

Medieval Exploration & Travel

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the late 400's, European exploration ceased. There was no progress in geographic knowledge; indeed, progress reversed itself. Commerce shrank, exploration and adventure ceased while men pursued theology and alternately exhorted and attacked their neighbors and next of kin. Dry at the root, the Empire drew in upon itself like a withered flower, armies were recalled, provinces and colonies were lopped off or left to strike new roots for themselves. Faith became the issue and knowledge was disregarded. What was left of knowledge and science finally found shelter in the half-light of the monastery and the cloister. In geography Aristotle and Ptolemy embodied all that was known, and gradually their teachings became displaced or perverted. For Rome and for the rest of Europe, the idea of a globular world which the Greek astronomers had contemplated collapsed like a pricked balloon. The earth became a flat disk; it remained a flat disk for a thousand years. Yet the very influences that shattered Rome--the barbarian invasions and the growth of the Christian church--had in them elements which eventually brought men in contact again with a larger world and which stirred them to undertake new travels. Europe was divided into small kingdoms and other states. For about the next 600 to 800 years, most Europeans had neither the means nor the desire to engage in exploration. During this same period, Muslims--that is, followers of the religion of Islam--established a huge empire that eventually extended throughout the Middle East and across northern Africa. Many Muslims became expert navigators. Muslim merchant ships with lateen (triangular) sails ranged throughout the Indian Ocean, going as far as East Africa and Southeast Asia.



This map shows how much of the world's lands (yellow) and seas (blue) were known to Europeans by the 1300's.

By about the 1200's, the Chinese and Europeans had a renewed interest in exploration. By that time, explorers could find their direction more easily because of the development of the magnetic compass. Some scholars believe that the Chinese were the first to use the compass for navigation about 1100 and that it was quickly adopted by Muslims and northern Europeans. Others believe that Muslims and northern Europeans independently developed the use of the compass for ship navigation.

Muslims studied the writings of ancient authorities and produced outstanding geographies and maps. During the 1100's, for example, al-Idrisi (*uhl ih DREE see*)

traveled widely throughout the Middle East. After moving to the court of King Roger II of Sicily, al-Idrisi prepared an important geographical treatise, often called *The Book of Roger*. Completed in 1154, it surveyed all the countries of the world known to Europeans and Muslims of that time.

The most celebrated Muslim explorer was Ibn Battuta (*IHB uhñ bat TOO tah*), who was born in Morocco. From 1325 to 1354, he traveled as far as India and China. He also visited the Mali Empire in western Africa south of the Sahara. His account of his travels is often called *Rihla* (Journey).

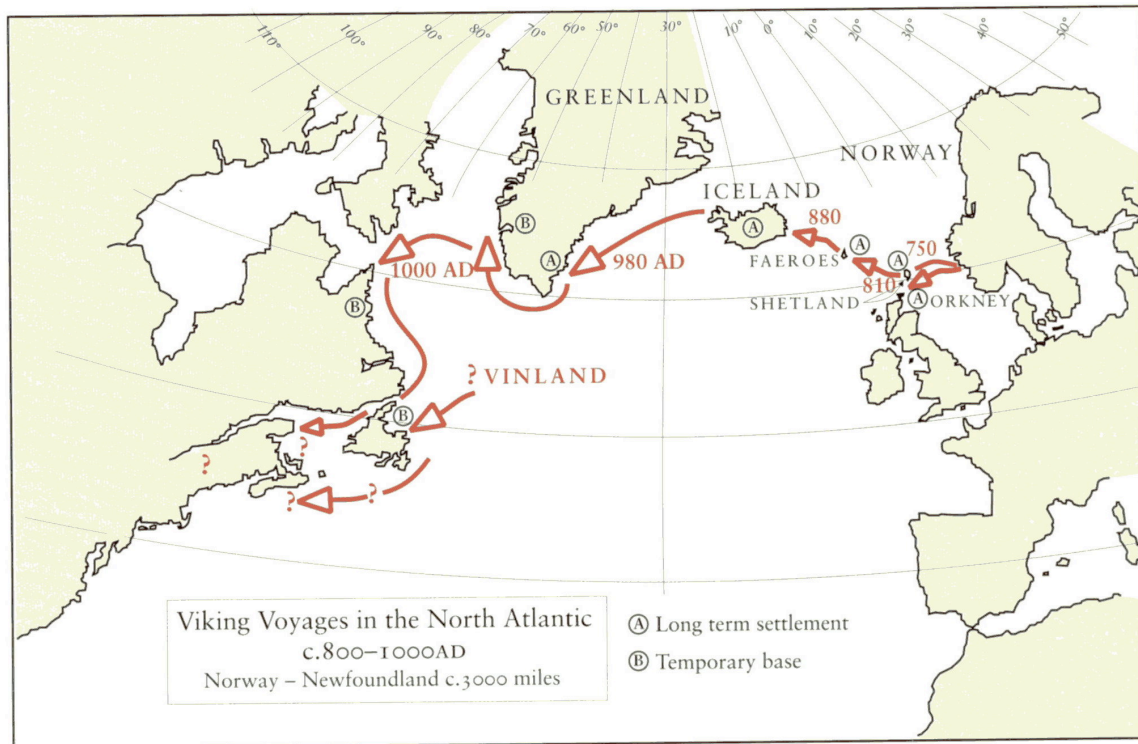
The most important European explorers from the fall of the Roman Empire to about the 1000's were the Vikings, who originally came from Scandinavia. About 800, they settled the Shetlands, the Faroes, and other islands in the North Atlantic Ocean. About 860, a storm drove a Viking ship to a large island that was later named Iceland. The Norse began to settle Iceland about 870, and it became the base for later voyages.

About 900, Gunnbjorn Ulfsson, a Viking leader, sighted Greenland. About 982, Eric the Red began exploring the coast of this huge island. Eric and other Vikings later established colonies there.

About 986, another Viking leader, Bjarni Herjolfsson (*BYAHR nee hehr YOHLE suhn*), was driven off course while sailing from Iceland to Greenland. Herjolfsson sighted a coastline to the west--probably North America--but he did not land there. Instead, he went on to Greenland. About 1000, Leif Ericson, son of Eric the Red, led an exploring party to the land Herjolfsson had sighted. He set up a base at a place he called *Vinland*. No one knows exactly where Vinland was, but most experts believe that it lay in what is now the Canadian province of Newfoundland. Vikings made several other voyages to Vinland and established a colony there. But conflicts with the local peoples and other problems led the Vikings to abandon the colony about 1014.



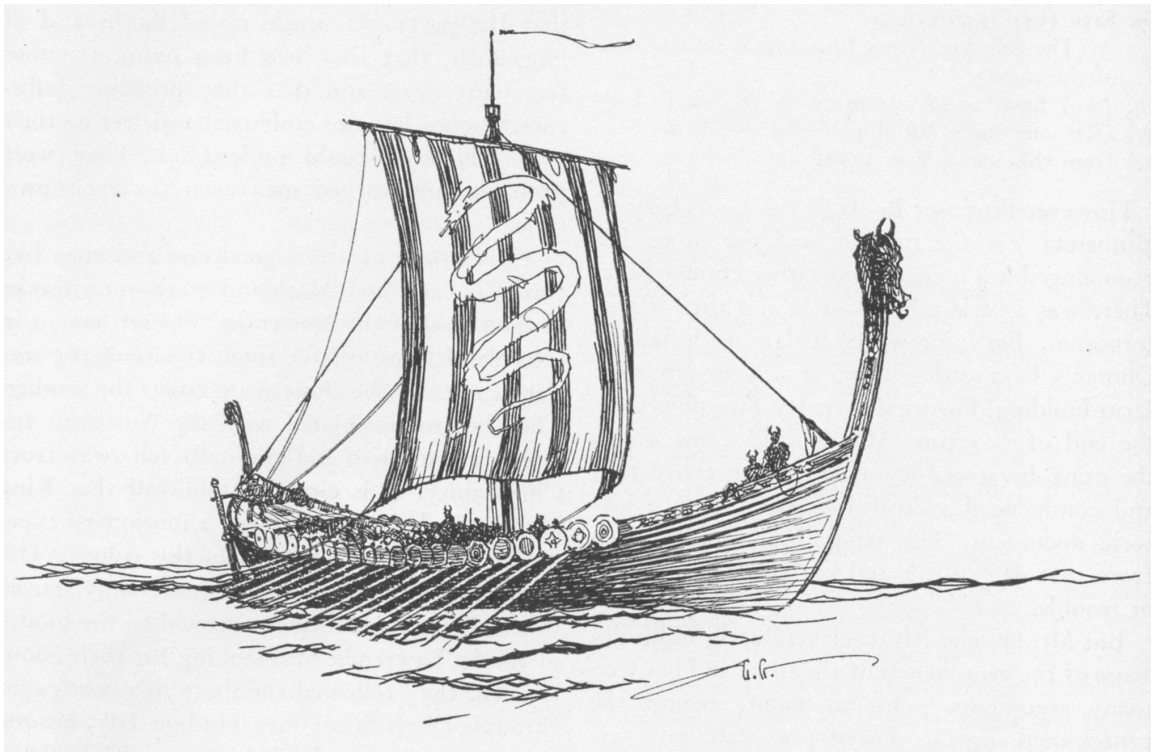
The Vikings sailed from Scandinavia in three main directions from the A.D. 700's to the 1000's. The Danes went south and raided Germany, France, England, Spain, and the Mediterranean coast. The Norwegians traveled to North America. The Swedes went to Eastern Europe.



