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### **Chaucer's Tartarye**

“At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye” — so begins that tale of wonder which has so long teased Chaucer's audience. Tartary, of the fabled Orient, summons up images of splendor and romance, and so was selected by Chaucer as setting for the Squire's tale of enchanted steeds and magical mirrors. For Chaucer's fourteenth-century audience, as for his audience today, Tartary was a name rich in connotations. It will be the purpose of this paper to explore those connotations and to reconstruct as far as possible the imaginative impression evoked by mention of that magical place. In order to reconstruct the prevailing fourteenth-century image of Tartary, I will examine the geographical knowledge common to the century, and the travellers' tales which were one of Europe's favorite diversions and which enjoyed a large circulation and popularity in Chaucer's day.

“Tartarye” excited the imagination. Though it lacked the fascination of the long ago, it had the fascination of the far away. It was remote and thus mysterious. Tartary in Chaucer's day was synonymous with the Orient, and the Orient meant fantastic wealth, natural wonders, and magic. It is always the unknown which breeds imaginative fancies, and for centuries Tartary and the Orient had been hidden from Europe's view by the iron curtain of Persia. For centuries myth and fable had grown up around it. It was not until the thirteenth century that Europe penetrated the barrier, and by that time the mass of fable had grown to such proportions that even the travels of men like the Polos, and the routine journeys of scores of merchants to Cathay could not entirely destroy it. To the fourteenth-century imagination Tartary was a land of fable, and European geographical knowledge of it was a body of fact liberally sprinkled with fiction.

Fables about the Orient had long been current in Europe and could be traced back to Homeric times, to the Golden Age of Greece, to Alexander the Great's Indian campaigns, to Pliny's *Natural History*, to

Solinus' *Polyhistor*. The resulting medieval collection was a strange combination of lore about unusual animals like the porcupine, monstrous races of men like those with a single huge foot utilized as a sunshade, and fantastic wonders of nature such as rivers which ran with gems instead of water. In the Orient pygmies fought with storks and giants with griffons. There could be found men with dogs' faces, and women who ruled a land without men. All of this was common knowledge from the time of that most excellent fabricator of tales of wonder, Ctesias (c. 400 B.C.), to the day of that other expert creator of travellers' tales, Sir John Mandeville.

Then too, added to this stock of fable, and increasing its bulk considerably, was a body of Biblical lore which populated the East with the realms of Gog and Magog, and situated somewhere in its furthest reaches the land of Ophir from which had come the gold and jewels of Solomon. In addition, though it was not charted on any map, somewhere in the East was to be found Eden, Adam's paradise with its four famous rivers. With this notion of a primal paradise added to its earlier reputation for unheard of wealth and wonders, the fabled Orient seemed to have reached its peak.

Then it was that there came to European ears a tale which combined in itself all earlier wonders and added more. It was in approximately 1158 in the chronicle of Bishop Otto of Feisingen that Europe first heard of Prester John. It was Otto who made the first mention of an Asiatic potentate of great wealth and power whose kingdom lay "in the extreme Orient beyond Persia and Armenia."<sup>1</sup> Basing his report on information communicated to him by the Syrian bishop of Gabalo, Otto declared the Prester not only the most powerful and magnificent of monarchs, but a Christian and a descendant of the Magi. Then in 1165 appeared a letter from the Prester himself. Addressed to the Pope and princes of Europe, this letter, which is perhaps the most remarkable hoax in literary history, seems to have taken Europe by storm and to have been accepted as entirely authentic.<sup>2</sup> It circulated extensively and described in extravagant detail John's magnificent kingdom and court.

