

Travel During the Middle Ages

Travel – the word did not exist before the 15th century, even if the entire medieval society -- from aristocrats to peasants, took part in the activity, using “an itinerary.” Existence itself was compared to a journey, with each human expected to carry out his or her “life’s pilgrimage.”

On foot or horse, by carriage or boat, merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, monks, and troubadours wandered a world they began to discover by way of maps and traveler’s narratives. Travel was not yet associated with pleasure, but was used for business or war, to gain information, to teach, or for prayer.

With numerous risks associated with travel, society responded by organizing a system of support to protect the traveler along routes and at inns and shelters; the Rule of Saint Benedict welcomed travelers to monasteries.

For greater safety, travelers invoked divine power from the saints, the Virgin Mary, and from God himself, praying: *Be for us a shadow against the sun, a cloak against the rain and the cold, be the staff that avoids falls.*

Since 1000 A.D., the peace of God granted traveling merchants and pilgrims license to circulate freely under “safe conduct.” Their aggressors, murderers who hung pilgrims, were excommunicated. Generally, assistance for travelers and punishment of travel “spoil sports” were the watchwords of this nomadic and itinerant civilization that was the Middle Ages.

We invite you to follow a journey, from France to the Far East, of a traveler who could have been an artist, a messenger, merchant, pilgrim, or even an ambassador.

The State of the World

The first stage of preparing for a trip was finding the site on a map in order to reach the chosen destination. How did one become acquainted with a world that, in large part, was unknown? How did one hold up during long journeys? What routes would best prevent loss of direction, or life?

In the medieval West, the concept of the world was influenced by information that came from ancient times, and from Arab civilization.

The Sources

The Greco-Roman World

The Greco-Roman world passed along concepts that it had obtained from the Near East: -- that the globe was a round world divided into 360 degrees. The earth was already perceived as a sphere, with the Mediterranean area cut into latitudes and longitudes.

Parallel to these scientific contributions, Pliny the Elder imagined a fantastic universe in his *Natural History*. Up to this time, world map illustrators were inspired by the limited confines of maps that depicted Cyclops, sciapodes (men with webbed feet), beings with heads of dogs, and sea monsters.

The Arab Civilization

The Arab civilization had preserved a great number of ancient works and had pursued geographical research. It had also provided the West with new instruments essential for navigation and map-making.

During the 10th century, a school of map-making was founded, based on the texts of expert geographers. Mecca was placed at the center of world maps.

Information about the earth's configuration, its rivers and climates, and even commercial exchanges between countries was illustrated in Arab geography books.

In the 12th century, Idrisi, geographer of King Roger II of Sicily, designed a map of Europe, Africa and Asia, depicting lands from Scandinavia to Morocco.

Also in the same century, thanks to a Jewish and Arab-speaking Mozarab presence, a translation center developed in Toledo, where a rush of Western scholars flocked in search of knowledge about the ancient world.

From Map to Boundary Marker

In the West, the image of the world before the 13th century was founded on philosophical and religious principles.

Thus, the image of the world emerged from simplified "T-O" maps, representing the idea of a round earth (O) where the Mediterranean and rivers took the form of a "T". The Holy City of Jerusalem was at the center, and the maps included the three known continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

From this schema and 11th century travelers' accounts, mapmakers were able to add new geographical details in the 12th century due to the development of commercial and diplomatic travels outside of Europe.

In the 13th century, travelers from the West, Marco Polo among them, ventured into Asia. Their accounts permitted mapmakers to represent India as a peninsula and to denote mountains in Asia.

On the Sea

Thanks to exchanges with the Muslim world during the 11th century, the West adopted the astrolabe and the compass.

Some nautical maps, or “seaport books,” existed from the end of the 13th century. The practical details included in these harbor maps brought more to light than marvelous monsters because sailors needed to be able to estimate distances, and to recognize cardinal points, tides, and seaports.

The coast lines, capes, bays, roads, and islands became more precise as illustrators used colors to identify winds, flags to indicate cities, and a stitching or cable line, based on the winds, to help with spatial orientation.

