

Readers of the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* will be interested in particular in his descriptions of various ports around the Andaman Sea and the journey to Ava, capital of the then-landlocked Burmese kingdom on the central Irrawaddy. Other European travelers may have gone as far east as Ava before Conti did, but up to his time, no European traveller had left a record of a visit either along the coastline or to the interior of Burma.

The information about Burma provided by Poggio stands out in contrast to accounts by two Chinese writers, who were almost exact contemporaries of Conti. Ma Huan (writing in 1433) and Fei Xin (in about 1436) recorded the findings of the Chinese voyages of discovery in the seas of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Fei Xin was on four of the Chinese voyages, from 1409 to 1433, and Conti sailed along some of the same routes about the same time that the Chinese ships did. Like Conti, both described the straits and southern part of the Andaman Sea, but they are silent about Tenasserim and the northern coastline. Chinese navigation charts did, however, record Tenasserim, Tavoy and other ports, some of which have not yet been identified. Chinese geographers wrote about the interior much earlier than Conti's time, but not in the contexts of eye-witness accounts or specific dates.

Similarly, Arab and other Muslim geographers, recounting information gathered from seamen, made frequent mention of the seaports visited by Arab ships. Some ports of the Andaman Sea are therefore well documented, but those at the northern end of the sea seem to appear in the records only in the mid-sixteenth century. The Turkish geographer Sidi 'Ali Celebi, writing in 1554, mentioned Pegu, Martaban and Tenasserim (Ferrand 1914: 486-7), since his main concern was to provide information useful to navigators in these waters. Abu'l-Fazl writing at the Mughal court in 1595 provided brief notes about coastal Arakan, Pegu and Tenasserim, likewise useful to navigators and traders (Ferrand 1914: 550-2). A glimpse of the interior appears in 1663 in a very sketchy description by Mirza Muhammad Kazim, who described a trail across the mountains, from Assam to the

Irrawaddy River, and the road that led to Ava (Ferrand 1914: 557), although not the route taken there by Conti.

Poggio did not record any dates in his composition. Some modern authors have attempted to assign a specific year to Conti's journeys in Southeast Asia, but it would be safe to assume only that he travelled through Sumatra, Tenasserim and the central and lower Irrawaddy basin at various times during the second half of the 1420s and perhaps early 1430s, before going on to Java and Borneo. Our only sure dates of reference are 1437, when he was in Sinai (after a two-year delay seeking permission to go there), and 1439, when his recollections were written down in Florence.

English Edition, 1579

The first edition of Conti's account (in Poggio's original Latin) was printed by Cristoforo da Bollate and dedicated to Pietro Cara, who was setting out on a journey to India and must have taken this slim volume with him to serve as a guidebook, since nothing else was available on the subject. Printing was a relatively new business in Europe, scarcely 40 years old, and Bollate may have placed an order with a printer, in the same way that a few handwritten and bound copies would have been commissioned a generation earlier.

The motivations for the first edition in English were similar, although John Frampton intended his translation for a wide audience: more than a century after his death, Conti's description, despite its limitations, was still one of very few reference works of its type available in Europe. Frampton's main purpose, however, was to translate the account by Marco Polo, to which the Conti text had been appended earlier to support the accuracy of Polo's claims.

The text in the present issue of the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* is Frampton's 1579 translation. This edition is reproduced here because it is the first and probably the least-known version in English. It was reprinted in 1929 by Norman Mosley Penzer, but that edition is now rare and provided very few editorial notes about the Conti text.

Caution is advisable when using the material attributed to Conti for research: Conti himself did not write it. It was recounted from memory, possibly embellished by imagination and clouded by the passage of time—as long as a quarter century after some of the events took place. Poggio inadvertently may have introduced errors by misinterpreting Conti's verbal statements, by rephrasing them in Latin (without leaving a record in Italian for comparison), by changing toponyms to Latin forms and possibly by rearranging the material to give it the neat geographical order of the final composition. The subsequent succession of translations of the text—into Portuguese (1502) and Spanish (1503) and from

Spanish to English (1579)—adds yet more likelihood of error in the case of the Frampton edition.

