

**Editor's Note:**

Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna has left us an account of India and Burma from the very first decade of the sixteenth century, prior to the largescale of the First Taung-ngu Dynasty that would follow in the decades ahead. It thus provides a valuable insight into a period for which many foreign sources are not available.

The original account, in Italian, was published at Rome on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1510 at the request of Lodovico de Henricis da Corneto of Vicenza by Stephano Guillireti de Loreno and Hercule de Nani, both of Bologna. The translation followed here was made by John Winter Jones in 1863, edited by G. P. Badger, and published under the title of "The Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna from 1502 to 1508," the same title we use in the text below.

Only material relevant to Burma has been included in the following text. Additional editorial changes include additional paragraph breaks and the addition of subject headers for clarification.

M.W.C.

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**THE ITINERARY OF LUDOVICO DI VARTHEMA OF  
BOLOGNA FROM 1502 TO 1508**

**Ludovico di Varthema  
Translated by John Winter Jones**

...We ... arrived at a city which is called Cioromandel...which is a marine district, and distant from Colon ... seven days' journey by sea, more or less, according to the wind. This city is very large, and is not surrounded by walls, and is subject to the King of Narsinga. The said city is situated opposite to the island of Zailon ... My companion disposed of some of his merchandise here, and inasmuch as they were at war with the King of Tarnassari we remained here only a few days, and then we took a ship with some other merchants ... We passed a gulf of twelve or fifteen leagues ... we arrived at an island called Zailon...[next] We arrived ... at a place which is called Paleachet, which is subject to the King of Narsinga. This district is one of immense traffic in merchandise, and especially in jewels, for they

come here from Zailon and from Pego. There are also here many great Moorish merchants of all kinds of spices. We lodged in the house of a Moorish merchant, and we told him where we came from, and that we had many corals to sell, and saffron, and much figured velvet, and many knives. The said merchant, understanding that we had this kind of merchandise, was greatly pleased. This country is most abundant in everything which is produced in India, but no grain grows there. They have rice here in great abundance. Their laws, manner of living, dress, and customs, are the same as at Calicut, and they are a warlike people, although they have no artillery.

As this country was at fierce war with the King of Tarnassari, we could not remain here a very long time. But after remaining here a few days we took our route towards the city of Tarnassari, which is distant a thousand miles from here. At which city we arrived in fourteen days by sea.

### **Tenasserim**

THE city of Tarnassari is situated near to the sea: it is a level place and well watered, and has a good port, that is, a river on the side towards the north. The king of the city is a pagan, and is a very powerful lord. He is constantly fighting with the King of Narsinga and the King of Banghella. He has a hundred armed elephants, which are larger than any I ever saw. He always maintains 100,000 men for war, part infantry and part cavalry. Their arms consist of small swords and some sort of shields, some of which are made of tortoise-shell, and some like those of Calicut; and they have a great quantity of bows, and lances of cane, and some also of wood. When they go to war they wear a dress stuffed very full of cotton. The houses of this city are well surrounded by walls. Its situation is extremely good, after the manner of Christians, and good grain and cotton also grow there. Silk is also made there in large quantities. A great deal of brazil-wood is found there, fruits in great abundance, and some which resemble our apples and pears, some oranges, lemons, and citrons, and gourds in great abundance. And here are seen very beautiful gardens, with many delicate things in them.

In this country of Tarnassari there are oxen, cows, sheep, and goats in great quantities, wild hogs, stags, roebucks, wolves, cats which produce the civet, lions, peacocks in great multitudes, falcons, goss-hawks, white parrots, and also other kinds which are of seven very beautiful colours. Here there are hares and partridges, but not like ours. There is also here another kind of bird, one of prey, much larger than an eagle, of the beak of which, that is, of the upper part, they make sword-hilts, which beak is yellow and red, a thing very beautiful to behold. The colour of the said bird is black, red, and some feathers are white. There are produced here hens and cocks, the largest I ever saw, so much so that one of these

hens is larger than three of ours. In this country in a few days *we* had great pleasure from some things which we saw, and especially that every day in the street where the Moorish merchants abide they make some cocks fight, and the owners of these cocks bet as much as a hundred ducats on the one which will fight best. And we saw two fight for five hours continuously, so that at the last both remained dead. Here also is a sort of goat, much larger than ours, and which is much more handsome, and which always has four kids at a birth. Ten and twelve large and good sheep are sold here for a ducat. And there is another kind of sheep, which has horns like a deer: these are larger than ours, and fight most terribly. There are buffalos here, much more misshapen than ours. There are also great numbers of fish like ours. I saw here, however, a bone of a fish which weighed more than ten *canton*.

