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CROSSCURRENTS
Contact, Conflict, and Conversion

The world was a vast and mysterious place in the medieval period. Most people lived their entire lives in the village or town of their birth, rarely if ever venturing more than a few miles from home. Travel was slow, difficult, and expensive. Roads were bad, maps were inaccurate, and even the basic necessities of food and lodging could be a struggle to find. As the monk I-ching says in the first selection below, "There was no fixed place for us to settle down. We had to move from place to place like a blade of grass swept by wind." Travelers on foot or horseback were liable to perish in burning deserts or at the hands of bandits; our phrase "highway robbery" harkens back to this era, when bandits' favorite victims were travelers, who could be caught on the high road, far from any town or aid. Ships could move about more freely, but they were at the mercy of storms, hidden rocks, and pirates—if they weren't swallowed up whole by the vast sea monsters who would sometimes float deceptively on the surface of the open ocean, disguised as islands, waiting for their prey to land. If they could be reached at all, distant cultures were populated by barbarians speaking incomprehensible languages, eating, dressing, and making love in strange ways, worshiping false gods, and liable to give visitors a hostile or even fatal reception.

These very dangers, though, offered special rewards for the hardy few who ventured far from home, and prominent among these rewards was a fund of remarkable stories to tell back home. Throughout the period, travelers' tales provided most people with their best sense of the wider world beyond their borders, and these tales often mixed factual reportage with highly imaginative elaborations of marvels glimpsed, or guessed, or reported at third hand. Selections from some of the period's most vivid travelers' tales are given here, some of them direct accounts by the travelers themselves, others fanciful retellings of the adventurers of travelers from the past.

Restlessness and sheer curiosity impelled some to travel and acquire these tales, but more often the motives were commercial, or religious, or often both at once. A trickle of exotic goods flowed back and forth between Europe and East Asia, usually through the hands of many middlemen, but some adventurers went far along these routes, seeking spices, jewels, and other highly profitable, readily transportable goods. Others sought wisdom. Chinese monks would travel to India in search of holy Buddhist texts, while Christian pilgrims journeyed to distant holy sites in their own lands (as when Chaucer's pilgrims head toward Canterbury, telling tales all the way), and ventured abroad as far as the Holy Land. Missionaries would go farther still, spreading the sacred knowledge they possessed in far-flung pagan lands.

In the travelers' reports home, and in the tales of travel that derived from them, contact with radically different cultures often provides an opportunity for profound self-reflection. The foreign locale becomes at once a place of danger and of freedom, of challenge to one's own values or affirmation of them, in foreign societies seen as shockingly savage or exceptionally civilized—or both. Particularly for the more spiritually minded voyagers, travel itself becomes a prime metaphor for spiritual questing and growth, as in the Korean poems given here. Even the most mercantile of travelers, Marco Polo, is deeply interested in foreign religious practices and beliefs, and he claims that the Chinese emperor Kublai Khan is similarly fascinated by what he knows of Christianity and is eager to receive missionaries to tell him more. Conversely, even the most pious travelers, such as the Muslim world traveler Ibn Battuta, are fully alive to the material splendors of the countries they visit, and they can be appropriately honored by their hosts with lavish presents.

The arrival of travelers can profoundly affect a host country's fortunes as well—favorably or otherwise. The tales given here provide a prehistory for the widespread voyages of exploration and colonial conquest that would be inaugurated by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The

Marco Polo tasting pepper picked by South Indians, illumination from a French manuscript of his *Travels,* 14th century.

two thirteenth-century Icelandic texts included here reflect back on the tumultuous time of the conversion of Iceland in the year 1000. The Christian authors of these texts celebrate this change, but they are also concerned to uphold the integrity of the old local culture and to convey the wonder and power of the pagan worldview. One of these authors, Snorri Sturluson, does this in part by prefacing his collection of Norse myths with a historical account of travel and migration that he believes linked Iceland and Asia long before the coming of Christianity.

