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MARCO POLO'S TRAVELS AND THE MIDDLE EAST: MARCO POLO'S BRIDGE BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA

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The travels of Venetian merchant Marco Polo (lived 1254-1324, traveled 1271-1293) captivated readers when his book was published c. 1300. At the time, most Europeans traveled very little, so Polo's descriptions of Armenia, Baghdad, Tabriz, Persia, Kashmir, the Desert of Lop, Karakoram, and Shangdu (Xanadu) tantalized his audience. Over seven hundred years later, Marco Polo's tale remains exciting for would-be adventurers and instructive for historians and other scholars. Polo's travels brought him into contact with various cultures that make up what we refer to today as the Middle East. In addition, he traveled eastward beyond the Middle East into India and China, lands anciently connected to the West by the Silk Road, yet still mysterious to most Westerners. Polo was but one of many medieval European travelers, yet certainly the most famous, to venture through what we now consider the Middle East to the Far East during the thirteenth century, helping to create an important cultural connection between the West and the East, with the Middle East as the bridge.

Polo's travels along the Silk Road, the ancient link between Europe and China, spanned across the major cultural and trade centers of the Middle East, including a large portion of the Islamic world and the Mongol Empire. On his journey, Marco Polo encountered Jews, Christians (including Nestorian, Jacobite, and Armenian), Muslims (Sunni, Shiite, and numerous sects), Persians, Turks, Mongols, Buddhists, and many others. Thus, Marco Polo's account provides a snapshot of the Middle East at the conjunction of key historical events: the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate, the end of the Crusades, the time of cultural and economic stability provided by the Mongol Empire (the *pax mongolica*), and the foundational stages of what would later become the European Renaissance. Polo provides scholars an invaluable view of the diversity of cultures along his route, as well as insight into the way products, ideas, and inventions flowed between China and Europe through the Middle East during the turbulent thirteenth century.

Marco Polo's account of his travels was published c. 1300 in French as *Livres des Merveilles du Monde* (*Book of the Marvels of the World)* or *Devisement du Monde* (*Description of the World*), in Italian as *Il Milione* (*The Million*), and is best known in English as *The Travels of Marco Polo.* Polo went to great lengths to describe the various places and cultures along his route, which amazed readers throughout Europe. However, although his account is useful for historians, geographers, and anthropologists interested in studying the thirteenth century, his account is not an itinerary or straightforward account of his travels.[1] Instead, the account is a fusion of entertaining anecdotes, romanticized myths and legends, and his own observations.[2] His goal in writing the account was to both inform and amaze his audience in the style of the popular Alexander the Great romances. In fact, much of what Europeans thought they knew about the East came from the Alexander romances, so it is not surprising that Polo and his scribe, a romance writer named Rustichello da Pisa, chose to infuse myth and marvel into the travel narrative.[3] Despite the infused sensationalism, scholars can still use Polo's *Travels* in much the same way as they use the *Histories* of Herodotus (fifth century BC), a key historical text also infused with myth and legend.

Just as Polo was not the only traveler to blend myth and reality to inform and entertain his audience, he was also not the only traveler to venture east toward China, using the Middle East as a bridge between the West and the East. Pope Innocent IV sent Franciscan friar Giovanni da Pian del Carpini (Friar John) as an envoy to the East in the 1240s. Like Polo, Friar John's report of his travels contained a mixture of direct observations and hearsay from dubious local sources.[4] In one particular example from his account, he described a battle between the Tartars (Mongols) and "monstrous men shaped like dogs."[5] Like Herodotus and Polo, Friar John's account contained a

[1] Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 140.
[2] Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Precursors* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), 13.
[3] Ibid., 9.
[4] Ibid., 37.
[5] "The Journey of Friar John of Pian de Carpini to the Court of Kuyuk Khan 1245-1247 as Narrated by Himself," in Manuel Komroff, ed., *Contemporaries of Marco Polo* (New York: Dorsett Press, 1989), 16.

heavy dose of myth and legend. Another Franciscan, a Flemish missionary named William of Rubruck (Rubruquis), traveled to Karakorum (in Mongolia) during the 1250s. His travels helped him "connect the dots" between the Seres, the ancient Chinese silk-producers with which the Romans indirectly traded, and the Cathayans, a medieval/Renaissance name for the Chinese.[6] While it was an important historical step for Rubruck to equate the Seres with the Cathayans, he may have known China only through hearsay. Unlike Polo, he may not actually have personally visited China.[7]

