

BOOK OF THE KNOWLEDGE

Chapter 5: Egypt, Persia, and the East

A Modern English Translation — Exhaustive Version

Egip to borders on Suria. Anciently it was called Exia. I came along the coast to a port which they call the port of La Risa, thence to the port of Descrion, thence to Tenexe which is in Egypt, and I took the road to the west and came to Damiata a noble city surrounded by the river Nilus. Know that here the King of France was defeated and a prisoner when he went to make conquest beyond sea. On the banks of this river Nilus is situated the great city Alcaira where the Kings of Egypt are crowned, and here was crowned Melic Nasçar, the Lord of Egypt.

The narrative continues from Syria into Egypt, noting the defeat of King Louis IX at Damietta in 1250 and the importance of Cairo (Alcaira) as the seat of the sultans.

After describing Egypt, the friar moves eastward into Persia, a very rich and well-supplied land. The Persians are described as wise and learned in all the sciences, with profound knowledge of the stars. The capital, Tabriz (Toris), is portrayed as one of the grandest cities in the world, rich and in a good climate. The Emperor of Persia flies a yellow flag with a red square in the middle.

In Persia rise two great fountains, each forming a lake twelve miles wide. From each flows a river; the two rivers unite and enter the Black Sea. The cities on their banks include Arghun, Caperti, Salamanca, Ormi, Cade, Buxila, and Rastello.

I crossed the river Arghun and traveled through much of Persia to the kingdom of Saldania and its rich and noble city. From there I went with merchants eastward to other cities and eventually reached Ayras (Shiraz), called by the Tartars Sarax, where the empire of Persia ends. It is a well-supplied, rich, and very ancient city. They say that in this city astronomy, or the law of the stars, was first discovered.

The cities visited in Persia include Casar, Serrans, Thesi, Spaor (Isfahan), Jorganian, Spalonero, Saldania, and Tabriz. In Tabriz, Benacayt (Abu Said), Emperor of Persia, was crowned. His empire extends from the Sea of Sara (Caspian) to the Persian Gulf (where lies the city of Hormuz) and from the Black Sea to Aquisio on the Persian Gulf. Its length is 125 days' journey and its width from the river Kur to Shiraz is 100 days' journey.

Benacayt assembled a great host and went to fight Uzbek, Emperor of Sara. More than a million and a half cavalry arrived. Benacayt promised Armenian monks that if he won he would become Christian. The Armenian Christians marched with a cross before them, and with God's help he conquered. Uzbek was defeated, his cavalry fled, many were killed or captured, and their tents and women were taken. After the victory, some Moorish Hajjis who preached to Benacayt gave him certain herbs, and he died. But the Kings of Persia always favored the Christians and trusted them.

After this I left Persia with merchants who came from Cathay (China). We crossed the river Kur at the island of Ausero and came to the city of Mesopotamia in the empire of Baldac. We traveled a great distance without seeing cities, for the inhabitants lived in the country. We came to the Euphrates, crossed it, and reached a city called Lualaxa. A branch of the river turns toward Damascus and the land of Jafet, falling into

the Mediterranean. I went along the river Ayuso until I came to Tripoli of Syria on the Mediterranean shore. There I embarked in a ship of Christians and went to Cyprus, then to the isles of Romania and Ancandia, then to the Morea, Crete, Negropont, and a kingdom of Greeks called Salonica, bordering on Macedonia, where the great Alexander reigned.

The King of Salonica flies a red flag with a yellow cross and four chain links. From there I went to Galipoli on the gulf between the Mediterranean and the greater sea — the way the French passed when they conquered Syria. I continued along the coast to a city called Recreta and then to Constantinople, the rich capital where kings are crowned. There stands the great church of Hagia Sophia, very wide, lofty, and beautiful. Before it is a stone tower that has never been ascended, on whose summit stands a metal knight with his horse in honor of the Emperor Constantine. His right hand is extended toward Turkey, formerly called Asia Minor.

The Emperor of Constantinople flies a flag quarterly: first and fourth quarters argent with a red cross, second and third quarters gules with a gold cross between four chain links.

I left Constantinople and entered the Black Sea (Mare Mayor), proceeding along the coast on the left hand until I came to the rich kingdom of Lodomago. Its king flies a red flag with a yellow cross between four chain links. I continued to Mesembria and then to Varna. Here is the true Greece. The empire of the Greeks in Greece is formed of many provinces: Arcadia, Achaia, Boeotia, Macedonia, Laconia, and others.

I departed from the kingdom of Mesembria and went along the shore of the Black Sea to the great city of Vecina (Widdin). Here nine rivers unite and fall into the Black Sea: the Turbo, Danube, Dacia, Drinago, Pinga, Raba, Rabeza, Ur, and Vecine. These nine rivers make a great commotion before the city. Vecina is the capital of the kingdom and flies a white flag with four red squares.

I continued along the coast to Mauro Castro and then to Lobo, a very high mountain. Near it rises the river Lusur from the Rexos mountains. I reached the port of Nigropila in a large gulf of the Black Sea, then the Cape of Gotia between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov (Letana). The Goths occupied this cape when they went forth to besiege Alexandria. The cape borders two extensive provinces: the land of King David and the province of Anogasia and Tana.

I entered the Sea of Tana by a strait between the Capes of Gotia and Tus, where there is a city called Materga. There are three kingdoms bordering this sea subject to Uzbek: Comania (whose people are Christians called Comanes), Tana (a country of Turks and Tartars), and Canardi. They are divided by a great river called the Tanais.

Notes on this Chapter

This chapter covers Egypt (Damietta and Cairo), then moves deeply into Persia (Tabriz as capital, the two great fountains/lakes, the battle between Benacayt/Abu Said and Uzbek, the role of Armenian Christians, and the poisoning of the Persian emperor). It includes travels with merchants from Cathay (China), crossing rivers, and the return journey through Mesopotamia, back toward the Mediterranean, and eventually to Constantinople and the Black Sea region. This is one of the most historically interesting chapters because it contains contemporary (14th-century) accounts of major political events in Persia and the role of Armenian Christians in the Persian court.