MARCO POLO'S SURNAME 'MILIONE' ACCORDING TO NEWLY DISCOVERED DOCUMENTS

BY

BOLESLAW SZCZESNIAK

The State Archives of Venice taking a part in the celebrations of the seven hundredth anniversary of the birth of Marco Polo (1254-1324) exhibited a collection of old documents pertaining to the prominent Venetian Traveller and to the early Venetian commerce with Oriental countries. It appears that important documents exhibited in the archives during 1954 escaped the attention of many scholars and admirers of the Traveller to Cathay. Among these documents were twenty-two hitherto unknown pieces relating to Marco Polo or his family 1).

The newly discovered documents 2) helped Prof. Rodolfo Gallo to establish a new, and, I think, very plausible, interpretation of the origin of Marco Polo's nickname Milione 3). But the interpretation must necessarily encounter the old, well established interpretations.

A contemporary of Marco Polo, Fra Jacopo d'Acqui, an obscure author of the chronicle Imago mundi, already was interested in the origin of Milione referring to the Polo travellers (Matteo, Nicolo, Marco) as millionaires. Another contemporary, Giovanni Villani


2) Five additional documents were published by Professor R. Morozzo which are contemporary to Marco Polo and in which the name of Catay, Cataium, Chatayo, Catayo, is mentioned in interesting circumstances; they refer to the Venetians who were in China at that time; see idem, "Catay", Storia e letteratura, raccolta di studi e testi (Roma, 1958), vol. 71, pp. 299-303.

(d. 1348), a Florentine historian ¹), calls the travel book of Marco Polo, Milione. Giovanni Ramusio (1485-1557) ²) similarly explained the nickname as coming from the supposed revenues of Marco Polo, which amounted to ten or fifteen million of a gold denomination. After Ramusio, who was the first biographer of the Venetian Traveller, several contemporary scholars accepted this explanation. Ramusio even referred to an entry in the books of the Great Council of Venice, dated April 10, 1305, condoning the offence of a smuggling wine merchant, Bonoci o of Mestre, whose guarantee had been "nobilis vir Marchus Paulo Milioni" ³). Henry Yule, the most prominent student of the traveller to Cathay, accepted from Ramusio the sobriquet of Marco Milioni ⁴). His worthy predecessor, Baldelli Boni, explained the nickname as having been derived from the name of the Province of Emilia. Hence a man from there could be called Emilione or Milione. Some scholars speculated that one of the forms of the name Marco was Emilio, or Aemilius in Latin, hence Milioni. It was recently thought that Milione came from the first (or middle) name of Marco Polo: Emilione or its old diminutive form Emilio, Milione ⁵).

With these interpretations in mind, we should approach the new documents. Most of them pertain to Marco Polo's widow, Donata Paulo (née Badoer) or their daughter Bellela, married to Bertucio Quirini, who being insane before her death, left a testament of which Donna Donata Paulo (or Polo) acted as the "commissaria" before the Venetian court. The first four documents, however, mention Ser Nicolaus Polo, "Stephanus Polo frater ser Marci Polo", ser Matheus Polo maior, ser Matheus minor, ser Marcus Polo

¹) Ibid., vol. I, 119.
²) Ibid., vol. I, pp. 5-6.