We know very well what a Viking ship looked like, how she was built and how she was managed. The long ships were called "Serpents." Several examples of Nordic vessels of early times have been buried in Norway and later dug up and reconstructed. One of these is the *Gokstad* ship now in the museum of Oslo, Norway. This ship dates from the 10th century, but we know from other drawings and relics that the general style of the vessel differed little for hundreds of years before and after this date. It is on the *Gokstad* ship that the present drawing is based. It was in such a vessel that Eric the Red and Leif and Karlsefni made their voyages.

This ship is primarily a rowing vessel. The beautiful easy lines of the hull show that she was designed to be driven. The sail-plan is the simplest possible and could be used only with favoring winds. The ship is open throughout save for the small raised platform on deck in the extreme bow and stern. The mast was set in such a way that it could be taken down in severe weather or at night, when it was set up in props and served as a ridge-pole for the sailor some other piece of canvas draped over it to form a tent. This was the only protection against weather that this ship supplied.

Note the use of the rudder-paddle mounted at the quarter on the right side of the vessel. Thus this side was known among the Nordic peoples as the *steer-board*, or as we would say, *starboard* side of the ship. Standing at the tiller the helmsman faced this side; the other side of the vessel became therefore the *boekboard*, or backboard; in French, *baboard*; and in English, *larboard* side of the ship. In approaching a landing with this ship the rudder would preferably be kept on the off-shore or deep-water side of the ship. It is likely therefore that this feature would account also for our other name for the left side of the vessel, that is, the "port" or shoreward side. When a Viking king died he was buried in his ship.



As Evelyn Edson states in her book *The World Map 1300-1492*, travel beyond the coast into the heartland of Asia was rarer, and it was not until the mid-13th century that we have the first records of European travelers crossing to the far East. Before this time merchandise exchange between East and West went through the hands of middlemen, peddlers, and caravaners, each going for relatively short stages of the journey. The same process divided up the southern sea route into digestible chunks of space. Upheavals and incursions in central Asia, added to the great distance and harsh climate, made overland travel and trade hazardous before the establishment of the Mongol Empire, founded by Genghis Khan (c. 1162-1227). The sudden eruption of the Mongol cavalry into Russia and eastern Europe terrified the Christians, who surmised that these were the hordes of Gog and Magog, who had been locked up by Alexander but were now set loose to bring the prophesied reign of the Antichrist. "In this year [1240]," wrote Matthew Paris, "that human joys might not last long unmixed with lamentation, an immense horde of that detestable race of Satan, the Tartars, burst forth from their mountain-bound regions, and making their way through rocks apparently impenetrable, rushed forth, like demons loosed from Tartarus." The death of Genghis Khan had given Europe a temporary respite, but by 1241 the Mongols were back, conquering southern Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Silesia, and were threatening Vienna. Refugees, fleeing to the west, brought tales of the invincibility and ferocity of the conquerors. European Christians were heartened, however, to hear that the Mongols were not Muslim but pagan and, with the easy tolerance of such folk, expressed an interest in the practices, beliefs, and paraphernalia of the Christian religion. Perhaps they could be converted to Christianity and would form an alliance to defeat the Saracens, who were rapidly reclaiming the holy land. After the initial depredations of Genghis Khan, the Mongols settled down to build an empire, which, at its height, had an impressive communications systems, rather like the pony express. Privileged

European travelers received golden passes that assured their safety and material support as they crossed the vast reaches of the Mongol domain.

The first traveler to write about his journey was a Franciscan friar, Giovanni di Pian di Carпинi, dispatched by Pope Innocent IV, in 1245, bearing letters to the "*Emperor of the Tartars*." On his way to the East, Giovanni was joined by "*Benedict the Pole*," an interpreter, and Ceslaus and Stephen of Bohemia. The papal letters explained the chief features of Christianity, upbraided the Tartars for their savage acts, and begged them to refrain from such in the future. The emperor was understandably unmoved by these communications and informed the Pope that it was God's will that other nations be subdued by him and that he expected the Pope to knuckle under as well.

Other missions followed, including that of William Rubruck from 1253 to 1255, the European appetite having been whetted by the rumors of a Christian population in central Asia and the alleged conversion of some members of the Mongol royal family. The Mongols in turn sent to the West their emissaries, charged with the task of forming an alliance against the Saracens in an attack on Syria. The idea was appealing, but the Europeans were too busy fighting among themselves to respond. The Mongols moved west, taking Baghdad in 1258 and Aleppo and Damascus in 1260. Another Mongol overture for an alliance in the 1280s came to an end with the Egyptian conquest of Acre and the other coastal cities of Palestine in 1291.

Travelers are not necessarily good sources of geographical information, either now or then. Not all the members of a tour group or a caravan know exactly where they have been. In addition, there is the human tendency to see what we expect to see, and late medieval travelers in Asia had to overcome their allegiance to a mass of knowledge inherited from the classical past before they could focus their eyes on what was in front of them. The purpose of the 13th century missionaries was not the collection of geographical data, but several of them produced written accounts with valuable details of ethnography and geography that were to transform the European picture of Asia. Slogging across the steppes, miring down in swamps, scaling precipitous mountains, fording rushing rivers, parching in the interminable deserts, the European envoys eventually reached the Mongol court at Karakorum in Mongolia. The Mongols of that day, living in tents mounted on carts, moving from place to place, and guzzling fermented mare's milk, were a far cry from the hyper-civilized court of Kublai Khan in *Cambalech* [Beijing] which Marco Polo found half a century later. Karakorum, William Rubruck tells us, was in 1254 not as big as the village of Saint Denis outside Paris. The envoys, though welcome, were given skimpy rations and sent from prince to prince up the Mongol hierarchy, each many days of hard traveling apart. Seeking fellow Christians, they were dismayed to find Nestorian Christianity the dominant version of their faith in Asia. The Nestorian church had split from Rome in the fifth century, mostly for political reasons but also because of a different interpretation of the dual nature of Christ. Over the centuries, its rituals and customs had developed independently of the West - for example, priests could marry - and the Franciscans were shocked by what they saw as deviant practices. Odoric denounced them as "vile and pestilent heretics,"

The most significant accounts of mid-13th century Asia were those of Pian di Carпинi (traveled 1245-47), composed for the Pope, and William of Rubruck, who was dispatched to the East by Louis IX of France. As Franciscans, their main interest was to get acquainted with the Mongol people and explore the possibility of converting them to Christianity. Pian di Carпинi opened his account with a series of summary chapters on the location of the "*Tartar*" lands, the history of the people, their customs, and their mode

of warfare. His story of the rise of Genghis Khan, with its many fanciful details, was apparently derived from Mongol folklore and is thus valuable in its own right. While only sixteen manuscript copies of the two versions of his report survive, we learn that he lectured at various monasteries on his way back to Rome and complained that some people copied parts of his report before it was finished. One survivor of this process is the *Tartar Relation*, found in the manuscript with the controversial *Vinland* map (#243). It appears to have been put together from notes taken during a lecture by one of the traveling friars. So the word spread and reached, among others, Matthew Paris (#225) in his monastery at St. Albans, England, who recorded in his chronicle facts about the Tartars, interspersed with the sordid details of the endless quarrel between Pope and emperor, meteorological disasters, the effrontery of the new mendicant orders, and the oppressive taxes of the English king. In Paris, Roger Bacon interviewed William Rubruck and put some of his observations on Asia into the geographical part of his *Opus Majus*. Vincent of Beauvais incorporated information from the report of Simon Saint-Quentin (not otherwise extant) and large parts of Giovanni di Pian di Carpine's *History of the Mongols* into his encyclopedia. Completed in 1253, Vincent's encyclopedia was widely distributed and survives in over fifty manuscripts.

William Rubruck in his report to Louis IX gave more details about his traveling route than Pian di Carpine had. He discussed the source of the River Don, its course into the Sea of Azov, and the distance between the Don and the Volga. He also described the great size and configuration of the Volga River and the fact that it flowed into the Caspian Sea, not into the Black Sea as Pian di Carpine had surmised. Rubruck was the first to assert positively that the Caspian was not a gulf of the northern Ocean, as it appears on almost all medieval world maps up to this time, but was an inland sea, "*four months' journey*" in circumference. He seldom estimated distances in any other terms than days' journeys, and his directions were frequently faulty - he obviously did not carry a compass. Like Pian di Carpine, he gave the names of many peoples conquered by the Mongols and those as yet unconquered, some of which appear for the first time in the West, such as the *Mordwins*, the *Uighurs*, the *Tibetans*, and the *Samoyeds*. Pian di Carpine retailed from Mongol folklore some stories of the monstrous races, which had appeared so colorfully on the *mappaemundi*. Rubruck, on the other hand, got a different response to his inquiry: "*I asked (these same priests) about the monsters, or human monstrosities, of which Isidorus and Solinus speak. They told me they had never seen such, which astonished me greatly, if it be true.*" Even Rubruck, however, had to admit the existence of the *Cynocephales* or *Dogheads*, and Friar Benedict of the Pian de Carpine mission said that he had seen one of their women at the Mongol court."