Though the exact geographical bounds of John's realm were hazy, it supposedly included the three Indias and stretched across the eastern desert from Babylon to the Tower of Babel. Four months were needed to cross this empire which included, besides the land of the Amazons and the land of the Brahmins, the shrine of St. Thomas the Apostle and the fountain of youth. Its splendors, particularly

those of John's court, could nowhere be matched. The roof of John's palace was of ebony, its gables of gold and carbuncle, its gates of sardonyx, and its windows of crystal. At its tables of gold and amethyst a thousand men dined each day. But in addition to such splendors as a river flowing with emeralds, sapphires and topazes, the land of Prester John boasted a truly Utopian character and atmosphere:

Honey flows in our land and milk everywhere abounds....There are no poor among us; we receive all strangers and wayfarers; thieves and robbers find no place among us, neither adultery nor avarice....Flattery finds no place; there is no division among us; our people have abundance of wealth....We believe we have no equal in the abundance of riches and numbers of people.<sup>3</sup>

It was this fabulous land of Prester John which colored European thought about Tartary and the Orient for almost four centuries. The legend enjoyed tremendous popularity; the one hundred manuscripts of the letter which still exist are proof of this. And it was this land which both the fifteenth-century explorers and the thirteenth-century travellers sought. When the Tartar conquests of the thirteenth century opened the East to European travellers, their minds were full of Prester John. As a result, they found him — several times over in various Tartar princes. Marco Polo, John of Carpini, Friar Odoric and William of Rubruck all identified him with different potentates, though Rubruck admitted with disappointment that reports of him were grossly exaggerated, telling "ten times more of him than was true."<sup>4</sup>

The point of all this is simply to show how great a hold on the European imagination Tartary had managed to attain. Though modern geographers are horrified at such tales, this was a large part of the geography which Chaucer's century knew. A good amount of accurate geographical knowledge was available, but mingled with it always was the geography of myth and fable. An illustration of this fact is the celebrated Catalan Atlas, a series of maps drawn in 1375 by Abraham Cresques, a Majorcan Jew. The maps are a good representation of geographical knowledge as it stood in the later Middle Ages, and they combine a remarkable accuracy with the familiar mythology. In drawing the maps the writings of the thirteenth-century travellers to Tartary had been used to locate accurately the cities of central Asia. But at the same time room had

been found for the charting of the land of the pygmies, the realm of Gog and Magog, and Alexander's wall. And it is by the same token that while Chaucer could speak in *The Book of the Duchess* with some authority of the "Drye se" and the "Carrenar", (ll. 1028-29) recognizing them as two of the outstanding physical features of the East Asia (the Gobi desert and the Black Lake), at the same time Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* could speak of Asia stretching eastward to the world's end "til that men come unto the gates of Paradis." (BK VIII, II. 570-571) Factual and fictional geography were inextricably mixed.

Having recognized the important place of the geography of myth in the medieval "mappemonde," and having recreated to some extent the image of Tartary which it would have shaped in the minds of Chaucer's audience, let us turn now to the factual geography which he and his audience would have known and to the sources of that knowledge.

In his *Chaucer Gazetteer* F.P. Magoun declares that in the fourteenth century "Tartarye" was a rather loose geographical term "including any or all areas from the Black Sea or Volga, eastward through north-central Asia, to the Manchurian coast of the Yellow Sea."<sup>5</sup> But within this vast area, Chaucer, as has already been pointed out, knew of the great eastern desert and its neighboring lake. Furthermore, in the *Squire's Tale*, though there is some confusion over which of the Tartar khans "werreyed Russeye" (l.10), Chaucer seems to have recognized "Sarray" as the capital of the western province of the great Tartar empire, the Khanate of the Golden Horde. How much Chaucer knew of the five great Tartar khans whose line began with the terrible Ghenghiz and culminated in the magnificent Kublai, his writings do not reveal. But that he probably knew a fair amount can be surmised from an examination of the many sources of such information which would have been available to him, sources both written and oral which it is unlikely the bookish and observant Chaucer would have let pass unnoticed.

There were, first of all, the serious geographical studies of the professional geographers, men like Edrisi, Albertus Magnus, and Roger Bacon. Chaucer may have known them, and they would have offered some information about Tartary, but it would have been scant. For sound geographical study depends upon observation, and for the most part their work was done while the East was still hidden from Europe's view. Only Bacon was able to incorporate some of the observations of the first of the thirteenth-century travellers, and medieval geographical science in general is silent about the East.

