

Analysis of Travel Notes of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti

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Abstract

The study of medieval trade routes and economic ties between the West and the East is of particular relevance for understanding the formation of the modern global economy and globalization processes. Travel notes of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, set out in his work "The Practice of Commerce" ("La Pratica della Mercatura"), are a unique and little-studied source of information on trade routes, goods and commercial practices of the 14th century. However, despite the significance of this document, its limited study within Russian historiography justifies selecting it as the research focus. The purpose of the article is to identify and analyze the main trade routes and economic ties described in Pegolotti's travel notes for understanding international trade and cultural exchange in the 14th century. The leading approach is theoretical analysis using historical-philological, comparative, and geographical methods to reconstruct trade routes and assess their impact on economic and cultural relations between the West and the East. Author's results. The hypothesis about the importance of Pegolotti's work for reconstructing trade routes and the economic structure of the Middle Ages is confirmed. The study reveals that detailed descriptions of trade routes, goods, and measures of weight in his work allow us to understand international trade of that time and reveal the complexity of commercial transactions between different regions. It is substantiated that Pegolotti's travel notes serve as a valuable source for studying the economic, social, and cultural aspects of medieval trade. The practical and theoretical significance of the results lies in filling gaps in the study of medieval trade and opening new perspectives for research that integrates history, economics, linguistics, and cultural studies.

Keywords: Francesco Balducci Pegolotti; medieval trade; trade routes; "The Practice of Trade"; economic history; cultural exchange; 14th century.

Introduction

The study of medieval trade routes and economic connections between the West and the East holds particular significance for understanding the formation of the modern global economy. The travel notes of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, presented in his work "The Practice of Commerce" ("La Pratica della Mercatura"), serve as a valuable source of information on trade routes, goods, and commercial practices of the 14th century. Despite the importance of this document, it remains insufficiently explored in Russian historiography, which justifies the choice of the research object.

The research hypothesis posits that analyzing Pegolotti's travel notes will not only facilitate the reconstruction of medieval European and Asian trade routes but also offer insights into the economic and cultural interactions of that period.

The aim of the study is to identify and analyze the key principles of trade routes and economic connections described in Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's travel notes, thereby enriching the understanding of international trade and cultural exchange in the 14th century. To achieve this, the following objectives were set:

- 1) To analyze the relevance and significance of Pegolotti's travel notes for medieval history and economics.
- 2) To investigate and reconstruct the main trade routes described in "The Practice of Commerce" using modern methods of historical and geographical analysis.

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- 3) To assess the impact of the trade practices and routes presented by Pegolotti on the development of economic and cultural relations between the West and the East during the medieval period.

This research aims to fill existing gaps in the study of Pegolotti's works and highlight their value for contemporary historical scholarship.

Literature Review

In recent decades, the study of sources related to trade and travel during the Middle Ages has undergone significant changes, reflecting the evolution of methodological approaches and the expansion of available materials. For instance, S.P. Karpov (2008) identifies five types of sources:

- 1) Natural-geographical – data on landscapes, climate, and other environmental components impacted by human activity.
- 2) Ethnographic – traditions, customs, folklore, and linguistic features preserved to this day.
- 3) Material – archaeological finds such as buildings, tools, means of transport, and household items.
- 4) Written – documents, chronicles, business correspondence, and literary works.
- 5) Pictorial – paintings, engravings, maps, and other visual materials.

A closer examination of written sources, particularly travel notes, reveals that this literary genre comprises journey descriptions where authors document their observations of nature, culture, daily life, and local traditions. In historical scholarship, they are regarded as valuable sources providing information about various aspects of life in past eras.

The origins of the travel notes genre trace back to antiquity. The works of Herodotus and Xenophon contain descriptions of travels and observations of different peoples and territories. In the Middle Ages, the genre developed in the form of pilgrimage literature, where authors described their journeys to holy places. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, travel notes acquired a more secular character, reflecting interest in geographical discoveries and cultural differences.