Nautical maps became more prevalent during the 14th century, first in Italy, then in Catalonia, and from Majorca to Parma. Genoa, Pisa and Venice played a major role in Mediterranean commerce.

In 1354, an ordinance from Peter IV of Aragon dictated that two harbor maps be aboard each ship, like two rudders. The importance given to nautical maps demonstrated, most certainly, concerns about travel at sea.

On Earth

Travelers got their bearings from stone markings engraved with information, like figurative designs of a finger pointing to indicate direction, or from enigmas: the abbey of Chelles (*l'échelle* = ladder) was represented by a ladder-shaped sign.

Decorative poles along routes with arms extended to show direction also served as oratory. Often, the traveler simply asked for direction, or where to find an inn, from those he met along the way.

Preparations

Each individual prepared his travel according to his situation and the presumed length of stay.

- Several nights for a pilgrimage to a regional sanctuary, or a seasonal change to an aristocrat's home
- Two months minimum for a distant fair
- Several months, even many years for an embassy, or a pilgrimage

For such journeys it was best to prepare a will: the traveler was very likely to die en route.

Baggage

The impoverished pilgrim traveled light, equipped with only a sack made of cloth or leather since he had to furnish his own supplies and bedding. He did not need to pack food beyond some bread and a bit of cheese: while on the road, the pilgrim was invited to feasts, marriages and funerals.

His pockets empty, he needed only his travel papers, a "safe conduct" prepared by a religious or municipal authority from the place of departure, and token coins to exchange for free meals or a room at an inn. A wooden begging bowl, a whistle, a knife (always useful), and a tinderbox were worn on the belt. The walking stick, with a pointed metal tip, served as a defensive weapon against stray animals. Like all travelers, he carried a gourd on his shoulder strap.

The noble and merchant, however, anticipated comfortable stops at an inn or at homes of relatives or friends. They weighed themselves down with cumbersome baggage; at the very least, their large leather bags were carried by servants on horses, or loaded onto heavy carts.

Well to do travelers had solid wood trunks encased with leather and metal corners that could withstand carriage jolts, and equipped with safety locks to discourage thieves. These trunks were often secured under the vehicle, stashed under the driver's seat, or placed in the back of the coach.

Preparations for long sea voyages were expensive since travelers had to purchase a spare set of clothes (due to lice), a supply of fresh water, and provisions for many days. They even had to concern themselves with preparing warm meals on the ship's deck.

Field armies in active service were faced with logistics even more challenging since they had to accompany not only wagon trains filled with food stuffs and arms, but also blacksmiths, surgeons, cooks, and bakers with their mobile oven. They could be considered the original "modern campers": their tents and beds were standard military travel. And even in the 15th century, inflatable mattresses, called "beds of wind," were in use.

Travel Clothes

Nobles, merchants, and pilgrims dressed in similar style, although pilgrims distinguished themselves by the insignia of their pilgrimage. In order to resist bad weather, travelers wore solid high-top leather shoes, with thick soles; in summer, the Spanish pilgrim wore espadrilles (cloth sandals).

Cavalrymen wore thigh boots of chamois leather and the hooded cape that typified the saintly voyager.

In the fall, travelers wore long capes, sometimes covered with animal fur on the outside for better waterproofing. Wide-brimmed hats, poised on a hooded cape, protected the face from rain. Travel was a question of arming oneself against the harsh elements of the road: the sun and dusty roads.

Noblewomen concerned about preserving their complexions adopted protective headdresses; cavalrymen applied creams to their faces to prevent sunburn, and aristocratic travelers and pilgrims in the desert of Egypt wore goggles -- bands of leather and cloth encased in two lenses of crystal or glass.

The simple traveler did not carry a first-aid kit because he was nourished and cared for by monks in nearby abbeys.

Transportation

With the disappearance of a Roman network of roads that favored rapid connections between cities, new channels came into existence during the 11th and 12th centuries that aided business expansion. These routes, born of local usage, made up a secondary network whose lack of readiness, unfortunately, slowed the transport of merchandise to 10 to 15 kilometers per day (7 to 12 miles).

