

Example of essay on ibn battuta and marco polo in world history

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo were not exactly contemporaries since about sixty years separated their travels, and there has always been some suspicion (probably unjustified) that the Polo did not visit China at all. Both men repeatedly defied death many times in their travels, whether from blizzards, floods, drought, ambushes or epidemics. They made hazardous journeys through mountains and deserts where few explorers have been even today, and without modern maps, medicine or equipment. In parts of the world, smallpox, plague and leprosy were commonplace, they both experienced severe bouts of illness. Furthermore, travelers and traders were always in danger of being robbed and murdered, yet he seemed to have endured all these hardships with no complaints. Throughout their writings, the same fascination with new lands and discoveries shows through constantly, and without the prejudice and condescension shown by European writers for the 'natives' that were the norm in later centuries. Only fables and myths existed about these lands and peoples before Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta reported back about them, and indeed many of these would linger for centuries, but most of what they described was as accurate as possible under the circumstances.

In history, the travel tales of Marco Polo have been far more influential than Ibn Battuta, who has been all but forgotten, but unjustifiably so since he visited even more lands and observed more cultures than his Italian counterpart. Except for scholars and specialists, Battuta is all but unknown, even in the Muslim world, although he was one of the premier chroniclers of the Arab Empire in the 14th Century, and saw virtually every Islamic state from Spain to Mongolia and Central Asia. He even saw much of northern and

eastern Africa, which Marco Polo never visited, and described the customs and cultures of the Muslims in that part of the world. Before the 13th and 14th Centuries, many of the areas they visited were all but unknown in the West, since travel and trade were so difficult and expensive. Virtually no one in Greek and Roman times had ever had any contact with these distant eastern and southern lands like Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, and there were known, if at all, only through myth and legend. In their time, however, the existence of the Arab and Mongol empires made commerce and travel to the far regions of the earth at least possible, if not always safe, rapid and convenient.

The Venetian trader and adventurer Marco Polo was an exceptionally astute observer as he traveled the caravan routes to China, Tibet, and India, and then returned by sea over twenty years later, with tales of countries few people in Europe had ever seen before. His brother and uncle had travelled there in 1260-65, then returned again four years later, and reported on their meeting with the Kublai Khan at Kaifeng (Beijing) and his request for one hundred Christian missionaries. The Khan's message was ultimately relayed to the Pope but he did not send the requested missionaries. When he left Venice with his father in 1271, Marco Polo was a boy of seventeen, and had no idea what adventures were ahead of him. Virtually no one in the Western world at that time could possibly have known since they literally had no maps of China or the route to get there, and all they knew about Asia was ancient myths and legends of faraway lands. For centuries, Marco Polo was accused of exaggerating his exploits and called Marco Millione or Marco of a Million Tales. Even today, there are questions about whether he ever

went as far to the east as China but simply recorded the stories of others who had been there. Thousands of copies of his book were circulated, though, and it was translated into most European languages, even though widely considered a book of fables and tall tales. Robin Brown, a famous naturalist, travel writer and producer of nature films paid exceptionally close attention to the archeological record, description of tools, towns, plants and animals in Marco Polo's account and determined that most of it was genuine.

Upon their arrival in 1275 the Great Khan took Marco into his service and eventually made him an ambassador and city governor, or so he claimed. As the product of a feudal society, Marco Polo would have easily grasped this concept of service to a king, patron or overlord, and being a commoner he had actually advanced far above his station in life by receiving such commissions from an emperor. Neither the Polo's nor the Khan seemed to have had the strong sense of race and racism that existed in later centuries, when Europeans colonized and enslaved 'natives' they regarded as inferior. In fact, the absence of racism in the modern sense is a striking feature of Marco Polo's travel accounts, although he was well-aware of religious and cultural differences. He was certainly no Puritan or Victorian, and frequently commented on how beautiful he found the women of the eastern lands, and wrote extensively about their sexuality. Nor was this written in terms of exoticism or Orientalism as Edward Said would have described it, with its veiled assumptions about the superiority of white Westerners. In short, Marco Polo simply lacks the race and color consciousness that is so noteworthy in the records of later explorers and adventurers, and seems to

blend in naturally as one of the many servants of a foreign ruler in a multicultural empire.