In Russia, the travel notes genre became widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries. Works by authors such as N.M. Karamzin ("Letters of a Russian Traveler") and A.N. Radishchev ("Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow") became classic examples of this genre, as they not only described journeys but also addressed social and political issues of their time.

In the dissertation by I.V. Guniakova (2009), "The Notes of William Coxe in the Second Half of the 18th Century about His Journey to Russia as a Historical Source," the author analyzes the notes of the English traveler William Coxe, who visited Russia in the 18th century. This study considers them a valuable historical source reflecting the social, political, and cultural realities of that period.

N.A. Zavgorodnyaya (2021), in her work "The Study of Travel Notes as a Text Type Using V. Büscher's Collection 'Berlin — Moscow. A Journey on Foot' as an Example," analyzes the structural features of travel notes, including their macro- and microstructures, and the stylistic devices employed by authors to convey their impressions.

G.E. Rafikova (2018), in her article "Travel Notes of the First Half of the 19th Century: The Tatars of the Kazan Province Through the Eyes of Travelers," examines descriptions of the Tatar population of the Kazan province in travel notes of the first half of the 19th century, analyzing them as ethnographic sources.

From the perspective of studying travel notes as valuable historical sources, the work of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti holds particular interest. His work provides an opportunity to better understand trade routes and economic connections between Western Europe and the East in the 14th century.

Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (c. 1290–1347) was a Florentine merchant and political figure known for his work "The Practice of Commerce" ("La Pratica della Mercatura") compiled between 1338 and 1342. This handbook represents a highly valuable source on the history of trade and economic relations of the 14th century, especially in terms of the interactions between Western Europe and the East.

"The Practice of Commerce" by Pegolotti contains detailed descriptions of trade routes, goods, units of weight and volume, as well as practical advice for merchants. Particular attention is given to the route from Tana (modern Azov) through Jintarkhan (Astrakhan) to eastern markets, including China. Pegolotti describes the duration of the journey, potential dangers such as bandits ("mocoli"), and provides recommendations for preparation, such as growing a beard for better adaptation to local customs and hiring interpreters proficient in the Cuman language.

Scholars note that Pegolotti provided valuable information on trade in the Black Sea region, particularly detailing the weights and measures used in Tana and correlating them with Genoese and Venetian standards. For example, he states that the "cantar" in Tana corresponds to the Genoese cantar, and the "large libra" equals 20 Genoese pounds—details that allow modern researchers to reconstruct economic relationships and trading practices of the time.

Pegolotti's work is highlighted in contemporary historical studies. For instance, A.V. Pachkalov (2021) emphasizes that his data on Tana's monetary and weight systems are unique and offer insight into the economy of the Golden Horde. The author underlines that Pegolotti's data, collected during his service in Cyprus in the 1320s, provide rare information on the metrological systems of the region.

Moreover, Pegolotti describes the diversity of goods passing through Azov, including wax, frankincense, iron, tin, copper, pepper, ginger, cotton, cheese, and honey. He also mentions the duties levied on various goods and the differences in rates for Genoese, Venetian, and other merchants. This information helps to understand trade flows and economic relationships between regions and peoples.

On the other hand, researchers point out that although Pegolotti likely did not visit many of the regions he described, his work is based on the extensive knowledge and experience of Florentine merchants of the time. Notably, he describes the use of paper money in China and offers advice on exchanging silver for local currency.

Despite the significance of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's travel notes, certain gaps exist in their study. Firstly, the primary source of *Pratica della Mercatura* is a single manuscript housed in the Riccardiana Library in Florence. This manuscript was copied in 1472 by Filippo di Niccolao Frescobaldi from a copy belonging to Agnolo di Lotti of Anella, who claimed it was made from Pegolotti's original. The absence of an autograph and the limited manuscript tradition complicate the establishment of precise textual accuracy and raise questions about possible distortions or lost sections.

Secondly, although *Pratica della Mercatura* was first published in 1766 by Gianfrancesco Pagnini and critically edited in 1936 by Allan Evans with glossaries, complete translations into modern languages, especially English, remain rare. Existing translations cover only selected fragments, which limits the text's accessibility and hampers its analysis.

