

THE DATE WHEN MARCO WAS MADE PRISONER ≠ MARCO POLO

We know from Marco Polo himself that he was in prison at Genoa in 1298, and R adds that it was "because of the war". The only contemporary account of how he got into prison has been given above, and there is small doubt that BENEDETTO is right in thinking that too little weight has been given to this story in the past. It has been assumed that this battle between fifteen armed Genoese merchant ships and twenty-five Venetian near Laias in 1296 "in the time of Pope Boniface" is nothing but a confused recollection of the better known battle of Laias between twenty-two Genoese and twenty-eight Venetian warships in 1294, when Marco Polo cannot have been present and therefore was not taken prisoner. The alternative occasion is the battle of Curzola fought on 8 September 1298, when 7000 Venetian prisoners were taken to the prisons of Genoa, arriving there, according to a contemporary ballad quoted by YULE, at noon on 16 October. The authority for supposing that Marco Polo was taken prisoner at Curzola is RAMUSIO, whose story is translated in full by YULE.¹ RAMUSIO begins with the words, "Not many months after they were come to Venice", and this will suit a battle in 1296 much better than one late in 1298; and will allow time also for the writing of the book. How could so long a book as *The Description of the World* must originally have been be dated in the prison at Genoa, 1298, if the author did not reach Genoa before the middle of October? It is known too that the prisoners of Curzola were released in the summer of 1299. Jacopo d'ACQUI says that Marco Polo stayed in prison a long time, and a long time is indeed required both for the writing of the book and for the details of RAMUSIO's own version of the story; and he dates the battle not merely 1296 but "in the time of Pope Boniface", and Boniface VIII was not elected till 24 December 1294, nor crowned till January 1295; and his battle of 1296 is distinguished from that of 1294 by the number of ships engaged. The contemporary story is then consistent with itself

sous le nom un peu satirique de Messer Marco Milione." The words are the same in the folio edition (p. 71), which was published under the general title of *Atlas [Pittoresque] Géographique et Physique des régions équinoxiales du nouveau Continent*, Paris, 1814-1834. The story, which seems first to be applied to Marco in 1812, relates in the older books only to Pigafetta. The contemporary record of the burning of the Chà Milione in 1596 is to be noted; cf. p. 591.

¹ Y. I. p. 6. RAMUSIO, *ibid.*, Pref. fol. 6v^o: Non molti mesi dappoi che furono giunti a Venetia; and on fol. 7v^o he says that Marco was set free "non molti anni dappoi", meaning clearly at least four years, if not six or seven. cf. d. 95 p. 587. A recent writer accepts the Curzola view without discussion, and makes no mention of a possible battle in 1296. He agrees with YULE in putting the battle on Sunday, 7 September, but brings the prisoners to Genoa on 6 October (*seze di*, which YULE makes "the 16th"), cf. G. I. BRATIANU *Le Commerce Génois*, 1929, pp. 262-274.