### Daily Life

With respect to the manner of living of this city, the pagans eat all kinds of flesh excepting that of oxen, and they eat on the ground, without a cloth, in some very beautiful vessels of wood. Their drink is water, sweetened where possible. They sleep high from the ground, in good beds of cotton, and covered with silk or cotton. Then, as to their dress, they go *all' apostolica*, with a quilted cloth of cotton or silk. Some merchants wear very beautiful shirts of silk or cotton; in general, they do not wear anything on their feet, excepting the Brahmins, who also wear on the head a cap of silk or camelot, which is two spans long. In the said cap they wear on the top a thing made like a hazelnut, which is worked all round in gold. They also wear two strings of silk, more than two fingers wide, which they hang round the neck. They wear their ears full of jewels and none on their fingers. The colour of the said race is semi-white, because the air here is cooler than it is in Calicut, and the seasons are the same as with us, and also the harvests.

### Foreigners and Conjugals

The king of the said city does not cause his wife's virginity to be taken by the Brahmins as the King of Calicut does, but he causes her to be deflowered by white men, whether Christians or Moors, provided they be not pagans. Which pagans also, before they conduct their wives to their house, find a white man, of whatever country he may be, and take him to their house for this particular purpose, to make him deflower the wife. And this happened to us when we arrived in the said city.

We met by chance three or four merchants, who began to speak to my companion in this wise:

“*Langalli ni pardesi*” that is, “Friend, are you strangers?”

He answered: “Yes.”

Said the merchants: “*Ethera nali ni banno*,” that is, “How many days have you been in this country?”

We replied: “*Mun nal gnad banno*,” that is, “It is four days since we arrived.”

Another one of the said merchants said: “*Biti banno gnan pigamanathon ondo*,” that is, “Come to my house, for we are great friends of strangers;”

[A]nd we, hearing this, went with him. When we had arrived at his house, he gave us a collation, and then he said to us: “My friends, *Patanci nale banno gnan penna periti in penna orangono panna panni cortu*,” that is, “Fifteen days hence I wish to bring home my wife, and one of you shall sleep with her the first night, and shall deflower her for me.”

We remained quite ashamed at hearing such a thing.

Then our interpreter said: “Do not be ashamed, for this is the custom of the country.” Then my companion hearing this said: “Let them not do us any other mischief, for we will satisfy you in this;” but we thought that they were mocking us.

The merchant saw that we remained undecided, and said: “O *langal limaranconia ille ocha manezar irichenu*,” that is, “Do not be dispirited, for all this country follows this custom.”

Finding at last that such was the custom in all this country, as one who was in our company affirmed to us, and said that we need have no fear, my companion said to the merchant that he was content to go through this fatigue.

The merchant then said: “I wish you to remain in my house, and that you, your companions and goods, be lodged here with me until I bring the lady home.”

Finally, after refusing, we were obliged to yield to his caresses, and all of us, five in number, together with all our things, were lodged in his house. Fifteen

days from that time this merchant brought home his wife, and my companion slept with her the first night. She was a young girl of fifteen years, and he did for the merchant all that he had asked of him. But after the first night, it would have been at the peril of his life if he had returned again, although truly the lady would have desired that the first night had lasted a month. The merchants, having received such a service from some of us, would gladly have retained us four or five months at their own expense, for all kinds of wares cost very little money, and also because they are most liberal and very agreeable men.