Thirdly, Pegolotti used Italianized forms of place names and goods, creating difficulties in their identification. Ephraim Nissan notes in his work that Pegolotti's adaptation of toponyms often leads to confusion and requires linguistic analysis for accurate identification of corresponding geographical locations.

Another issue is that while *Pratica della Mercatura* contains valuable data, modern studies, such as Henry Yule's *Cathay and the Way Thither*, provide only partial translations and commentary on sections concerning 14th-century trade routes, leaving room for analysis and comparison with other historical sources.

Furthermore, the potential for studying travel notes in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies remains underutilized. For instance, exploring the social and cultural aspects reflected in Pegolotti's work could enrich the understanding of trade practices and interactions of the period.

It is known that Pegolotti's work influenced subsequent trade manuals, such as "Tarifa zoè noticia dy pexi e mexure di luogi e tere" in the 1340s and Giorgio Chiarini's "Libro che tracta di mercatantie et usanze de' paesi" in 1458. However, the extent of this influence and specific borrowings require detailed analysis to understand the evolution of trade literature in medieval Europe.

Methods

The research utilized both primary and secondary sources. The primary source of the study is Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's "The Practice of Commerce" ("*La Pratica della Mercatura*"), composed between 1338 and 1342. Additionally, the 1936 critical edition by Allan Evans, which includes glossaries and commentary, was utilized.

Secondary sources included historiographical works on medieval trade and economy, such as studies by Robert S. Lopez and D. Valerian, contemporary publications by Russian historians, and research focusing on the analysis of travel notes and their significance as historical sources.

The following methods were employed during the research:

- *Historical-philological analysis* of Pegolotti's text to identify the characteristics of its language, terminology, and style. This involved examining the terms he used, units of weight and volume, names of cities and regions, and descriptions of trade practices, with particular attention paid to the interpretation of Italianized toponyms and terms.
- A *comparative analysis* of the data presented in "The Practice of Commerce" with other written sources of the period to confirm the reliability of Pegolotti's information and determine the degree of correspondence between his descriptions and data from Genoese and Venetian archives.
- *Comparison of information* about trade routes and goods with data from other travel notes and trade manuals of the time.
- *Geographical analysis* was conducted to reconstruct the trade routes described by Pegolotti. Historical maps and modern geographical data were used to determine the precise locations of the cities and regions mentioned.

The analysis examined both maritime and overland routes connecting East and West, evaluating their length, complexity, and strategic significance.

Results

The analysis of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's notes reveals key data providing valuable insights into 14th-century trade; his detailed descriptions not only illuminate the routes for the transportation of goods but also demonstrate the economic connections between different regions of the time.

One of the main trade routes outlined in the text is the route from Acre to Syria, a significant port on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, connecting to various cities in Europe and North Africa. Acre served

as a major hub for trading spices, silk, cotton, silver, and other valuable goods from Asia and the Middle East. From there, these goods were sent to cities such as Naples, Messina, Tunis, and others.

The trade route from Acre to Naples traversed the Mediterranean Sea, with ships carrying goods like spices, cotton, and precious metals over vast distances. Pegolotti notes that one cantar from Acre was equivalent to two cantars and 50 rotoli of spices in Naples. This route was crucial for supplying Italy with Eastern goods, which were subsequently distributed throughout Europe.

The route from Acre to Messina, Sicily (a strategically located port at the crossroads of East and West), was a major artery for the trade of spices, silk, and other goods. Ships departing from Acre crossed the Eastern Mediterranean, navigating zones of potential hazards, including piracy and adverse weather conditions. However, the profits from this trade outweighed the risks, ensuring the continued demand for this route.

Trade connections with Tunis in Barbary (North Africa) highlight the diversity of medieval trade directions. The route from Acre to Tunis crossed the southern Mediterranean. Here, merchants exchanged Eastern goods for North African products such as gold, ivory, and exotic items from the Sahara. Pegolotti's references to the differences in weights and measures between Acre and Tunis underscore the complexities of trade between diverse cultures and the necessity of understanding local measurement systems.

