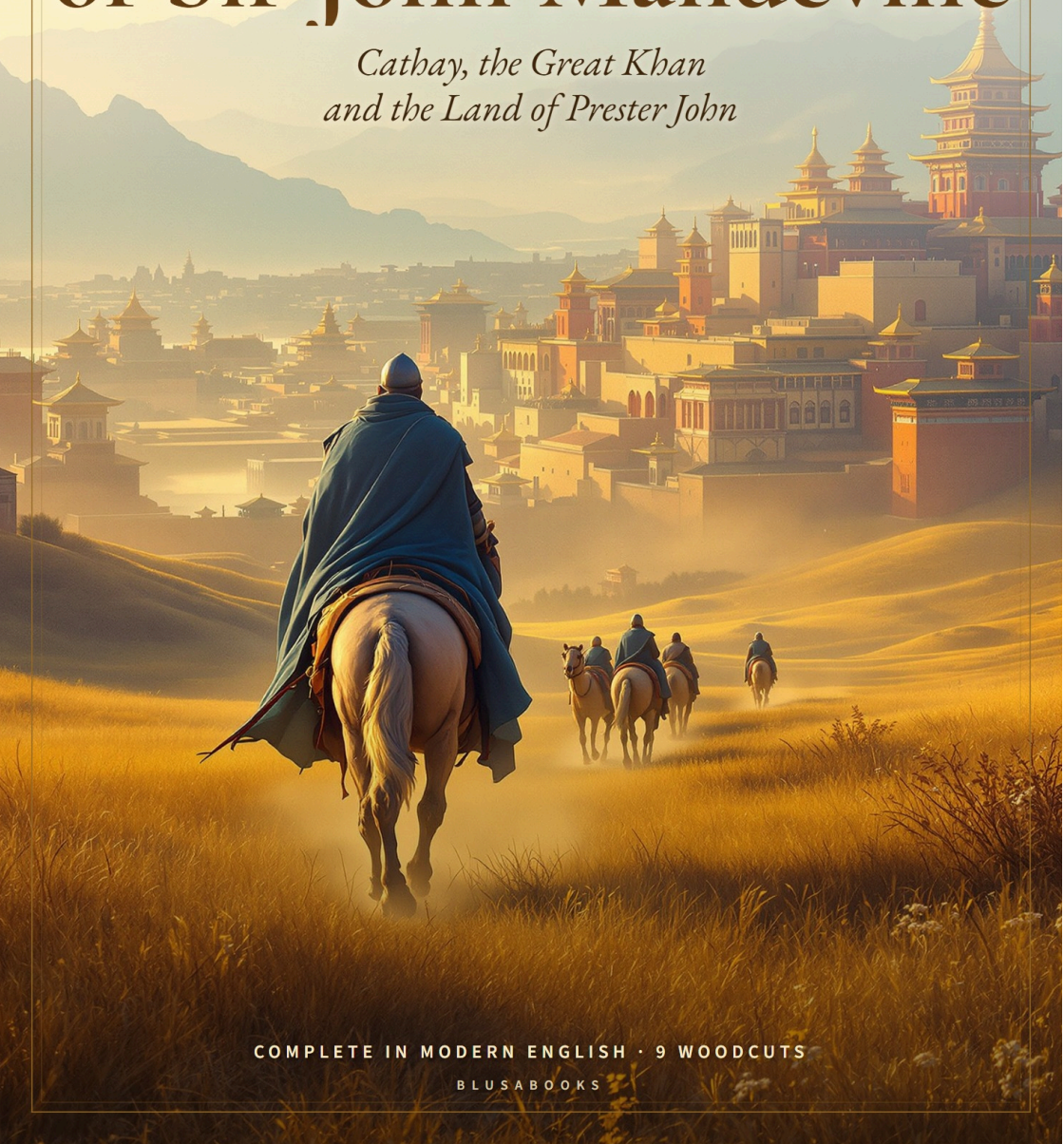


THE LONDON EDITION OF 1503

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville

*Cathay, the Great Khan
and the Land of Prester John*



COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH · 9 WOODCUTS

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The Travels of Sir John Mandeville

Cathay, the Great Khan and the Land of Prester John

From the London edition of 1503, in modern English

BlusaBooks · MMXXVI



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Source: *The boke of Johan Maundeuyl*, Wynkyn de Worde, London 1503 (STC 17249), Bodleian Library copy; text after EEBO-TCP A06814 (CC0).

Woodcuts redrawn from the original.

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	5
I The isles of the man-eaters and Mancy	7
II Cathay and the palace of the Great Khan	17
III The court of the Great Khan	24
IV Tartar customs, the Khan's burial and the election of a new Khan	31
V The roads back to the West	34
VI Beyond Cathay: Bactria and the griffins	40
VII The land of Prester John	45
VIII The perilous valley and the isles of giants	53
IX The good people and king Alexander	60
X The trees of the Sun and Moon, and Taprobane	64
<i>Commentary</i>	67



FOREWORD

The book that took Europe to the East. Around 1356 a book began to circulate in Europe whose author called himself Sir John Mandeville, an English knight of St Albans. He said that he had set out in 1322 and for thirty-four years travelled through the Holy Land, Egypt, India, Cathay and the islands far beyond them. It became one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages: about three hundred manuscripts survive, and it was translated into almost every European language. Merchants, monks and kings read it, and there is evidence that Christopher Columbus knew it too.