If the goods aboard ships proved to be too important or valuable, boats sailing on rivers and canals used relay stations. On waterways, a chain of towboats, pulled by hundreds of men, moved 500 to 600 tons of merchandise at a time. All forms of watercraft traveled the sea, carrying men and merchandise in a precariousness linked as much to the elements of weather as to pirates.

On Foot, On Horse, By Boat

Walking was the simplest mode of travel for the penniless, or for pilgrims in search of penitence. Those who had the means rode a horse, mule, or other beasts of burden like the donkey or, in the desert, the camel.

The horse -- palfrey, charger, and packhorse, played a major role in the service of noblemen, transport, war, and professional riding.

Four-wheel wagons, ancestors of the coach, and luxury litters chauffeured aristocrats, the elderly, pregnant women especially, or those too feeble to mount a horse. Teams of horses pulled valuable loads at top speed.

Boats allowed heavy products (wood, stone, wine) to be shipped on waterways and, from the 12th century, on canals. Armies, pilgrims, and merchants also used vessels for travel to the Mediterranean or to coast the English Channel.

Roads

The European road network was reorganized during the 12th century, permitting important traffic. On major highways, more than 1,000 tons of merchandise was moved each year. At the end of the 13th century, Philippe de Beaumanoir, in his *Customs of Beauvaisis*, noted five types of roads, characterized by size: 1) foot path (1.20 meters) 2) cart track (2.40 meters) 3) highway (4.80 meters) 4) route (9.60 meters), and 5) main royal highway (19.20 meters).

Road and bridge maintenance, a great burden to noblemen in spite of tolls, was done particularly during times of peace and economic growth.

As a result, field armies took on the task so convoys could advance more rapidly. Thus, in 1359, English King Edward III, on his way to conquer Paris, had his army of 500 men clear and widen roads with axes and shovels so it could advance in procession.

The time of transport varied greatly. A rapid messenger (steed) was able to travel 150 kilometers per day; the average daily travel was between 20 and 60 kilometers.

The Dangers of Travel

Numerous were the hazards of nature affecting travel. River passages, poorly maintained bridges and ferries, or rushing, icy fords caused accidents. Fevers that travelers picked up from unhealthy regions, harsh winters or raw conditions in desert countries also finished off men whose bodies were weakened by long journeys... if the sea had not swallowed them up beforehand. Human dangers complete the picture. Although lords assured protection to all travelers crossing their lands, thieves remained formidable, even in times of peace. Pirates and bands of nomads pillaged, stole or killed isolated travelers and lone sailors.

Crime was reduced when travelers avoided extreme seasons, traveled in groups, were well equipped, and hired experienced guides, but it did not end completely.

As always during the Middle Ages, man depended on God. Thus, before beginning a journey, pilgrims, armies, and ships received a blessing and often adopted the name of a holy protector or the Virgin Mary to serve as symbols of good luck.

The Steps

Where to sleep when traveling? According to level of income, the traveler who reached an urban center before nightfall could choose between a hostel dormitory, an inn, the house of a relative or friend, or even the home of a colleague, available to merchants whose network of contacts offered numerous possibilities.

The Hostels

Everywhere in France, pilgrims of St. Jacques were welcomed in specialized places: modest houses known by the small statue of the saint mounted above the threshold, or pilgrim hospitals combining chapel, reception room and a vaulted passageway overlooking the path.

There, stone benches allowed travelers to rest a moment during the day and sheltered them from sun or rain after they received a light meal from the hostel keeper at the entry booth.

Those coming from northern France or Flanders and crossing through Paris met at the Saint-Jacques of the Pilgrims Hospital, located at the crossroads of Rue Saint Denis, Rue du Cygne, and the true Rue Etienne Marcel. The richest pilgrims stayed in neighborhood inns – The Pilgrim's Staff or The Scallop Shell.