The travelers named places that are now, even with the most heroic efforts of modern editors, unidentifiables. The problems of dealing with unreliable interpreters and transcribing place-names into Latin script were formidable. In addition, the thorough devastation of central Asia by Tamerlane in the late 14th century, meant that some places ceased to exist or, when rebuilt, had another name.

The hardships of travel over land formed a constant theme - the harsh climate and extreme weather, the importunity of the impoverished people travelers came across, the scarcity of provisions, the incomprehension of language, and the lack of spiritual comfort in the form of fellow Christians. Going by sea was worse, however, in Rubruck's opinion. He mentioned the ruse of a Frankish traveler who was being sent back to the West with Mongol envoys who were thought to be spies. "*He answered that he would put them to sea, so that they would not be able to know whence they came nor how they*

had come back." In his concluding recommendations, Rubruck stressed the advantages of the land route to the East, where one was not "*exposed to the dangers of the sea or to the mercies of the sailor men, and the price which would have to be given for a fleet would be enough for the expenses of the whole land journey.*"

The great *mappaemundi* of the late 13th century were unaffected by the Tartar assault and the information of Western travelers. The depiction of Asia on the *Hereford* map (#226) is resolutely classical, based on the work of Solinus, Isidore, and Aethicus Ister, the most recent of these dating about 700 CE. Although the map is more up to date in Europe, its conservatism in Asia may be noted in the closeness of its presentation to the text of *Expositio Mappae Mundi*, which was composed one hundred years earlier. Russia is *Sithia*, China is the land of the *Seres*, and the *Golden Fleece* can be seen spread out in Colchis at the eastern end of the Black Sea. Most of the cities in Asia were those visited by Alexander the Great, if not by Jason, and the monstrous races are found in abundance. In north central Asia can be found the river Acheron, the entrance to hell. The *Ebstorf* map (#224), the date of which may be somewhat earlier than the *Hereford*, is equally traditional in its presentation of Asia.

Matthew Paris (#225) was the first to recognize the existence of the Tartars in the map of the holy land that he made to illustrate his chronicle around 1253. In the northeast corner he shows the enclosure surrounding the peoples of *Gog* and *Magog*, and notes that from this place came the Tartars who "*have conquered many territories and destroyed what is called India.*" The first world map to take notice of these current events does not appear until the production of the Sanudo/Vesconte map corpus in 1320-21 (#228). On this world map Asia does not have much detail, partly due to its small size (between twenty-five and thirty centimeters in diameter) and partly because Sanudo's interests lay elsewhere, but we do find the Tartars in two inscriptions: "*Hie fuerunt inclusi Tartari*" and "*Hie convenit multitudo Tartarorum.*" [Here the Tartars were enclosed], and [Here gathered a great multitude of Tartars.] The last perhaps refers to the assembly held at the election of the Great Khan in 1246, recorded by Pian di Carpini. "*Hie stat magnis canis*" [Here is the Great Khan] is placed vaguely in the area of Mongolia, and "*Incipit regnum Catay*" [The kingdom of Cathay begins] marks the border with China. The map also makes note of "*Carab, terra destructa,*" an unidentified city that could stand for many of those destroyed, particularly in the first wave of conquests. Thirteenth-century travelers commented frequently on the number of ruined cities and piles of bleaching bones they encountered.

Other modern names appear in the geographical text that surrounds the world map in most manuscripts: *Cathay*, the *Tartars*, *Georgia* (instead of the classical *Colchis*), *Turkestan*, *Corasmia*, the city of *Sarai*, *Russia* (instead of the classical *Scythia*). The text also mentions a very rich province to the south of *Cathay* known as *Sym*, which seems to be *Sin*, or south China. We also find the *Abcas* or *Abkhazes* - Pian di Carpini uses the term *Obesi* for an ethnic group among the Georgians, which is described as now free from Tartar rule, *regum Tarsae* ("*Tarsi*," or the Uighurs, found west of *Cathay* and east of *Turkestan*). Other features include the desert of *Belina* (north of *Cathay*), and *Cumania*, described as north of the Caspian Sea, though the map shows it north of the Black Sea. These names appear to be interpolated into a more conventional geographical description as an updating and are mostly not on the world map, probably for lack of space. Sanudo almost certainly got this information from Hetoum of Armenia, *Flor des Estoires de la Terre d'Orient*, written in 1307. In Book I, Hetoum briefly describes the kingdoms of Asia, giving the same boundaries and directions Sanudo has here. Sanudo

also repeats some unusual features mentioned by Hetoum, such as *Mount Albors* (modern Mt. Elborus or Elburz in Russia, 18,481 feet) and the hundred-day journey across the desert east of Corasmia. Sanudo refers to Hetoum's work several times in his main text. The departure from the conventional picture of Asia presented by the *mappaemundi* is made clear by the fact that neither Sanudo nor Hetoum mention the location of *Paradise*.

During the mid-1200's, Europeans came into more direct contact with central and eastern Asia than ever before. At that time, most of Asia was ruled by the Mongols, a nomadic people who were superior fighters. European leaders hoped to convert the Mongols to Christianity and persuade them to become allies against Muslim rulers in the Middle East and northern Africa. In the 1240's and 1250's, the journeys of the diplomatic missions sent out by Pope Innocent IV and by Louis IX, King of France, in 1245 and the years immediately following have often been described in academic literature. The Pope's envoy, John of Pian de Carпинi and Louis' representative, William of Rubruck, reached the Mongol capital at Karakorum, near Lake Baikal, and on their return wrote graphic narratives of their journeys, which have been preserved and which give full account of the Tatars and their customs. Many of the observations made by John of Pian de Carпинi and by Simon of St. Quentin (who took part in an expedition under Friar Ascelin, or Anselm, sent by the Pope to a Mongol ruler in Persia in 1247) are included in the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais. The geographical information acquired by Rubruck, although it was ignored by other writers of the period, found its way to Roger Bacon, who incorporated much of it in the *Opus majus*.

Prior to the 13th century western Christians had only the haziest impressions of what lay beyond the principalities of European Russia and the crusading grounds of the Middle East. Vague and fanciful notions permeated their perception of Asia, among them the domain of Prester John, a mighty prince who ruled a Christian kingdom somewhere deep in the interior. Curiously, it was the rise of the Mongol empire that finally brought East and West together, wreaking havoc in eastern Europe but thereafter providing the political stability, the *Pax Mongolica*, that would allow a traveler to pass unhindered from Christendom to China. Taking advantage of this, and with an arrogance and presumption that defies comprehension, the pope decided that the 'Great Khan' of the Mongols could be ideal material for recruitment into the Christian fold. Sadly, what he had not anticipated was that the appearance of an emissary before the khan would automatically be taken as a gesture of submission and allegiance, not only by the emissary but also the potentate he represented.

The first mission to the Mongols started from the papal residence at Lyon in 1245, led by the Franciscan friar Giovanni da Pian del Carпинi. However, when he and his Polish companion arrived a year later on the River Volga at the camp of Batu, commander of the Mongol western front, they were told that to accomplish their mission they would need to continue on horseback to the court of the supreme khan, a mere 5,000 kilometers (3,000 miles) to the east. After 106 days in the saddle, their bodies tightly bandaged to prevent chafing, they finally encountered the khan Guyuk at his camp near the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Not surprisingly, the khan was in no mood to accept Christianity, and in November 1246 he sent the travelers on their way with an imperious and self-asserting reply for the pope.

Friar John of Plano Carпинi, who derives his name from Piano di Carпинi near Perugia, styled his Book of the Tartars a *libellus historicus*, that is, a work descriptive of the Mongols, their lands, manners, and way of life. The narrative of his journeys across

Asia, out and home, concludes this general report (ch. IX of his original text; bk. XXXII, chs. XIX-XXV and XXXIII, in the *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais). Brief though the account of his own traverse of Asia is, Carpini is scrupulous in stating dates and length of stages, and in giving indications of orientation. Thus it is possible to recover from his text both his itinerary and the geographical ideas that he formed from observation and report.

Although Carpini nowhere mentions a map of any kind, we may assume that the mental image of the geography of Asia with which he set out was that of the 13th century *mappaemundi*; such as those of *Ebstorf* (#224) and *Hereford* (#226) and the *Psalter* (#223) maps in the British Museum. Preconceived ideas of the geography of Asia are hinted at in only a few passages in the original texts of the Carpini mission; among these are Carpini's allusions to peoples and monsters of medieval legend, to Prester John, to the river systems of Asia and to the ocean sea, and Benedict's reference to the Caspian Sea.