All of the texts given here show the writers' complex, shifting reactions to the many challenges the foreign cultures offer to their sense of themselves and the world, and together they show us the utter strangeness that awaited the bold medieval travelers who ventured beyond their own familiar borders.

I-ching
635–713

It was not just South Asian teachers who carried the Word of the Buddha to the outside; pilgrims also came from the outside to India. One such traveler was the Chinese monk I-ching, or Yijing, who journeyed to India at the end of the seventh century, one of a number of celebrated Chinese visitors, including Hsüan-Chuang, or Xuanzang, whose pilgrimage formed the basis of the famed Chinese novel *Journey to the West* a thousand years later (see Volume C). It was a perilous journey, but the rewards were great: the chance to see with one's own eyes the very places where the Buddha himself had been born, achieved enlightenment, and taught; to collect precious Sanskrit manuscripts for later translation; and to return home with a knowledge of the Law perfected at one of the great Buddhist universities such as Nalanda (once located in what is present-day Bihar), which would enable one to start one's own lineage of pupils. I-ching's dramatic account of his journey provided his students with an object lesson in spiritual striving amid the dangers of the ephemeral world.

right for me to eat any food after hearing an invocation of the Lord Buddha's name."[4] Then he began to think, "If I suddenly close my mouth right now, this ship will be driven back by the water current and destroyed. Many people will lose their lives. I know: I should close my mouth gently and ever so slowly." Then the Timiṅgila monster closed his mouth gently and ever so slowly.

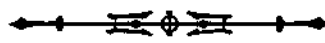
Once their ship was freed from the jaws of that great monster, it found a favorable wind and soon arrived at shore. When the merchants came to shore, they loaded their goods on carts, camels, bulls, donkeys, and so on, and after passing through marketplaces, villages, towns, and trading-centers, one after another, they arrived in Śrāvastī. Once there, they reflected, "It's only proper that if a ship successfully completes its voyage because of the power of someone's name, all its treasures should go to him. Therefore, let's give these treasures to the Lord Buddha."

Then they collected those treasures and went before the Blessed One. Having each, in turn, venerated with their heads the feet of the Blessed One, they then said to him, "Blessed One, we set sail in the ocean in a ship, and then when our ship was being carried off by the Timiṅgila monster and the end of our lives was before us, we spoke the name of the Blessed One, concentrating our awareness on him, and were thus freed from the jaws of that great monster. Now that we have successfully completed our voyage, Blessed One, we have come here, safe and sound. It's only proper that if people successfully complete a voyage on a ship because of the power of someone's name, the treasures of that ship should go to him. By speaking the name of the Blessed One, we escaped from that deadly danger. Therefore, the Blessed One should take these treasures of ours."

The Blessed One said, "I have obtained the treasures of the moral faculties, their corresponding powers, and the factors of awakening.[5] What more than this can natural treasures do for the Transcendent One? My sons, if you want to go forth as monks in my order, come with me!"

The merchants reflected, "Whatever life we have is completely due to the power of the Lord Buddha. Let us abandon these treasures and go forth as monks in the Blessed One's presence."

Then they distributed their treasures, according to custom, to their mothers, fathers, wives, and sons, servants, maids, and workers, friends, companions, kinsmen, and relatives, and went forth as monks. Having gone forth as monks, they continued striving, struggling, and straining until they directly experienced *arhat*ship.[6]



Tibetan Death Rituals and Dream Visions
9th–11th centuries

Conversion as an experience of intellectual conviction did of course occur in Buddhism, and nowhere more dramatically than in Tibet in the late eighth century, when the king of the country invited two celebrated Indian Buddhist scholars, Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava, to

4. That is, it would be inappropriate to commit an act of violence, since killing sentient beings earns one very bad karma. The decision to refrain from eating is the issue that drives the rest of the story. In what follows Dharmaruci is reborn as a child who can't ever eat enough, and then he becomes a monk who eats everything he can get his hands on.

5. The moral faculties, which are also considered powers, are confidence, strength, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The awakening factors are mindfulness, discrimination of *dharmas,* strength, joy, calmness, concentration, and equanimity.

