

From Bayla Singer:

In research for a proposed book on deepwater transportation, I've come across an item which seems implausible, but it's way out of my area of expertise.

Query: in the early 1400s, how could the following confusion have occurred?

Ma Huan, chief translator for the great Chinese admiral whose name is variously transliterated as Cheng Ho or Zheng He, encountered the story of Moses and the golden calf in "Calicut" [then a "country" in India] and thought it had occurred in Calicut itself, "explaining" the local reverence for cows.

The story is described as a local tradition, and differs somewhat from the Hebrew version: Instead of Moses' older brother Aaron, we have a younger brother Sa-mo-li [translated as "the Samaritan"] who produces the calf in Moses' absence. The calf excreted gold, which was given to the people and made them very happy to obey Sa-mo-li and turn away from Moses's teachings. When Moses returns, he destroys the calf and Sa-mo-li mounts an elephant and vanishes. The people yearn for Sa-mo-li's return, and thus venerate the cow and elephant associated with him.

The transliteration from the Chinese for Moses' name is variously Mou-hsieh or Mouxie; Nathan Sivin and some speakers of modern Arabic tell me that it's close to the Arab pronunciation, and that the Chinese in any case weren't very accurate when it came to transcribing foreign sounds. (The present Hebrew pronunciation is Moh-sheh.) Nathan also tells me that there were numerous Muslims in China at the time.

Ma Huan was a Muslim who also traveled to Mecca. He was presumably familiar with the Koran; my sources say that the Koran does mention Moses and other stories from the Hebrew scriptures, but they don't say if this particular story is included. In Jewish and Christian traditions, of course, anyone with any religious training at all would instantly recognize the story and its origin.

My sources suggest that Ma Huan heard the story from "Arabs," but I'm dubious. If he'd heard it from a fellow Muslim, would Ma Huan have been confused as to its origin? If he heard it from Hindus, would they have claimed it as their own?

As far as I know, there were no established Jewish communities in Calicut at that time, though there probably was a Jewish community in neighboring Cochin. The Jews, like other ethnic groups, included traveling merchants; some cultural contact is likely, and may have included comparative discussions of religious matters and group history.

The story is distorted enough that I would think it had gone through one or more other cultures before reaching Ma Huan's ears. But why would it have been presented as a local tradition? Why would other cultures have adopted/ adapted the story? Why would anyone have bothered to tell Ma Huan the story in the first place? Was some smart-alecky informant pulling his leg, expecting him to recognize the story and then too embarrassed to correct the misperception?

From John Staudenmaier: I've never heard this story before; interesting. Only thing to add, and it's precious little, to what you say below is that some traveling Christians might have been the carriers too. The Moses-Aaron-calf story has been pretty prominent in Christian thinking as well.

From Arwen Mohun: Long ago I took a history of religion class from someone who studied cargo cults and was interested in the transfer and transformation of religious ideas across cultures. I have the vague memory of Nestorian Christians who created a community in China in the early medieval period. Maybe this story is a result of syncretist ideas resulting from their teachings.

From Martha Trescott: I think the suggestions re contact with Christian communities, orders, missionaries may be a good lead w. r. t. this question. The Dominicans and others might have been teaching in parts of China by the 1400s. While the Vincentian missionaries were certainly present in China a couple of hundred years later--and I have studied a little about them--they weren't founded until the late 1500s-early 1600s, but other, earlier orders could have established schools and been preaching and teaching in various parts of China by the early 1400s.

From Bayla Singer: There are really several parts to the question ...

* How was it that Ma Huan (the translator from China) was not familiar enough with the golden calf story to recognize it when he heard it in India? (This assumes that the story was NOT well known in China, although there was a substantial Muslim demographic.)

* Was the story actually presented to him as having taken place in Calicut (a city-state in India)?

* Was his informant Muslim or Hindu? (The two most influential and numerous sects represented in Calicut, and who could be assumed knowledgeable about the local customs.)

* A lesser question is how did the story get from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean - - there are several possibilities for this -- and was it in fact adopted by the local Hindus as an "explanation" of their reverence for cows?

I'm in the process of formulating the question for H-Asia (Nina's excellent suggestion), and hope they'll have a more precise answer for me. Many thanks to all of you who cudgelled your memories for me! It reaffirms the fact of historians' creativity when it comes to breadth of resources and development of plausible scenarios!