

## THE MYSTERIOUS STORY OF THE MANUSCRIPTS OF MARCO POLO

### IV. THE MANUSCRIPTS AND VARIOUS STATES OF *THE DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD*

Being in prison at Genoa, Marco Polo met a professional romance-writer, a fellow-prisoner, Rustichello of Pisa; and to that fortunate accident we owe the existence of his book, for "he caused all these things to be recounted (*retraire*) by Master Rustacius of Pise who was in that same dungeon." In England we have called it "*The Travels of Marco Polo*" as resolutely as the Italians have called it "*Il Milione*", and with as little reason. For it is not the story of Marco Polo's travels, but "the book which is called the description and the strange things of the world", the pioneer of scientific geography. It is a serious and invaluable description country by country and town by town of a large part of medieval Asia, relieved by a few well told stories—but they are not stories of Marco Polo's travels.

The question of the true text of the book is a very curious and intricate one.<sup>1</sup> The book may have become popular, although RAMUSIO probably exaggerates when he says that "all Italy in few months was full of it". But this popularity resulted not in the preservation but in the destruction of the book in the form in which it left the author's hands, till there has survived no single known copy which can claim at all to be either complete or correct. Not only so, but it appears that there are some errors and omissions which infect every manuscript which has yet been examined; as if the large number of extant manuscripts were all ultimately derived from one copy, and that not the original, but one already corrupt. We are in fact almost forced to the conclusion that the original itself, while it must have been in a sense complete, may have had (as indeed it is likely to have had) serious clerical mistakes left uncorrected. It was very long and not a little dull, the work of one who had, as has been said, "looked at everything and seen nothing"; it was written in an uncouth French much mingled with Italian which sometimes puzzled even contemporary interpreters; and so from the first each copyer omitted, abridged, paraphrased, made mistakes and mistranslations, as he saw fit, influenced naturally by his own point of view and immediate interests or purpose; and the result with which we have to deal is nearly 120 manuscripts of which, it is little exaggeration to say, no two are exactly alike.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a masterly and very detailed treatment of this subject consult L. F. BENEDETTO *Il Milione*, 1928, pp. xi-ccxxi.

<sup>2</sup> For details of the grouping, dates, languages, &c., of these MSS. we must refer again to BENEDETTO's great work, and to the list of MSS. at p. 509 below.