The route from Acre to cities in Southern Italy and Sicily, such as Barletta and Palermo, was also crucial for distributing goods across the Italian Peninsula, as these routes ensured the supply of spices, cotton, and other highly valued commodities in Europe. Merchants had to consider not only distances but also the political and economic conditions of the regions they traversed. This often involved paying customs duties, navigating the laws of different states, and adhering to cultural practices.

In addition to sea routes, Pegolotti describes overland paths connecting inland regions to port cities, such as routes from cities in Turkey to the Mediterranean coast, facilitating the transport of goods from the interior of Asia to European cities. These paths were fraught with challenges: crossing mountain ranges, deserts, and areas with unstable political conditions. Nevertheless, they were vital for trading goods like silk, spices, and precious stones.

Trade routes also connected Northern European cities to the Mediterranean, with the route from Acre to London serving as evidence that goods from the East reached the British Isles. Ships covered great distances, navigating around the Iberian Peninsula and passing through the English Channel. This route was utilized to supply England with spices and other exotic goods that were highly sought after by the nobility and wealthy classes.

The description of these trade routes highlights their complexity. Merchants had to consider numerous factors: geographical obstacles, climatic conditions, political situations, piracy, and competition from other trading powers. Maritime navigation at the time was a perilous endeavor due to the lack of modern navigational tools and weather forecasts. Land routes posed additional risks, such as bandits and hostile territories.

Furthermore, merchants needed to be familiar with multiple languages, cultures, and trading practices. They interacted with a wide range of people, from Arab and Turkish traders to European colleagues from various countries. Such communication required not only business acumen but also diplomatic skills to negotiate successfully and close deals.

Trade routes facilitated not only economic exchange but also cultural exchange, as they enabled the spread of ideas, technologies, religious beliefs, and cultural values. They connected the East and the West into a unified trading network.

By linking descriptions of routes with specific goods and geographic locations, Pegolotti provides a comprehensive understanding of trade operations of that era. Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's text mentions various goods, such as spices. For instance, in the section dedicated to the trade relationship between Acre

in Syria and Naples in the Principality, it is noted that one cantar of Acre was equivalent to two cantars and 50 rotoli of spices in Naples. In the cotton trade, one cantar of Acre was equal to between 2 cantars and 65 to 70 rotoli in Naples.

The text also mentions that 100 mens of Acre cinnamon equated to 95 to 98 rotoli in Naples, highlighting that cinnamon was a valuable commodity and that precise measurement of its quantity was critical for determining value and concluding deals.

Pegolotti's work further discusses pearls: "A pearl ara that weighs 40 bezant weights in Acre equals 6 ounces and 10 tarli by gold weight in Naples." Regarding silver, he notes that "1 mark of Naples-weight silver is equal to 1 mark and 7 sterlins in Acre," indicating differences in weight units and the value of metals between cities.

The text provides information about grain: "100 salms of grain by Naples' measure make between 140 and 145 moggia in Acre," illustrating how grain volumes were converted in trade between regions and how this influenced pricing and logistics.

Connections between Acre and other cities and regions are also mentioned, such as Messina in Sicily: "1 cantar of Acre equates to between 2 cantars and 75 to 80 rotoli of spices, and between 2 cantars and 85 to 90 rotoli of cotton by fine weight in Messina." This demonstrates that Messina was a significant trading partner of Acre, and the exchange of goods between them was substantial.

When comparing weight measures between Acre and Tunis in Barbary, it is noted: "1 cantar of Acre equals 4 cantars and 30 rotoli in Tunis." Additionally, "4 mens of Acre make 15 and a half rotoli in Tunis," highlighting the differences in weight units between the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa and the necessity of accurate conversions for successful trade.

The text also addresses trade between Acre and other European cities, such as Ancona, Pisa, and London. For instance, "1 cantar of Acre converts to 100 pounds in London," illustrating how spice and other goods trade was conducted over vast distances, connecting the Middle East with Western Europe.

