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978-1-108-01036-8 - Cathay and the Way Thither, Volume 1

Edited by Henry Yule

Excerpt

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I.

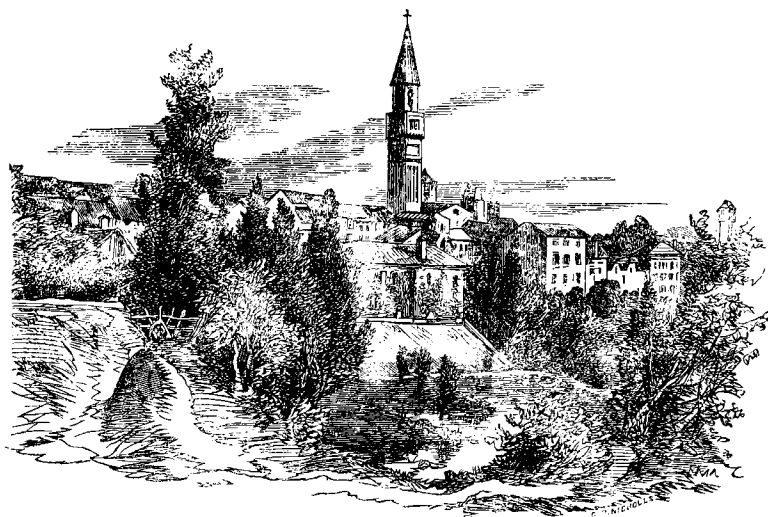
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View of Pordenone from near the Railway Station.

ODORIC OF PORDENONE.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL NOTICES.

THE first place in this collection has been given to the narrative of Odoric of Pordenone, a Beatus or semi-saint of the Roman Church, not as the first in time, nor perhaps in value, but as on the whole the most curious and as that which was the original nucleus of the volume.

Odoric was a native of Friuli, a country which was perhaps better known to travellers before there was a railway through it. Few now, in passing from Trieste to Venice, or from Venice to Vienna, think it worth while to break their journey for the sake of seeing such places as Pordenone, Udine, or Cividale; and thus those interesting cities, though on or near a great thoroughfare, still keep a rare old-world flavour and simplicity.

This border land had in old times closer relations to Germany than to Italy. It has again close relations of a certain kind to

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Germany, but in no region of Italy, it is believed, is the Italian feeling stronger.

The Patria del Friuli borrowed its name from Forum Julii, a city represented by modern Cividale, and became the seat of a dukedom under the nephew of Alboin when the Lombards first burst into Italy.

Charlemagne extinguished the Lombard dukes, and from Friuli for a time was governed the Eastern March of the Frankish empire. In the end of the ninth century or thereabouts, the administration of the province fell into the hands of the Patriarchs of Aquileia, whose seat had been at Cividale since 737; and in 1029 the Emperor Conrad II formally conferred on the Patriarch Poppo the Duchy of Friuli and the Marquisate of Istria.

This ecclesiastical principality continued to exist, with territory of fluctuating extent, until 1420, when the Patriarch, engaging in war with Venice, lost his temporal dominion, and Friuli became subject to the Republic. It was remarkable as perhaps the only Italian state, excluding Sicily, which possessed a genuine Parliament. This consisted of three Estates, assembling in one house.

Friuli divides naturally into three zones. The first and widest is a great level, subsiding near the Adriatic into swamp, elsewhere well cultivated and fairly productive, but without irrigation, and far behind the wealth of the Lombard plain, excepting towards the west, where water lies nearer the surface, the streams have a more perennial character, and there is seen an almost tropical luxuriance of vegetation.

The second zone consists of undulating hills, dotted with white villages, and covered with fine grass carefully reserved for the scythe. The brilliant verdure of these undulating meadows, as seen under a July sun, was alike surprising and delightful. The third zone is that of the mountain country.

The dialect of the Friuli country is a Romance one, said to be very distinct from the Venetian, and to come very near to Provençal. Many of the local names are alleged to be quite French in character, and I remember one, *Martignac*, which struck me particularly. It may be only a fancy that this quasi-French idiom

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may sometimes be traced through the thin veil of Odoric's Latin.

The native district of Odoric was Pordenone, in that richer part of the Friulian plain which lies towards the river Livenza. Pordenone itself, called in Latin, I know not of what antiquity, *Portus Naonis*, is a quaint but thriving little city of some seven thousand inhabitants, standing on the banks of the *Nonicello*, a tributary of the *Livenza*, and by which boats ascend from the sea to the town. The beautiful gardens which environ it, and the very fine *campanile* which rises beside the cathedral, group into a singularly pleasing picture, even as seen by a railway traveller.