The earliest Middle Eastern accounts of China date to c. 850, however, "reliable" detailed accounts came much later.[8] These came from sources including Rashid al-Din of Persia (1247-1318), a Jewish explorer who converted to Islam, and Ibn Battuta of Morocco (1304-1368), one of history's most well-known travelers. Rashid al-Din's description of the Middle East and of China, like Polo's, is invaluable to historians interested in the medieval perspective of China, yet it also contains exaggerations, myths, and legends. Interestingly, some of Rashid al-Din's geographical and cultural errors mirror those made by Polo. This raises the question of whether both travelers failed to observe personally the locations or events in question, instead using the same erroneous sources.[9] Nevertheless, because much of Rashid al-Din's account contains his own first-hand observations, it remains a valuable resource for historians.

Ibn Battuta, the most famous Muslim traveler through the medieval Middle East, provided a first-hand description of geography and culture over an immense area, ranging from Anatolia to the Swahili Coast of Africa. His perspective provides both parallels and contrasts to Polo's tale, in large part due to his Muslim point of view. One particular episode from Ibn Battutah's account raises

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[6] G. F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relationships from the Earliest Times to 1800* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1931), 150.
[7] Ibid., "Marco Polo," *The Geographical Journal* 120, no. 3 (September 1954): 300, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1791579 (accessed May 23, 2015).
[8] Wood, 143.
[9] Ibid., 62.

questions about his attitude toward non-Muslims, paralleling questions historians have raised regarding Marco Polo's attitude toward non-Christians. At Arz al-Rum (Erzurum) in Asia Minor, Ibn Battutah berated a Jewish physician who sat on a bench in front of the sultan. This bench was above the Qur'an readers' bench, and Battutah considered the Jew's choice of seat to be a breach of protocol. Battutah called the Jew a "God-damned son of a God-damned father."[10] In a similar instance of possible religious bigotry, Polo denigrated the Turkomans of Armenia Minor by writing, "The Turkomans, who reverence Mahomet and follow his law, are a rude people, and dull of intellect."[11] Polo painted the Turkomans with a very broad and unflattering brush, likely because of their Islamic faith.

This and other such comments from Polo about non-Christians have caused some readers of his *Travels* to label Polo as anti-Islamic. In a scholarly debate among noted scholars in the field, historians Syed Manzul Islam and Leonardo Olschki described Polo as an anti-Islamist, while John Larner cautioned against a rush to judgement against Polo. According to Larner, one must consider the background and "entrenched attitudes" between Christians and Muslims following the Crusades.[12] In addition, Marco Polo's "hero," Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan and the Mongol emperor of the Yuan Dynasty in China, had misinterpreted Surah 91 of the Qur'an and initiated a campaign of persecution against Muslims. In another example of either bigotry or misunderstanding, William of Rubruck gave an account of Tibetans eating the carcasses of their own deceased parents.[13] Religious and cultural misunderstandings were obviously rife at the time.

[10] Tim Mackintosh-Smith, ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battutah* (London: Picador, 2003), 110; see also note 18 on page 310.
[11] Manuel Komroff, ed., William Marsden, trans., *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1953), 24.
[12] John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 102.
[13] "The Journal of Friar William of Rubruck: A Frenchman of the Order of the Minor Friars, to the East Parts of the World, in the Years 1253 to 1255," in Manuel Komroff, ed., *Contemporaries of Marco Polo* (New York: Dorsett Press, 1989), 117.

Because Battutah and Polo both traveled throughout the Middle East and beyond and encountered such a wide variety of cultures, misunderstandings and ideological clashes were probably inevitable. According to Larner, "considering the habitual ignorance and bigotry evoked by the Islamic religion and peoples in the writings even of the best educated propagandists of medieval Christianity, it could be argued that Marco is at times remarkably open to 'Saracens'."[14] In other words, the few examples of bigotry found in Polo's account should not be used to condemn him. One could argue that such misunderstandings and clashes, common yet today in the modern Middle East, were the product of the given circumstances. The writings of Polo and contemporaries such as Battutah and Rubruck, biased or not, help historians and other scholars see the Middle East of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through different paradigms.

The Middle East of Polo's time, as it is today, was a place in great flux. The Mongol conquests inaugurated a time of cultural and economic stability across Eurasia, often called the *pax mongolica*. According to Olschki, "One might travel through Tartar territory with the relative certainty of not being put to death."[15] However, Mongol control over the Middle East was anything but stable in the decades before Polo embarked from Venice to the East. In 1258, a Mongol warlord named Hulegu Khan, a grandson of Genghis and brother of Kublai, sacked the Abbasid capital Baghdad. This was certainly devastating for the Abbasid dynasty, but it was also devastating for the entire region because of Hulegu's destruction of the House of Wisdom. Known as the *Bayt al-Hikma*, the House of Wisdom was a massive library containing manuscripts from the Byzantine Empire, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and from ancient and contemporary cultures in Egypt, Syria, Iran, India, and the Levant.[16] Some of these texts had no copies, so they were lost forever.