### Death

All the Brahmins and the king are burnt after death, and at that time a solemn sacrifice is made to the devil. And then they preserve the ashes in certain vases made of baked earth, vitrified like glass, which vases have the mouth narrow like a small *scutella*. They then bury this vase with the ashes of the burnt body within their houses. When they make the said sacrifice, they make it under some trees, after the manner of Calicut. And for burning the dead body they light a fire of the most odoriferous things that can be found, such as aloes-wood, benzoin, sandal-wood, brazil-wood, storax and amber, incense, and some beautiful branches of coral, which things they place upon the body, and while it is burning all the instruments of the city are sounding. In like manner, fifteen or twenty men, dressed like devils, stand there and make great rejoicing. And his wife is always present, making most exceedingly great lamentations, and no other woman. And this is done at one or two o'clock of the night.

In this city of Tarnassari, when fifteen days have passed after the death of the husband, the wife makes a banquet for all her relations and all those other husband. And then they go with all the relations to the place where the husband was burnt, and at the same hour of the night. The said woman puts on all her jewels and other objects in gold, all that she possesses. And then her relations cause a hole to be made of the height of a human being, and around the hole they put four or five canes, around which they place a silken cloth, and in the said hole they make a fire of the above-mentioned things, such as were used for the husband. And then the said wife, when the feast is prepared, eats a great deal of betel, and eats so much that she loses her wits, and the instruments of the city are constantly sounding, together with the above-mentioned men clothed like devils, who carry fire in their mouths, as I have already told you in Calicut. They also offer a sacrifice to Deumo. And the said wife goes many times up and down that place, dancing with the other women. And she goes many times to the said men clothed like devils, to entreat and tell them to pray the Deumo that he will be pleased to accept her as his own. And there are always present here a great many

women who are her relations. Do not imagine, however, that she is unwilling to do this; she even imagines that she shall be carried forthwith into heaven. And thus running violently of her own free will, she seizes the abovementioned cloth with her hands, and throws herself into the midst of the fire. And immediately her relations and those most nearly allied to her fall upon her with sticks and with balls of pitch, and this they do only that she may die the sooner. And if the said wife were not to do this, she would be held in like estimation as a public prostitute is among us, and her relations would put her to death. When such an event takes place in this country the king is always present, However, those who undergo such a death are the most noble of the land: all, in general, do not do thus.

I have seen in this city of Tarnassari another custom, somewhat less horrible than the before mentioned. There will be a young man who will speak to a lady of love, and will wish to give her to understand that he really is fond of her, and that there is nothing he would not do for her. And, discoursing with her in this wise, he will take a piece of rag well saturated with oil, and will set fire to it, and place it on his arm on the naked flesh, and whilst it is burning he will stand speaking with that lady, not caring about his arm being burnt, in order to show that he loves her, and that for her he is willing to do every great thing.

### **Justice**

He who kills another in this country is put to death, the same as in Calicut. With respect to conveying and holding, it is necessary that it should appear by writing or by witnesses. Their writing is on paper like ours, not on the leaves of a tree like that of Calicut. And then they go to a governor of the city, who administers justice for them summarily.

However, when any foreign merchant dies who has no wife or children, he cannot leave his property to whomsoever he pleases, because the king wills to be his heir. (And in this country after his death his son remains king.) And when any Moorish merchant dies, very great expense is incurred in odoriferous substances to preserve the body, which they put into wooden boxes and then bury it, placing the head towards the city of Mecca, which comes to be towards the north. If the deceased have children, they are his heirs.

### **Water Conveyance**

These people make use of very large ships and of various kinds, some of which are made flat bottomed, because such can enter into places where there is not much

water. Another kind are made with prows before and behind, and they carry two helms and two masts, and are uncovered.

There is also another kind of large ship which is called *giunchi*, and each of these is of the tonnage of one thousand butts, on which they carry some little vessels to a city called Melacha, and from thence they go with these little vessels for small spices to a place which you shall know when the proper time comes.

