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CONTI, NICCOLÒ DEI (c. 1395–1469)*Italian Merchant and Traveler*

After the collapse of the prosperous trade system in the distant parts of Asia around the middle of the fourteenth century, very few Europeans traveled to India. This was a result of the plague, the breakup of the Mongolian empire following the assumption of power in China by the xenophobic Ming dynasty in 1368, and the disintegration of the kingdom of the Mongol Timur, an Islamic convert, after his death in 1405. One who did travel in this period, however, was Niccolò dei Conti, a merchant from Chioggia, who spent some 25 years between c. 1415 and 1439/42 traveling around the Near East and Southeast Asia. Conti's travels were a risky undertaking, but he was fortunate enough to return home, where an eager scholar, Poggio Bracciolini, took an interest and wrote down Conti's impressions and experiences.

As an adolescent, Conti studied Arabic in Damascus, one of the main crossroads for trade in the Levant. Since Europeans were forbidden to trade with Persia and India as a result of a trade monopoly, he joined an Arabian caravan en route to Baghdad, then sailed via Basra, the Persian Gulf, and Hormuz as far as Kalhat in present-day Oman, where he learned Persian. While Conti was returning via Arabia, his disguise as a Persian merchant was uncovered. At the Egyptian border, with his life and those of his wife and his four children under threat, he was forced to convert to Islam. On Conti's return to Italy, he begged absolution for his conversion from Pope Eugene IV at the Council of Florence and thus came to know the eminent humanist and private secretary to the pope, Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459).

In 1448, the scholarly Poggio, who had been in the service of the pope since 1404, published the authenticated details of his thorough interview of Conti in *Historia de varietate fortunae*, a work designed to demonstrate the fickleness of fortune, which he dedicated to

Pope Nicholas V. Cooperative works of this kind (for example, Odoric of Pordenone with William of Solagna, Marco Polo with Rustichello) traditionally acquired greater credibility. Poggio divided the story of Conti's travels into two parts—itinerary and detailed summary—which he added to the first of three volumes of his work, written between 1432 and 1435 and covering the history of Rome, of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and of the pontificate of Eugene IV. Poggio's purpose was to provide reliable knowledge on Asian cosmography, supported and complemented by two short reports from envoys in Cathay and Ethiopia.

Conti traveled via the usual trade routes; personal details, such as his motivations, have not been passed down. Traveling as a tradesman in a Persian vessel, Conti set off for Cambay via the west coast of India, and from there, via the Malabar coast, he went south toward Delhi via Barkur, crossing India by land via the capitals of Vijayanagar as far as “Pudifetania” (probably what we now know as Madras Chennai) on the Indian east coast. In Mailapur, he visited the grave of St. Thomas the Apostle and a community of Nestorians, before heading south along the Coromandel Coast toward Cayal and to the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), rich in precious stones and cinnamon. From there, Conti sailed past the Andaman Islands to Sumatra, where he remained for a year and observed cruel native customs. A storm took him to Tenasserim and finally to the mouth of the Ganges, where he sailed upriver in search of a number of cities that have never been identified. The details of the route Conti took are probably an amalgamation of several different voyages. He used “Pudifetania” again as the point of departure for his crossing of the Gulf of Bengal and his journey by land from Arakan, following the Irrawaddy to Ava, the former capital of the Burmese empire. A diagram of a route to Cathay at this point in the narrative has provoked lively scholarly debate about the possibility that Conti had visited China, though this seems unlikely. After stops in Sittang and Pegu, he spent nine months in Sumatra and Java (he uses “Java minor” and “maior,” which could possibly have denoted Java and Borneo). It was there that Conti heard about the remote spice islands of Sandai (Sunda) and Bandam (Banda), situated further to the east, which were reported to be sources of nutmeg Sandai (Sunda) and cloves. The furthest Bandam (Banda) mainland point to the east that he reached was Ciampa (Vietnam). His return journey to Europe took him via the Malabar Coast, the island of Socotra, Aden, the Red Sea, and Cairo. It was in Cairo that Conti lost, during an epidemic, the woman he was reputed to have married in India, two of his children, and all his servants, before finally reaching Venice accompanied by his two surviving children.

The narrative describes a total of 25 months of travel and lengthy stopovers of approximately four years; we know little about the remaining periods.