Odoric is said to have sprung from one of the garrison established in this district by *Ottokar*, King of Bohemia, to whom the territory had passed from his cousin *Udalric*, Duke of Carinthia and Lord of Pordenone.¹ A curious confirmation of this tradition is found in the manuscript from which we print the Latin text of his travels, for in it he is designated "*Frater Odericus Boemus*." The name of his family is alleged to have been *Mattiussi*,² and the place of his birth was *Villa Nuova*, a hamlet of cottages dispersed among vineyards and mulberry trees, about a mile and a half from the town.

A substantial two-storied cottage is still shown at *Villa Nuova* as the house in which Odoric was born; and in the half-open arcade which forms a part of the lower story, a rude old fresco, representing the friar holding forth the crucifix, much defaced by the contact of firewood and farming gear, is evidence at least

¹ "*De reliquiis seminis eorum quos olim Rex Otakerus apud Portum Naonis ad custodiam deputavit.*" This is quoted from an anonymous chronicler of *Laybach*, in *Monumenta Ecclesiæ Aquilejensis*, etc., *Argentinae*, 1740, p. 866. *Ottokar* succeeded to the throne of Bohemia in 1254; *Rudolf* of Hapsburgh was chosen emperor in 1262; their wars about the Austrian provinces held by *Ottokar*, including part of *Friuli*, terminated in 1279 in the rout and death of *Ottokar*. See also *Venni*, p. 3.

² This name does not seem to appear in print before the work of *Gabelli* in 1639. *Zeno* quotes as authority for it a MS. work on the Patriarchs of *Aquileia* by *Jac. Valvasone* (*Dissertaz. Vossiane*, 1751, ii, 297). It is also given by *Asquini* in his *Life of Odoric*, on the authority of a MS. of *Lugrezio Treo*, author of *Sacra Monumenta Prov. Forojuvii*, 1724.

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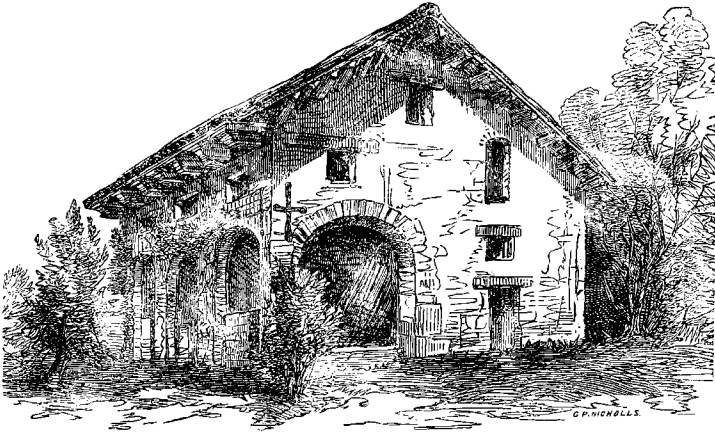
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of the antiquity of the tradition. Even the room is pointed out in which the traveller and saint was born! and the bed, a vast and ponderous expanse of timber, looked as if it also might have officiated at the auspicious event. The parish priest asserted that the house had passed through only a second transfer since it quitted the family of Mattiussi.



Traditional Birthplace of Odoric.

The name Odorico is the same that occurs north of the Alps as Ulric, and it is found in various shapes besides, such as Udalric, Vodaric, etc. It would seem to have been common in this region of the world, for it turns up frequently in old Friulan lists, and was borne by Aquileian patriarchs and Carinthian dukes. And it is said to be still common about Pordenone, both as surname and Christian name. Our friar, therefore, might come by it in many ways, but perhaps he got it actually from the patron saint of his parish church, for that is saint Udalric. One of the old Franciscan writers calls our traveller *Ludovicus* Odoricus,¹ but it seems likely that this was a mistake.

The date of his birth is assigned to 1286, whilst the Patriarch Raymond della Torre was reigning in Friuli. In naming this date later writers appear to have followed Gabelli, who published

¹ Bartholomew Albizzi of Pisa, in the work cited below, *ed. Mediolan.* 1510, f. cxviii.

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a life of Odoric in 1639. Asquini, another biographer in the last century, quotes as authority for it "*Osuall. Ravenn.*,"¹ a reference respecting the age or value of which I have no knowledge. Judging, however, from the effigies of Odoric on his tomb at Udine, I should have guessed the date of his birth to stand a dozen years earlier than that mentioned.

The authorities for the circumstances of Odoric's life, exclusive of such as can be gathered from the story of his travels, are the annalists or hagiologists of his order. Whether the man whom they describe after the regular saint-model of the middle ages answers in any degree to the author of the travels, as he indicates his own likeness however faintly, appears to me most questionable. The contemporary notices of him, except the local records of the miracles which were said to have followed his death, are very brief.