Transition through Several Languages

The work attributed to Conti is a heritage that defies any simple bibliographical citation, and the succession of publications is complex. Henri Cordier (1899) attempted to compile a bibliography of all the early translations of the Conti account. He failed to find the first editions in Latin, Italian and English, but his essay is still helpful for understanding how widely Conti's information became disseminated in European languages.

Poggio wrote down the information recounted to him by Conti in 1439, and by 1448 he had completed his four-part manuscript in Latin. Part four, containing the Conti account, was selected by Cristoforo de Bollate in 1492 and published in Milan with the title *India Recognita* (India Rediscovered).

This first published edition, the 1492 Latin edition, was translated into Portuguese (1502) and then into Spanish (1503). The Portuguese edition appears to be the source of the first Italian-language edition, which was included in the collection of travellers' accounts published in 1550 by Giovanni Battista Ramusio. Frampton translated the Spanish version into English and published it in 1579. A truncated translation from Italian to English was published in Samuel Purchas' collection of voyages in 1625.

The British Library has a copy of Frampton's work, but by far the greater part of that publication is a translation of the travels of Marco Polo. The part attributed to Conti is treated almost as a continuation of the Polo text, thereby nearly concealing its identity as a separate work. Not surprisingly, when John Winter Jones, a curator of the British Museum, made his translation (1857), it was believed to be the first English translation of Conti. The claim is true only in the sense that Jones worked directly from the Latin text and not at second hand from one of the translations in other languages. He did not know that the British Museum had a copy of the 1579 Frampton translation, because Conti's name does not appear in the title of that edition, and the Conti part of the text is placed inconspicuously at the end. Jones also did not know about the first Latin edition (1492) or that the British Museum had a copy of it. He therefore used the 1723 edition. A more nearly definitive English-language edition was published in 1963 by Lincoln Davis Hammond, based on Jones' work but retranslating and correcting Jones' errors.

The Conti text continues to be the subject of scholarly study. Recent editions include an Italian one by Alessandro Grossato (1994) and a French one by Diane Ménard, Geneviève Bouchon and Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary (2004), which includes Tafur's account of his brief acquaintance with Conti.

Selected Versions of the Conti Text in Chronological Order

1439. Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini made notes of his discussions with Conti in 1439 and, by 1448, he completed his four-part manuscript in Latin titled *De Varietate Fortunae* (The Vicissitudes of Fortune). Part four, containing Conti's information, was published in 1492 and given a title of its own.

1492. *India Recognita. Christoforus bullatus ducis Isubrium senator Petro Carae ducis alobrogum Senatoris. Poggii Florentini de uarietate Fortunae* [The Indies Rediscovered. Printed by Cristoforo da Bollate, Senator of the Duke of Milan, for Pero Caro, Senator of the Duke of Savoy. Poggio of Florence's *De Varietate Fortunae* (The Vicissitudes of Fortune)]. Milan: Uldericus Scinzenzeler, 1492.

Bollate's 1492 volume is the first printed edition of the material attributed to Conti. Bollate appears to have chosen this essay to serve as a handbook for Pero Caro, who was preparing to travel to India, and presumably Caro carried a copy with him on his journey. The only known copies of this edition are in the British Library and Harvard University Library.

Although part four of Poggio's composition is attributed to Conti, it is doubtless the product of much editing and organisation by Poggio. At the end, Poggio placed some additional facts that he obtained from visitors from Ethiopia.

1502. *Marco Paulo. Ho livro de Nycolao veneto. O trallado da carta de hum genoves das ditas terras* [Marco Polo. The Book of Nicolò the Venetian. A Translation of a Letter of a Genoese of the Said Lands]. Imprimido per Valentym fernandez alemao. Em a muy nobre çidade de Lyxboa, 1502.

Poggio's composition was translated from Latin to Portuguese and published in Lisbon in February 1502. One copy of this rare work is in the national library in Lisbon. The British Library has a 1922 reprinted edition.

