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Italian Traveller and Missionary Odoric of Pordenone's Journey to Ceylon

The Franciscan traveller and missionary Odoric of Friuli in Northern Italy, called Odoric of Pordenone, left Padua around 1314 in the company of four Irish missionaries to preach the gospel in the East. By way of Armenia and circling through Persia, they came to Hormuz (now in Iran) whence they embarked for India in about 1321. Shortly after their arrival at Tana (near Bombay), the four Irish missionaries were martyred; a French friar called Jordanus Cathala of Séverac buried them. Odoric then sojourned for some time in India. He travelled along the Coromandel coast, stopping at Mylapore at the tomb of St. Thomas. Then he left for China, carrying with him the bone relics of the martyrs in order to deposit them in the convent at Zaytoun. After a sojourn of three years in China, his homeward journey took him via the northern Chinese route through Turkistan and Tibet (where he may have visited Lhasa), then through Persia and Asia Minor. Hence he was away from Padua, whence he had set off, for over twelve years. By the time Odoric reached Italy after more than twelve years of wanderings, he had baptized more than 20,000 persons.¹ It is said that he returned to Italy in order to recruit fifty more missionaries.²

At the behest of his superior, Odoric narrated the account of his journey to the Franciscan William of Solanga who committed it to writing in Padua in the year 1330. Several months later, Odoric tried to make his way to the Papal court in Avignon but fell ill and died on the 14th of January 1331.

Very little is known about Odoric himself. From the sources available, it is known that he was born in the year 1286 to a family of soldiers thought to have been of Bohemian origin. At an early age, long before his departure for Asia, he entered the convent in Udine where he has been attributed with having miraculous powers. He enjoyed the reputation of a saint, a reputation that would spread far and wide after his death in Udine in 1331, but he was not officially beatified until 1755.

Odoric seems to have visited Ceylon, which he describes as an island having a circumference of 2,000 miles. His visit to the island must have taken place soon after he left India on his way to China. He describes the journey, however, in the way Marco Polo recounted his visit to Ceylon, i.e. as being on his homeward journey from China. In fact, Odoric arrived in China by sea and left China for Europe by land as opposed to Marco Polo's travels which were overland to China and by the sea route on the return.

Upon his arrival on the island, what struck the Italian friar most was the abundance of snakes³ and dangerous wild animals. The abundance of snakes in Ceylon is explained by the fact that it

is primarily a tropical island, unlike Italy. Because they are cold-blooded animals, (fauna incapable of controlling their body temperature), warm climates with little or no seasonal fluctuations are highly conducive for the existence of snakes. Being an island and thus cut off from mainland India, and possessing a varied topography, Sri Lanka has given rise to many fauna that are confined to this island alone. Scientists presently consider Sri Lanka to be one of the areas with the highest bio-diversity⁴ reflecting the variety of fauna and flora found in this small space covering barely 65,000 square kilometres. The country thus can be considered an island containing many zoological islands within it. This comparison is suggested by the hilly nature of its terrain and lower slopes that merge with the surrounding land mass of the low country, the latter being reminiscent of the surrounding sea while the hills are like islands found therein.⁵

The presence of a large number of elephants on the island was also remarked by Odoric, but we glean from his description that he did not feel quite at ease when the vessel that carried him to the island's shores was being moored, for, he says – as if to reassure himself – that these beasts do not mean any harm to foreigners but are harmful only to the natives. It is not strange that Odoric should have come to make such an assertion, as the local elephant keepers (also called mahouts) still believe the same to be true of the Pinnawala herd, the largest semi-domestic herd in an elephant orphanage in Pinnawala near Kegalle in Sri Lanka: The keepers say that foreigners need not be afraid when approaching elephants, because the animals recognize them as harmless. According to the Sri Lankan zoologist Indrakanthi Perera, the Canadian-born French film director Gregory Colbert, truly convinced of this belief, fearlessly went into the thick of this herd while shooting “Ashes and Snow” in 1998. When asked about the veracity of this belief, he confessed that it could be the absence of fear that makes the elephants less suspicious of him.⁶ The extent to which this belief holds true and to which foreigners can afford to be fearless when approaching an elephant are matters only to be conjectured!