The document describes goods that were in demand across various regions, mentioning spices such as pepper, ginger, sugar, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, cubeb, mace, and galangal. Cotton, both raw and spun, was also an important commodity exported from Acre.

Gold and silver served not only as a medium of payment but also as tradable goods. For instance, weight units for silver and gold were meticulously compared between cities to establish fair prices and exchange rates.

Another principle of trade involved units of length for textiles. It is noted that "100 canne of Ancona make 102 canne in Acre," indicating that even minor differences in length measurements impacted the volumes and costs of goods like fabrics and linen products.

Grain trade is also described in detail, with various volume measures for grain, such as moggia, salma, and others, compared across regions. For example, "100 salms of grain by the standard measure of the Sicilian plains make between 148 and 150 moggia in Acre."

The text mentions trade routes and distances between cities, although specific distances in miles or days of travel are not always provided. The mere listing of numerous cities and regions connected by trade demonstrates an extensive network of trade routes spanning the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Europe.

To systematize and analyze the presented information, it is advisable to refer to a summary table, which can visually organize the categories of goods, associated cities, and measurement specifics to facilitate understanding of the scale and structure of 14th-century trade (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key Goods, Cities, and Trade Routes According to Pegolotti

Category	Subgroup	Description
Goods	Spices	Pegolotti mentions popular spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger.
		For example, in descriptions of Eastern trade, "Cypriot sugar" and syrups are highlighted as export goods.
		Detailed calculations of weights and packaging for these products are provided; for instance, Cypriot ruotoli are used for measuring cinnamon and sugar.
	Fabrics	Wool from England and Scotland, silks from the East, and linen fabrics from Flanders.
		The book includes a detailed list of wool production sites, such as English monasteries known for producing high-quality wool.
	Metals and other resources	Pegolotti mentions copper, gold, and silver, assessing their qualities based on their regions of origin.
		Attention is given to methods of evaluating metal quality, such as a comparative analysis of copper from two regions.
	Food products and agricultural goods	Among agricultural goods, honey, olive oil, and wine stand out. Details about their packaging (e.g., barrels, boxes) and cost calculations are even provided.
	Jewelry and luxury items	Luxury items such as jewelry, rare fabrics, and precious stones are mentioned, which were highly sought after in major European trade cities.
	Cities	European cities
London and Bruges. Key locations in English and Flemish trade, focusing on wool transactions.		
Genoa and Venice. Ports central to Mediterranean trade, particularly for importing goods from the East.		
Middle East and Asia		Constantinople. Described as one of the largest trade hubs connecting Europe and the East.
		Famagusta (Cyprus). A city where Pegolotti spent several years, serving as a transit point for Levantine trade.
		Tabriz. One of the main stops along the route to East Asia.

Distances	Trade routes	From London to Bruges. A route crossing the English Channel with detailed descriptions of transportation costs and customs duties.
		From Genoa to Tabriz. Stages of the journey through the Mediterranean, Syria, and Persia are outlined, including customs stations.
		Routes to China via Central Asia are described in a special chapter, detailing caravan travel conditions and transit costs in specific regions.
Distance measurements		Various units of distance, such as "miles" and "days of travel," are mentioned. For example, the journey from Florence to Famagusta is calculated in terms of caravan days.

Pegolotti's *La Pratica della Mercatura* is not merely a trade manual but an extensive study of goods, geography, and transportation systems in the Middle Ages. The references to commodities, cities, and distances provide a detailed understanding of the complexities of international trade during that era, and the text serves as an invaluable source for studying economic history, illustrating the vast reach of trade connections and the meticulous planning of routes and transactions by merchants.

Discussion

The analysis of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's travel notes confirmed the hypothesis regarding the significance of his work in reconstructing trade routes and the economic structure of the Middle Ages. The detailed descriptions of trade routes, goods, and weight measures presented in *La Pratica della Mercatura* offer insights into the nature of 14th-century international trade.