It is alleged that Odoric is treated of in a catalogue of Franciscan saints, written only five years after his death ;² but I find no quotation from this work, and the earliest notice of him that I can discover (apart from the exceptions just specified) is in the chronicle of his German contemporary, John of Winterthur, who seems to have written about 1348-50, and whose reference shows that he was already acquainted with the Itinerary.³ His travels, alleged missionary work, and miracles are also briefly spoken of by Bartholomew Albizzi, of Pisa, in his treatise concerning the *Conformity of the Life of St. Francis to the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, from which the passages are quoted in the *Acta Sanctorum*.⁴ This work was written, according to

¹ *Vita e Viaggi del B. Odorico*, etc., Udine, 1737.

² *Sbaralea, Supp. et Castigatio ad Scriptores Trium Ordinum S. Francisci*, etc. Romæ, 1806, p. 443.

³ After giving a notice of the martyrdom at Tana, and some other circumstances related by our author, the chronicler adds: *Hæc testatur Sanctus Odoricus de Padua oriundus, qui peragravit cunctis regionibus orientaliibus et incolumis ad terram nativam reversus, hæc et alia mira et stupenda illic visa et audita ab eo, rogatus et compulsus a suis confratribus minoribus in scripturam redegit; opusculum valde solatiofum et delectabile, de hujusmodi raris et a seculo quasi inauditis, relinquens.*" (*Joan. Vitodurani Chron. in Eccard Corp. Historicum*, i, 1894).

⁴ *De Conformitate*, etc., bk. i, pa. 2, conf. 8.

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Professor Kunstmann, about 1380, fifty years after Odoric's death, but the author was fully entitled to be termed a contemporary, for one of his works, cited by Wadding, was dated as early as 1347, and at his death in 1401 he is said to have been over a century old.¹

According to the ecclesiastical biographers, however, having in early years taken on him the vows of the Franciscans, and joined their convent in Udine, he speedily became eminent for ascetic sanctity, living on bread and water, going barefoot, scourging himself severely, and wearing ever next his skin hair-cloth or iron mail. His humility refused promotion, and with the leave of his superior he retired for a long time into the wilds to pass a solitary life. A local reputation for sanctity and miracles is ascribed to him before his wanderings began.²

On these he started sometime between 1316 and 1318 (inclusive), and from them he returned shortly before the spring of 1330. That he was in Western India soon after 1321, that he spent three of the years between 1322 and 1328 in Northern China, and that he died in January 1331, are all the chronological facts that we know, or can positively deduce, from his narrative, and contemporary evidence.³

I shall not here give any detailed view of his travels; the particulars of these, with the fullest explanations that I can provide, will be found in the ensuing text and notes. Suffice it to say that his route lay by Constantinople to Trebizond; thence to Erzerum, Tabriz, and Soltania; and that in all probability he spent a considerable part of the time previous to 1322 in the Houses of his Order in those cities. From Soltania he passed to Kashan and Yezd, and thence turning by Persepolis he followed a somewhat devious route, probably by Shiraz, and perhaps a part of Kurdistan, to Baghdad. From Baghdad he wandered to the

¹ *Cave, Script. Eccles.*, App., p. 48; *Wadding*, vol. vii.

² *Acta Sanctorum*, January 14th; *Wadding*, vol. vi, under 1331; *Liruti, Notizie delle Vite ed opere scritte da' Letterati di Friuli*. Venez., 1760, i, 274 et seq.

³ D'Avezac, in the very valuable dissertation prefixed to Carpini's account of the Tartars, says that Odoric reached Trebizond in 1317, and Tana in 1322; but I do not trace the authority for such precision.

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Persian Gulf, and at Hormuz embarked for Tana in Salsette. Here, or from Surat, where Jordanus had deposited them, he gathered the bones of the four brethren who had suffered there in 1321, and carried them with him on his voyage eastward. He went on to Malabar, touching at Pandarani, Cranganor, and Kulam, and proceeded thence to Ceylon and the shrine of St. Thomas at Mailapoor, the modern Madras. From this he sailed tediously to Sumatra, visiting various parts of the coast of that island, Java, probably Southern or Eastern Borneo, Champa, and Canton. Hence he travelled to the great ports of Fokien, and from Fucheu across the mountains to Hangcheufu and Nanking. Embarking on the Great Canal at Yangcheufu, he proceeded by it to Cambalec or Peking, and there remained for three years, attached, it may be presumed, to one of the churches founded by Archbishop John of Montecorvino, now in extreme old age. Turning westward at length through Tenduc (the Ortu country of our maps), and Shensi, to Tibet and its capital Lhassa, we there lose all indication of his further route, and can only conjecture on very slight hints, added to general probabilities, that his homeward journey led him by Kabul, Khorasan, and the south of the Caspian, to Tabriz, and thence to Venice by the way he had followed thirteen or fourteen years before, when outward bound.