The abundance of the pachydermal population might be attributable to the density of the island's forests in pre-colonial times.⁷ The introduction of the plantation economy and subsequent clearance of vegetation for plantation caused the elephant population of the island to diminish greatly, with near total extinction in the hill country, an area which gave way to coffee and tea estates under British rule. Added to this was the gaming propensity of the British planters, who hunted this animal down indiscriminately. Tusks, heads and feet were relished trophies, displayed with great gusto by these hunters in their bungalows. The English author Carrington describes one of these hunters – namely Samuel Baker, now considered to place first among the hunters responsible for the decimation of elephants in Ceylon – as *one of the more humane big game hunters*.⁸

In Odoric's account, a first-time visitor to the island notices the serpents, which are numerous and of various kinds. In the encyclopaedic works of the Middle Ages, the island is mentioned as representing an area adjacent to paradise, abounding in serpents that protect mines of gold and precious stones. Under the name of Probane, as the island's old name Taprobane was mistakenly interpreted by the first English printer William Caxton, Sri Lanka appeared in 1481 in the latter's encyclopaedic work, the first illustrated English book to cater to a general public: *In Ynde is an yle Probane, (...). There been the grete mountaynes of gold and of precyous stones and of other riches plente. But no man dare approche it for the dragons and for the gryfons wylde whiche haue bodyes of lyouns fleyng, which easily bere a man away armed and sytting upon his horse, when he may sease hym with his clawes an ungles*.⁹ When Richard of Haldingham drew his map of the world in as early as 1290 (now on display at Hereford Cathedral, England), he portrayed two dragon-like monsters as inhabiting one part of Taprobane and – beneath the scene of the Last Judgment – depicted the island as a country adjacent to terrestrial paradise.

This evocation of paradise associated with the image of diabolical creatures represents the idea



Detail of Abraham Cresque's "Atlas Catalan" from 1375 showing Trapobane (=Taprobane)/Ceylon. (Original kept in the French National Library, Paris)

that Odoric formed of the island. His reference to serpents in infinite numbers evokes rather a fear of these reptiles, which incarnate the devil, temptation. Is this temptation itself not sufficient reason to visit Ceylon, which some consider to be paradise or at least the refuge of Adam and Eve? But is it not also dangerous to penetrate this place, which is prohibited to man until the day of the Last Judgment?

In his report to the Pope, Jordanus – the French missionary to the East – writes that Paradise is said to lie between India (which he qualifies as "this" India) and Ethiopia towards the Orient. For he believed that it was from these regions that the four rivers of Paradise flowed forth, plentiful in precious stones, and abounding with excellent gold.

It was not, however, the four rivers mentioned in the Genesis that Odoric was interested in seeing, but traces left behind by Adam and Eve during their sojourn in Ceylon. Prior to his arrival on the island, no doubt, Odoric is quite likely to have heard about the legend of Adam and Eve sojourning in Ceylon, a legend fairly popular in Islamic countries at this time. In fact it is in the well-known chronicle by Tabari, the reputed Arabic historian who lived in the ninth century, that a poetical description of the famous mountain in Serendip can be found. Unfortunately the relevant passage cannot be cited here in its entirety because of its considerable length.¹⁰ After the original sin, the first Father of Humankind was banished to Ceylon. Whilst striding, one foot fell on a peak, leaving an imprint there, and the other fell at Mecca. In the course of the same banishment, Eve fell upon Jeddah, near Mecca, whereupon Adam bemoaned his fault and shed tears for a hundred years. The tears of the weeping Adam brought forth an innumerable variety of healing and aromatic plants with which this mountain is bedecked. God pardoned him and reunited him with Eve. The two of them settled down on the island in the



Adam and Eve shedding tears for a hundred years after being expelled from paradise. Wooden engraving from the Strassburgian print of 1499 of "The Travels of Sir John Mandeville" through the Holy Land, India and China, originally published around 1350.

region most pleasing and begot many children. Another version of the legend recounts that after the death of Abel, killed by his brother Cain, Adam and Eve wept so much that torrents of tears showered down, the drops transforming into gemstones when they hit the earth and into fine pearls when they reached the ocean.