But in the middle of the thirteenth century the situation changed radically. It is probable that before that time no European had gone further east than Baghdad; the Moslem crescent had barred the way. But in the early years of the thirteenth century there occurred something which swept away the Moslem barrier. That something was the westward surge of the Golden Horde of Ghenghiz Khan. The Tartars swept from their central Asian homeland east to the Pacific and west to Persia and Turkey and even to Poland and Hungary. Europe was at first terrified by this new swarm of barbarian invaders, but after 1241 when the second wave of invasion had receded, Europe began to look at the Tartars in a new light. She had two reasons for doing this. One was that she saw them as possible allies against her old enemies, the Moslems. The second was that the Tartar empire which stretched from Poland to China, from the Dreister to the Pacific, suddenly threw open to her the whole expanse of Asia and the riches of Cathay. The Khans opened wide all of Tartary, tolerated Christians and welcomed traders. And their vast empire was so well administered and efficiently policed that travelers could cross it in comparative ease and safety.

The result was that for almost a century there was a considerable amount of traffic between Europe and the Orient. Because this situation was of comparatively short duration, and because this first era of eastern travel has been overshadowed in history by the fifteenth-century explorations to the Indies, its importance has been minimized and often forgotten. But this is a mistake. For although the open door policy of the Tartars may seem unimportant today, its impact upon thirteenth and fourteenth-century Europe can scarcely be over estimated. For these one hundred years Europe and the Orient were in closer contact than they were to be again until after 1850. Suddenly the world had tripled in size, and its furthest reaches were available. And thanks to the conquests of Ghenghiz Khan and his successors, it became possible to traverse those reaches from the banks of the Volga to the Yellow Sea with as little danger as attended a pilgrimage from Canterbury to Compostella.

That a tremendous number of travellers availed themselves of this opportunity is attested by the travel literature of the period. Legates, missionaries, merchants — all made the long Asiatic trek. In 1245 John of Carpini, as legate from the Pope to the Tartar Khan, began a series of diplomatic communications between East and West. The Khans reciprocated, and in 1287 Rabban Sauma, a native of Peking, visited Rome, Paris and Bordeaux, and conferred with the Pope, Philip the Fair and Edward I. In 1307 two Tartar ambassadors actually appeared before Edward II at Northampton, returning the visit to the East in 1291 of an English delegation headed by Geoffrey de Langele whose expense account for the journey still survives.

Missionaries, as might be expected, were not far behind. As early as 1278 the first mission to the Tartars was dispatched. By 1300, though small in number, Franciscan missions were flourishing in Cathay. Ten years later John of Monte Corvino had been appointed Archbishop of Peking. Others joined him — Andrew of Perugia who became bishop of Zayton, one of Kublai's largest and most magnificent cities; John de Cora, Archbishop of Soltania, who in 1330 wrote an account of "The Estate and Governance of the Grand Caan"; Pascal of Vittoria who preached to the Tartars in their own tongue in Chaucer's city of Sarray before being martyred by the Saracens in 1339.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the missionaries to Tartary wrote letters to those at home; some wrote accounts of their travels. Among the latter were Ricold of Monte Croce who wrote an *Itineraria* and Jordanus of Severac who wrote in his *Mirabilia* what professed to be a description of marvels, but was in effect a short geographical treatise on the countries he had seen. Among the letter writers were John of Monte Corvino who declares quite honestly that of the fabled monsters supposedly residing in the Orient "much have I asked and sought, but nothing have I been able to discover."<sup>7</sup> But another of the letter writers, Andrew of Perugia, reports of Kublai's court and realm such wonders of fact that they equal the old wonders of fiction. For in Cathay under Tartar rule European travellers found a civilization far superior to their own, a civilization which in their eyes came near to equalling the fabled splendors of the land of Prester John. For the most part they were astounded, and Andrew's reaction was typical when he wrote of Kublai's empire:

As to the wealth, splendor, and glory of this great emperor, the vastness of his dominion, the multitudes of people subject to him, the number and greatness of his cities, and the constitution of the empire, within which no man dares to draw a sword against his neighbor, I will say nothing, because it would be a long matter to write, and would seem incredible to those who heard it. Even I who am here in the country do hear things averred of it that I can scarcely believe.<sup>8</sup>

Tartary had been opened wide to European travel. There ensued a tremendous volume of traffic with the result that while some of the wondrous East of fable disappeared, the almost equally marvelous East of fact came into view. And it was this East which became familiar to Chaucer and his audience, the East described by the famous Polos and the scores of anonymous merchants who followed their lead to the trade riches of Cathay.

