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Marco Polo and the *Courte-Durée* Global Middle Ages

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Balascian est une provence que les gens aorent Maomet et one langajes por elz. Il est grant roiames et se roit por hereditajes : ce est que de un lignajes sunt, desendu du roi Alexandre et de la fille del roi Dayre, le grant sire de Persie. Et encore s'apelent tuit celz rois Çulcarnein, en saraisin lor langajes, que vaut a dire en frascois Alixandre, por le amor dou grant Alixandre.

Badakhshan is a province whose people worship Muhammad and have a language of their own. It is a large kingdom and [has] a hereditary king: they are from a single lineage, descended from Alexander and King Darius, the great lord of Persia. What's more, all these kings are named Zulkarnein [Çulcarnein] in their Saracen language (meaning "Alexander" in French), for love of the great Alexander.¹

These are the opening lines of chapter 47, "Here the great province of Badakhshan is described, "of Marco Polo's *Le Devisement du monde* (*The Description of the World*)—the text commonly if misleadingly known in English translation as "The Travels." The *Devisement* was composed in 1298 by Polo, the Venetian merchant recently returned from over four decades in Asia and the Mongol empire, and the Arthurian romance writer Rustichello of Pisa while the two were both captives in the city of Genoa. Their original is lost, but the surviving manuscript scholars agree to be closest to it (Paris, BNF français 1116) was copied c. 1310, in old French—that is, in the version today commonly called Franco-Italian or, most recently, "the French of Italy."²

In this mini essay, I'd like to use the *Devisement* to explore the place of medieval French language and literature in the emerging field of "the global Middle Ages." Conventionally, we think of French becoming a cosmopolitan language in the early modern period (as shown by Pascale Casanova in her *République mondiale des lettres*), peaking in the eighteenth century. Conversely, the institutionalization of the study of medieval French literature, as many have demonstrated, is inseparable from the nationalist projects of the Third Republic in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and perpetuated throughout the twentieth in the nationally-defined departments of literature in which many of us were trained. Undoing such disciplinary definitions is not easy, not least because of the inertia produced by such institutional structures. In North America, the impulse to move the field of French literature beyond the borders of the Hexagon came from the interest in Colonial and Postcolonial Theory, resulting in the way "Francophone studies" has been appended to the name of so

¹ Marco Polo, *Milione/Le divisament dou monde. Il Milione nelle redazioni Toscana e franco-italiana*, ed. Gabriella Ronchi (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1982), XLVII, 1-3 (360); Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, trans., with Introduction and Notes, by Sharon Kinoshita (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2016), 38.

² See the archived website "The French of Italy" at <https://frenchofitaly.ace.fordham.edu/> (accessed 24 October 2022) and the journal *Francigena: Rivista sul franco-italiano e sulle scritture francesi nel Medioevo d'Italia*, <https://www.francigena-unipd.com/index.php/francigena/index> (accessed 24 October 2022).

many departments of French in order to take account of the literary production predominantly from the former French colonial world. In my 2006 book *Medieval Boundaries*, I argued that such an expanded geopolitical frame was indispensable to the study of medieval French, given that so many of the foundational texts of the literary tradition—the *Chanson de Roland*, the *lais* of Marie de France—were set, and in many cases composed, outside the borders of the medieval kingdom of France and/or the modern Hexagon.³

A word is in order on terminology. We are all aware of the controversy over applying the period-concept “medieval” to cultures outside of Europe, more recently redoubled by objections to the emerging field of the “global Middle Ages.” While acknowledging the important historical, historiographical, and political issues underpinning these debates—and I was fascinated a few years ago to learn of the controversy that Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s introduction of the rubric “early modern” had stirred within South Asian Studies—I myself have not hesitated to use it as an umbrella term under which to situate my work; after that initial framing, however, I aim for specificity, in terms of both period and geography/culture re: late thirteenth-century Venice, Ilkhanid Persia, the “Latin empire” of Constantinople (1204-1261), etc.

As for the “global” Middle Ages, while the tokenism of the random mansion of a non-European case, or the treatment of a non-European case only through a European lens, are certainly to be decried, I prefer to focus on the broader questions and perspectives that the field-concept can enable. Let me give analogies from the two directions my own research has taken. First, in the case of Mediterranean studies, there is the very helpful distinction proposed by Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell (in their monumental 2000 book, *The Corrupting Sea*) between phenomena incidentally located “in” the Mediterranean versus those that are quintessentially “of” it.⁴ As for the global: my inspiration comes from the project of “worlding” that some colleagues and I pioneered through a curricular program in “World Literature and Cultural Studies” in the Literature Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz in the early 1990s.⁵ The gerund is crucial, underscoring not an entity given in advance but a process: “an interruption and critique of a range of field imaginaries” in which the world (rather than nation states or national literary traditions) are the indispensable backdrop⁶—very different from the way David Damrosch subsequently shaped “World Literature” as a kind of alternative literary history of the spread of texts across linguistic boundaries.

³ Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). On the diffusion of medieval French based on a study of manuscript production, see Jane Gilbert, Simon Gaunt, and William Burgwinkle, *Medieval French Literary Culture Abroad*, Oxford Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), reviewed at <https://academic.oup.com/fs/article-abstract/75/1/102/6031405?redirectedFrom=fulltext> (accessed 24 October 2022).

⁴ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). For the “California school” of Mediterranean Studies that I have worked to promote, see Brian A. Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita, eds., *Can We Talk Mediterranean? Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017) with relevant bibliography.

⁵ Kristin Ross, “The World Literature and Cultural Studies Program,” *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (1993): 666-76.

⁶ Christopher Leigh Connery, “Introduction: Worlded Pedagogy in Santa Cruz,” in *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Rob Wilson and Christopher Leigh Connery (Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press, 2007), 1-11 (at p. 1). For my own deployment of these concepts, see Sharon Kinoshita, “Deprovincializing the Middle Ages,” in *The Worlding Project*, 61-75, and “Worlding Medieval French Literature,” in *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, ed. Susan Suleiman and Christie McDonald (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3-20.

To return, then, to Marco Polo's *Devisement du monde*: most people, including medievalists, are surprised to learn that this iconic text, co-authored by a Venetian and a Pisan, was in fact composed in a dialect not of Italian but of French. This choice makes perfect sense, not for the Middle Ages as a whole but for the second half of the thirteenth century: in these decades just before Dante's *Commedia* magisterially elevated Tuscan to the prestige of a literary language, non-clerical Italians wishing to write in the vernacular composed their works in French because, in the words of Brunetto Latini (Dante's mentor, remembered today for his appearance in Canto XV of the *Inferno*) in the preface to his encyclopedic compilation *Le Livre dou tresor* (*The Book of Treasure*), "por ce que la parleure est plus delitable et plus comune a touz languagees" (because the language is more pleasing and more widespread than all languages).⁷

At courts across northern Italy, princes sponsored the copying and composition of French epics and romances; and in Genoa, captive Pisans were put to work copying French texts—including Rustichello's own Arthurian compilation. This was at the same time that French served as lingua franca for the Crusader states before the Mamluks' final conquest of Acre in 1291.⁸ The version of the *Devisement* preserved in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France fonds français 1116 (the so-called "F" text) is in a ragged French that an early translator, Sir Henry Yule, described as "at war with all the practices of French grammar"—a raggedness that has contributed to French philologists' rather patronizing attitude towards this version despite its recognized historical value.⁹ A major indication that the "F" text reflects the language of the lost original (rather than being a translation from, say, thirteenth-century Tuscan or Venetian) are the moments where it introduces a foreign word or name, then translates the term for us "in French." In Georgia, for example, there is "un roi qui est apelés par tout tens Davit Melic, que vaut a dire en fransois Davit roi" (a king who for all time is called Davit Melic, which means "David king" in French [§23])—a particularly interesting example since "Melic" in fact represents the Arabic word for king, "malik." The *Devisement's* defamiliarized rendition of the Biblical account of the Magi even puns in French: "se il prient mire qu'il est mire" (if he takes the *myrrh*, he is a *physician* [§31]). This brings us back to the passage with which we started. In this case, the name glossed as "meaning 'Alexander' in French" is Dhū'l-Qarnayn—the "two-horned" one mentioned in the Qur'an which becomes an Islamic designation for Alexander the Great, as known through the sprawling text network of the Alexander romance.¹⁰

Through these examples, I have been suggesting that the *Devisement du monde*, composed in French in 1298, offers us an unexpected window onto how we might begin to think of the global Middle Ages. The fact of a Venetian merchant narrating his account of his twenty-four years' acquaintance with Asia in French is, I have suggested, a phenomenon specifically tied to the linguistic environment of the second half of the thirteenth century. Historically, moreover, 1298 falls almost exactly at the midpoint of the remarkable century chronicled by Janet Abu-Lughod in her seminal text *Before European Hegemony*, when the Mongol conquests that produced the largest contiguous land empire ever seen resulted in an

⁷ B. Latini, *Tresor*, ed. P. G. Beltrami, P. Squillacioti, P. Torri, and S. Vetteroni (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2007), I.1.7 (6, with my translation).

⁸ *The French of Outremer: Communities and Communications in the Crusading Mediterranean*, ed. Laura K. Morreale and Nicholas L. Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

⁹ *The Travels of Marco Polo: The Complete Yule-Cordier Edition*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Yule and Henri Cordier (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 1: 83.