The translator's identity is not apparent from the title. 'Valentim Fernandez the German' had exclusive printing and sales rights for this edition, which includes three separate works. The part by Conti may be the source of Ramusio's Italian translation (Crivat 2003: 14). Note that the main text is the account by Marco Polo, and the information attributed to Conti is appended to provide verifications of Polo's claims about southern Asia.

According to an apocryphal story, Conti was assigned by the Pope to provide all this information to Poggio, as a penance for his forced renunciation of the Christian Faith in a Muslim land. This penance appears to be the invention of the translator

of the 1502 Portuguese-language edition, who included it in his introduction (Crivat 2003: 10, 14), and from there it has been handed down in the literature up to the present.

1503. *Cosmographia breve introductoria en el libro d'Marco paulo. El libro del famoso Marco paulo veneciano d'las cosas maravillosas q. vido en las partes orientales. ... Com otro tratado de micer Poggio florentino q. trata de las mesmas tierras y yslas* [Cosmography Briefly Introduced in the Book of Marco Polo. The Book of the Famous Venetian Marco Polo about the Marvellous Things That He Saw in Eastern Places. ...With Another Treatise by Mr. Poggio the Florentine Which Deals with the Same Lands and Islands]. Sevilla: por Lanzalao Polono y Jacome Cromberger Alemano, 1503.

A translation of the Latin text into Spanish was made by Rodrigo Fernández de Santaella (or Santa Ella) and published in 1503 in Sevilla by Lanzalao Polono and 'Jacome Cromberger the German'. The only known example of this edition is in the British Library. It appears that Santaella relied on the 1502 Portuguese translation at least for reference, since the story of the penance imposed by the Pope is transmitted in succession: from the editor's introduction to the 1502 Portuguese edition, through the 1503 Spanish edition to the 1579 English version.

1550. Ramusio, Giovanni Battista, ed. *Primo Volume delle Navigazioni et Viaggi nel qual si contiene la descrizione dell'Africa, e del Paese del Prete Ianni, con varii viaggi, dal Mar Rosso à Calicut, et infin all'Isole Molucche ... et la Navigazione attorno il Mondo* [First Volume of the Navigations and Voyages in Which are Contained Descriptions of Africa, and the Land of Prester John, with Diverse Voyages, from the Red Sea to Calicut and Finally to the Maluku Islands...and the Navigation around the World]. Venetia: Gli Heredi di Lucantonio Giunti, 1550.

Ramusio published three volumes of travels (Venice, 1550-9) and included a translation of the text attributed to Conti in the first volume, with the title 'Viaggio di Nicolo di Conti Venetiano Scritto per Messer Poggio Fiorentino' [The Voyage of Nicolò de' Conti the Venetian, Written by Mr. Poggio the Florentine], pp. 364a-372a. The reference to the papal penance in Ramusio's introduction suggests that he used the Portuguese edition for this translation into Italian.

1579. Frampton, John. *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marcus Paulus, one of the Nobilitie of the State of Venice, unto the East Partes of the World, as Armenia, Persia, Arabia, Tartary, with many other Kingdomes and Provinces*. London: printed by R. Newbery, 1579.

Frampton translated from the 1503 Spanish edition. His reasons for wanting an English edition of the book of Marco Polo (to which the Conti text is appended) are explained in a letter to Edward Dyar, included in the preface and dated 26 January 1579:

Having lying by mee in my chamber a translation of the great voyage & long travels of Paulus Venetus the Venetian, manye merchants, pilots, mariners, and others much bent to Discoveries, resorting to me upon severall occasions, toke so great delight with the reding of my Booke, finding in the same such strange things that I could never bee in quiet, for one or for an other, for the Committing the same to printe in the Englishe tongue, perswading, that it mighte give greate lighte to our Seamen, if ever this nation chaunced to find a passage out of the frozen zone to the South Seas, and otherwise delight many home dwellers, furtherers of travellers.