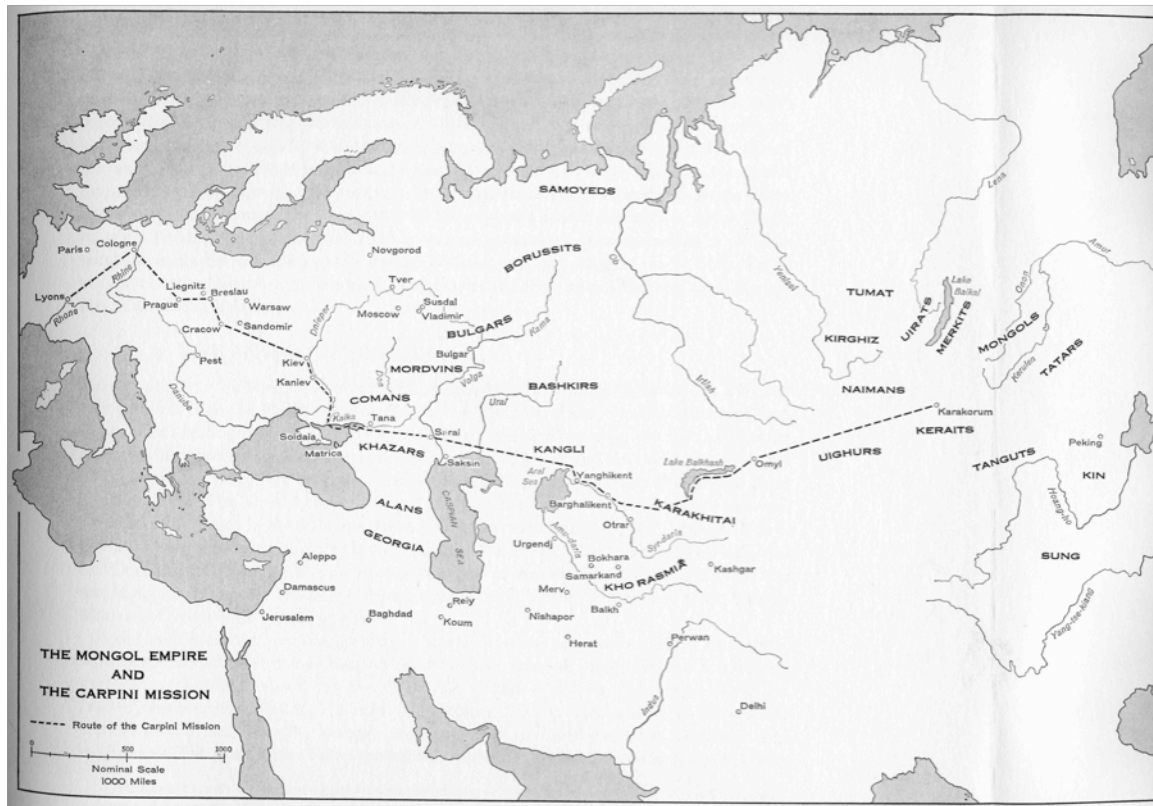
If so, the length of his journey to Mongolia must have surprised him. From none of the Europeans who preceded him had any information on Central Asia reached the mapmakers, whose design, conforming to a traditional pattern, ascribed roughly the same longitudinal extension to Asia (from the Holy Land to the Far East) as to the Mediterranean. Yet from Kaniev, on the Dnieper, where he and Friar Benedict arrived on 4 February 1246, it took them sixty days to reach the camp of Batu, on the middle Volga; and, although "passing through Comania we rode most earnestly", Carpini drily comments, as they traversed the steppes eastward, "thus far had we traveled from the beginning of Lent until eight days after Easter". They left Batu's camp on Easter Monday (8 April), were crossing the steppe land east of the Ural river on Ascension Day (17 May), and a month later were in the land of the Karakhitai, east of the Aral Sea; passing by the south of Lake Balkhash," along the northern Tien Shan, they entered the country of the Naiman, in the western uplands of the Altai, on 28 June, and eventually, riding "without intermission" eastward over the mountain passes, they came to Kuyuk's camp near Karakorum, south of Lake Baikal, on 22 July. The return journey is described by Carpini more summarily; leaving Kuyuk's camp on 13 November 1246 and traveling "all winter long", they arrived at that of Batu, on the Volga, on 9 May 1247. For the extraordinary speed of the outward journey (some 3,000 miles in 106 days), credit is no doubt due to the post system of the Mongols; yet, as Kimble remarks, the Franciscans' achievement is "remarkable by any criterion; not least by mileage".

Carpini was thus the first traveler to demonstrate, from experience, that Eurasia extended much further to the east than European geographers and mapmakers supposed; and this process of education was continued by Rubruck, Marco Polo, and Odoric. How far the continent stretched beyond the limits of his information remained a matter of surmise to Carpini, who reports (for instance) that Mongolia is "on the north side, . . . environed with the Ocean Sea".

From the observations made on his journey Carpini was also able to describe the character of the interior and to distinguish its geographical regions: the "plain ground" of the steppe lands, the Turanian desert, the complex mountain systems of the Tien Shan and the Altai, and the stark homeland of the Mongols - "in some part full of mountains, and in other places plain and smooth ground, but everywhere sandy and barren". The principal Mongol peoples are named (not, however, without some misapprehensions) and located, as are the peoples against whom they made war; and it would be easy to lay them down on a map from Carpini's account. To knowledge of the

hydrography of Asia he made a less significant contribution than Rubruck; for, although he differentiated, and gave their Slav names to, the four great rivers Dnieper, Don, Volga, and Ural, he supposed them all to fall into the Black Sea. There is no evidence that he was aware of the existence of the Caspian, the inland Caspian Sea that begins to appear in the world maps from the early 14th century was derived from Rubruck's report. Initially by Fra Paolino and Petrus Vesconte (#228); Bianco doubtless derived this feature in his world map from a cartographic tradition, not directly from Rubruck's report or any other text.

Whether through the mapmakers' conservatism or through their lack of curiosity and diligence in research, Carpini's report left no mark on 14th century cartography; and it is only in a figurative sense that we can agree with C.R. Beazley's dictum that "Carpini really begins the reliable western map of Further Asia". This is an odd accident of cartographic history, since it was Carpini's account of the Mongols, and not Rubruck's, which Vincent brought into currency by publication in the *Speculum Historiale*.



The Journey of Friar John of Pian de Carpini to the Court of Kuyuk Khan, 1245-1247

In 1245-1247 John of Plano Carpini (Pian del Carpine) and Benedict the Pole, two Franciscan monks, were sent as envoys of Pope Innocent IV to the Mongol Khan. The monks traveled through the dominions of Khan Batu (ruler of the "Golden Horde") to the vicinity of Karakorum, where they witnessed the proclamation of Güyük as the new Great Khan. Where he is discussing that which he actually saw, Friar John's account is "the first direct authentic description of Asia" (Olschki) and one of the most perceptive

and detailed accounts we have of the Mongols in the 13th century. Considering his European Christian perspective, it is surprisingly unbiased. It became quite widely known in Europe through excerpts in an encyclopedia compiled by Vincent of Beauvais, the *Speculum Historiale*.

The establishment of a Catholic bishopric in China at the end of the 13th century for a time increased missionary travel along the tracks and sea routes to the Far East. Once there they encountered resident Italian merchants, some of whom even had their families with them. Yet none of the 14th century accounts (the best being those by Odoric of Pordenone and John of Marignolli) are as rich as those provided by the 13th century friars. Marignolli tells us little about his long traverse of the *Silk Route* but a great deal about Sri Lanka, where his main concern was the possible location there of the *Garden of Eden*. Odoric traveled to the Far East via Persia and the southern sea route.

Blessed Odoric of Pordenone (c. 1286–1331), one of the most prominent missionaries of the later Middle Ages. A native of the town of Pordenone in the Friuli region of Northern Italy, Odoric joined the Friars Minor about 1302. He devoted his early life to eremitical prayer and preaching but then went to evangelize in other lands, first in the Balkans and then among non-Christian peoples in Southern Russia. After returning home for a time, he left Venice c. 1317/18 as a missionary to Asia. He would be gone for over a dozen years on a remarkable journey. Traveling first to Constantinople, he spent some time at Franciscan houses in what is now Armenia and Iran. Sailing down the Persian Gulf, Odoric arrived in India in 1322. He then traveled east, passing through Sumatra and Vietnam to China, where he spent three years evangelizing in Beijing (1324–27). His companion for much of his journey was a Brother James of Ireland.

According to his book, he left Venice for Constantinople and traveled across the Black Sea to the port of Trebizond. From there he went by land to Tabriz and Sultaniyeh, and then to the port of Hormuz, from which he sailed to India, where he collected the relics of the four martyred Franciscans whose story dominates the center of his book. His route took him around India to Ceylon, through Indonesia to Vietnam and thus to China. In *Zaiton* he deposited his precious relics at a Franciscan monastery. His return route is not clear, and it seems unlikely that he saw, as he indicated, Tibet, the kingdom of Prester John, the haunt of the Old Man of the Mountain, and hell itself. He did not tell of making any conversions during his trip, but tradition attributes the harvest of twenty thousand souls to him, and he was nominated for sainthood shortly after his death, eventually receiving beatification in the 18th century. Despite his holy mission, Odoric was quick to notice the commercial possibilities of every place he visited: salt is so plentiful in Tabriz that one can get it free and without tax, pepper is harvested in Malabar, gold and tin are abundant in Sumatra, and spices in Java. He also exclaimed frequently about the low prices, for example, in the teeming food markets of *Censcalan* [Canton], where one could buy three hundred pounds of ginger for less than one groat. He said he would not even begin to tell of the greatness of *Cansay* [Quinsay, Hangzhou], except that so many people from Venice had already been there and perhaps would vouch for him.