¹⁰ See, for example, Haila Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition: History, Myth and Legend in Medieval Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), and Daniel Selden, "Text Networks," *Ancient Narrative* 8 (2010): 1-23.

integration of eight Old World regional sub-systems unmatched before the age of European expansion in the sixteenth century.¹¹ This integration, of course, was the indispensable condition of the Polos' journey in the first place: Marco's father and uncle had first ventured into the khanate of the Golden Horde in c. 1260 and eventually reached the court of the Great Khan in the entourage of an envoy sent to Qubilai by his brother, the Persian Ilkhan Hülegü. In fundamental ways, in other words, the *Devisement* is both the product and the document of a *courte-durée* Global Middle Ages.

Much of the skepticism around the Global Middle Ages, of course, comes from the perception that it remains a Eurocentric project that takes account of other parts of the world when they come under the sway of European agency, from a perspective that remains European. The *Devisement du monde*, I have argued elsewhere, offer us a point of view much less Eurocentric than is generally supposed; after all, the oft-cited work calling the authenticity of Marco Polo's narrative into question argues that much of his "knowledge" of China could have been gleaned from Persian-language sources!¹² Though convincingly countered by a number of specialists in Asian and Mongol studies, such a thesis reflects the extent to which Marco's perspectives is at times more "Asian" than "European." And in fact, the central focus of the text is arguably Qubilai Khan and his empire—justifying one of the text's later medieval titles, *Le Livre du grant caam* (*The Book of the Great Khan*). Although authored by a Venetian, the description often seems to reflect Mongol experiences of and perspectives on the places and phenomena described.

As a literary historian, I have been especially interested (inspired in part by Sanjay Subrahmanyam's idea of "connected histories") in reconstructing something like a cultural analog to the economic connectivity at the heart of Abu-Lughod's work.¹³ To date, I have taken two different approaches. First, I began with the tantalizing mention in the prologue that upon first reaching the Mongol court, Marco aroused admiration and wonder for the way in which he so quickly learned four different languages and their scripts. Though Rustichello does not specify what those four languages were, venturing educated guesses leads us to uncover the multilingualism of medieval Eurasia, in which the use, diffusion, and interaction of different languages were determined by political, economic, and cultural factors much different from the ethnic nationalism of the modern world.¹⁴ Particularly relevant here is recent work on the Persianate world—a vast region that in Marco Polo's day reached from the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia to South Asia, where Persian was a language of cultural expression (think Rumi in Konya and Amir Khusrau, whom we will meet below, in Delhi).¹⁵ My second strategy for "worlding" Marco Polo's century originated in pure serendipity: my

¹¹ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A. D. 1250-1350* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹² Sharon Kinoshita, "Traveling Texts: De-orientalizing Marco Polo's *The Description of the World*." In *Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge*, ed. Gesa Mackenthun, Andrea Nicolas, and Stephanie Wodianka (Münster: Waxmann, 2017), 223-46.

¹³ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31: 3 (1997): 735-62.

¹⁴ Sharon Kinoshita, "Premodernities," in *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, ed. Jenny Burns and Derek Duncan, *Transnational Modern Languages* 7 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 243-50, and "Marco Polo and the Multilingual Middle Ages," in *Medieval French Without Borders*, ed. Thomas O'Donnell, Jane Gilbert, and Brian Reilly (York: York Medieval Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ See Nile Green, "Introduction," in *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), pp. 1-71; and Richard M. Eaton, who argues that the period conventionally called "medieval" in Indian historiography coincides with the centuries of interaction between Persian and Sanskritic cultures across the subcontinent. See *India in the Persianate Age 1000-1765* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), especially 3-18 (at 18) and 62-99.

discovery of several individuals whose birth and death dates correspond closely to Marco's own: exact contemporaries whose extraordinary lives offer nodes of possibility for thick descriptions around different nodes in Marco's interconnected world: Zhao Mengfu, the Chinese literatus whose painting and calligraphy changed the canons of Chinese art; Takezaki Suenaga, the provincial warrior who commissioned a scroll celebrating his role in helping to repel the Mongols' failed invasions of Japan; Amir Khusrau, the Delhi poet and polymath who wrote in both Persian and Hindavi; and Maria Palaiologina, an illegitimate daughter of the Byzantine emperor who married Abaqa, the Ilkhan (subordinate khan) of Persia and, after his death, returned to Constantinople to found the monastery informally named "Saint Mary of the Mongols."¹⁶ Touched to a greater or lesser extent by the same Mongol century that enabled the Polos' sojourn in Mongol Asia, these personages afford us at least a distant glimpse of some of the individual lives interlinked by this extraordinary period "before European hegemony."

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¹⁶ For the first two, see Sharon Kinoshita, "The Painter, the Warrior, and the Sultan: The World of Marco Polo in Three Portraits," *The Medieval Globe* 2:1 (2016): 101-28.