The companion of Odoric on a part, at least, of these long journeys was Friar James, an Irishman, as appears from a record in the public books of Udine, showing that on the 5th April after Odoric's death a present of two marks was paid to the Irish friar "*Socio Beati Fratris Odorici, amore Dei et Odorici.*"¹

The assertion of Wadding and the other biographers that Odoric had sowed everywhere the seed of the Gospel, and had baptised more than 20,000 Saracens, would appear to rest on a basis of pure imagination only. No hint of such a thing appears in his travels, nor indeed any indication of his having acted as a Missionary at all; though probably in the years he spent at Cambalec, and perhaps also in Armenia, he may have taken part in the missionary duties of his brethren. In his contemporary

¹ *Venni*, p. 27.

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Jordanus the spirit of the missionary breaks out strongly and clearly, showing his heart in the work. Odoric's narrative again gives one decidedly the impression of a man of little refinement, with a very strong taste for roving and seeing strange countries, but not much for preaching and asceticism. *Qui peregrinantur raro sanctificantur*, says Thomas a-Kempis. And one wonders what odd chance picked out Odoric as the wanderer to be accredited with such exceptional sanctity. "*Molto diverso il guidardon dall'opre!*" Had the simple and hardly bestead Jordanus of Séverac, or that zealous patriarch John of Montecorvino striving for the faith at the world's end to the age of fourscore years, been made a saint of, one could have understood it better.

Miracles also, and miraculous experiences, are assigned to the friar by his biographers, of which no trace will be found in his own story. Thus we are told that as he was on his way back from Tartary, commissioned by the Great Khan to call more brethren to the work of preaching to that monarch's subjects (a commission which seems again to be purely imaginary) he was met by the Great Enemy,¹ who reviled him, and taunted him with the bootlessness of his errand, seeing that he was fated never to return. The assailant was repelled by the sign of the cross, but his words proved true.

So bowed and changed was Odoric by the hardships and starvation that he had endured in his years of wandering, say the biographers, that his nearest of kin could scarcely be brought to recognise him.²

It was after visiting them no doubt that he betook himself to the House of his Order attached to St. Anthony's at Padua, and there in the month of May, 1330, he related his story, which was taken down and done into homely Latin by William of Solagna, a brother of the Order; Friar Marchesinus of Bassano also afterwards lending a hand in the redaction, and adding at least one interesting anecdote from his recollection of Odoric's stories.

¹ *Wadding*, l. c. "Sub formâ mulieris gravidæ!" says Mark of Lisbon, quoted in the *Acta Sanctorum*.

² *Wadding*; *Petrus Rodulphius, Hist. Seraphicæ Religionis*, Ven., 1586, p. 125.

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Whether the traveller had not already written or dictated a brief sketch of his journeys will be spoken of below.

From Padua he is said to have proceeded to Pisa in order to take ship for the Papal Court at Avignon, that he might make his report of the affairs of the church in the far East, and ask recruits for the missions in Cathay. At Pisa he was sorely troubled by what he heard of the mischief wrought in the fraternity by the schisms of Caesenas and Corbarius,¹ and became all the more anxious to prosecute his voyage. But he fell into serious illness, and being warned in a dream by St. Francis to "return to his nest," he caused himself to be transported back to his own province.

There at Udine, he took to his bed, to rise no more. Having confessed, on the priest's pronouncing the absolution Odoric is related to have said: "Do thine office, reverend Father, for I desire like a humble child to submit to the keys of the church; but know that the Lord hath signified to me that he hath pardoned all my sins." And so he died on the 14th January, 1331.²

The friars of the convent were about to bury him the same day privately, contrary to the custom of the country. But when this became known in the city, Conrad Bernardiggi, the Gastald or chief magistrate of Udine, who had a great regard for Odoric, interfered to prevent such a hurried interment, and appointed a solemn funeral for the next day. This was attended by all the

¹ Petrus Rainalduccius de Vico Corbario was a Minorite venerated for his age, learning, and piety, who to the great scandal of his order let himself be set up at Rome as Antipope by the Emperor Lewis of Bavaria. In 1330 he asked pardon of Pope John with a halter on his neck. Michael Caesenas was the general of the order, who absconded from Avignon to take part with the emperor (*Wadding*).

² This is the date given by the postscripts to Odoric's narrative, and all the subsequent accounts. *Wadding* adds, "On a *Monday*, about the ninth hour." The 14th January 1331 might mean in modern style 14th January 1332, especially as the postscript to the narrative in the extracts published by the Bollandists specifies "*Anno Dominicæ Incarnationis*," which I believe indicates properly the year commencing on Lady Day. But it seems not to be so. For the date assigned fell on a Monday in 1331, and, moreover, the order by the Patriarch for an inquiry into the miracles is dated May 1331, which is not open to ambiguity.