Poggio combined eyewitness accounts with professional skill and scholarship to a degree that was unique in writings about the Near East and the Ganges in the Middle Ages. Conti is often cited as an impartial source, but he rarely appears as an individual, with the result that it is difficult to distinguish between what was his actual experience and what was simply hearsay. A nonjudgmental, neutral tone (with little reference to *mirabilia* and myth) dominates Conti's travel narrative, which concentrates mainly on trade in plants (fruits, spices, timber), pearls and precious stones, and animals and on native customs, but he seldom gives detailed accounts of cities and islands. The systematic, ethnocentric textbook style of description of the Indian and Indonesian peoples is modeled on classical lines, particularly those of Pliny the Elder. Beginning with the partition of India by the Ganges and the Indus, Poggio describes everyday life (food, clothing, jewelry, prostitution), ritual (marriage, polygamy, burial, sati), gods and idols (sacrifice, ritual suicide), festivals, technical skills (navigation, shipbuilding, calendars, currency, weapons), Asian views of Europeans, writing, justice, diseases, and idiosyncracies. The result is a wealth of new and precise writing that takes its inspiration from classical historiography and contemporary Asian studies (such as those of the male and female islands in Socotra or the tale of hunting for diamonds using birds of prey borrowed from Marco Polo).

The Castilian nobleman and global wanderer Pero Tafur (1410–c. 1479), who from 1435 to 1439 traveled throughout the Holy Land and nearly all over Europe, covered the same journey as Conti, but his writings reveal completely different observations. He is supposed to have met up with Conti in 1436 or 1437 at the monastery of St. Catherine on the Sinai peninsula as Conti arrived with a caravan from India. It is said that Conti so energetically advised him not to continue to India that Tafur joined the caravan heading for Egypt. Conti, who was supposedly in the service of the sultan in Cairo, reportedly sent Tafur on ahead to Venice with letters and notes. This encounter has been the subject of intense scholarly debate, because Tafur claims that Conti had spent 40 years in India, giving an entirely different route for his travels (Alexandria, Babylon, the court of Tamerlane and the kingdom of Prester, conversion in Mecca), and that he had given Tafur his notes does not quite ring true. The stereotypical description and the numerous *mirabilia* give one reason to doubt their encounter, especially as Tafur was, like Bracciolini and perhaps Conti, also in Florence in 1439 and only committed his account to paper

in 1450. Other elements, however, support the view that the encounter did occur: the urgent warning against traveling to India (which corresponds with Conti's own opinion in his last will), the denial of the existence of mammoths in India, and the accounts of necromancy on windless days, which are found only in Poggio's writings.

Poggio's report survives in 52 of the 59 known manuscripts of *Historia de varietate fortunae* (of these, 28 contain all four books and one has books 1 and 4). Twenty-three manuscripts contain only book 4, which was circulated widely and keenly read as a separate volume. All the manuscripts, with the exception of three originated in central Italy, are exclusively from the fifteenth century. The early printed versions (the first being that of Ulrich Scinzenzeler in Milan in 1492) reproduce only the fourth book, and then often in the context of other eyewitness accounts. The Latin edition was followed in 1502 by a Portuguese edition and in 1503 by the first Spanish translation. An Italian version was published in 1550 in the famous collection of travel writings by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, gaining wide circulation, but it was riddled with errors. The foreword for this work claims that Conti was forced to dictate his experiences as a penance. Proof that interest was concentrated in Italy (for instance, it was not published in Germany) can be found in the clear evidence contained in the Genoese Portulan map of 1457, in Fra Mauro's 1459 map of the world, in Enea Silvio Piccolomini's (Pope Pius II) geographical compendium *De Asia* (1461), in an annex to the foreword of Ansel Adorno's journey to the Holy Land (1470–1471), and in other treatises of the sixteenth century.

INGRID BAUMGÄRTNER

Biography

Little known about his life. The only certain dates are those concerning the period following his 25 years traveling in India. Born c. 1395 in Chioggia, a port in the republic of Venice; supposed to have headed for Damascus in 1415, to have married an Indian woman, and to have returned to Italy between 1439 and 1442 accompanied by his surviving children, Maria and Daniele. We know that he was a member of the *Maggior consiglio* in 1451, that he was elected procurator of the churches of San Francesco in 1453 and Santa Croce in 1460, *giudice di proprio* in 1456, and that he was subsequently a member of various trade missions tasked with buying cereals and oil in Faenza and Apulia. His will was read on 10 August 1469, apparently soon after his death.

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