[14] Larner, 103.
[15] Olschki, 46.
[16] Nurdin Laugu, "Muslim Libraries in History," *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 71, http://www.aljamiah.or.id/index.php/AJIS/article/view/36/17 (accessed June 23, 2015).

The destruction of the House of Wisdom destroyed an important link that connected Classical Europe, medieval Europe, and the Middle East.

Despite the devastating blow Hulegu dealt to the Middle East during his rampage, his actions may have had an unseen benefit. In addition to sacking Baghdad, Hulegu also sacked Mosul and Aleppo, crippling silk production industries there and encouraging merchants to reinvigorate the ancient Silk Road between Europe and China through the Middle East. Centuries earlier, in the mid-sixth century, Byzantine emperor Justinian procured silkworm eggs from a group of monks near Khotan (Yutian) in the Tarim Basin region of modern China, allowing Constantinople to monopolize the silk trade.[17] Once the Byzantines and the major Middle Eastern cities began producing their own silk, the old Silk Road between Europe and China declined. Hulegu's destruction of the largest Middle Eastern silk production centers unsettled the regional industry. Some silk production facilities in the Levant continued production, but needed supplementation from the East to keep up with demand. The reintroduction of Eastern silks into the western market, two silk industries that had been separated for centuries, caused a blending of the eastern and western silk production styles, creating new styles out of the diffusion. According to David Jacoby, "These developments contributed decisively to the diffusion of distinctive types of Oriental luxury silks in the Frankish Levant and the Christian West."[18] Europeans and Middle Easterners accustomed to buying and selling silk now had renewed interest in traveling to the Far East.

Traveling east from Europe was no easy business. The Mongol Empire splintered somewhat under Genghis Khan's grandsons, straining the *pax mongolica*. In addition, the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate created turmoil in the Islamic Middle East. The Mamluks in Egypt regrouped out of the

[17] James Yates, "Sericum," in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1875), 1029, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Sericum.html (accessed June 27, 2015).
[18] David Jacoby, "Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 231, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3591386 (accessed May 27, 2015).

turmoil of the Abbasid collapse to form the Sultanate of Cairo, which controlled Egypt, the Levant, and the Hejaz of modern Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Hulegu formed the Ilkhanate Empire, which controlled modern Iran, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This set up a power play between the Mamluks and the Ilkhanids, rulers of regions once united under the Abbasids. Europeans, particularly the Italians, contributed to this power play as well, as they hoped to maintain or expand trade and missionary activity with the East.

By Polo's time, Italians from Genoa, Venice, and other cities, including envoys from the Pope, already engaged in trade and missionary work with the Mamluks, Ilkhanids, and other civilizations as far east as western China. In fact, the papal inventory in 1295 listed "Tartar Cloths" (silks) that were either purchased or received as gifts from Persian Ilkhanid rulers.[19] The Genoese developed excellent relations with the Ilkhanid ruler Arghun (c. 1258-1291). Nine hundred Genoese workers built galleys for him in Baghdad that were to be launched against the Mamluks of Egypt to settle an Indian Ocean trade dispute. Venetians, other the other hand, had an alliance with the Mamluks and another enemy of the Ilkhanids, the Kipchak Tartars.[20] The Pope sought to maintain Christian control over the port of Acre (in what today is northern Israel), the last Christian stronghold in the Levant left after the Crusades.[21] Perhaps this explains how or why the papal inventory contained Ilkhanid Tartar Cloths. The Ilkhanids were no friends of Islam, as Hulegu's sack of Baghdad illustrates. According to G. F. Hudson, the Pope had hoped that the Mongols would crush Islam, especially in Egypt.[22] However, in a disaster for the papacy, Acre inevitably fell to the Mamluks in 1291. In response, the Pope prohibited all trade with Muslim powers.[23] The

[19] Ibid., 233.
[20] Larner, 116.
[21] Peter Jackson, "Marco Polo and His 'Travels'," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 61, no. 1 (1998): 84, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3107293 (accessed May 24, 2015).
[22] Hudson, *Europe and China*, 135.
[23] Larner, 117.

Crusades were over, but tensions between European Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims continued.