Odoric, however, recounts this legend as having originated among the inhabitants of Ceylon. On this island, Odoric states, there is a very high mountain, and the inhabitants of the country claim that Adam and Eve there bemoaned their sin for a hundred years. At the centre of the mountain is a large pool of water and Odoric goes on to say that, according to the natives, this reserve of water is in fact what Adam and Eve had shed as tears. Odoric, however, does not endorse this legend. He affirms that it is not to be believed, because he has seen that the water in which the precious stones are found also teems with leeches.

The renderings of this legend by Odoric are varied. In one version, Adam and Eve wept together over the loss of their offspring Abel. In another version Adam alone bemoaned the loss of his child Cain. According to some versions, the mourning of Adam and Eve lasted for over a hundred years. These variations seem to suggest the missionary's attempts to link the legend with historical reality. It ultimately matters very little whether or not Odoric believes the story. What is significant is that Odoric sees the water of the pool gushing forth from the earth. Moreover, not only the precious stones deposited in the pool were visible to Odoric, but also the leeches that swarmed in the water, representing – in the eyes of Odoric – nothing but the famous serpents already observed by him at the outset of his description of the island. He goes on to say that these leeches, which endanger those who venture into the water to fetch the gemstones, can easily be repelled by simply applying the juice of the lemon to the body.

There are thus stories one can believe and others which seem incredible. What are the criteria that Odoric applies to distinguish the believable from the unbelievable? It is difficult to judge. Whereas Odoric slips out of the imaginary and legendary context of the origin of precious stones in Ceylon, he remains faithful to the medieval conception of nature that it is the water that produces the precious stones. In fact, with regard to this legend, which is new to him, he prefers an explanation much more familiar to him.

Odoric finds soon afterwards a subject which is of great satisfaction to him and helps him forget his previous deceptions. The religious sense of generosity and understanding that characterises the king of the country profoundly impresses him. According to Odoric, the king – conscious of the powers to be gained through meritorious deeds in this worldly life – gives the poor unrestrained access to certain reserves of his country. Odoric states that the king does not acquire any share of the precious stones but rather, for the benefit of his soul, allows the poor to dive into the water and look for precious stones, as many as they can gather, once or twice a year.

Ibn Batuta, who visited the island about fourteen years after Odoric, contradicts the above as-

sertion of this Franciscan friar concerning the liberality of the king of Ceylon, affirming that the latter holds the monopoly on the gem gathering and pearl fishing. According to the tradition maintained by the natives, precious stones whose value was assessed at up to 100 panams were reserved for the lord of the land, who determined their price and kept them for himself. As for the stones of lesser value, they became the property of those who had found them. As if to clarify matters pertaining to the value of these stones, Ibn Batuta gives the rate of parity as one hundred panams to the equivalent of six gold pieces. Ibn Batuta nevertheless goes on to explain that, in order to undertake mining, land should be bought beforehand.

In the Age of Faith, the task of missionaries was not limited to proselytization alone. The travel narratives of missionaries serve the purpose of depicting the state of Christianity, the progress of proselytization and the possibilities for enlarging the scope for spreading the faith. The manner in which the king of Ceylon is portrayed by the Italian friar compels us to believe that the island was seen by him as a land propitious for conversion to the Christian faith. The king, it is true, can allow himself the luxury of being magnanimous. The waters gushing out of the soil flowed as streams, brooks and rivulets containing fine rubies, diamonds, pearls and other precious stones. The king of Ceylon, therefore, is the richest on earth in precious stones.

The island produces a large variety of gems and jewels. Contrary to Odoric's assertion, diamonds are not found in Ceylon. The fact that the country enjoys a high reputation as a treasure trove of valuable minerals also led a considerable number of Arabic geographers to believe that the country could not be lacking in this Queen of Gems, the diamond. One well-known case is that of the Persian geographer Caswini, who also held the view that the island Serendip abounded in diamonds. It is perhaps a similar belief that made Odoric mention diamonds when he speaks of the precious stones of Ceylon. On the contrary, he is the first traveller of medieval Ceylon to have located the major deposits of precious minerals concentrated in the mountainous regions of central Ceylon.¹¹ The torrents that flow from these mountains carry down precious minerals which are strewn in the valleys and deposited in the plains that extend as far as the shores. By the term "torrent" Odoric may well have meant, simply, "river" – a common feature in the mountainous regions of the island.

If the leeches, which are a real scourge for travellers in Ceylon, made no undesirable impact on his readers because they are known in the West, the strange bird Odoric describes no doubt must have created some sensation. For he says that on the island there is a kind of bird as large as a goose and that this peculiar bird has two heads. It is no doubt correct for us to deduce that Odoric was attempting to describe the hornbill, a species of bird (often confused with the quite distinct toucans of tropical America), which has an impressive outgrowth on its beak, giving the impression of a double top: *Bill enormous, curved from the base to the tip; the upper mandible surmounted by a long, high and sharp casque, its anterior edge projecting forward.*¹² This can be further identified as the Malabar Pied Hornbill (*Anthrococeros coronatus coronatus* Boddaert) which is the larger of the two hornbills found on the island.¹³ The Malabar Pied Hornbill, however, does not frequent the peak wilderness (the area where Adam's Peak is located), unlike the other, the Ceylon Grey Hornbill (*Tockus gingalensis* Shaw) species peculiar to Ceylon. It can therefore be concluded that Odoric sighted this creature on his way to Adam's Peak in the low-country dry-zone region (where this species occurs). It is of great interest to note that this is the very first ornithological reference to hornbills by a Western traveller in medieval Ceylon. John R. Baker, who was in the peak wilderness in 1937 for research purposes, records a significant sighting of a hornbill: *Birds are seldom seen as one walks through the forest, though probably plentiful enough in the canopy far above. The ornithologist would be attracted much more to the small woods of much-branched trees outside the forest, for in these it is far easier to see the birds. It is pleasant to record that the hornbill (*Lophoceros griseus gingalensis*) is neither rare nor particularly afraid of mankind.*¹⁴

The Adam's Peak region consists of tropical rain forests whose main characteristics are incessant rains and high humidity. The common land-leech (*Haemadipsa zeylanica*) and water leech occur in this region up to about 5,000 feet elevation and abound amidst the thick layers of rotting foliage and vegetational debris. Their sole nourishment comes from the mammalian fauna, and the traveller or pilgrim passing through such a patch of land is not exempted by these clinging bloodsuckers.¹⁵

Robert Knox, who remained a prisoner on the island for nearly twenty years, was also impressed by this bird which he describes under the title "Strange Birds" in his book on Ceylon written in 1681. He describes this bird, which he refers to as "Carlo," as perching atop trees and never landing on the ground. It is as big as a swan, continues Robert Knox, and black in colour, the legs being short, the head enormous and the beak long and curved, thus causing it to resemble a bird of prey. As described by Knox, it bears a sort of a white crest like that of a rooster and, on either side of its head, black marks having the appearance of ears.

To facilitate his readers' visualisation of the enormous size of this bird, unknown in the West, Odoric apparently considered it useful to compare it with the goose, a large bird familiar to them. It must have been a difficult task for him to describe the most peculiar and surprising feature of the bird – the head. Two-headed men and animals form an integral part of the menagerie of monsters that travellers in the Middle Ages expect to encounter in distant lands. Monsters are therefore sought after because they seem to lend authenticity to the traveller's account of his journey.