Just how familiar Tartary and Cathay were to the fourteenth century and to Chaucer's audience is not usually recognized. Later centuries have tended to ignore the large volume of traffic, the steady stream of travellers who took the eastern road. Later centuries have forgotten that Genoese, Venetian and Pisan merchants engaged in trade with Tartary and Cathay as regularly and in as routine a fashion as they did with Europe and North Africa, so regularly in fact that Francesco Pegolotti, an agent of the Florentine house of Bardi, could write a handbook for merchants containing advice on such practical matters as possible profits, currency rates, and camel drivers. What is more, he could give them the comforting assurance that the road is perfectly safe whether by day or by night.<sup>9</sup>

Later centuries have forgotten this, but Chaucer in his customs house would not have forgotten it. And when he wrote of Sarray, he wrote of a Sarray which was a great Tartar city on one of the busiest and richest trade routes in the world. His reference is to a city which would have been familiar to his hearers, a city of that Tartary made familiar by constant commercial intercourse during their century. For we must not forget that from 1245 when John of Carpini made the first journey to Tartary and the Great Khan, until 1368 when the Tartar dynasty fell and the East was once more closed to western travellers, a good amount of information about Tartary which is new and strange to us was familiar to Chaucer and his contemporaries. Hundreds of missionaries, merchants and travellers had made the trip. Some of them, like John of Carpini, William of Rubruck, Friar Odoric, and Marco Polo, wrote of their travels; we can be sure that all of them talked about them. And the important result was that Europe knew a great deal about Tartary, strange combination of fact and fiction though it was.<sup>10</sup>

The kind of thing it knew about Tartary from the accounts of these travellers was first of all, a remarkably accurate, though severely limited, physical geography of the area. It was Rubruck who discovered the true nature of the Caspian Sea as a lake instead of a gulf as had long been thought, and Carpini's description of the Gobi desert, which he personally traversed, was not bettered till the nineteenth century. But the most valuable observations made by these men lay in the realm of what might be termed cultural geography. They brought back word of the strange nomadic life of the early Tartars, of the idol worship and cannibalism of the Tibetans, and of the long fingernails and bound feet of the inhabitants of Cathay. Polo explained at length the use of paper

money and Rubruck was the first to grasp the essential characteristic of Chinese writing. They brought back too fuel for the fire of fable with tales like that of a certain province on the other side of Cathay "where no man grows old, no matter what his age,"<sup>11</sup> but their fables were few, and it must be said to their credit that they were skeptical about such wonders, and for the most part reported truthfully what they had actually seen. The point is that what they had seen was nearly as wonderful as what Europe had so long heard. The Tartary of fact rivalled that of fiction. Prester John's river had run magically with gems, but now Polo told of a marvelous black stone which ran in rich veins in the mountains, and which when lighted burned like wood or charcoal. John's court had been described in splendid terms, but was it any more splendid than Kublai's imperial palace of marble and gilt, decorated with intricate carving, and with windows "so delicate as to have the transparency of crystal?"<sup>12</sup> And what of Kinsay, the "celestial city...beyond dispute the finest and noblest in the world,"<sup>13</sup> of whose splendor Polo himself admitted "it is not easy even to put it in writing, and it seems past belief to one who merely hears it told."<sup>14</sup> Kinsay was described rapturously by all travellers who viewed its innumerable canals spanned by twelve thousand arched bridges, its wide streets and lovely gardens, its stone warehouses and silk clad merchants, its rich lords and lovely ladies living amid the splendors of a city rich and beautiful beyond compare.