Into the complicated, dangerous, and diverse Middle East of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo ventured east. Because he was a Roman Catholic Venetian merchant, he needed to tread with care through Eastern Orthodox Constantinople, particularly following the sack of Constantinople by Catholic Crusaders in 1204. He also needed to navigate through communities containing Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, sects considered heretical by Polo's Roman Catholic faith. Experience with Nestorians along his route undoubtedly helped Polo, however, since Kublai Khan's mother was a Nestorian Christian.[24] Olschki notes that only the women of Genghis Khan's family professed the Nestorian faith, perhaps explaining why Franciscan missionaries spoke "severely and disparagingly" of Mongol men.[25] When Polo entered into the service of Kublai Khan at Dadu (modern Beijing), it is likely that he encountered a mixture of religious beliefs in Kublai Khan, including Nestorianism and Mongol shamanism.

In addition to the practitioners of the various forms of Christianity along Marco Polo's route, the majority of the people he encountered between Italy and China were non-Christians. An earlier traveler, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (traveled 1160-1173), described many pockets of Jews along his route to the East. According to Rabbi Benjamin, the city of Baghdad contained twenty-eight synagogues, despite being capital of the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate.[26] Further eastward, Jews along the Kizil-Ozein River in the Azerbaijan region near Persia lived peacefully alongside Turks and other non-Jews.[27] William of Rubruck also wrote about practitioners of various religions living in peace in the Azerbaijan region of Persia. In particular, he identified peaceful coexistence

[24] Hudson, "Marco Polo," 304.
[25] Olschki, 29.
[26] "The Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela 1160-1173," in Manuel Komroff, ed., *Contemporaries of Marco Polo* (New York: Dorsett Press, 1989), 292.
[27] Ibid., 304-305.

between Nestorians, Muslims, and "idolaters" (perhaps the Jugures of Organum).[28] Polo wrote about the cosmopolitan nature of the Azerbaijan region as well. Writing about Taurus in Irak (probably the northwestern Iranian city of Tabriz), Polo described that they made silk interwoven with gold. He also described bazaars filled with merchants from India, Baudas (Baghdad), Mosul, Cremessor (Hormuz), and from a few European cities.[29] This cosmopolitan collection of merchants followed various religious beliefs, including Nestorian, Armenian, Jacobite, and Georgian Christianity, Persian Zoroastrianism, Islam, and probably Buddhism.

As Polo continued east, he encountered fewer Christians and Jews in lands largely populated by Muslims. Polo's position was undoubtedly precarious amid the majority Sunni and Shiite communities along his route, especially given the timing of his travels and the ending phases of the Crusades. Regarding the Muslims of Tabriz, Polo wrote, "The Mahometan inhabitants are treacherous and unprincipled."[30] While this may provide evidence of Polo's alleged bias against Muslims, as discussed above, Polo may have been mindful of the treachery of the frightening Assassins nearby.[31] The Assassins were members of a Shiite sect who followed the commands of the "Old Man of the Mountains," who sent men on missions to kill rivals. Ibn Battuta described the Assassins in part II of his *Rihlah* (journal of his travels). Writing of a branch of the Assassins in Syria, Battuta wrote, "When the sultan desires to send one of them to assassinate some of his foes, he pays him his blood money….They have poisoned knives, with which they strike the victim of their mission."[32]

Aside from the Assassins and the "treacherous" Muslims Polo described near Tabriz, most of the encounters between Marco Polo and the Muslims of the Middle East were uneventful,

[28] "Friar William of Rubruck," in Komroff, *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, 111-112.
[29] Komroff, *The Travels of Marco Polo,* 36.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 53; see also "Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela" in Komroff, *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, 269.
[32] Mackintosh-Smith, 33.

garnering no particular mention in the *Travels*. In some cases, Polo praised Muslims for their artistry. For example, Polo lauded Persian silk and gold workers. He also drew attention to their cultivation of cotton, wheat, barley, millet, grapes, and fruit. However, in a somewhat backhanded compliment, he wrote that the Muslims there circumvented their religion's prohibition on drinking wine by boiling it and changing the taste.[33] Although Komroff omits mention of it in his 1953 translation of part I, chapter 53 of Marco Polo's *Travels*, Henry Yule's famous 1875 translation notes a popular drink among the Persians known as Kemiz (also known as Kumis, Qumis, or Cosmos). It is "mare's milk, prepared in such a way that you would take it for white wine; and a right good drink it is, called by them Kemiz."[34] Friar William also described the drink, known to him as Cosmos. In a somewhat strange anecdote, Friar William related a story about a Saracen (Muslim) who desired Christian baptism. Just as the baptism was about to begin, the man thought he should first go home and discuss the matter with his wife. When he returned, he told Friar William that he must decline baptism. The reason was that his wife reminded him that Christians banned drinking Cosmos due to its intoxicating nature, so the man declined baptism so he could continue drinking Cosmos.[35] While Friar William's story is somewhat hard to believe, it corroborates a point of folklore in Polo's account and adds to our historical understanding of the region during Polo's time. These stories also point to possible breaches of Sharia Law among Muslims on the outskirts of the Middle East, perhaps indicating diffusion between different religious and cultural traditions.