Frampton's words might be rephrased (particularly for the benefit of non-native speakers) as follows in modern English:

Next to me in my bedroom, I had a translation of the great voyages and distant travels of Paulus Venetus the Venetian, many merchants, pilots, mariners and others who are very devoted to making discoveries. I returned to it on different occasions. I took such great delight in reading my book, finding in it such strange things, that I could not, in one way or another, remain still until I had printed it in English. I am convinced that it can be instructive to our men of the sea, if this nation ever happens to find a route from the northern latitudes to the southern seas, and that it can also delight many people who remain at home and are supporters of travellers.

It should be noted that Frampton's main concern was to publish the account by Marco Polo (the Marcus Paulus of his title and the Paulus Venetus of his letter). Conti's name does not appear on the title page or in the table of contents. The part attributed to Conti thus became somewhat concealed behind the main text, in the absence of a subdivision to distinguish the two authors.

1625-6. Purchas, Samuel, ed. *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Containing a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*. Five volumes. London, 1625-6.

The Purchas edition includes a translation of Conti's information from an Italian copy. This English edition is greatly abridged, omits many details and is doubtless the poorest version of the text in any language.

1723. Poggio Bracciolini, Giovanni Francesco. *Poggii Bracciolini Florentini Historiae de varietate fortunae libri quatuor...* [Poggio Bracciolini the Florentine's *Vicissitudes of Fortune*, Book Four...]. Paris: Typis Antonii Urbani Constetier, 1723.

Cordier (1899: 388) assumed incorrectly that this was the first Latin edition of the Conti text. Jones (1857) used it for his translation. Neither was aware of the 1492 Latin edition.

1857. The Travels of Nicolo Conti, in the East, in the Early Part of the Fifteenth Century, as Related by Poggio Bracciolini, in his work entitled *Historia de Varietate Fortunae*, Lib. IV. Translated by J. Winter Jones. In *India in the Fifteen Century; Being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the Century Preceding the Portuguese Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope; from Latin, Persian, Russian, and Italian Sources, Now First Translated into English*, pp. 3-39. Edited by R. H. Major. Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, no 22. London: Hakluyt Society, 1857.

John Winter Jones translated the Latin text composed by Poggio into English, using the 1723 Paris edition. He also provided extensive editorial notes. Richard Henry Major published it together with three other travel accounts. Jones' version has been criticised for errors of interpretation and translation, rectified subsequently in the 1963 retranslation by Hammond.

1906. The Voyage of Nicolo di Conti a Venetian, to the Indies, Mangi, Cambulu and Quinsai, with some Observations of those places. In Samuel Purchas, ed., *Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Containing a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*, Vol. 11, pp. 394-400. Glasgow: James McLehose and Sons, 1906.

This version is reprinted from the Purchas (1625) edition. As noted above, this is the poorest and least reliable of all versions.

1929. *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo together with the Travels of Nicolò de' Conti, Edited from the Elizabethan Translation of John Frampton with Introduction, Notes and Appendixes by N. M. Penzer, M.A.* London: Argonaut Press.

Norman Mosley Penzer reprinted Frampton's 1579 edition of Marco Polo's travels. Conti's name does not appear in the table of contents. But unlike the 1579 edition, the Conti portion is no longer hidden. It is clearly separated from the rest of the work in a section of its own with a subtitle: 'The Travels of Nicolò de' Conti in the

East' (pp. 123-49). Penzer compiled elaborate editorial notes and detailed maps for Polo's account, but little for the account attributed to Conti. The Penzer edition was reprinted in London by A. and C. Black in 1937.

1963. Hammond, Lincoln Davis, translator and editor. 1963. *Travelers in Disguise: Narratives of Eastern Travel by Poggio Bracciolini and Ludovico de Varthema*. English translations by John Winter Jones. Revised with an introduction by Lincoln Davis Hammond. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University.

Hammond's careful retranslation of the 1857 Jones edition, using the original 1492 Latin edition, provides a nearly definitive translation in English of Poggio's Latin composition. Hammond (1963: 1-45) published it with the Latin title '*India Recognita. The Indies Rediscovered, by Poggio Bracciolini. In Which Are Included the Travels of Nicolò de' Conti*'. This edition does not include explanatory notes for the text, and one must therefore continue to rely on Jones' work and translations in other languages for scholarly commentary. Two recent editions are listed below.