6. The state of being a "worthy one," an adept who has attained the final stage of spiritual development.

build the first monastic institution in the country. The progress of Buddhism in the larger Tibetan world seems to have been very gradual, with beliefs of the indigenous religion (Bon) inflecting Buddhist doctrine for some time. The *Way of the Dead,* a ninth-century text connected with funerary ritual, exemplifies this well. The direct address to the dead, unknown in Buddhist works, probably reflects archaic Tibetan practices. Moreover, the purpose of the text is to help beings achieve divine rebirth, not, as in Indian Buddhism, to escape the cycle of transmigration altogether, whereas the ultimate beneficent state is a kind of paradise rather than the extinction of existence (nirvana). *Mar-pa's Dream Vision,* composed by a renowned spiritual adept and translator (1012–1097), illustrates the continuing representation of an imaginary India as the one true source of all authentic spiritual knowledge: it describes how Mar-pa receives in a dream the esoteric teachings of the "Great Master," the Brahman Saraha. But it does so in a style that is entirely Tibetan in character, and with a double narrative framing, of the song of Saraha within a dream episode of Mar-pa's, and Mar-pa's dream as a whole within the context of a communal feast—a framing that is closely related to ancient Tibetan oratorical practices.

PRONUNCIATIONS:

Padmasambhava: PUHD-muh-SUM-bhuh-vuh
Shantarakshita: SHAHN-tuh-RUHK-shi-tuh

The Way of the Dead[1]

Now, then, the teaching of the path of the deceased:

May all the Buddhas, transcendent lords, endowed with unsurpassed and inconceivable gnosis, and with the pure eye of divinity, gaze upon us!

May the Bodhisattvas, great heroes, who protect all sentient beings equally, like unto your own progeny, gaze upon us!

May the exalted Arhats, [who possess] right discernment and who have uprooted all the afflictions of the three realms, and so have attained the great state of liberation from both aspects [of obscuration], gaze upon us![2]

Now listen, you who are deceased! Fickle impermanence, the real nature of the whole world, has at this time befallen you, the deceased. The illusion of the five conditioned bundles[3] has been undone. It's time to provide you with the great refuge for one who journeys from this world to the next. Your lords and refuges, in journeying as one without a second to uncertain domains, are the Buddhas, who are transcendent lords, the bodhisattvas, who are great heroes, and the exalted arhats. None are greater than these. Therefore, you who are deceased, do not let your mind stray, do not allow your thoughts to rebel, but at all times think on the Three Precious Jewels,[4] and, turning to those Precious Jewels, let the mind's path tend to nothing else whatsoever! Do not unbalance the scales of thought!

Hear more, you who are deceased! Obtaining illusory bodies in this prison of the three realms, all who are born die in the end. No one is free from that! Journeying thus from one birth to the next, the path of birth and death is oppressive. Remember that that's how it is!

1. Translated by Matthew Kapstein.
2. Buddhas have ascended to complete enlightenment and are free of all phenomenal existence; Bodhisattvas, on the brink of enlightenment themselves, resolve to use their powers to assist suffering humans to attain salvation; arhats are adepts who have reached the final stage of spiritual development. The three realms are the world of desire, the world of form, and the formless world.
3. The psychological components of the human personality—form, sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness. They are to become purified through the dissolution of the self in the light of true being.
4. The Buddha; the teaching that leads to enlightenment; and the community of Buddhists.

The Dharma in Korea
8th–10th centuries

Buddhism spread to Korea from China, becoming established in 528 C.E. as the dominant religion of the early Korean kingdom of Silla, and thereafter of the medieval kingdom of Koryŏ, from which "Korea" takes its name. Korean monks regularly went as pilgrims to study Buddhist scriptures in China and in India, and they were often accomplished poets as well as religious thinkers. Much poetry was written in Korea in Chinese in the early periods, but the following three poems were all written in Korean, using a common verse form of two four-line stanzas and a concluding couplet. In these poems, life is metaphorically seen as a journey to the "Pure Land" of enlightenment, the realm of dharma, the Sanskrit term for law or sacred duty, and more generally signifying the cosmic order, a union of natural and moral harmonies.

