

# Marco polo - the travels



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Marco Polo is inarguably the most famous medieval European traveler, despite the heated controversy among modern scholars surrounding his adventurous travels. In *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Polo has clearly portrayed the character of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Asian society, which forms the basis of this paper. Various issues have been considered in the paper, such as the government organization and administration by Kublai Khan, the prosperity of the Asian society, their beliefs and last but not least, the values and possessions that people esteemed.

At the age of only 17 years old, Marco Polo accompanied his father and uncle in a long and difficult journey from Venice his birth place, to Cathay, China. It was in this journey, started at the end of 1271, that Marco began his account of the escapades during the three and a half long difficult journey, and his account of the Mongol's life. Marco's detailed description on the greatest moment when he first met the Great Khan, and the appointment of Marco to high posts in the Khan's administration demonstrated Marco's gift in linguistics and languages. His amazement with China's vast power, immense wealth, and complex social structure made Marco to travel the more in China, becoming one of the most travelled Westerners on the Silk Road. His journey throughout Asia took 24 years, which made him to reach beyond Mongolia to China (Silkroad 10-14). The following analysis is based upon Polo's information, and additional information obtained with reference to his writing.

The government of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Asian Civilization provides an interesting reading, especially from the ruler, Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan was, as Polo describes him, the "the greater and more powerful than all others", <https://assignbuster.com/marco-polo-the-travels/>

of the six khans that ruled the Mongol Empire. Being the last khan, a title given to a ruler in the Mongolian languages, Kublai ruled the Mongol Empire from 1260 to 1294, founding the Yuan Dynasty, which lasted until 1368. The Mongols, under the rule of Kublai, implemented divide-and-rule methods in a way that made the Mongols and the Asians to remain separate from Chinese life (Brummett et al 98). By dividing the Chinese population into the Mongols; the northern Chinese and Koreans; the southern Chinese; and the central Asians, it was possible to successfully rule the Mongol minority. While the Mongols and the central Asians enjoyed extensive privileges the southern Chinese were barred from state offices. The government was also reorganized by Kublai, and he established three distinct divisions to supervise the military, to deal with civilian affairs, and the third one to supervise the major officials (EWB 6-10).

The prosperity of the Asian society during Marco Polo's travels is revealed by many of Polo's quotations concerning, for instance, the Greater Hermania. Polo wrote that the Tartars of the Levant frequented the Armenian country every summer due to the outstanding pasture that was available in plenty for their cattle. The pastures were always abundant for the cattle, and according to Polo, the pastures were in large quantity, never failing the cattle. Also of unique significance is the oil fountain that Polo met on the boundaries towards Georgiana. The plenty oil that sprung from the fountain was in such a large quantity that as Polo put it, " a hundred shiploads might be taken from it at one time." Although the oil is was not recommended to be used with food, it was needed for burning and was also used for anointing

camels that had the mange. The oil was such a treasure that people came from great distances to obtain it (Armenia ch5).

The beliefs of the Asian civilization are of utmost importance when understanding their character. There were various beliefs in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Asian society, and the existence of the different religious beliefs, for instance, was because of Kublai Khan's religious tolerance. Moreover, Kublai supported Confucian rituals and rites at court, and also showed special act of kindness to Buddhism. His tolerance was further demonstrated by his decision not to alienate Daoist interests, as well as protecting Muslims and professing an interest in Christian beliefs (Polo 134).

The monastery of St. Barsamo is a very important example in portraying part of the beliefs of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Asian society. The many monks who came to the monastery involved themselves in knitting girdles, which they placed on the altar of the monastery as the service continued. The monks have been likened to the "Brethren of the Holy Spirit" Polo, and he writes that they present the girdles to their friends and to other people, since the monks belief was that the girdles could remove bodily pain. Every monk, henceforth, just like the "Brethren" is religiously fervent to have them. Polo's description of how the one-eyed man prayer caused the mountain to move is very significant in understanding the Christians and their behaviors, as they converted the Saracens after the miracle had been performed (Armenia, Ch12)

Polo's travels reveal various possessions that people esteemed. One of these was the manufactures promoted under the Mongols. The Mongols were good

stewards at accumulating wealth, which they did through various ways, such as sacking of cities, promoting trade, and by taxation. A variety of objects were found in the tombs of the influential Mongolians, especially from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. These included items such as gold cups, leggings, robes. Of these commodities, hundreds of craftsmen were located into northern China, others located in the steppe regions north of the Yellow River. Marco Polo described them as “ they live by commerce and industry... just as we have woolen clothes of many different types, so have they of cloth of gold and silk” (Waugh 34).

Marco Polo's narrative was of tremendous use in understanding the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Asian civilization. From all the discoveries that he made, and all the documented information regarding the behaviors, culture, and way of life of the Asian community, it was possible for one to not only understand the civilization, but also appreciate the lifestyle. There were numerous adventures in Marco Polo's travels, which played an important role in understanding various elements of the character of the civilization. Marco's escapades were written with a simple, yet profound, easy to understand way, and his excellent skill of using an interactive language was very significant in relating with the society. Since most of the information provided in Polo's narration was concerning his experiences and the Asians' way of life, the narration was a very relevant source in understanding and characterizing the society.

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