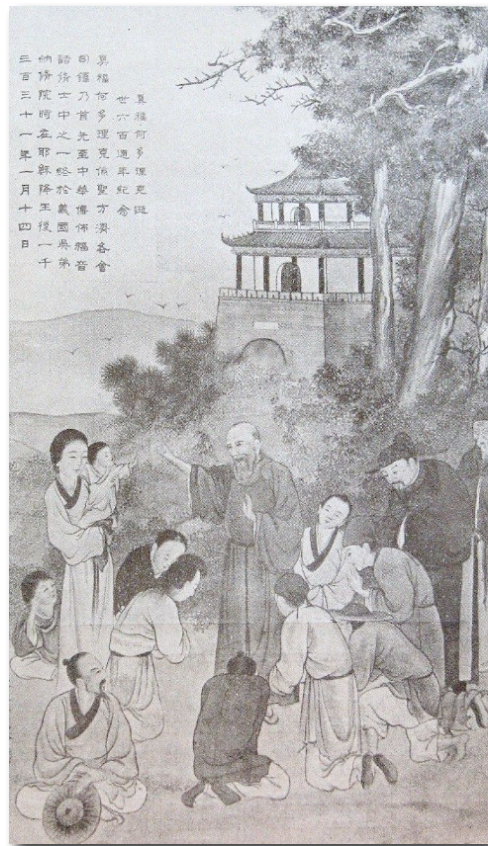
A number of Odoric's tales bear a suspicious similarity to Marco Polo's text, such as the statistics on Quinsay (one hundred miles in circumference and 12,000 stone bridges) and the tale of the Old Man of the Mountain. Perhaps he was familiar with *The Travels* or had heard some of Marco's tales in Venice. Odoric's simple, straightforward style and good stories made the book an instant success, and it circulated through the network of the Franciscans. At least a hundred manuscripts survive until this day, and, the surest

sign of flattery, his work was copied by others, most notably, John Mandeville. Odoric's book was also incorporated in the great travel compendium, the *Livre des Merveilles*, assembled by Jean Le Long of Ypres in 1351. By the end of the century not only Marco Polo but John Mandeville himself had joined the collection.

Odoric found his own church established in several parts of the East, with Franciscan houses in Zaiton, Hangzhou, and Yangzhou in China. In *Cambalech* [Beijing] he reports that "*we Minor Friars have a place assigned to us at court.*" The Dominicans also had establishments in Asia, and bishops were installed in Tabriz, Sultaniyeh, Samarkand, Urgenj, and Beijing, though their constituencies came mostly from the foreign population. All was not smooth sailing, as is witnessed by the martyrdom in India of the Franciscans, whose bones Odoric went to collect. Within a few years other Christians in Asia were to meet the same fate, as the Mongols, now converted to Islam, became less tolerant of religious diversity.

We do not know many details about their return journey, but Odoric arrived back in Italy in 1330. They intended to go to Avignon to give a report of their travels to the Pope when Odoric fell ill and returned to his native land. There he dictated an account of his voyages, with many fascinating details about the cultures of Asia, dying at Udine in January 1331. As mentioned, Odoric's account of his travels became somewhat of a medieval "best-seller." A cult to him grew up in Udine almost immediately, with reports of many healings at his tomb. Odoric's travels were made possible by a vast network of territories, extending from Southern Russia through Central Asia to the Pacific, ruled by the Mongols with their tolerant religious policies (the "*Pax Mongolica*"). In China, under the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty, beginning with Kublai Khan, Franciscan missionaries had become established in several cities, including Beijing, in the 1290s. When the Yuan were replaced by the native Ming dynasty in 1368, however, these relationships between China and Western Christians ended.

The most famous European traveler in Asia in the 1200's was Marco Polo, a native of Venice. In 1271, when Marco was 17, he accompanied his father, Nicolo, and his uncle Maffeo to *Cathay* [China]. Nicolo and Maffeo Polo were merchants. Had it not been for the accident of his meeting in a Genoese prison in 1298 Rustichello, a writer of popular romances, we likely would know nothing of Marco Polo's Asia or the fact that his father and uncle had previously visited the court of the Khan and returned with him to China ostensibly on a papal mission. Unlike the Franciscan accounts, written while their journeys were fresh in mind, a good part of what Marco recounted and Rusticello embellished, was imperfect recollection of events a decade or more old. We cannot always be certain of his itineraries, which took him through Persia and Afghanistan to Kashgar and then south



of the Taklamakan Desert on his way to Beijing in 1271-5 and later involved extensive travel in China in the Khan's service before his return by the sea route to the Middle East. It is often hard to know whether his narrative is adventure fantasy or descriptive geography. Marco mixes clichéd descriptions of large cities and their products with detail that reflects an eyewitness encounter with the Mongol elite in China. The fact of his moving in Mongol circles there explains his silence about what some assume he should have described regarding Chinese culture. They had visited China in the 1260's and had been well received by Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor of China. During Marco's visit, he made such a favorable impression on Kublai Khan that the Mongol ruler sent him on official missions throughout the kingdom. After returning to Venice in 1295, Marco was taken prisoner during a conflict between Venice and Genoa. While in captivity, he dictated an account of his travels. This widely read book, called *Description of the World*, was the first to provide Europeans with detailed and accurate information about China's impressive civilization. Some of his contemporaries and readers in the 14th and 15th centuries felt he had invented much of what he described, even if they lacked the basis to distinguish fictionalized wonders from sober fact about unfamiliar cultures. Popular as Marco's work was in its various translations, the fictionalized and exotica-filled travels attributed to one John of Mandeville (who plagiarized Odoric of Pordenone's genuine account) were the most widely read of all the European travel accounts about Asia in the late Middle Ages. Nonetheless, Marco Polo's book had a profound impact on European knowledge about Asia.

The way shown by Pian de Carпинi and Rubruck was soon followed by Nicolo and Maffeo Polo, whose incentive was commercial, and by their far more famous son and nephew, Marco. Marco Polo's amazing wanderings were succeeded by the journeys of others, among them the wonderful missionary enterprises of John of Monte Corvino, Riccoldo of Monte Croce, and Ordoric of Pordenone. The story of these and other travels of the period, fascinatingly told in the third volume of Beazley's *Dawn of Modern Geography*, falls far beyond the limits of this monograph. Suffice it to remark, however, that the wanderings of the adventurous traders and friars were generally forgotten in the West during the centuries that followed and were largely ignored, even in the literature of the time itself.

As long as the Khans kept the great Mongolian Empire together, Europeans continued to travel to China. They went out either by the northern route to Mongolia that Friar John and Friar William had first followed or by the southern route through Persia that Marco Polo explored. Occasional travelers also went overland to Ormuz in Persia and sailed from that port for India or China.

The northern trade route became very popular with merchants from Florence and Venice; so popular indeed, that in 1350 Pagolotti and Pagnini published a kind of Baedeker for travelers to Mongolia.

The missionary explorers followed the southern routes. The first of these was John of Monte Corvino. For a time he had a station at Tabriz in Persia, then he went to southern India and reached China in 1293. He established the Roman church in Peking and continued work in China until he died. He was about 58 years of age in 1305 when he sent beautiful letters to the Pope giving a clear picture of his life in China.

Andrew of Perugia went to Zayton. He wrote very little about China but he sent home one burning paragraph that strengthened the impression that Marco Polo had made: "As to the wealth, splendor, and glory of this great emperor, the vastness of his dominion, the multitudes of people subject to him, the number and greatness of his

cities, and the constitution of the empire, within which no man dares to draw a sword against his neighbor, I will say nothing, because it would be a long matter to write, and would seem incredible to those who heard it. Even I who am here in the country do hear things averred of it that I can scarcely believe."

