The (mostly) true tales of a medieval traveler

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For two years he ventured abroad by ship, mule, and horse, escaping murderous robbers and enduring a brief prison term.

He took notes on everything from how Egyptians incubated chicks in slow-firing ovens to the color of turbans that distinguished between Turk, Jew, Christian, Greek and "heathen."

Now, nearly 400 years later, an American scholar has literally blown the dust off a newly discovered copy of these notes and hopes to reintroduce the world to the unusual and (mostly) true tales of Arnold von Harff.

"Who?"

A German Marco Polo Mr. von Harff was not. He traveled closer to home and for much less time than Marco Polo.

But von Harff's colorful and detailed accounts of life styles and early languages provide one of the most overlooked, but "one of the best examples of medieval travelogues - and one of the most popular at the time," says Peter Jorgensen, associate professor of Germanic languages at the University of Georgia.

In 1496, von Harff, in his mid-twenties, left his town of Cologne, Germany, crossed the Alps to Italy, passed through present-day Yugoslavia and Albania, the islands...
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of Corfu, Crete, and Rhodes, then went on to Egypt. From there he traveled to Gaza (where he was imprisoned for three weeks for reasons not clear in his notes), Jerusalem, Beirut, then via Italy to France, Spain, and home.

His notes also describe another year of travel, from Cairo to India and Madagascar and to the source of the Nile. This account includes tales of horned snakes, sea monsters, dog-faced men, and people so small they lived in nut shells, says Jorgensen. This portion is not true.

The rest is, as far as he can tell, Professor Jorgensen says. Use of names of families von Harff visited, the detail of his accounts, and especially his lists of words from various languages in countries he visited, point to the accuracy of the rest of his accounts, Jorgensen adds.

"He [von Harff] existed, quite clearly," says Harold Roe, a professor at the Centre for Medieval Studies in Toronto. Even if he sat at home and wrote what others told him, he didn’t make up the language lists included in the accounts, Professor Roe says.

Wolfgang Stammel, whose recent dictionary of authors is considered “totally reliable,” according to Roe, states that von Harff did make the travels and that the accounts offer an “uncommonly large repository of information” of local customs.

Jorgensen discovered what he believes is the oldest of nine known handwritten copies of von Harff’s travelogue last year in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, where it had sat on a back shelf gathering dust since the library acquired it in 1813. The original has long been lost, he says.

Among the customs von Harff describes are how the Egyptians made “sugar honey.” Sugar cane was cut into finger-length pieces, ground on a stone mill turned by oxen, and boiled in caldrons. The sugar honey was skimmed off the top and used in place of butter in preparing many foods.

Also in Egypt, von Harff observed that Christians wore long blue scarfs around their heads, Turks wore long pointed hats with white scarfs around their heads, Jews wore long yellow scarfs around their heads, and “neathens” wore long white scarfs and flat pasteboard hats.

He described 44-foot thick defensive walls and a drawbridge on the island of Rhodes. In Constantinople, he noted that each woman in a harem had her own garden and servants and was closely guarded by eunuchs. There he also witnessed public hangings at least once every five or six days.

In Spain he described a particularly cruel punishment: relatives of the condemned were required to do the killing by shooting arrows at the person.

His writings are “not boring,” says Jorgensen. But, he adds, “I think he [von Harff] hasn’t been known or used enough in the US. He makes an excellent introduction into medieval life.”

Through three scholarly papers and some public talks in the next few months, Jorgensen hopes to make the 15th-century traveler a little less obscure in this country.