

## COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

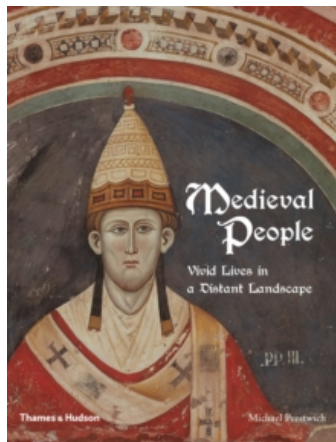
Copyright Regulations 1969

### WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College under Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

**Do not remove this notice.**



Prestwich, M. (2014). *Medieval people*. London: Thames & Hudson.

# Marco Polo

TRAVELLER

c. 1254–1324

In a Genoese prison at the end of the thirteenth century, a Venetian captive whiled away the time by telling stories about his extraordinary travels to a fellow inmate. The traveller was Marco Polo. His companion, no traveller himself, was an author, Rustichello of Pisa. Marco's tales provided him with fresh inspiration, and the work that resulted, usually known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, was an enormous success. A form



*The book of Marco Polo's travels was extremely popular. This illustration of merchants arriving at Hormuz is from a fifteenth-century manuscript version.*

of travel guide, it covers not only China, but devotes many pages to India, places such as Sumatra and Zanzibar, and even extends as far as northern Russia. The book, however, is highly problematical. As a writer of fiction – he had written a book about King Arthur – Rustichello was not above embroidering on what he was told. It has even been suggested that Marco never visited any of the lands that are described.

Even if Marco Polo did not go to all the places mentioned in the book, he was a remarkable traveller. The difficulties in making a journey by land to China, and back to Europe by sea, were immense. Marco and his family were not, however, the first travellers to go to the east. The Mongol conquests had opened up the land routes across Asia to Christian travellers. In 1245, an elderly friar, John of Piano Carpini, led an expedition to Karakorum, and witnessed the enthronement of the Great Khan Güyük in the following year. In 1253, another friar, William of Rubruck, undertook the same journey. The Polos were not alone in seeking new trade routes for silk and spices. Pietro Vilioni, a Venetian, was in Tabriz in 1264. His family was committed to eastern trade; a tombstone at Yangzhou records the death of Catherine Vilioni there in 1342.

Marco Polo's father and uncle probably first set out for China in 1260. They reached Shangdu, the summer palace of the Great Khan Qubilai, and returned to Venice after some ten years. In 1271, they set out again, this time taking Marco with them. By his own account, Marco was entrusted with many missions by the Great Khan, travelling to India and elsewhere. He also claimed to have spent three years as governor of Yangzhou. In 1295, the Polos finally returned to Venice. Following his brief imprisonment in Genoa (he had been captured in a naval battle between the Genoese and the Venetians), Marco married, and spent the rest of his life in his home city. He died in 1324. By that time, there were significant numbers of Italian merchants operating in China, with the Genoese the most active. However, the fragmentation of the Mongol empire, and the eruption of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, brought an end to European ventures across Asia.

Scholars have identified a number of difficulties with Rustichello's account of Marco Polo's travels. As long ago as 1747, it was pointed out that the Great Wall of China is not mentioned. Although the way that Chinese girls walk, placing one foot only just in front of the other, is described, the custom of binding their feet is omitted. Place names are given in a Persian, not a Chinese form. There is nothing about tea-drinking. It is not possible that the Polos were instrumental in introducing trebuchets at the siege of Xiangyang in 1273, as the book claims (other evidence shows that the trebuchets were the work of Arab engineers). It seems most unlikely that Marco Polo could have governed such an important Chinese city such as Yangzhou, and surprising that, if he did, he does not describe the place. It is such points as these that have led to the suggestions that Marco Polo never in fact went to China.

Yet, although there is much undoubted elaboration and invention in the book, many of its descriptions do ring true. The details of how paper money was produced and employed show first-hand knowledge, as does the expertise displayed about finance and taxation. It is not surprising that the Great Wall is absent; though there were various defensive lines, the

stone Great Wall as it stands today was built after Polo's time. However, although Marco Polo in fact clearly did go to China, what he provided to Rustichello was in many ways limited to a Mongol view. He knew the Mongol language, but no Chinese dialects. Much of his information therefore was probably gleaned at the Mongol court.

There is a healthy scepticism in the book. Unicorns are identified as rhinoceroses, which, unlike the creatures of myth, are not susceptible to the charms of maidens. Preserved bodies alleged to be pygmies were in fact mummified monkeys. Tibetan magicians were capable of astonishing feats, but 'I will relate none of them in this book of ours; people would be amazed if they heard them, but it would serve no good purpose'. Strikingly, the book does not include accounts of the mysterious races thought to inhabit distant regions; there are no people with heads below their shoulders, or heads like dogs, or ears that hang down to their knees. It was perhaps part of the book's purpose to dismiss such accounts.

Marco Polo's personality is difficult to tease out. As a merchant, he was very interested in the exotic spices and other trade goods, and was clearly expert in financial matters. Animals intrigued him; there is a good description of a giraffe in the book. He was fascinated by sexual customs, explaining that in Tibet, prior to marriage, young women were expected to have at least twenty tokens given to them by men who had slept with them. In the province of Yunnan, 'they reckon it no matter for a man to have intimacy with another's wife, provided the woman be willing.' There was no suggestion, however, that Marco himself took advantage of such customs, though he certainly admired the beauty of many of the women he encountered. Those in Persia, 'in my opinion, are the most handsome in the world'.

Notable and successful as the book of Marco Polo's travels was, it did not meet popular demand as well as the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, written in the mid-fourteenth century in the Low Countries. Much of this was a nonsensical farrago, but in providing a lengthy description of the Holy Land, and much improbable detail about strange peoples inhabiting faraway islands, as well as explaining that the world was round, the author of these *Travels* knew just what his readers wanted. In the sixteenth century, it was believed that Columbus had been inspired by reading about Marco Polo's travels to try to reach China by sailing west. Sadly, there is no evidence to show that this was so.



*Marco Polo setting out for the east from Venice in 1271, with his father and uncle, according to a late fourteenth-century manuscript.*