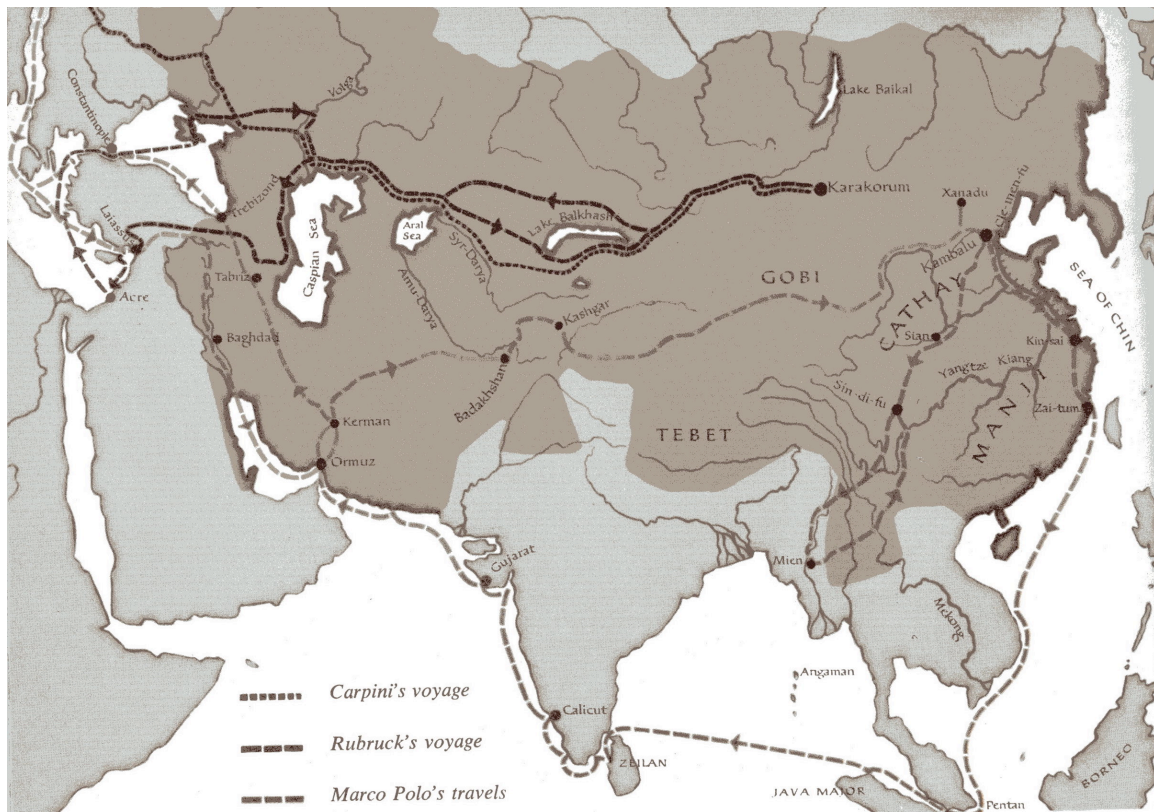
But of missionary travelers the greatest was Friar Oderic of Pordenone whose journey lasted from 1316 to 1330. From Constantinople he crossed Persia, sailing from Ormuz for China. He stopped at Malabar, Ceylon, Madras, Sumatra, Java, Cochin-China and reached Canton. He was in northern China between 1332 and 1338. He gives a brilliant description of the city of Hangchow and of his passage by the Grand Canal to Peking. He returned overland through Ordos to Shensi and then to Tibet and is the first European to give us a description of Lhasa.

There were of course other travelers besides missionaries. We might for example journey with a business man named Clavijo who went to Samarkand in the beginning of the 15th century, saw that great city in the days of its prosperity and was admitted to the magnificence of Timur's court. Or we might follow the strange wanderings of Hans Schiltberger who saw the court of Timur from the point of view of a slave. Despite his humble position Schiltberger saw parts of the world that no European reached and left descriptions of great importance. He left Bavaria as a boy to fight against the Turks with the army in Hungary. He was captured at Nicopolis in 1396 and taken to Constantinople. Timur's army captured him from the Turks in 1402 and he was taken to Samarkand. Three years later Timur died. A new master bought him and took him to Tobolsk and Toms in Siberia. Under one master he visited Mecca, and his account of the Islamic religion and the life of the Prophet is surprisingly clear and reasonable.

So it was that during the Mongol peace travelers and missionaries opened a gateway through which for a time Europe saw the vast landscape of Asia. There was an Asia that was bitter and barren and savage; an Asia that was unclean, mysterious and pagan; and an Asia golden, scented, silken and spiced. Then the gate closed again. Timur died and the great empire of the Mongols crumbled. Ottoman rulers began an extension of their power. The tolerance and the love of learning of later Mongols were displaced by the fanaticism and hostility to foreigners that frequently characterized Islamic rule. In China itself anti-foreign ideas began to gain ground. Europe was cut off from direct trade with the Orient. Travel was again dangerous and trade passed at great cost through many intermediary hands. The Turk and the Saracen barred the way.

But Europe had seen Asia. The effort to recover that vision and that contact with the fabulous Orient provided the driving force for centuries of exploration. It sent the Spanish ships westward across the Atlantic to the Caribbean.

It started the Englishman and the other sailors of northern Europe looking for a northwest and a northeast passage. It sent the caravels of Portugal reeling around Africa on their way to India, and it was they who first reestablished direct contact with the Orient. The vision of the Orient had strange by-products: it led Columbus to disclaim his own discoveries; for centuries Africa lay practically unexplored because it was regarded as no more than a detour on the road to India.

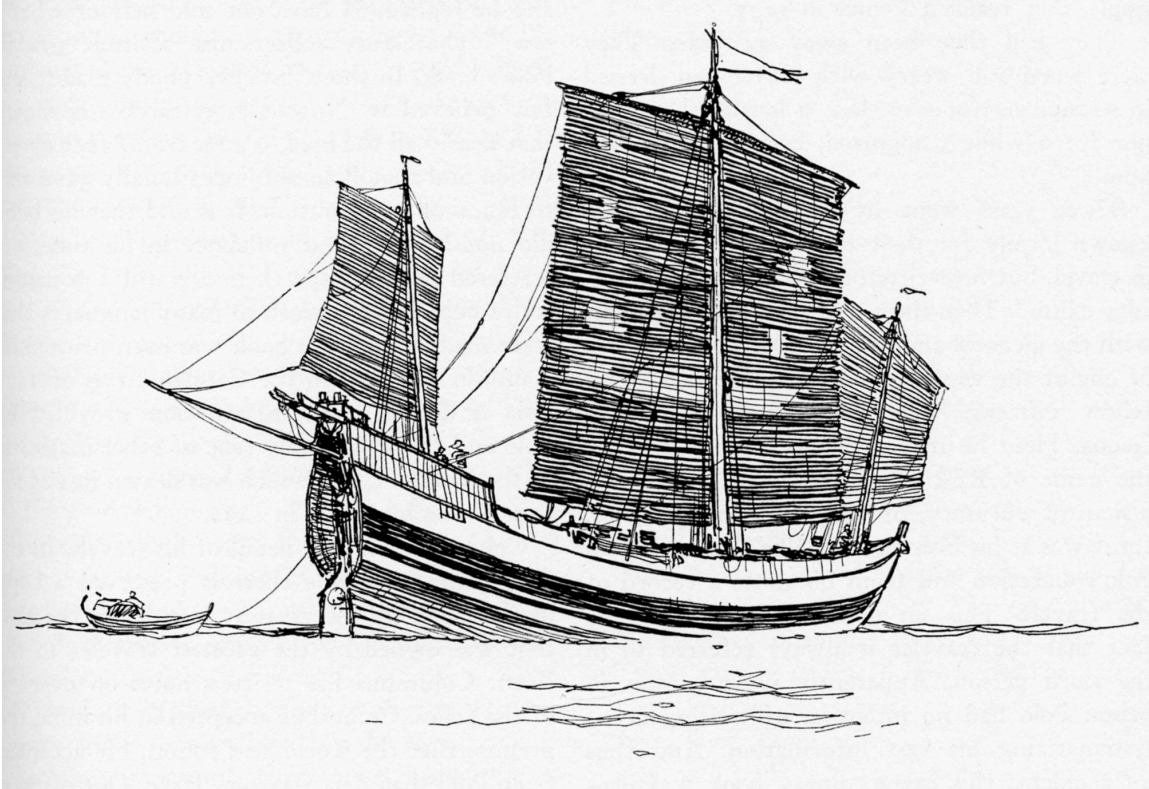


Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled from Venice to Asia in the mid-1200's. Their route is shown on the map as a dashed line. The Polos, this time accompanied by Marco, set out again for *Cathay* in 1271 and reached *Shangdu* in 1274. Marco Polo's travels took him as far as *Pagan* in what is now Myanmar. The three Polos stayed in *Cathay* until 1292 and returned to Venice in 1295. Marco's route is shown as a solid line on the map.

As it did for Europeans, Mongol rule had an impact on some Asians' knowledge about Central Eurasia. There are records of several journeys to the West by imperial functionaries, among them the important Qidan Yeh-lü Ch'iu-Tsai who went as far as Afghanistan in 1218-27. One of the most intriguing travel accounts is that of a revered Daoist, Ch'ang Ch'un, who was summoned by Chingis Khan when the latter was campaigning in Central Asia. In 1220-2 the elderly monk traveled first to Mongolia, then north of the Tien Shan Mountains, before making his way south to the Khan's camp in northern Afghanistan. While the Khan had hoped to learn from Ch'ang Ch'un the secret of prolonging life, he had to be satisfied with advice on healthy living. The account of Ch'ang Ch'un's travels, written by his disciple Li Chih-Ch'ang, is one of the most substantial contemporary records of the landscapes and challenges of travel along routes in inner Asia.