1994. Grossato, Alessandro, editor. *L'India di Nicolò de' Conti. Un manoscritto del Libro IV del De Varietate Fortunae di Francesco Poggio Bracciolini da Terranova* [The India of Nicolò de' Conti: A Manuscript of Book 4 of the *Vicissitudes of Fortune* of Francesco Poggio Bracciolini da Terranova]. Padova: Centro Veneto Studi e Ricerche sulle Civiltà Classiche e Orientali, con sede presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Storico-Archeologiche e Orientalistiche dell'Università di Venezia.

2004. *Le voyage aux Indes de Nicolo de' Conti 1414-1439* [The Voyage to the Indies of Nicolo de' Conti 1414-1439]. Traduction de Diane Ménard. Edité par Geneviève Bouchon et Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary. Paris: Accueil Éditions, 2004.

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Crivat, Anca. 2003. Excurso. El Viaje de Nicolo dei Conti en los Relatos de Pero Tafur y Poggio Bracciolini [The Voyage of Nicolò de' Conti in the Accounts of Pero Tafur and Poggio Bracciolini]. In *Los Libros de Viajes de la Edad Media*

Española [Books of Voyages of the Spanish Middle Ages]. Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii. Citations are from www.unibuc.ro/eBooks/filologie/AncaCrivat/excurso.htm.

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Ma Huan. 1970. *Ying-yai sheng-lan. 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores (1433)'*. Translated from the Chinese text edited by Feng Ch'eng-Chün, with introductory notes and appendices by J.V.G. Mills. Hakluyt Society, Extra Series no. 42. Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press.

Poggio Bracciolini, Giovanni Francesco. 1993. *De varietate fortunae. Edizione critica con introduzione e commento a cura di Outi Merisalo* [The Vicissitudes of Fortune. Edited with an introduction and commentary by Outi Merisalo]. Suomalaisen tiedeakatemia toimituksia (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae), Series B 275. Helsinki: Suomalaisen tiedeakatemia toimituksia.

Tafur, Pero. 1926. *Pero Tafur: Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*. Translated from Spanish and edited by Malcolm Letts. New York and London: Harper and Brothers.

Niccolò de' Conti was from a noble mercantile family; at an early age he decided to follow in the family tradition by establishing a lucrative trading operation in the East. Unlike most of his fellow Venetians, however, Conti did not concentrate solely on trade with Egypt. In 1419 he began a journey "reminiscent of that of Marco Polo" which lasted nearly a quarter of a century and took him to the Near and Far East. Like Marco Polo, Conti displayed a facility for language and for recording his observations for posterity. The first phase of Conti's odyssey included a stay in Syria, where he spent enough time to learn to speak the Arabic language. He traveled overland through the desert to Baghdad; from there he moved on to Persia (modern Iran), where he founded a trading company with local merchants. Lastly, Conti's account reflected a tendency for more rational view of the nature and culture of the South and Southeast Asia. Some images of the exotic animals unknown to the Western world, such as Moluccan cockatoo, were precisely realistic in the account. In general, the Venetian traveler and the Florentine humanist both considered the bestiary images of different origin as a powerful instrument of constructing the images of foreign cultures. Keywords. imaginary zoology, bestiaries, Republic of Venice, medieval voyages, Niccolò de' Conti, humanism, orientalism, elephant. Received. 15.09.2016. Introduction. This dissertation begins with a focus on Niccolò de' Conti's fifteenth century travel account, originally rendered in Latin by the Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini, who incorporated de' Conti's oral account in his treatise on the vagaries of fortune, the *Historia de varietate fortunae*. 1 Investigating the role of this narrative as cultural intermediary, in this introduction I focus on the relationship between the humanist Bracciolini and the merchant de' Conti. 2 I. As it is generally agreed that these editorial operations express religious, philosophical, and historical concerns, I contend that the accounts I have analyzed (but the research could extend to a greater number of narratives) also betray concerns over sexuality and its relationship.