After many years, Marco and his father and uncle received permission to leave China, as long as they agreed to escort a Mongol princess back to the Caliph of Baghdad. This part of the story seemed particularly unbelievable to both contemporaries and later observers, since he wrote about how they departed China with a fleet of fourteen large ships and hundreds of passengers, visiting Vietnam, Sumatra, Ceylon and India before sailing up the Persian Gulf. He claimed that only eighteen people survived this very long and hazardous journey, including the princess. Her intended husband had died so his son carried out the arranged marriage. All of this sounded like a romantic legend of fable, which is how most of Marco Polo's contemporaries read it, but in reality the accounts he gave of these lands were genuine.

In contrast to Marco Polo, Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta is virtually unknown in the West compared to Marco Polo but he also traveled all over the known world in the 14th Century before returning home to Morocco to write his account. He visited India, China, Russia and the Byzantine Empire, as well as Arabia, Spain, Nigeria, East Africa and the Middle East, and probably travelled more than anyone else in history before the invention of railroads and steamships. He started out with the goal of making the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, which he did seven times in fact, but also had an impulse to keep seeing as much of the world as possible. This he did alone, leaving his friends and family behind, which was unusual at the time, and weather, illness or bandits did not deter him. His descriptions were very

detailed, including large cities like Baghdad, Alexandria, Cairo and Damascus, trade, commerce and agriculture, as well as social customs, languages and cuisine.

In his time, the Arab-Muslim Empire was at its apex, and dominated much of the world from Europe to Asia, while the Turks or Ottomans had not yet acquired their empire. He described Alexandria as the most beautiful and impressive he had seen anywhere in the world, except for Calcutta and Canton. It was there that he had a prophetic dream that told him he would travel to China and India. He was in Damascus in 1348 when the bubonic plague struck, and the Jews, Muslims and Christians all joined in praying for deliverance. Ibn Battuta visited the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in Hebron, which the local scholars affirmed were genuine, based on ancient traditions, and the supposed birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem. In Jerusalem, he reported that the great mosque called the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount was reputed to be the largest in the world and covering the site where the Prophet rose up into heaven and another site where Jesus ascended.

He visited the city of Tumbuktu on the Niger River (although he has this confused with the Nile) and described the African tribal customs there, who were Muslims. He thought highly of the African people of Mali, regarding them as just and honest, even with whites. They were also devoutly religious and memorized the Koran, saying their Friday prayers faithfully, but he was also surprised that women were allowed to go naked. For Ibn Battuta the hippopotamus was an unknown animal and he was amazed at its size and power along with the skill required to hunt them. Like many travelers, he

thought that some blacks were cannibals but was relived to find that they did not eat white men because they were not seen as 'ripe' enough, but when they visited the Sultan they were allowed to eat one of his slaves.

History treated Marco Polo far more kindly than Ibn Battuta, even though he traveled a greater distance and saw more countries than his Italian counterpart. Marco Polo's book sold thousands of copies in the Middle Ages and was one of the first to be printed, while Ibn Battuta's existed only in obscurity. Christopher Columbus brought a copy of Polo's book with him on his 1492 voyage, and tried to make the geographic features match the Caribbean islands that he was observing. He thought Cuba was Japan, for example, and continually asked the 'Indians' where he might find China and the Great Khan. Only very gradually did Europeans come to realize that they had discovered two new continents in the West that were not related to any lands described by Marco Polo. In retrospect, it does seem difficult to believe that Marco was just seventeen when he began his travels, and Ibn Battuta was only twenty, even though childhoods were much shorter in the Middle Ages and young people took on adult tasks and responsibilities at much younger ages than in the modern world. Both deserve to be called the pioneers of geography because they made a detailed survey of nations, peoples, inventions, plants and animals that were totally unknown to their contemporaries at that time. Both were unusually open-minded and curious enough to record just about everything they observed, no matter how unusual or bizarre it would have seemed to those in their own countries. Marco Polo had a reputation for lying and exaggerating that Robin Brown finds was almost completely unjustified, but even in his lifetime he was

regarded as a clown or a buffoon. Yet he was indeed telling the truth on his deathbed in 1324, when a priest asked him if he intended to confirm the truth of everything in his account, and he responded " I have not told the half of those things that I saw." They both really did explore the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, China, India, Indochina and Indonesia long before anyone else in the West and by latter standards took a relatively unbiased and unprejudiced view of the new cultures that they encountered.