The next important instance of Asian monastic travelers under the Mongols involves two Nestorian monks, Rabban Sauma (an Onggut or Uighur; d. 1294) and Markos (d. 1317), who left Beijing around 1275 on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Syrian missionaries had brought Christianity to China in the late seventh century. The faith had some appeal amongst the inner Asian nomads; when William of Rubruck visited Karakorum, he found the Nestorian church well established there. Converts included members of the Mongol elite, among them Khubilai Khan's mother. The narrative of Rabban Sauma and Markos' travels to the West via the southern route around the

Taklamakan Desert is thin until they reached Ilkhanid Persia and Iraq. There they became enmeshed in Nestorian internal politics and the Church's relations with the Mongol rulers. On the death of its Patriarch, the Nestorian Church rather abruptly elected Markos as his replacement, in part due to his knowledge of languages and the Mongols. The Ilkhanid ruler sent Rabban Sauma on a mission to negotiate in Europe an alliance against the Mamluks. We learn details of the visits to Rome and France by this first individual to have traveled all the way from Beijing.



The Chinese Junk

The Chinese junk served to extend the range of European exploration when it carried travelers like Oderic of Pordenone, Friar John of Monte Corvino and Marco Polo on their Oriental travels. The Chinese were from immemorial time the great navigators and traders of the Eastern seas. In Polo's day their great vessels were plying regularly to Sumatra and Java and the farther islands. There were very many different kinds of junks, small ones for the rivers and canal and great clumsy structures that dared the sea. Our drawing shows one of the types. The form of hull and rig have persisted to the present day. Even the use of rattan sails or sails made of matting has survived.

Some of the sea-going junks of Polo's time were very large indeed. Most of the early European travelers were struck by them and described them in much the same terms, so we may accept their descriptions as relatively accurate. They carried 200 to 300 men as crew. The hull was divided up in apartments occupied by important travelers, their women and their retinues of servants. There was place as well for cargo and stores. The vessels were elaborately decorated outside as well as within. Many of them carried boxes of earth in which plants and flowers flourished. They were unwieldy and slow but very capacious and very strongly built.

Some of the most valuable accounts of Mongol Eurasia are not travel narratives as such but were informed by travelers' information. Noteworthy examples are the Persian histories by 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, a learned Khorosanian who worked at the Mongol court in Karakorum in the 1250s and then returned to the Ilkhanate. Juvaini clearly learned a lot while traveling and by interrogating those who traveled, often in the company of the Mongol armies. His fellow Persian administrator and historian Rashid al-Din, who himself never traveled to Inner Asia, had as an informant a learned Mongol official, Bolod, who had been sent west by Khubilai Khan and then remained in the Ilkhanate. Rashid al-Din's *World History* is full of detail about Mongol campaigns and undoubtedly drew upon material Bolod had brought with him concerning China.

Of all the late medieval travelers, the one who seemed to be most strongly motivated by curiosity alone was Ibn Battutah (1304-68). Although his journeying began with a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325, he did not return for thirty years, visiting most of the countries of the Islamic world from southern Africa to eastern Asia. Born in Tangier, he had been educated in the law and was able to put his skills to use as a judge in some of the far-flung places he landed. The universal use of Arabic in the lands of Islam was an additional advantage to a traveler. Ibn Battutah used the respect accorded to an educated man to demand special privileges and was quite annoyed when his reception was not as honorable as he felt to be his due. He traveled through the islands of the Indian Ocean, to China, and into the dreaded Sluggish Sea, from which he was lucky to escape. His book is really an autobiography, in contrast to Marco Polo's more impersonal account. We hear about his minor and major illnesses, his love affairs, his triumphs and setbacks. The book, written with the aid of a professional writer, was popular in the Islamic world, and Ibn Battutah today is remembered fondly in Tangier, where the airport, a street, and a hotel are named after him. Whether his book had any impact on the European West is another question. It is possible that the *Catalan Atlas* (#235) records some of his findings, for the barrier between the Islamic and Christian worlds was most porous in the western Mediterranean.

Although the Mongol Empire was already disintegrating when he set out from Morocco on the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325, Ahmed Ibn Battuta took advantage of the cultural unity of the Islamic world to surpass all other pre-modern travelers in the extent of his itineraries over the next quarter century. He ranged across the Middle East, western Eurasian steppe, Central Asia and India. After spending some time in India as a judge, he seems to have followed the well-established sea routes to southeastern China. On his return home he then visited the African interior before finally dictating his travels to a younger scribe, who fitted them into the genre of travel for the benefit of Islamic learning. Thus he emphasizes how he interacted with learned men and visited shrines in the Islamic communities, a pattern already familiar to us in the Buddhist focus of the Chinese monk Xuanzang or any number of Christian pilgrimage accounts of Biblical sites in the Holy Land. Ibn Battuta's inquisitiveness and remarkable memory went well beyond his faith, however, and he provides substantial detail about the cultures and peoples he encountered. For example, thanks to him we know a good deal about the court of Khan Özbek of the Golden Horde and the flourishing commercial culture of its cities. Granted, Ibn Battuta does not always get his facts right, and at times we cannot be sure he really visited some of what he describes. Yet the compass of his work has no equal among the medieval travel accounts of Eurasia.



The civil wars which fragmented the Mongol Empire hindered overland travel and contributed to the decline of the caravan trade. However, important overland exchange between China and the Timurid Middle East continued in the late 14th and the 15th centuries. One of the best travel accounts from that period is by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, an ambassador from Spain to Tamerlane's court in 1403-05. Clavijo provides a careful description of one of the standard routes from the west into Central Asia, via the Black Sea and northern Iran, and devotes pages to Tamerlane's flourishing capital of Samarkand, where a Chinese embassy had just arrived and there was much evidence of trade with China.

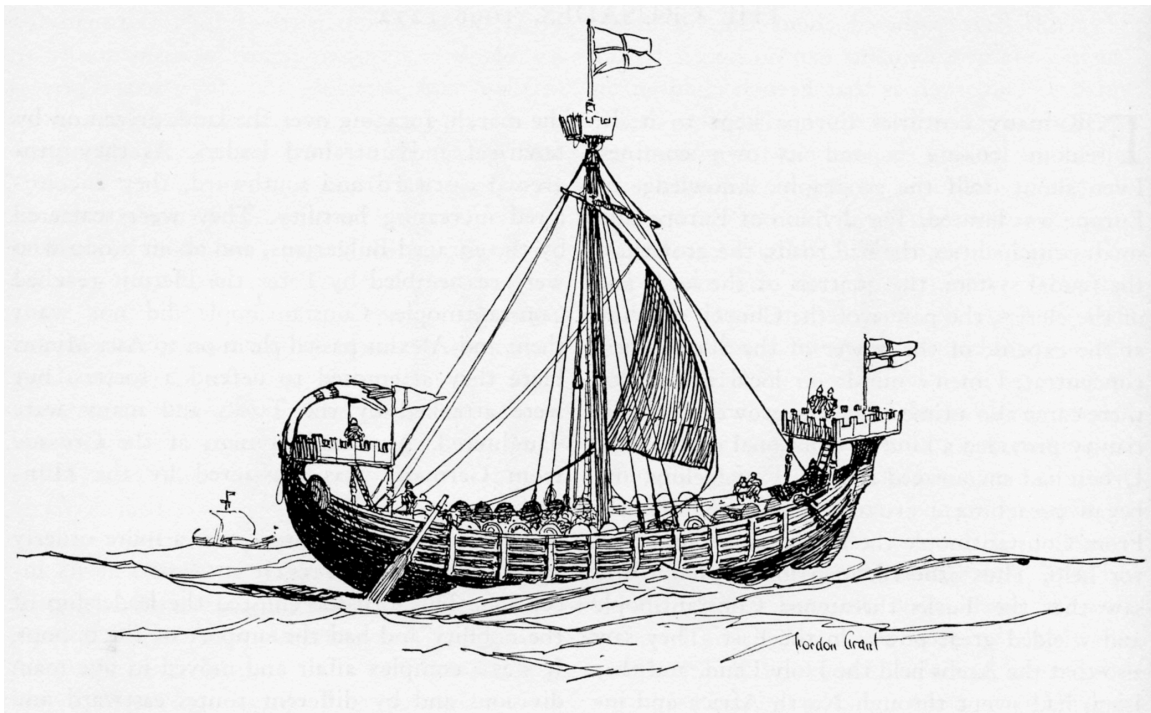
On his way home through Syria in 1348, Ibn Battutah was a horrified witness of the ravages of the Black Death. By the time he reached Damascus the death toll was two thousand per day, and the entire population of Jews, Christians and Muslims had joined in praying for mercy to their respective gods. The epidemic was one reason why the century of lively communication between the West and Asia was to come to an end. The dramatic drop in population, Cairo is thought to have lost almost half its people, meant a smaller labor force and a concentration on basic needs, such as food production, rather than manufacture for the luxury trade. At the same time the Mongols were fighting among themselves, and in the 1330s the il-khanate of Persia broke up into hostile factions. An attack on the Christian population of Almalyk in 1340 was an additional discouragement, and Christian churchmen in their small enclaves in Asia now more often found martyrdom instead of converts. Commercial crises in Italy, such as the collapse of the Bardi bank, were unrelated to either plague or Mongol warfare but contributed to the decline of long-distance trade/travel. Finally, in 1368 the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty was overthrown by the native Chinese Ming, which was much less interested in international outreach, expelling all foreign Christians in 1369. None of these factors can be considered decisive, but we can see the fragility of an extended system of trade/travel like that which thrived from 1250 to 1350. A few breaks in the chain and merchants were no longer willing to venture themselves or their capital on a too-risky proposition. After the mid 14th century, there were no more eyewitness travel accounts of the Far East. There were travel books, but the authors were not travelers themselves but writers and compilers of the works of others.

In 1405, the Chinese eunuch admiral Zheng He set forth with a fleet of 317 ships crewed by 27,870 men. Their two-year mission: to seek out new life forms and new civilizations (and make them submit to the Emperor). Between 1405 and 1431, the exploration fleets made seven major voyages, traveling to India, Ceylon, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa (some scholars going so far as speculating on the expedition circumnavigating Africa). They brought back curiosities such as zebras, ostriches, and giraffes (and the king of Ceylon, who did not appreciate their visit). They also distributed lavish foreign aid on those princes who swore fealty to the Chinese Emperor.

Then, they stopped. The entire program was shut down. The mighty shipyards no longer produced long-range vessels. Ownership of oceangoing ships was forbidden to Chinese citizens. Foreign trade of any kind was discouraged, whether by land or sea. In 1479, the War Ministry destroyed the official records of the journeys. Chinese exploration might never have happened, for all its effect on future generations.

European exploration got off to a later start, on a shoestring compared to the Imperial budgets of the Chinese. The Europeans did not succeed because of superior ship technology, either. Zheng He's exploration vessels had compasses, stern post rudders, and multiple watertight compartments. Scholars estimate the largest of the vessels were over 400 feet long, and displaced up to 3,000 tons. (The Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria of 1492 are thought to have been smaller than 100 tons; they could have served as lifeboats for Zheng He).

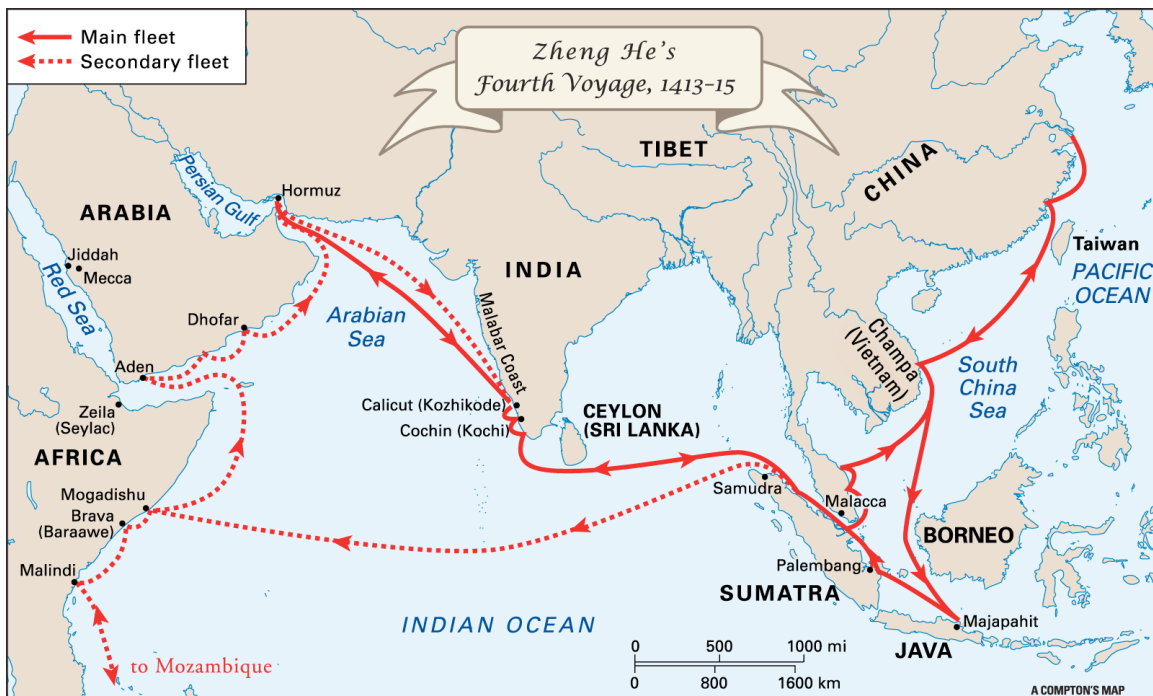
The difference between European and Chinese exploration was simple. Chinese explorations were huge government projects whose goal was prestige (and perhaps shipbuilding contracts for the politically favored?). They were not followed by traders or settlers, because the Emperors valued control over their subjects' lives above all else. The Emperors did not believe in individual rights or private property apart from that granted by the all-powerful state. The Chinese Age of Exploration was founded squarely on the ideal of government control of- everything.



This drawing shows the characteristic ship of the later Middle Ages. To be more exact, this is a ship of the north European ports at about the time of the Crusades. It was in a fleet of vessels something similar to this that Richard the Lion-hearted sailed for Europe and the Holy Land. It is true that we have accounts of larger vessels such as could carry a captain, 15 sailors, 40 knights with their horses, 40 men-of-arms, servants and stores. But the larger ships were exceptions and our example is the characteristic type which probably changed little over a period of many years.

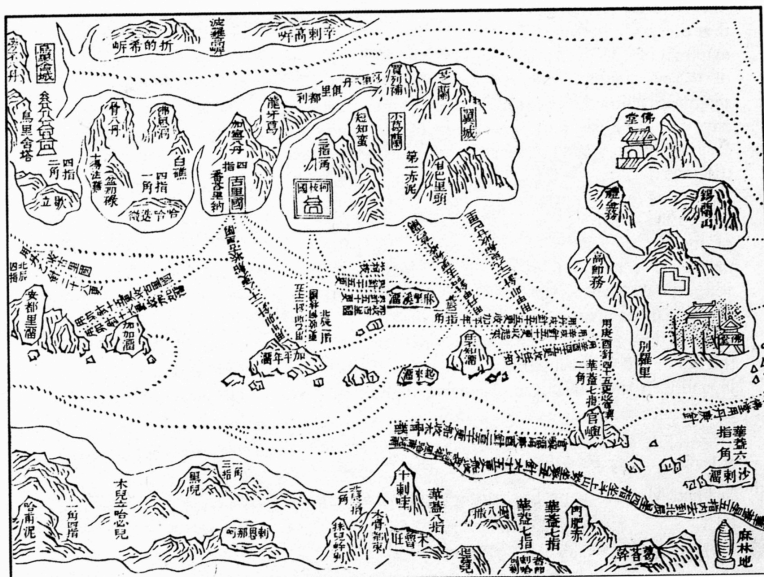
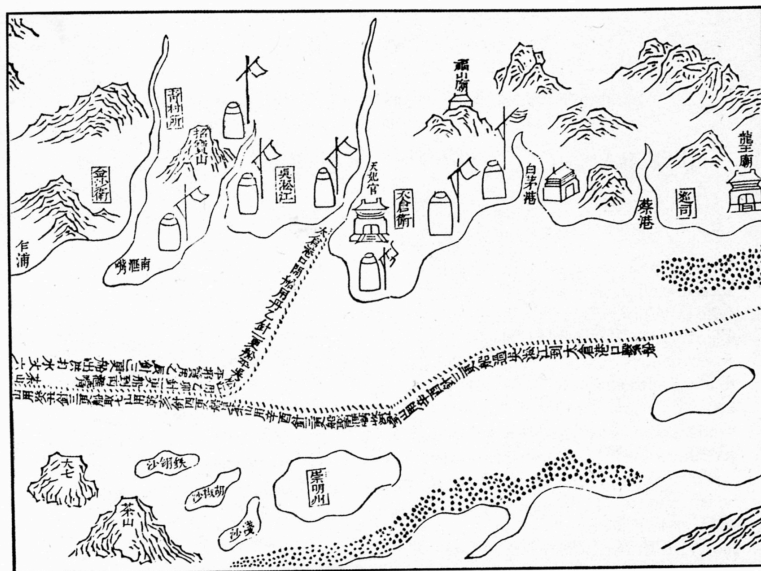
No exact plans and no remains of medieval ships exist. Our knowledge of this type comes from tapestries, a few old drawings and the seals of the ports of the English and French coast. Cesar gave us our first description of the vessels of the Atlantic coast. These were the ships of the Veneti of Brittany. These vessels were round and bowl-like, with shallow draft and rather flat bottoms so that they might be drawn up on beaches. They had a marked sheer, that is they swept upward at the bow and stern. They were built of unusually heavy timbers and planking; they depended upon sail and not upon oars. See how all these characteristics are adapted to the heavy weather and rough seas of the Atlantic. The ships made an impression upon Cesar because they contrasted with the lower, leaner, lighter galleys of the Mediterranean waters.

The medieval vessel preserved many of the characteristics of the ship of the Veneti. In the earliest ships the curious, raised structures that we see at the bow and stern were not permanent. These ships were mostly cargo and transport vessels. The European nations then had no Royal Navies. When war threatened, the merchant ships were taken over and these structures were erected on them and they became Naval vessels. The two raised platforms became the stations of the fighting men, the space under them served as shelter. