



Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu

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As the most celebrated European to explore Asia, Marco Polo was the original global traveler and the earliest bridge between East and West. A universal icon of adventure and discovery, he has inspired six centuries of popular fascination and spurious mythology. Now, from the acclaimed author of "Over the Edge of the World: Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe" ("Superb . . . A first-rate historical page turner"--"The New York Times")--comes the first fully authoritative biography of one of the most enchanting figures in world history. In this masterly work, Marco Polo's incredible odyssey--along the Silk Road and through all the fantastic circumstances of his life--is chronicled in sumptuous and illuminating detail.

We meet him as a callow young man, the scion of a wealthy Venetian merchant family, only seventeen when he sets out in 1271 with his father and uncle on their journey to Asia. We see him gain the confidence of Kublai Khan, the world's most feared and powerful leader, and watch him become a trusted diplomat and intelligence agent in the ruler's inner circle. We are privy to his far-flung adventures on behalf of the Khan, living among the Mongols and other tribes, and traveling to magical cities, some far advanced over the West. We learn the customs of the Khan's court, both erotic and mercantile, and Polo's uncanny ability to adapt to them. We follow him on his journey back to Venice, laden with riches, the latest inventions, and twenty-four years' worth of extraordinary tales.

And we see his collaboration with the famed writer Rustichello of Pisa, who immediately saw in Polo the story of a lifetime; enlivened by his genius for observation, Polo's tales needed little embellishment. Recorded by Rustichello as the two languished as prisoners of war in a Genoese jail, the "Travels" would explode the notion of non-Europeans as untutored savages and stand as the definitive description of China until the nineteenth century.

Drawing on original sources in more than half a dozen languages, and on his own travels along Polo's route in China and Mongolia, Bergreen explores the lingering controversies surrounding Polo's legend, settling age-old questions and testing others for significance. Synthesizing history, biography, and travelogue, this is the timely chronicle of a man who extended the boundaries of human knowledge and imagination. Destined to be the definitive account of its subject for decades to come, "Marco Polo" takes us on a journey to the limits of history--and beyond.

Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu Details

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Jeffrey Sylvester says

I thought this was a great book. It is rare to read such a detailed historical account of the high middle ages corroborated with primary sources. Begreen does an excellent job of getting the reader into the mindset of 13th century Venetians as well as the other societies he came in contact with and the challenges this posed. It was also amazing to catch a glimpse of the breadth of diversity across Asia due to geography and the isolation of various societies. The challenges were also varied. At some points the Polo crew would have to forego food or engage in neolithic practices to obtain it and eat it. At other points they were given the town's women to enhance the honor of the men to which they belonged. And then there were the natural risks like the constant threat of Lions and the insight to medieval solutions to deal with these problems.

I was fond of this adventure for personal reasons as well. In first year university I wrote an essay on the poem "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bergeen draws parallels between the society Marco observed the references in the poem and uses the poem as an example of the lasting influence of 'Travels'. Marco also explained how Travels helped fuel the renaissance and acted as a foundational travel guide for later explorers attempting to avoid the arduous, time consuming and dangerous overland passage of the Silk Road to trade in the Orient. I have also been to what is now known as 'Marco Polo's Bridge' in China; a bridge completed in 1192 that Marco would have visited that looks the same today as it had then.

And then there was Marco's rise in the Mongolian bureaucracy, the decline of the empire, Kubla's failed siege of Japan, Marco's narrow escape and his descriptions of the immense biodiversity of Indonesia.

And as far as explorers go, Marco wasn't commissioned. He was just a curious trader who knew no bounds and by fortunate accident survived and became imprisoned with a writer long enough to tell his tale and cement his legacy and the beginning of a new globalization.

Overall, I think I may have enjoyed Bergeen's book on Columbus a bit more but I would recommend this book to anyone without reservation.

Chrissie says

This book follows Marco Polo's life from birth to death. We all know of his famed opus Travels, recounting his travels to China, South East Asia and India. He left with his father and uncle at the age of 17 in 1271. They returned 24 years later. What is fact and what is fiction of his stories, written in a Genoese prison with the collaboration of the romance writer and notary Rustichello of Pisa? This book tells of the events told in those stories and is a careful study in an attempt to distinguish between fact and fiction. For centuries that related seemed all too fanciful to be true, but has been proven to be true. The original manuscript, which was written in bad French and of which there are numerous variants and missing sections, is another impediment in discovering what is true and what is imaginary. The Mongol Empire and Kublai Khan and its demise are all covered in this book in minute detail. How did they get home, and what happened afterwards? Why was Marco imprisoned? Had Marco never been imprisoned it is doubtful that his tales would remain today. This is all interestingly covered, except that sometimes there are really too many details. There are many, many quotes from the original manuscripts that make the reading disjointed and dry. There are pretty pictures, notes and an index.

To appreciate this book you must be interested in learning not only about Marco Polo but also the Mongol Empire.

Igor says

Uma biografia de Marco Polo

Tive que parar e pensar um pouco antes de escrever essa avaliação. Já havia lido (ou tentado ler) o livro que Marco Polo 'ditou' (sim, ele não escreveu sua própria estória, mas contou para um escritor profissional) e tinha achado um pouco difícil de entender. Aí que esse livro é diferente porque não é o livro dele, mas uma biografia do Polo que obviamente usa muito do livro.

O autor faz um esforço enorme para tentar contextualizar a época do Polo, seu pai, tio e importância da família. Esforça-se também para traçar um perfil psicológico de um indivíduo único por suas experiências de vida. O que não é fácil, pois tudo se passou há mais de 700 anos e ele, apesar de ser de uma família relativamente abastada, não era nobreza e as informações existentes são não uniformes e muitas vezes mais lenda que realidade.

Resumidamente:

- 1) Um esforço genuíno do autor em fazer uma biografia honesta do Marco Polo e seu pai e tio (que têm papel muito maior nas suas 'aventuras' que o livro original de Marco descrevem);
- 2) Uma contextualização muito interessante da Europa, mundo islâmico e Ásia. Sem isso, é quase impossível uma compreensão mínima da complexidade e 'beleza' da viagem do personagem;
- 3) Explicação fundamental do que aconteceu com ele e seus parentes, após retornarem da China;
- 4) O leitor acaba apreciando ainda mais a importância do livro do Marco quando entende minimamente as dificuldades e riscos que tiveram que passar em 25 anos fora de Veneza; e
- 5) Por fim, indico fortemente o livro: "Gengis Khan e a Formação do Mundo Moderno", de Jack Weatherford. Este último é um especialista em Mongólia e escreveu uma obra prima sobre o império mongol. Ajuda ainda mais para entender no que Marco Polo se envolveu quando esteve sob tutela do Kublai Khan e as 'aventuras' que foram suas viagens e missões pela Ásia.

Obs: Por que não dei 5? O autor diverge diversas vezes da estória quando conta as partes do livro original de Marco e tenta explicar de fato o que poderia ser real ou percepção equivocada do viajante. Como disse, o livro original é de leitura complicada e a tentativa de explicar e corrigir o texto não é perfeita. Melhorou, mas não solucionou completamente.

Mark says

Excellent read. All right - the author had a great story to work with - 18 year old Italian gets on a boat and a horse, rides to Mongolia, meet the Emperor Kublai Khan, delivers message back to Pope and rides back to Mongolia, becomes a tax assessor and an advisor to the Khan and journeys through the Khan's massive Empire before going back to Venice decades later and retiring. With this impressive historical tale it's hard

to write a bad book. Still, the author does add to the basic history. I enjoyed reading the author's comments on the context and possible accuracy of Marco Polo's own descriptions of his journey. The fact that the author also wrote in a modern language set makes for an easier read. It was great to read about Xanadu, the ways of the ancient Mongol Empire and how the Asian cultures which had no contact with Europe before Marco Polo's trips lived. It was interesting to read how advanced the Mongol empire was in the 1200's. They had paper money, a well developed government system and culture and even managed to conquer China which was a country several times the Mongols' size (the Khan did fail to conquer Japan despite some efforts...). There are also some very interesting descriptions of basic daily lives in the Khan's empire here including Marco's insightful comments on the different sexual practices of the different Asian peoples he met...

All in all a great tale told and helped by the author.

Gustavo Nascimento says

Há muito tempo eu tinha curiosidade de saber como foi a história de Marco Pólo o homem que teria ido onde nenhum europeu jamais foi (ou pelo menos relatou ter ido), pois justamente tentava imaginar a sensação de conhecer lugares e povos totalmente desconhecidos, quase como se encontrássemos vida alienígena nos dias atuais.

Tal viagem não poderia ser fácil portanto esperava que muitas as dificuldades desta longa viagem de mais de vinte anos, num tom narrativo, estivessem presentes no relato de Marco Pólo. Daí veio a primeira das minhas decepções pois o tom é predominantemente descritivo, o que em alguns momentos é interessante mas fica maçante pelo excesso. Quanto a isso creio que o problema seja eu, afinal a obra original foi escrita para o leitor do final do século XIII que estava muito mais interessado no lendário Kublai Khan, nos ambientes e povos fantásticos que não poderiam vislumbrar com os próprios olhos, a trajetória pessoal dos Pólo não interessava tanto à este público.

Quando o autor ama o seu objeto de estudo em geral é algo positivo, pois ele se dedica ao máximo a sua obra, porém creio que o senhor Laurence Bergreen foi um pouco longe demais. Desde o começo sabemos que quem escreveu o livro ditado por Marco Pólo foi Rustichello de Pisa, ao longo do livro Bergreen tenta argumentar a favor de vários relatos fantásticos de Marco Pólo usando relatos de outros viajantes ou características geográficas da região provando que o relato é verdadeiro, dando grandes indícios que boa parte do que está nos relatos é real. Porém Bergreen não quer de maneira nenhuma manchar a imagem de seu "herói": tudo que é irreal demais pra ser verdade ele conclui que foi acrescentado por Rustichello. O mesmo vale para todas as opiniões eurocêntricas e preconceituosas, comuns a todo mundo ocidental na Idade Média. Além disso, Bergreen tenta ler a mente de Marco Polo em diversos momentos, vendo amadurecimento, busca espiritual e quase conversão ao budismo que pelos trechos que ele transcreve não ficam claros em nenhum momento.

No final das contas acho que vale a leitura principalmente pelo trabalho do autor de compilar e tentar organizar cronologicamente as mais de 100 versões (todas diferentes) das "Viagens".

Mikey B. says

I would suspect that this is a rather difficult biography to write – Marco Polo would seem to be a rather enigmatic personality. Many of his observations and recordings are true, but others exaggerated and/or based on hearsay. Did Marco Polo really travel to Burma and Java? Although he traversed Eastern Europe and the vast Asian landmass with his uncle and father, he gives them very little credit (it was their second such expedition). Marco Polo's travels extended over twenty years and the timelines are confusing. How did

Marco Polo manage to return to Kublai Khan after journeying to Southeast Asia?

Nevertheless we must remember that this history was written in the 12th century – when the printed word was only starting to be inscribed mechanically and when there was no academic or scientific approach to chronicling observations.

Laurence Bergreen does give us a feel for the amazing life and the explorations of Marco Polo. He was probably one of the first great travellers and, aside from commerce and trading, he had no other objectives like religious conversion or settlement. He was one of the first Europeans to travel and write about lands beyond his homeland.

Jim Fonseca says

Bergreen essentially gives us a biography of Marco with occasional passages of his original stilted language, so it's not at all a translation of *The Travels*. The author provides commentary on the accuracy of Marco's observations. It's important to know that, for the most part, Marco made distinctions between what he "saw with his own eyes" and the fantastical stuff "he had heard people say" about distant lands and strange beings and animals.

Marco arrived at a time when the Mongols had taken over China. Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, ruled. Kublai's winter capital was Xanadu and of course Marco's travels inspired Coleridge's famous poem, *Kubla Khan*. The summer capital Marco called Cambulac is now Beijing.

Marco did not write the original text. The book was hand-written in the days before moveable type by a writer of romantic fantasies, a man named Rustichello, who freely added some of his own material and Christian allegories. Marco met this writer while he was imprisoned by the Genoans for his role in a naval attack by Venice on Genoa back in the days when Italy was still a series of warring city states. Marco dictated his stories to Rustichello years after his return to Venice.

Not a single copy of the original book survives. Eventually it was transcribed into various languages, often by monks who added their own invented material, blended in works from others, got pages and chapters out of order. The first printed version did not appear until 175 years after it was first written. A whole field of Marco scholarship arose trying to figure out which of the 104 – all different – surviving early versions of the book are the original Marco work.

Meanwhile a second school evolved claiming that Marco never went to China and gathered his material from "sailors in taverns." These "hit men" and "hit women" were wrong. One scholar that I happen to remember reading a story about years ago appeared to have settled the argument with findings like "he didn't mention the Great Wall." Fake news! The wall wasn't built until almost a hundred years after Marco left China. Imagine claiming to be a scholar and making that kind of mistake?

Here's the bottom line: it wasn't that big a deal for Marco to go to China. How did the "sailors in taverns" get their information? Venice was the world's greatest merchant and ship trading center at that time. You basically sailed to somewhere in what we now call the Near East (let's say Lebanon) and hitched a ride east on the Silk Road camel caravans. Marco found all other tribes of people in China – Christians, Jews and Moslems. The Christians were Nestorians. Islam was new to the Far East at that time and the Mongols were

not Moslems then.

Marco did not go by himself. He was in his late teens and he went with his father and uncle in 1269. His father had made the trip previously. And other Europeans had gone before him. A few years before, a Franciscan monk made the journey carrying a letter from Pope Innocent IV to the Khan. Even earlier, 1160, Benjamin of Tudela, a rabbi from Navarre had travelled to China and written a book about his experiences that remained unknown to other European scholars for centuries because it was hand-written in Hebrew.

When Marco, with his father and uncle, returned 24 years later there are legal documents in Venice about them taking their house back from the strangers who took it over during the time they were gone. If not in China, where were they for 23 years? Marco was not idle all his time in China. He worked directly with the Khan and travelled throughout the kingdom as a tax collector. The Khan had a policy of having foreigners supervise his tax collections. He also traveled all over China and to India and southeast Asia.

As human oddities, Marco and his relatives enjoyed a first-hand relationship with the Khan and his court dignitaries. Marco wrote accurately of intrigue in the Khan's court hundreds of years before historians would know of these events from other sources. How would "sailors in taverns" have known accurately of such things? Marco also reported events such as the Khan's failed invasions of Japan and the island of Java decades before other historical sources reported them. The invasions failed because the Mongols were great horsemen but lousy seafarers.

A great 700-year old story!

Top drawing: Marco Photo

Center photo: a Nestorian cross from a Christian monastery in Beijing carved around the time of Marco Polo's visit

Bottom drawing: the emperor Kublai Khan

All photos from Wikipedia

George says

"Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu" by Laurence Bergreen is an enjoyable account of the life and adventures of Marco Polo (1254-1324). Bergreen based this book on "The Travels of Marco Polo" which was dictated by Polo to the writer Rustichello da Pisa. This is an engaging narrative.

At various points throughout the book, Bergreen examines the authenticity of Polo's claims (true, exaggeration, or false) but he doesn't get bogged down so that it hurts the narrative. Bergreen also discusses Polo's character flaws - especially later in life.

Marco Polo's famous account provided Europeans with knowledge of Asia and inspired the European explorers of the following centuries. Overall, I found this to be an enjoyable book which inspired me to have zeal to explore the world.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in European History, World History, or exploration.

Rating 4 out of 5 stars

Notes:

Audiobook:

Written by: Laurence Bergreen

Narrated by: Paul Boehmer

Length: 16 hours and 29 minutes

Unabridged Audiobook

Release Date: 2007-09-26

Publisher: Books on Tape

Jessica Howard says

An exhaustive, but fortunately not quite exhausting, look at the life of Marco Polo. This book is long, and dry in a couple of spots, but manages to depict the astonishing life of Marco Polo in magnificent detail. Some of it may be conjecture, yes, but most of it seems historical verifiable--making Polo's achievements all the more extraordinary. The story begins with Polo's father--follows his path to the court of Kublai Khan and back, and then the ensuing travels of Marco, who spent more than two decades wandering through Asia and the Middle East.

Some of the descriptions of the sexual habits of other cultures were downright funny, and the references to bizarre animals, easily recognizable to the modern watcher of Animal Planet, are also amusing. The speculation that Polo's histrionic flights of fancy may have been fueled by hashish or opium is intriguing, as is the whole book really. If you're a history buff interested in 13 century culture in Europe or Asia, this is a great read.

Nick says

I loved this book. Marco Polo brought the East back home to the West after being trapped in Kublai Khan's palace and kingdom for 17 years. The good news was that allowed him to get to know the Mongols pretty well, and the Chinese some. He learned about paper money, good sewage treatment, and the welfare state (who knew the Mongols 'invented' that!). In return, he brought those seige engines that can lob infected corpses over city walls, a European idea which fascinated and appalled the Mongols. The Great Khan's kingdom was polyglot, tolerant, and about 200 years ahead of Europe at the time.

I've read Polo's own travel book before. What I liked about this was that Bergreen summarized and explained Polo's account, which can get a bit long and tiresome in places. It's also helpful because you never know (reading Polo straight) whether he's accurate or just making it up. Bergreen has done that work so you don't have to. Good reading for anyone interested in the clash between East and West.

kyersten says

I have always been curious about Marco Polo. Now I know what all the hype was about, the guy witnessed some pretty incredible things. No wonder after he died many believed he fabricated these stories in prison to

pass time and entertain others. After Rustichello documented Marco's Travels it was re-written and re-translated many times. It wasn't until 1938 that all his stories were compiled into one text, this of course was after they had been varified years earlier. I feel fortunate to have read this book when there are so many others out there. The author did a wonderful job of adding information that others have aquired, up to present day, of Marco's account. Without these insights it would have been easy to get lost.

I feel I should leave a disclaimer, young Marco was 17 when he left Venice with his father and uncle he was quite the observer and a curious fellow. Especially when it came to women. He diligently recorded mating and marital customs of the various regions he visited. 'nough said.

Feisty Harriet says

3.5 stars. I knew a little bit about the Mongol empire and the reign of the Khans, a bit more about the Chinese Imperial dynasties, and I knew a little bit about medieval European economic history, but this book really spells out several hundred years of history and follows Marco Polo's adventures from Venice to almost every corner of the Mongol empire, the rise and fall of the Khans, and the exchange of information and civilization and economic principles. Dah, this was so interesting. The actual writings of Marco Polo are pretty tricky to follow, there is no surviving original, most have been translated and re-translated a half-dozen times, at least, and they weren't initially written by Polo himself anyway, they were dictated to an prison guard with a flair for adventure stories (while Polo was in prison in Genoa), who wrote everything down in a romanticized French style, a language Polo didn't speak in the first place. So. There are a lot of holes in the history, this book tries to fill them in with information from other sources contemporary of Marco Polo. A lengthy read, but super interesting.

Clif Hostetler says

I've read and heard many things about Marco Polo but I have never previously read a detailed narrative about his adventures. Several years ago I tried to read a version of *The Travels of Marco Polo* but found it not well written and I didn't finish. When I learned about his book I decided it was time to give it a try.

I learned from this book why my first attempt at reading *The Travels* was unsuccessful. The original was written in colloquial French by an Italian who didn't understand French grammar. Subsequent translations and translations of translations resulted in no two ancient manuscripts being identical. Furthermore, there are portions of his story that appear to be missing. It wasn't written by Polo, but rather by a writer of romance tales who transcribed the stories told by Polo. There are indications that this author arbitrarily embellished and/or inserted portions to make it more interesting. Furthermore, Polo himself retold myths and hearsay as if they were fact. Thus it's difficult to determine what's fact and what's fiction.

The author of this book attempts to bring order out of this chaos by providing commentary that compares Polo's stories with other historical records. He also comments on the internal evidence within the narrative that give some indication whether Polo experienced the various events first hand or is retelling stories told to him.

It's humorous to notice the detail provided by Polo when describing sexual practices and the value to various commodities, while at the same time completely overlooking the technology of moveable type which later revolutionized European culture. He discussed paper money and other examples of printed material, but made no effort to understand how it was done.

In the end, Polo's book did much to inform Europe about Chinese culture. It's hard to imagine the Renaissance without Polo's adventures being widely reported throughout Europe. The stories of Polo provided the motivation to Europeans to develop the necessary means to trade with the rich eastern lands. Driven by this motivation, Europeans developed sailing technology to the point where they could sail around the world. This together with the subsequent discovery of the Americas had much to do with the ascendancy of the West over the East in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

One of the things that this book points out is that Marco Polo was not the person who introduced pasta to Italy, contrary to popular wisdom.

"Marco would not have been surprised to encounter noodles in Mongolia; long before his journey, this type of food had spread from turkey along the Silk Road in both directions. Contrary to myth, Marco Polo did not introduce noodles to Italy; his anonymous predecessors had."

Wikipedia says that it was introduced by Arabs, specifically in Libya, during their conquest of Sicily in the late 7th century, according to the newsletter of the National Macaroni Manufacturers Association, thus predating Marco Polo's travels to China by about six centuries."

I was impressed by the lack of detail—at least in comparison to the detail regarding their life in China—provided by Polo about the return trip. It was mostly by sea around the south of India. Perhaps that that can be explained by the briefness of encounters in the ports-of-call. However, the portion of his overland travels from Ormuz to Terbil was fought with peril and being held hostage. I got the impression that things happened during that part of the trip about which he was embarrassed to recount. Of course maybe that can be explained as not of interest to the author, Rustichello da Pisa, because it wasn't about China. The only surviving copies of the original text are scattered and partial handwritten copies, so maybe later copiers skipped these parts as being of less interest.

I learned about this book from the following review from my PageADay Book Lover's Calendar:

WHERE'S THE PASTA?

Marco Polo was not the first European to travel over the Silk Road to the mysterious East. Nor was he the first to write about it. But thanks in part to the writer Rustichello of Pisa, coauthor of Polo's Travels, he is the man remembered today as the one to first connect East and West. Laurence Bergreen has captured this tale and so much more in what is probably the definitive biography of the amazing trader and explorer. His vibrant account of Kublai Khan and his magnificent empire is not to be missed.

MARCO POLO: FROM VENICE TO XANADU, by Laurence Bergreen (Knopf, 2007)

Robert Melnyk says

Pretty interesting book about the life of Marco Polo, focusing mainly on his years of traveling to China and the far east, his relationship with Kublai Khan, and his interactions with various cultures of people he met along the way. We know about Marco Polo based on his own writing that he did while in a Genoese prison, written with the help of a romance writer from Pisa, and written first in broken French. Based on this, there is a lot of skepticism as to the validity of much of what we know about Marco Polo, but it seems that most scholars think that most of what we know about him is true. And I learned that one thing I had always thought was true about Marco Polo is not true. He did not introduce pasta to Italy from China. They had pasta in Italy before Marco Polo ever went to China :-). I probably would have given this 4 stars, but I thought at times it was a bit too detailed and dry, but overall it was interesting and a worthwhile read.

David says

This is a very interesting annotation of the famous work "The Travels of Marco Polo". Laurence Bergreen brings to this book an enormous amount of research, summarizing the findings a large number of scholars. The book includes an excellent historical introduction that provides a cultural backdrop for the work. It follows Polo's "Travels" step by step through all of its color and accounts.

One reason that such a book is greatly needed is that the original "Travels" is hardly well written and authoritative. In many places, Polo did NOT personally witness the sights or accounts mentioned, but instead relied on reports he had heard from others. In some instances, the reports are entirely fictitious. For that matter, Polo did not write the book himself -- instead, scholars recorded his words and tried to piece it together into a coherent narrative (and sometimes failed!).

For a while some scholars thought that the book was entirely fictitious, and that Polo never made the fabled journey. One reason cited, for instance, is that Polo made no mention of the Great Wall. Only later did scholars realize why -- the Wall had not yet been built! Nowadays scholars are in general agreement that Polo actually did make the trip, and that most of his account is accurate, although there are continuing debates as to which parts are accurate and which parts are not.

It is precisely for these reasons that Bergreen's book is so valuable -- sorting out fact from fiction, personally witnessed accounts from hearsay, and to provide a rich background of history and culture to place Polo's wanderings in context.

Bergreen's style is very readable. It is definitely a must-read for those of us interested in world history in general, and in Chinese history and/or European history in particular.
