At the end of 13th century three men set out on a long and arduous journey from Venice that took them halfway across the known world. The Western Hemisphere had yet to be discovered by most Europeans and the best access to the prized spices and commodities of the East is travelling thousands of miles over a harsh landscape with bandits and armies in between home and riches. It was because of this journey that one of the three men, Marco Polo, would enter and witness a new world which will forever influence the course of history not only for Venice but also the world. Marco had traveled to Kublai Khan’s royal court in the Far East of China. Marco Polo’s manuscript, The Travels of Marco Polo, have gone down has one of the most influential works of all time and one of the most influential to future explorers and geographers.

Prior to this fateful journey Marco’s father and uncle, Nicolo and Maffeo respectively, had already ventured to the court of Kublai Khan. Even before the Polos had traveled to China a handful of others had made their way east in an attempt to learn about the Mongol people or to try and evangelize them. Two Papal Envoys were sent to Genghis’ Empire a couple decades before the journey of Marco Polo. It was during this time that a few more Papal travelers would venture east. One such traveler was the Franciscan Friar John Monte Corvino. Corvino had traveled to China in 1291 specifically to meet with the “Grand Khan” as he referred to him in his letters and offer to convert the people to Roman Catholicism. Though refused he was welcomed openly and with great interest. In a letter that Corvino wrote in 1305 he described how he was accused of spying and lying about being sent by the Pope. Stories going so far as to saying how he had murdered the true Papal envoy in India but an unnamed individual came to his aid and proved to the Khan that he was innocent. The Khan then banished the others away from the court. Shortly after this Corvino built a Catholic church in Khanbaliq, Kublai’s grand capital. [1] I add this story to highlight that the Khan’s had been welcoming to foreigners. Also the idea of religious tolerance was already in place in the Khan’s lands.

When the Elder Polos had originally met with Kublai Khan he had many questions for his guests ranging from the style of governments and the rituals and ceremonies of the European Emperors and Kings. He has since come to be known for his trait of seeking knowledge from the wider world and this
exchange is just one of the earlier examples. He also asked of more military matters. It seems fitting as he was a military ruler as well as an Emperor. Kublai Khan then sent them on a return mission in 1269 to bring back 100 holy men from the Christian Pope in Rome and oil from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It was in this mission that once returned home the Polos found out of the death of Pope Clement the IV. A new Pope had yet to be elected; though in 1274 Gregory the X would win that election. Waiting on the holy men for two years Nicolo and Maffeo decided that the best course of action was to leave again and this time 17 year old Marco would join them with only two priests.

Before Marco ever wrote his book and even step one foot outside of Venice the Mongols were seen merely as a horde of barbaric invaders and butchers that killed entire kingdoms and pillaged all before them. Nations crumbled or submitted to the force of the Great Khan and his massive army and news of the brutality spread faster than news of religious and economic tolerance did. The Mongol hordes were at the time called Tartars in reference to a smaller ethnic group that was subject to Mongol rule but also based on the image of people from Tartarus, a depth of Hell. Genghis had done so well in his role as conqueror that the vast majority of the Silk Road had fallen under Mongol control. This allowed for an exchange of information to many of the Mongol Empire that bordered Eastern Europe but it was the eastern realm of the Empire that was still shrouded in mystery. As stated above; prior to Marco’s journey hardly anyone in Europe knew of Kublai Khan. Those who did know of the Yuan Dynasty were the merchants and traders, like the Polos, who knew of them from second and third hand accounts.

Nothing concrete was certain.

The empire that Kublai Khan built was taking shape as Marco arrived. Kublai’s new capital of Dadu or Khanbaliq would replace the wondrous Xanadu as the imperial capital and was built and rebuilt at the former Jin Dynasty capital. This supports the view that Kublai Khan was a man who could bring together people of all ethnic backgrounds in order to accomplish a monumental task. In this case his imperial city which was built by men from many nations and supervised by a Muslim foreman. Like many of the Chinese cities built prior to the Mongol invasion and during the occupation the city of Dadu had a series of large walls built around it for protection. In this case the city was built as a tri-walled city. These two cities were described in Polo’s manuscript so vividly that 600 years later Samuel Taylor Coleridge would write a poem, “Kubla Khan”, describing Xanadu from reading a book of Kublai Khan.