The Inns

At the end of the Middle Ages, inns opened by the dozens in small towns, and by the hundreds in large urban centers. They clustered together, often in

proximity to passageways like bridges, businesses, major streets, market places, or city gates. Late-comers had to sleep in the suburbs.

Information about these establishments came by word of mouth, and targeted specific clientele since many travelers could not read. Germans knew how to find a German-friendly hostel by the sign of the bear; French travelers looked for the fleur-de-lis or the crown of France, Burgundians the shield of Burgundy, Bretons, the shield of Brittany. Church clerics stayed at the Red Hat (cardinal's headgear), and all travelers felt reassured sleeping at the Head of the Moor, or the Star, icons of the Magi kings, patrons of travelers.

Many establishments opted for spiritual protection, displaying an angel, the Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas, Saint Christopher, Saint Peter, the cross. The traveler who located a crescent moon sign could be assured of a room after dark.

Signs of the Star

But many travelers found themselves sleeping at the "beautiful star." To sleep "at the sign of the star" meant, in jest, sleeping under the stars, outdoors. Such travelers settled near a stream of water or fountain, preferably under a tree, or pitched a tent, if rich enough to afford one; tent fabric was very expensive during the Middle Ages.

Medieval tents resembled the Canadian gear of modern campers: lined cloth, perhaps waterproof, with tent pole, carpeted floor, and hooks attached to tent pegs, called "crochets."

Tents came in different sizes, some with a roof and two side panels with one or two dormers, or a rectangular or circular roof, made for traveling aristocrats, or

used during war. Some tents were rather large in order to accommodate trunks, unfolded camp beds, and a chess table, and some tents held a kitchen, hospital, chapel, and a stable. Even horses were able to sleep in a tent!

By Ship

The traveler en route to the Holy Land slept steerage, between decks, on a thin mat of straw or rush that he also used in the desert. He also brought his indispensable “night vase” (chamber pot).

But thieves beware! Merchants set up bank branches/trading posts to avoid carrying too much cash, and invented paper money, letters of credit and exchange.

Exchanges and Contacts

During the 10th century, the doors of the West swung open: travelers headed East, out of curiosity, or attracted by its riches.

In spite of the risks of shipwreck or pirates, the sea route was the best way to cross the Mediterranean. Venetian and Genoan boats docked twice a year in Syria and Egypt, bringing wood, tar pitch, iron and other metals, durable and luxurious fabrics like wool and linen. They returned loaded with exotic products, essentially luxury goods: medicinal and aromatic spices, pearls, precious stones and metals, ivory, things of value (arms, fabrics, rugs)....

Business Trips

The opening of branch banks and trading posts in diverse Mediterranean ports (Corfu, Salonika, Alexandria), and the crusades (Jerusalem seized in 1099),

were also reasons to discover the Near East. From there, the settling of Christians in the Holy Land permitted Western merchants to visit Baghdad, India, and even China.

The development of international business regularly brought a greater variety of Eastern products to Western markets and contributed to the success of numerous city merchants.

During the 12th century, Venetians and Genoans dominated the Mediterranean Sea. In order to limit risks, merchants banded together to negotiate shipping insurance contracts. In case of loss, expenses were shared, and if the merchandise arrived, it basically benefited all.

Religious Travel – and Agreement

Pilgrims of all social rank set off for the Holy Land on a voyage that was long, costly, and dangerous. Some travelers had to sell their goods or pawn them. Transporting pilgrims, more numerous during the 11th century, was a lucrative enterprise. From the 13th century, there were planned round trips leaving from Venice, including the Venice-Jaffa route, with a stay in Jerusalem and surrounding areas.

The more well-heeled traveler was not content visiting holy sites exclusively; he admired the lighthouse of Alexandria -- still standing at the beginning of the 14th century, visited the pyramids, marveled at the natural and artistic riches of Damascus, and was transformed by the eeriness of desert landscapes.

On paths to Egypt and Syria, travelers discovered the palace inn (caravansary) – an inn built around a large court for accommodating caravans. This type of establishment, built of long-lasting materials around a central court, offered a

few tiered compartments for the night; it sheltered caravans and accompanying animals, often free of charge.

The food could be a surprise. Travelers ate local specialties: camel meat and sour milk. Pilgrims tasted exotic fruits -- lemons from Alexandria and melons from Jaffa, discovered mastic (early chewing gum) from the Greek island of Chios, and even drank water from the Dead Sea!

Travelers from the West and East observed one other and their narratives describe the impressions they formed. The pilgrim Thietmar, in the 13th century, marveled at the beauty of the city of Damascus: *It is exceptionally rich, full of reputed and remarkable craftsmen in diverse areas. It is filled with fountains and manmade canals more marvelous than one could ever imagine. In each house, in each street, there are basins and sinks (square or round), admirably arranged according to taste or to rich imagination.*

The Return

If the medieval traveler brought back souvenirs, it was not due to his taste for the exotic. For the pilgrim, it proved he had accomplished his religious vow. For the educated traveler or the political ambassador of the 15th century, it was to fulfill his taste for artistic or geological curiosities, and to acknowledge his awareness of archeology.

From such travels, words heard in the East were integrated into Western language: the names of stars (Altair, Vega, Betelgeuse); terms related to direction (azimuth, zenith); and names of food: sukkar-sugar, al-bargug-apricot, al-kohl-alcohol.

Up until the end of the 15th century, the King of France and princes invited Moor craftsmen to decorate their castles in Arabian style, with square blue tiles and star pavers.

Religious Souvenirs

Signs of Pilgrimages

Once having arrived safely at his destination, the pilgrim returned home almost as quickly. After embracing the saintly statue or object of his pilgrimage, and receiving an attestation from a canon, he took only the time to rest up and restock for his return voyage. In open courtyards outside of churches where merchants gathered, the pilgrim acquired badges in the form of small brooches or patches of the pilgrimage to sew on clothes, in form of scallops, crosses, or faces of saints or the Virgin. These badges, as keepsake images, also served as fulfillment of a pledged offering. Returning to his point of departure, the pilgrim threw them from the top of the bridge, a gesture of thanks for having survived.

Biblical Keepsakes

Medieval travelers returned with Bible-related relics especially – bone fragments of saints or wood fragments of the Nativity manger, Jordan River water, or objects of an organic origin, both symbolic and priceless, such as roses of Damascus or a palm branch. A banana—in round slices from which English travelers had seen the sign of the cross, a fragment of stone on which Mary had sat, a chard dug up of the Holy Cross, even a splinter from the Golden Gate where Saint Ann had waited for Joachim, were additional sought-after souvenirs.

Pagan Souvenirs/Exotic Souvenirs

Medieval travelers rarely returned empty handed. Local specialties were objects of purchase: Murano crystal, Trapani coral, Persian Gulf pearls.

Pilgrims who traveled overseas brought back archeological remains, such as mummy fragments or carved scarab beetles.

In the 15th century, nobles bought gifts at Arab markets, presenting their wives and loved ones with purses of silk, jewelry that had touched the Holy Sepulcher, musk, Turkish arms, and small bird-shaped perfumed containers to scent their rooms.

The taste for distant lands enticed top aristocrats to buy exotic animals that sailors brought back aboard ship. In the 15th century, monkeys and parakeets were the most popular purchases.

Artistic Images

Aristocratic travelers were often accompanied by their favorite artists who sketched while on the terrain, then recopied their works as commemorative manuscripts. In the 15th century, King René d'Anjou's favorite painter stopped in Puy, in Auverne, on his way to the Lorraine court, where he drew the celebrated statue of the Black Virgin Mary

Travel Narratives

Translated travel guides -- intimate books containing detailed lists of distances, inns, and roads taken, and written by numerous medieval travelers, relieved anxiety through real evidence of this extraordinary deed known as the ocean

voyage. These rarely recopied travel accounts, however, remained in manuscript form, more destined to inform those close to the author than to enrich the experiences of other unknown travelers.

Translation by Peggy Linrud – September 2010