This is the Tartary Chaucer and his century knew, the Tartary made familiar through the contacts of missionaries, merchants, and travellers, the Tartary described in the travel accounts of Carpini, Rubruck, Jordanus, Odoric and Polo, the Tartary made vivid in the pages of deville's *Travels* which fused strange fable with stranger fact to synthesize and summarize for Europe its picture of the East. This is the Tartary which becomes the setting for Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, a Tartary in which truth is stranger than fiction, in which the geography of fact and the geography of fiction are inextricably mixed. And this is the image of Tartary which would have been evoked in the minds of Chaucer's audience by the first line of his tale.

R.K. Root has suggested that since no single narrative source for the *Squire's Tale* has been found, "Chaucer merely allowed his imagination to play freely with the familiar themes of Arabian magic, filling in his background with such scraps of knowledge about Tartary and the Far East as he had picked up in reading or conversation."<sup>15</sup> I have here attempted to discover what were those "scraps of knowledge about Tartary" which Chaucer may have picked up, those scraps gleaned from the



reading of old fables and the hearsay of new travels, those scraps which could provide for Chaucer the setting for a tale of wonder, and those scraps evocative enough to transport his audience with the first line of his tale to the magic and marvelous "land of Tartarye."

## NOTES

1. Otto quoted by Henry Yule, ed. *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, 2 vol. (London, 1903) I, 233.
2. It received such credence that in 1177 Pope Alexander III actually sent his friend and physician, Master Philip, to find the Prester and deliver a reply to his letter. For a complete discussion of the Prester John legend, see E. Denison Ross, "Prester John and the Empire of Ethiopia" *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur P. Newton (London, 1926), pp. 174-194.
3. Letter of Prester John quoted in full by E. Denison Ross, pp. 175-176.
4. *Journal of Friar William Of Rubruck: 1253-1255*, in *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, ed. Manuel Komroff (New York, 1928), p. 93.
5. F.P. Magoun, *Chaucer Gazetteer* (Chicago, 1961), p. 151.
6. For complete information on 14th c. missionary activity in the East, and letters and accounts of the missionaries, see Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (New York, 1955); and Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, 4 vols. (London, 1913-1916), III.
7. *Cathay and the Way Thither*, III, 62.
8. *Cathay and the Way Thither*, III, 72.
9. Francesco Pegolotti, *Libro di divosamenti di Poesi*, excerpts trans. and ed. Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, II, 279-308.
10. If the number of mss. of travel literature still extant is any indication of popularity, medieval travel accounts enjoyed a fairly large circulation. Ricold of Monte Croce's *Itinerario* survives in considerable quantity, as does Frair Odoric's *Descriptium Orientalium Partium* of which 73 mss. are still extant. Polo's book is represented by 138 mss. still extant today, and the popularity of Mandeville's *Travels* has been estimated by one scholar as second only to the Scriptures in the 14th and 15th centuries. See J.O. Halliwell quoted by J.W. Bennett in "Chaucer and Mandeville's *Travels*," *MLN*, LXVIII (1953), 532.
11. Rubruck, p. 152.
12. *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, ed. Henry Yule, 2 vol. (London, 1903), I, 362-366.
13. Polo, II, 185.
14. Polo, II, 190.
15. *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Boston, 1922), P. 270. Other critics, however, have been more specific. Skeat found parallels in Polo; see III, 463-479 and V, 370-387 of his edition of Chaucer's *Complete Works*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1894). J. M. Manly refutes Skeat's theory, but finds echoes in Odoric's *Journal*; "Marco Polo and the Squire's Tale," *PMLA*, XI (1896), 360. J. W. Bennett finds similarities in Mandeville; "Chaucer and Mandeville's *Travels*," *MLN*, LXVIII (1953), 531-534. And J.L. Lowes sees the Prester John legend as a possible source; "The Squire's Tale and the Land of Prester John," *Washington U. Studies*, I, ii, (1913), 3-18.