Marco Polo's *Travels* offer numerous additional examples of cultural diffusion throughout the Middle East, illustrating the fluctuating political and cultural reality of the thirteenth century.

[33] Komroff, *The Travels of Marco Polo,* 41.
[34] Henry Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian: Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (London: John Murray, 1875), 249, https://books.google.com/books?id=olwNAAAAYAAJ (accessed June 27, 2015).
[35] "Friar William of Rubruck," in Komroff, *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, 77-80.

This is not surprising given the intermingling of Chinese, Persian, Afghan, Indian, and European merchants who met in bazaars and warehouses in Persia.[36] This Persian economic melting pot made the issue of currency a problem. Byzantine gold and silver coinage was useless in Persia when Polo arrived there. Instead of metal coinage, Persians traded linens and cloths through barter.[37] In time, small cloths or pieces of paper became used as currency. Muslims learned about papermaking from Chinese artisans they held captive in Samarkand (in modern Uzbekistan) during the eighth century. Muslims then spread this technology to Europe through the Middle Eastern trade routes. Centuries later, Chinese block printing spread across the Middle East and into Europe because of the Mongol Conquests.[38] The Mongols, having already adopted the use of paper money, forbade the use of gold or silver coinage in business transactions in China. Foreign merchants, such as Marco Polo, were forced to use cotton paper money stamped with the Khan's seal.[39] Persian merchants, eager to solve their currency problem, saw the benefit of paper money and adopted its use. Eventually, Europeans began to use paper money in their business transactions as well.

Paper currency is one of many examples of technological diffusion between the West and the East during the thirteenth century. In the early 1270s, the Chinese combined the "standard Muslim mechanical stone thrower [a catapult] with an explosive projectile."[40] Gunpowder weapons then spread rapidly across the Middle East to Europe. The first European gunpowder weapons, according to "trustworthy" sources, appeared at the siege of Metz (in France) in 1324, at an armory in Florence (in Italy) in 1326, and at the siege of Cividale del Friuli (in Italy) in 1331.[41] It took approximately fifty years, a remarkably short period of time considering the distance from China to

[36] Olschki, 79.
[37] Ibid., 74-75.
[38] Hudson, *Europe and China*, 165.
[39] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 334.
[40] Ibid., 326.
[41] K. DeVries, "Gunpowder Weaponry and the Rise of the Early Modern State," *War in History* 5, no. 2 (April 1998): 130, *International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center*, EBSCO*host* (accessed June 23, 2015).

Europe, for Chinese gunpowder weapons to appear on European battlefields. In addition to gunpowder weapons, another important innovation to travel from China to Europe through the Middle East was the floating compass. By the twelfth century, floating compasses were commonly used on Chinese ships.[42] By the dawn of the thirteenth century, European ships also used floating compasses.

Inventions such as paper, paper money, gunpowder weapons, and the compass are tangible items that are somewhat easy for archaeologists and historians to chronologically track from China to Europe. The flow of ideas, such as religious and philosophical beliefs, are much more difficult to track. Such ideas certainly did flow through the Middle East, as Polo's observations attest. The timing of this flow of products, inventions, and information points to the likelihood that the exchange between Europe, the Middle East, and China that occurred during Marco Polo's time contributed to what would later become the European Renaissance. According to Janet Abu-Lughod, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and many smaller sects "all seem to have permitted and indeed facilitated lively commerce, production, exchange, risk taking, and the like."[43] Europe benefitted from this "lively" exchange. China also benefited through the Mongol custom of hiring foreigners to manage economic and political affairs.[44] The Polo's, beneficiaries of this policy, gained an opportunity to impart the European worldview on their Mongol and Chinese supervisors. All of the cultures along Polo's route felt the impact of the cultural exchange between the West and the East, all of which passed through what we today call the Middle East.

[42] Abu-Lughod, 326.
[43] Ibid., 354.
[44] Hudson, *Europe and China*, 149.

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