### **Bengal**

LET us return to my companion, for he and I had a desire to see farther on. After we had been some days in this said city, and being, indeed, tired of that same service of which you have heard above, and having sold some of our merchandise we took the route towards the city of Banghella [Satgaon in Bengal], which is distant from Tarnassari seven hundred miles, at which *we* arrived in eleven days by sea. This city was one of the best that I had hitherto seen, and has a very great realm. The sultan of this place is a Moor, and maintains two hundred thousand men for battle on foot and on horse; and they are all Mahommedans; and he is constantly at war with the King of Narsingha. This country abounds more in grain, flesh of every kind, in great quantity of sugar, also of ginger, and of great abundance of cotton, than any country in the world. And here there are the richest merchants I ever met with. Fifty ships are laden every year in this place with cotton and silk stuffs, which stuffs are these, that is to say, *bairam*, *namone*, *lizati*, *ciantar*, *doazar*, and *sinabaff*. These same stuffs go through all Turkey, through Syria, through Persia, through Arabia Felix, through Ethiopia, and through all India. There are also here very great merchants in jewels, which come from other countries.

### **Nestorians**

We also found some Christian merchants here. They said that they were from a city called Sarnau, and had brought for sale silken stuffs, and aloes-wood, and benzoin, and musk. Which Christians said that in their country there were many lords also Christians, but they are subject to the great Khan Cathai.

As to the dress of these Christians, they were clothed in a *xebec* [jerkin] made with folds, and the sleeves were quilted with cotton. And on their heads they wore a cap a palm and a half long, made of red cloth.

These same men are as white as we are, and confess that they are Christians, and believe in the Trinity, and likewise in the Twelve Apostles, in the four Evangelists, and they also have baptism with water. But they write in the contrary way to us, that is, after the manner of Armenia. And they say that they

keep the Nativity and the Passion of Christ, and observe our Lent and other vigils in the course of the year. These Christians do not wear shoes, but they wear a kind of breeches made of silk, similar to those worn by mariners, which breeches are all full of jewels, and their heads are covered with jewels. And they eat at a table after our fashion, and they eat every kind of flesh. These people also said that they knew that on the confines of the Rumi, that is, of the Grand Turk, there are very great Christian kings. After a great deal of conversation with these men, my companion at last showed them his merchandise, amongst which there were certain beautiful branches of large coral.

When they had seen these branches they said to us, that if we would go to a city where they would conduct us, that they were prepared to secure for us as much as 10,000 ducats for them, or as many rubies as in Turkey would be worth 100,000.

My companion replied that he was well pleased, and that they should depart immediately thence.

The Christians said: "In two days' time from this a ship will sail which goes towards Pego, and we have to go with it; if you are willing to come we will go together."

Hearing this we set ourselves in order, and embarked with the said Christians and with some other Persian merchants. And as we had been informed in this city that these Christians were most faithful, we formed a very great friendship with them. But before our departure from Banghella, we sold all the rest of the merchandise, with the exception of the corals, the saffron, and two pieces of rose-coloured cloth of Florence. We left this city, which I believe is the best in the world, that is, for living in. In which city the kinds of stuffs you have heard of before are not woven by women, but the men weave them.

### **Pegu**

We departed thence with the said Christians, and went towards a city which is called Pego, distant from Banghella about a thousand miles. On which voyage we passed a gulf towards the south, and so arrived at the city of Pego.

THE city of Pego is on the mainland, and is near to the sea. On the left hand of this, that is, towards the east, there is a very beautiful river, by which many ships go and come. The king of this city is a pagan. Their faith, customs, manner of living and dress, are after the manner of Tarnassari; but with respect to their colour, they are somewhat more white. And here, also, the air is somewhat more cold. Their seasons are like ours. This city is walled, and has good houses and palaces

built of stone, with lime. The king is extremely powerful in men, both foot and horse, and has with him more than a thousand Christians of the country which has been above mentioned to you. And he gives to each, for pay, six golden *pardai* per month and his expenses. In this country there is a great abundance of grain, of flesh of every kind, and of fruits of the same as at Calicut. These people have not many elephants, but they possess great numbers of all other animals; they also have all the kinds of birds which are found at Calicut. But there are here the most beautiful and the best parrots I had ever seen.

Timber grows here in great quantities, long, and I think the thickest that can possibly be found. In like manner I do not know if there can be found in the world such thick canes as I found here, of which I saw some which were really as thick as a barrel. Civet-cats are found in this country in great numbers, three or four of which are sold for a ducat. The sole merchandise of these people is jewels, that is, rubies, which come from another city called Capellan, which is distant from this thirty days' journey; not that I have seen it, but by what I have heard from merchants. You must know that in the said city, a large pearl and diamond are worth more here than with us, and also an emerald. When we arrived in this country, the king was fifteen days' journey distant, fighting with another who was called King of Ava.

Seeing this, we determined to go and find the king where he was, in order to give him these corals. And so we departed thence in a ship made all of one piece, and more than fifteen or sixteen paces long. The oars of this vessel were made of cane. Understand well in what manner: where the oar takes the water it was cloven, and they insert a flat piece of board fastened by cords, so that the said vessel went with more power than a brigantine. The mast of it was a cane as thick as a barrel where they put in the provisions. In three days we arrived at a village where we found certain merchants, who had not been able to enter into the said city of Ava on account of the war. Hearing this, we returned with them to Pego, and five days afterwards the king returned to the said city, who had gained a very great victory over his enemy. On the second day after the return of the king, our Christian companions took us to speak with him.

### **The King of Pegu**

Do not imagine that the King of Pego enjoys as great a reputation as the King of Calicut, although he is so humane and domestic that an infant might speak to him, and he wears more rubies on him than the value of a very large city, and he wears them on all his toes. And on his legs he wears certain great rings of gold, all full of the most beautiful rubies; also his arms and his fingers all full. His ears hang down half a palm, through the great weight of the many jewels he wears there, so that

seeing the person of the king by a light at night, he shines so much that he appears to be a sun. The said Christians spoke with him, and told him of our merchandise. The king replied: "That we should return to him the day after the next, because on the next day he had to sacrifice to the devil for the victory which he had gained." When the time mentioned was past, the king, as soon as he had eaten, sent for the said Christians, and for my companion, in order that he might carry to him his merchandise. When the king saw such beautiful corals he was quite astonished and greatly pleased; for, in truth, among the other corals there were two branches, the like of which had never before entered India.

This king asked what people we were.

The Christians answered: "Sir, these are Persians."

Said the king to the interpreter: "Ask them if they are willing to sell these things."

My companions answered: "That the articles were at the service of his highness."

Then the king began to say: "That he had been at war with the King of Ava for two years, and on that account he had no money; but that if we were willing to barter for so many rubies, he would amply satisfy us."

We caused him to be told by these Christians that we desired nothing further from him than his friendship,—that he should take the commodities and do whatever he pleased. The Christians repeated to him what my companion had charged them to say, by telling the king that he might take the corals without money or jewels.

He hearing this liberality answered: "I know that the Persians are very liberal, but I never saw one so liberal as this man;" and he swore by God and by the devil that he would see which would be the more liberal, he or a Persian. And then he desired one of his confidential servants to bring him a certain little box which was two palms in length, worked all round in gold, and was full of rubies, within and without. And when he had opened it, there were six separate divisions, all full of different rubies; and he placed it before us, telling us we should take what we wished.

My companion answered: "O, sir, you show me so much kindness, that by the faith which I bear to Mahomet I make you a present of all these things."

And know, sir, that I do not travel about the world to collect property, but only to see different people and different customs.”

The king answered: “I cannot conquer you in liberality, but take this which I give you.” And so he took a good handful of rubies from each of the divisions of the said casket, and gave them to him.

These rubies might be about two hundred, and in giving them he said: “Take these for the liberality you have exercised towards me.”

And in like manner he gave to the said Christians two rubies each, which were estimated at a thousand ducats, and those of my companions were estimated at about one hundred thousand ducats. Wherefore by this he may be considered to be the most liberal king in the world, and every year he has an income of about one million in gold. And this because in his country there is found much *lacca*, a good deal of sandal-wood, very much brazil-wood, cotton and silk in great quantities, and he gives all his income to his soldiers.

### **Final Observations**

The people in this country are very sensual. After some days, the said Christians took leave for themselves and for us. The king ordered a room to be given to us, furnished with all that was requisite for so long as we wished to remain there; and so it was done. We remained in the said room five days. At this time there arrived news that the King of Ava was coming with a great army to make war upon him, on hearing which, this one went to meet him half way with a great many men, horse and foot. The next day we saw two women burnt alive voluntarily, in the manner as I have described it in Tarnassari.