The first of these poems was written by a poet known as Master Wŏlmyŏng (fl. 750 C.E.), whose pen name means "Moon's Radiance." This poem is an elegy for his sister, and beautifully combines the image of the road of life, leading to the land of enlightenment, with the very different image of lives as leaves scattered in the wind. These themes are also found in medieval European poetry: Dante begins his *Divine Comedy* "in the middle of our life's road," while a singer in the *Carmina Burana* describes being "like a leaf, played with by the wind."

The second poem, written by a monk named Yŏngjae (fl. 790 C.E.), involves an actual journey, though as in Dante's opening lines, the poet's wandering in the dark seems to reflect a spiritual state as much as a physical situation. According to an old tradition handed down with the poem, Yŏngjae was crossing an isolated mountain ridge when he was set upon by bandits. They recognized him as a great poet, and asked him to compose a poem on the spot as the price of his release. The result is said to have been this poem, which wittily contrasts the bandits' bright swords to the higher enlightenment both he and his captors should seek.

Finally, a meditative verse by Great Master Kyunyŏ (923–973 C.E.) transposes earthly nature to the divine realm of dharma and then to the mind itself, making explicit the link between interior and exterior landscape.

PRONUNCIATIONS:
Kyunyŏ: KEWN-yoh
Wŏlmyŏng: WOHLM-yawng
Yŏngjae: YAWNG-jay

Master Wŏlmyŏng: Requiem[1]

On the hard road of life and death
That is near our land,
You went, afraid,
Without words.

5 We know not where we go,
Leaves blown, scattered,
Though fallen from the same tree,
By the first winds of autumn.

Abide, Sister, perfect your ways,
10 Until we meet in the Pure Land.

1. Translated by Peter H. Lee.

Snorri Sturluson
1178–1241

From the time of its settlement in the ninth century until its eventual absorption by Norway four hundred years later, Iceland was a rarity in medieval Europe: a country without a king. The farmers, fishermen, and traders who lived there were grouped in independent households and clans, with no overall government apart from an annual assembly, the Althing. There people would gather to feast, trade, and settle disputes under the guidance of the "law speaker," a man deeply versed in history and legal custom. Snorri was twice chosen as law speaker, a mark of his wealth and influence as well as of his legal knowledge and verbal skill. Son of a powerful chieftain, Snorri was a talented poet, but he became famous as a historian and writer of historical tales or sagas. He composed a major early history of Norway, as well as a saga concerning Norway's patron saint Olaf, and he is also the likely author of *Egil's Saga*, a richly nuanced tale of an early Icelandic chieftain who was a poet as well as a fighter.

Snorri was a committed Christian, but he was also devoted to the traditional mode of Norse poetry, filled with allusions to the old gods and to mythic events. In *The Prose Edda*—"edda" means "poetic art"—Snorri discusses poetic devices and metaphors as a guide and resource to young poets, prefacing his discussion of poetic language with a long account of the old myths on which many metaphors were based. To clear himself of any suspicion of promoting pagan belief, Snorri prefaces the legends with a tale of travel, arguing that the supposed Germanic gods were really Greek heroes who journeyed north after the fall of Troy, and were so powerful that people mistook them for gods. He then proceeds to give the fullest and most eloquent surviving account of pagan Germanic beliefs about the gods and the origins and end of the world. Snorri claims these legends are told inside a haunted castle as a joke on a visiting Swedish king, but even after he has distanced himself from the old myths, Snorri then retells them with grim relish, detailing the violent lives and fated deaths of the pagan gods.

PRONUNCIATIONS:

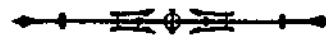
Aesir: AY-seer
Asgard: AHS-gard
Gangleri: GAHN-glair-ee
Gylfi: GILL-fee
Snorri Sturluson: SNOH-ree STIR-loo-son

from The Prose Edda[1]
from *Prologue*

In the beginning Almighty God created heaven and earth and everything that goes with them and, last of all, two human beings, Adam and Eve, from whom have come families. Their progeny multiplied and spread over all the world. As time went on, however, inequalities sprang up amongst peoples—some were good and righteous but by far the greater number, disregarding God's commandments, turned to the lusts of the world. For this reason God drowned the world and all creatures living in it—with the exception of those who were with Noah in the ark. Eight persons survived Noah's flood and these peopled the world and founded families. As the population of the world increased, however, and a larger area became inhabited, the same thing happened again; the great majority of mankind, loving the pursuit of money and power, left off paying homage to God. This grew to such a pitch that they boycotted any reference to God, and then how could anyone tell their sons about the marvels connected

1. Translated by Jean I. Young.

The next thing was that Gangleri heard a tremendous noise on all sides and turned about; and when he had looked all round him he found that he was standing in the open air on a level plain. He saw neither hall nor stronghold. Then he went on his way and coming home to his kingdom related the tidings he had seen and heard, and after him these stories have been handed down from one man to another.



Njal's Saga

c. 1280

Among the great medieval travelers were the Vikings, the raiders and traders whose long, narrow boats took them from Scandinavia as far south as Italy and North Africa, and as far west as Greenland and the coast of Canada. Far out in the North Atlantic, Iceland had been a deserted island until it was settled in the 800s by farmers and fishermen from Norway. They established prosperous farms and a two-tiered society of independent free men and their families, and a larger number of thralls or slaves; by the year 1000 Iceland had a population of some sixty thousand. The Scandinavian kings on the mainland often wished to bring Iceland under their control, particularly after they accepted Christianity while Iceland remained pagan. In 1000 the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason sent a missionary named Thangbrand to convert the island, which he did with spectacular success. A detailed account of the conversion was recorded a little over a century later by a historian named Ari the Learned, based on the recollections of his own foster-father and others whom Thangbrand had baptized. Ari's account in turn became the basis for the vivid account of resistance and conversion given here.

Icelanders excelled at two literary forms: dense, allusive lyric poetry, and expansive tales or sagas ("things said," "stories"). Prominent among these narratives were the "family sagas," originally oral accounts of the doings of great figures in the earlier history of the island's clans. The greatest of the family sagas were recorded or composed in the thirteenth century, often focusing on events of the early years of settlement. The longest and richest of all the sagas is *Njal's Saga,* whose anonymous author paints a panoramic portrait of Icelandic society in the years before and after Iceland's conversion. The story centers on the family of a chieftain named Njal, who seeks to advance his family's power while also mediating the feuds that constantly threaten to tear Iceland apart. The saga is written with a spare intensity, showing the violence always about to break out as individuals and clans jockey for influence, honor, and sexual conquests. Njal and his sons thrive at first, yet ultimately they can't withstand the forces of violence around—and within—them, and their enemies burn them alive in their house. This shocking event is fated from the start, and comes as no surprise to the reader—in Icelandic the saga is called *Brennu-Njáls Saga,* "The Saga of Burnt Njal." Yet the author is clearly concerned to understand why even so wise and good a figure as Njal couldn't avert this doom.

A pivotal event in the story is the conversion of Iceland. The saga's author inserted this self-contained tale into the middle of his saga to point up the shift from pagan times to the new Christian order that should have supplanted the old patterns of revenge and feud. The violence continued, however, and worsened in the thirteenth century, giving the Norwegian court an opportunity to come in and assert control: Iceland lost its independence in 1262, some two decades before this saga was written. The author weaves several of his characters into the conversion story, and significantly, his villains consistently oppose the missionary Thangbrand, while his favored characters welcome him. The story shows the forces at play as the pagans—and, it seems, their gods—resist the new faith, while Thangbrand combines preaching, miracle-working, swordplay, and intense politicking to achieve his goal.