The story of Odoric's journey must have reached a wide public. Sixty copies of his narrative dating from his time are still extant. His narrative would inspire the famous book of marvels written by John of Mandeville, who claims that his account, which enjoyed immense success, was an authentic one, based on a long journey through the countries of Asia. Odoric essentially distinguishes himself from Jordanus Cathala by the fact that he visited Ceylon. Odoric's journey as recounted in his book is "less marvellous" because he did not encounter on that island the extraordinary things that he had heard of.

In fact, the phenomena he had expected to encounter were relegated to islands he did not visit. Even within his account, however, we find a similar approach: Not all that is new can be believed. Discoveries can only be realized in the context of a broad spectrum of experiences of other travellers who bore witness to extraordinary things. This attitude no doubt explains why John of Mandeville preferred the narrative of Odoric to that of Marco Polo for the description of Ceylon.

Visits to holy places bearing witness to the history which actually forms the foundation of Western culture are not that infrequent in travel literature. During his travels in India, for example, Odoric does not fail to undertake a pilgrimage to the sepulchre of St. Thomas which had already been identified by Marco Polo during his visit to that country. This pursuit of holy places and traces of history is not limited to the age of the Messiah. It also signifies the search for the cradle of humanity, its source and its origin.

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Notes:

- 1 *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 9, *Micropaedia*, 1993 (15th edition), p. 877 under Odoric of Pordenone.
- 2 Samuel Couling, *The Encyclopædia sinica*, p. 403 under Odoric.
- 3 John R. Baker, who travelled in the 1930s through the primeval forests skirting Adam's Peak, observed the fact that *Poisonous snakes are unpleasantly common. They include the cobra, tic-polonga, and Ceylon pit-viper (Trimeresurus trigonocephalus). The harmless, brilliant green tree-snake (Passerita mycterizans) also occurs*, John R. Baker, "The Sinharaja rain-forest, Ceylon," *The Geographical Journal*, vol. LXXXIX, No. 5, May 1937, p. 547.
- 4 Charles Santiapillai and Jayantha Jayawardena, "Biodiversity conservation in Sri Lanka," *Loris*, June 1999, pp. 4-6.
- 5 Cf. Frank Wall, *Ophidia Taprobanica or the Snakes of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1921, 581 pp. Reprinted by the Lake House Bookshop of Colombo in 1993.
- 6 Personal communication (2nd October 2001).
- 7 Jayantha Jayawardena, *The Elephant in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1994, 128 pp.
- 8 See Richard Carrington, *Elephants. A Short Account of their Natural History, Evolution, and Influence on Mankind*, Middlesex, 1962, p. 158. – Concerning historical and literary sources on elephants see Merlin Peris, "Abusing the elephant: pseudo-specification and prognostication in Ancient Elephant Lore," *Gajah, Journal of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group*, No. 20, January 2001, pp. 51-59.
- 9 Caxton's *Mirror of the World*, ed. by Olivier H. Prior, p. 70.
- 10 Cf. Ananda Abeydeera, "Die Reise des Johannes von Marignola nach Ceylon," *DSA* 15, 1992, pp. 55-68.
- 11 See P.G. Cooray, *An Introduction to the Geology of Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1984, 340 pp.
- 12 Vincent Legge, *A History of the Birds of Ceylon in Four Volumes*, Dehiwala, 1983, vol. II, p. 350. First edition 1880. – See also the colour plate "Malabar Pied Hornbill" by Cicely Lushington on page facing 18 in W.W.A. Phillips, *Birds of Ceylon 4: Bird of the Ruhunu National Park*, Colombo, 1961.
- 13 See G.M. Henry, *A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon*, Oxford, 1955, pp. 144-145.
- 14 John R. Baker, *art. cit.*, pp. 546-547.
- 15 In Ceylon, the *Hirundinea* are divisible into two sub-orders, namely *Rhynchobdellae* and *Arhynchobdellae*. Five species have been recorded as falling into the sub-order *Rhynchobdellae* (Sucking Leeches): (1) *Ozobranthus shiplei* Harding; (2) *Placobdella ceylonica* Harding; (3) *Placobdella emydae* Harding; (4) *Placobdella undulata* Harding; and (5) *Paraclepsis vulnifera* Harding. In the sub-order *Arhynchobdellae* (Biting Leeches) fall the so-called "cattle leeches" namely *Limanatus* and *Dinobdella*. The *Limanatus paluda* Tennant is also called the "horse leech" and grows to about 60 mm in length. The *Dinobdella ferox* Blanchard is a very large "cattle leech," the adults of which range from 200 to 300 mm in length. The "medicinal leeches" represented in Ceylon by *Hirudinaria manillensis* and *Hirudo birmanica* are two further species of Arhynchobdellid leeches present in Ceylon. See A.S. Mendis and C.H. Fernando, "A Guide to the Fresh-water Fauna of Ceylon," Fisheries Research Station, Dept. of Fisheries, Ceylon, Bulletin No. 12, 1962, pp. 46-50. Illustrated and bibliography. See also W.A. Harding, "Notes on two leeches from Ceylon," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 1909, 15, pp. 233-234; H.F. Macmillan, *Tropical Planting and Gardening with Special Reference to Ceylon*, London, 1956, p. 464.

Die Reise des italienischen Missionars Odoric von Pordenone nach Ceylon

Zusammenfassung

Der Franziskaner Odoric von Pordenone aus dem norditalienischen Friaul unternahm gegen 1314 eine Missionsreise, die ihn über See nach Indien und China brachte. Nach zwölfjähriger Abwesenheit kehrte er über Turkestan, Persien und Kleinasien nach Italien zurück und diktierte seinen Reisebericht, der weite Verbreitung fand. Auf dem Weg von Indien nach China besuchte er auch Ceylon, das heutige Sri Lanka.

Auf der Insel beeindruckte ihn die fremdartige Fauna, besonders die Elefanten, unzählige Giftschlangen, »zweiköpfige« Riesenvögel (vermutlich Nashornvögel) und Myriaden von Blutigeln zu Lande und zu Wasser. Wichtiger aber waren für den Missionar die Legenden, die sich um Ceylon, besonders den Adamsberg, als Ort ranken, an dem Adam und Eva nach der Vertreibung aus dem benachbart gedachten Paradies ihren Sündenfall beweinten.

Odoric war mit vagen westlichen Vorstellungen nach Ceylon gekommen, die er korrigierte. Er selbst beeinflusste wiederum viele nachfolgende »Reiseschriftsteller«, besonders den berühmten John de Mandeville.

Le voyage du missionnaire italien Odoric de Pordenone à Ceylan

Résumé

Le franciscain Odoric de Pordenone, originaire du Frioul en Italie du Nord, entreprend aux alentours de 1314 un voyage missionnaire qui le conduit par mer en Inde et en Chine. Après douze ans d'absence, il rentrera en Italie en passant par le Turkestan, la Perse et l'Asie mineure, puis dictera le récit de son voyage qui sera largement propagé. En se rendant en Chine depuis l'Inde, il visite également Ceylan, l'actuel Sri Lanka.

Ce qui le frappe sur l'île, c'est une faune qui lui est inconnue, en particulier les éléphants, de nombreux serpents venimeux, des oiseaux géants «bicéphales» (probablement des calaos) et des myriades des sangsues sur terre comme sur mer. Cependant, ce qui est le plus important pour le missionnaire, ce sont les légendes qui courent sur Ceylan, en particulier sur la Montagne d'Adam, lieu où Adam et Ève, après avoir été chassé du Paradis qui est censé être proche, auraient pleuré sur leur péché.

Odoric était venu à Ceylan avec de vagues idées occidentales, qu'il corrigera. Lui-même influencera de nombreux «écrivains voyageurs» qui suivirent, en particulier le célèbre John de Mandeville.