Who was Mandeville? Modern scholars are almost certain that the knight Mandeville never existed, or at least that he never saw most of the lands he describes. The book was written in French and put together from the best travel writing of its day — above all the account of the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, who travelled to China around 1330, together with the works of William of Boldensele, Hetoum the Armenian and the encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais. The author retold them in his own name, added legends and reflections of his own, and shaped the whole into what reads like one man's lifelong journey. That is why the book is so alive: real reports of the Mongol Great Khan's court stand side by side with headless men, giants and trees that speak.

Our edition. In English the book spread in several versions. One of them reached print in London, where Wynkyn de Worde, William Caxton's apprentice, printed it in 1499 and again in 1503. The 1503 edition is remarkable for its woodcuts, which the earlier one lacks. Our text comes from the copy of this edition kept in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The copy is incomplete: only leaves 72 to 102 survive. So the book begins in the middle of a sentence on the isle of Dody and breaks off on the isle of Taprobane. But this is the most famous part of

all: China, then called Cathay, the court of the Great Khan, the roads back to the West, the land of Prester John and the islands of marvels at the edge of the world.

This translation. We worked from the 1503 text, checked against images of the printed pages. The English of 1503 is a language of long sentences strung together with “and ... and ...”, so here and there we have divided a sentence, but we have changed nothing in the sense and left nothing out. Where a letter or word had faded in the print, we restored it from the context. This English edition renders the same text in modern English; a Latvian translation is published alongside it.

How to read this book. The book contains only the translation itself, to be read straight through. Where a place, a people or a thing appears that is no longer familiar today, there is a small number beside it and the explanation is at the foot of the same page. The book is divided into ten parts, and within each part the original chapters are kept with their old numbers. At the end, each part has a short account *In plain words* and *What history tells us* — what really lies behind Mandeville’s story. The main names and terms are explained in a footnote where they first appear. Nine woodcuts from the 1503 edition have been redrawn from the original lines and placed where they stood in the book. Each part opens with a colour illustration in the manner of 15th-century manuscript miniatures — a modern addition, not part of the original.

This is the publication of a historical source. Mandeville writes as a man of the Middle Ages — with the faith, the prejudices and the hunger for wonders of his time. We have left his words untouched; our own judgement appears only in the notes and the commentary.

PART I

THE ISLES OF THE MAN-EATERS AND MANCY

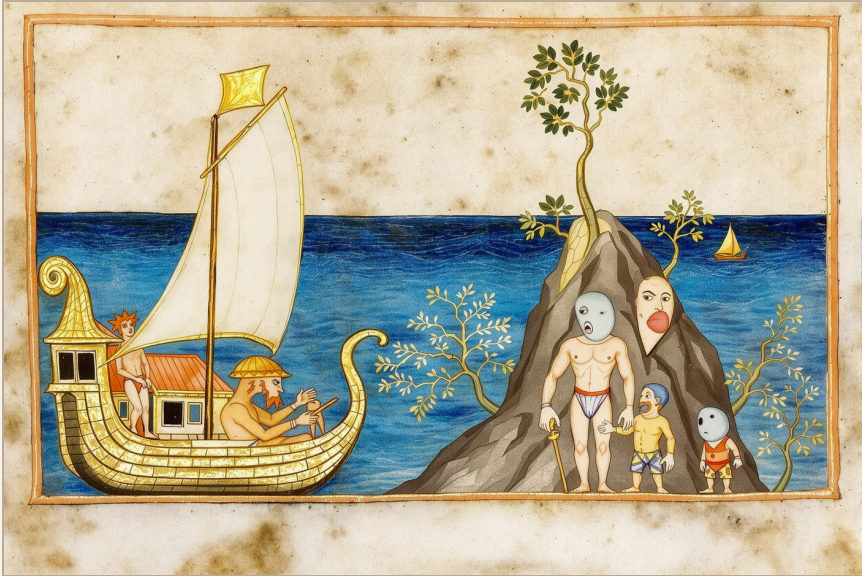


Illustration in the manner of 15th-century manuscript miniatures

The Isle of Dody and its strange people (end of chapter 62)

... Then there is another isle that men call Dody¹, and it is a great isle. In this isle live many different kinds of men, and they have evil customs, for the father eats the son and the son the father, the husband his wife and the wife her husband. And if it happens that the father falls sick, or the mother, or any friend, the son goes at once to the priest of their faith and begs him to ask the idol whether his

1. In the original *Dody*. Odoric of Pordenone calls it *Dondin*; which island is meant is unknown — perhaps one of the Andaman or Indonesian islands.

father shall die of that sickness or not. Then the priest and the son kneel down devoutly before the idol and ask it, and the idol answers them. If it says that the sick man shall live, they tend him well; but if it says that he shall die, then the priest comes with the son, or with the wife, or with whatever friend it may be, to the one who is sick, and they lay their hands over his mouth to stop his breath, and so they kill him. And then they cut the whole body into pieces and beg all his friends to come and eat of the dead man; and they make a great feast of it, with many minstrels, and eat him amid great music and song. And when they have eaten all the flesh, they take the bones and bury them, singing and with great honour. And all those of his friends who were not present at the eating of him are held in great shame and disgrace, so that they shall never again be counted as friends.



Woodcut from the 1503 edition, f. 72r — redrawn from the original lines

And the king of this isle is a great and mighty lord, and he has under him fifty-four great isles, and each of them has a king of its own. And in one of these isles