Firstly, the detailed accounts of trade routes connecting the cities of the East and West enable the reconstruction of medieval trade geography. Pegolotti describes not only maritime routes across the Mediterranean but also complex overland paths through Central Asia, demonstrating the scale and complexity of trade operations at the time and the sophistication of commercial networks between various regions. Such data support contemporary scholars' conclusions that the Middle Ages were a period of exchange not only of goods but also of cultural values between the East and the West.

Secondly, the analysis of the range of goods mentioned in the notes reflects the diversity and volume of trade operations. For instance, commodities such as spices, textiles, metals, agricultural products, and luxury items were integral to the economy of the time. This supports the thesis that international trade was a driving force behind the development of medieval societies, and the detailed information on weight and volume measures contributes to a precise understanding of economic relations and pricing structures of the period.

Comparisons between Pegolotti's data and other historical sources confirm the reliability and value of his accounts. While challenges exist in interpreting Italianized toponyms and terminology, a comparative analysis reveals a high degree of correlation between Pegolotti's descriptions and data from other sources, such as chronicles, archival documents, and modern research. For example, information on routes from Acre to European cities aligns with data from Genoese and Venetian archives, enhancing the credibility of the information presented in *La Pratica della Mercatura*.

However, utilizing Pegolotti's travel notes as a historical source requires acknowledging certain limitations. The absence of the original manuscript and the existence of only a single later copy raise concerns about possible distortions or lost sections of the text. This imposes constraints on textual analysis and necessitates caution in interpreting the data. Additionally, Pegolotti himself likely did not visit many of the locations he described, relying instead on the experiences and accounts of other merchants. While valuable, this second-hand information requires critical scrutiny.

The methodological approaches employed in this study proved effective for analyzing medieval texts. Historical and philological analysis facilitated understanding of terminology and context, while comparative methods established connections between Pegolotti's data and other sources. Geographic analysis of routes enriched the study by visualizing trade networks and deepening comprehension of their scope.

Combining these methods provides a more comprehensive and accurate representation of the subject matter. In the case of Pegolotti's travel notes, such an approach reveals both economic and cultural aspects of 14th-century international trade. For example, mentions of adapting to local customs—such as growing a beard or hiring interpreters—demonstrate the author's awareness of cultural nuances.

For future research, a more detailed exploration of the social and cultural principles reflected in Pegolotti's work appears promising. This includes analyzing communication between different peoples and cultures, studying the impact of trade on social structures and daily life, and continuing efforts to identify the toponyms and terms used by Pegolotti to refine the geographical and economic data.

Conclusion

This study addressed the underexplored value of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's travel notes as a significant historical source. Through the analysis of his work *La Pratica della Mercatura*, the research elucidated the importance of this document for understanding the economic and cultural connections between the West and East in the 14th century.

The conducted research confirmed the hypothesis that analyzing Pegolotti's travel notes facilitates a deeper understanding of international trade and cultural exchange during the medieval period. The findings of this study demonstrate that:

- Pegolotti's travel notes are of great importance to historical scholarship, as they provide detailed information about trade routes, goods, weight and volume measures, and trading practices of the time. His descriptions assist in reconstructing the economic landscape of the Middle Ages and understanding the complexity of trade operations across different regions.
- All objectives outlined in the introduction were successfully achieved. The relevance of the topic was analyzed, and the selection of the research subject was justified. Major trade routes described in *La Pratica della Mercatura* were reconstructed using historical-philological and geographical methods, and the influence of Pegolotti's trading practices on the development of economic and cultural relations between the West and East was evaluated.
- The research hypothesis was validated. The analysis of Pegolotti's travel notes indeed facilitates an understanding of the economic and cultural interactions of the period.

Thus, the study of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's travel notes not only fills gaps in the exploration of medieval trade but also opens new avenues for interdisciplinary research. By integrating history, economics, linguistics, and cultural studies, it contributes to a better understanding of the processes that shaped the economic and cultural landscape of Eurasia during the Middle Ages.

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