It has been pointed out, however, that Marco failed to include a description of the famous and immediately recognizable Great Wall of China in his manuscript but there are references of the wall at Dadu which Marco had estimated at a total length of 16 miles. This would be large but understandable since many of the larger European cities had large walls built during antiquity or the middle ages. His description of the large walled city would be a familiar notion for many reading his work and something that would be easy for many Europeans to relate to. Walled cities in Europe after all were quite common.

It is this book, Polo’s personal manuscript, that has touched millions of lives and this is seen in the maps of Asia created by Jacabo Gastaldi. Gastaldi utilized many of the names of locals described by Marco Polo in “Travels of Marco Polo”. Much of the regional knowledge of the Asian regions came from the book that many others also used in their travels and wonderings. The details and how in depth Gastaldi went in his research of Marco Polo’s text in the making of his maps is even more evident when you take in the fact that like Polo Gastaldi left Lake Aral out of any notions; the lake isn’t in Polo’s account nor in any map created by Gastaldi. Without the lake being mentioned it can be inferred that Gastaldi sourced Polo’s map exclusively and did so without venturing to the area himself.

One other note can be made on the influence of Marco Polo’s travels, specifically on The Travels of Marco Polo. His book was a major tool and inspiration to another great explorer; Christopher Columbus. It was in his quest to find a quicker route, by sea, to Asia for their spices and riches that the
Travels of Marco Polo came into mind for the Genoese sailor. Columbus’ voyage in 1492 taking place only a couple centuries after Polo’s monumental adventure. Much of the tale was written while in a Genoese prison so maybe that’s the biggest connection to the famous Genoese sailor. We do know from a letter written in 1497 by the Spanish Inquisition spy John Day that Columbus had received a copy of The Travels of Marco Polo from him.

Apart from Columbus we have notes written in Toscanelli and Columbus by Henry Vignaud that Toscanelli took his descriptions for his work from Polo, even after 150 years, than more recent observations that had been made. Furthermore Nicolo di Conti had traveled through the Far East and had gathered information that was more recent at the time but when compared to Polo’s information just as accurate. Accuracy after 150 is something of note since many have called Polo’s work that of a man who did not write based on Papal influence but was a foundation that Columbus could use as a practical source. In fact in his journal we know that Columbus was looking for the islands described by Polo that were off the coast of China, India and Southeast Asia.

What more can be said of the book’s popularity when so many explorers, financed by the Kings and Queens, use it for their own voyages or when the particular details begun to be corroborated by other well-known explorers. It is fairly certain that Marco Polo prior to writing his famous manuscript was little more than a traveling merchant that was not known until after his book’s publication. Marco Polo died in obscurity though his manuscript has been revered as an extraordinary source of information regarding the geography of the Far East.

It isn’t over when Marco visits China and then stays for 17 years. His time is spent as he puts it as a civic official in Yangzhou. Most possibly a salt inspector but he also visits many cities and towns in the Khan’s empire. He writes how in Hangzhou that people are Idolaters, something a devout Roman Catholic would despise, but more importantly on their use of paper currency. Not only do we see description of this type but also of how men and women dress in their silks and eat foods that many in Europe would find to be unclean and unappetizing, such as dogs and other unclean flesh of beasts. In fact much of the manuscript begins to read more like a travel guide to China and the Far East than a scholarly journal. This serves Marco well as he vividly describes city after city and the directions on how to reach each. He also incorporates what a traveler might expect to find in each.

Further reading in his journal we can find descriptions of Japan called Chipangu and a description of the 1274 failed invasion of Japan by the Mongol forces. Later we see his return trip home through the islands of Java and what is now Siri Lanka. As with the rest of his manuscript Polo writes these passages as a travel guide narrative that future generations can read and compare notes with should they embark on such a quest.

It is a controversial tale. An unknown man from a merchant family becomes one of the most famous explorers of all time. His tale inspires many and his life, though briefly discussed here, affects many during his lifetime and many years after. Future explorers have used his writings in an attempt to guide themselves and as an inspiration for their own glory. Marco Polo’s legacy is that he traveled and lived a life that gave many others something to look to for adventure and research. More importantly is the fact that his manuscript, The Travels of Marco Polo, have become greater than the man himself and his book has served to inspire generations of other explorers.

Bibliography


[1] A letter from China


The influential writing of Marco Polo: History


[10] Toscanelli and Columbus

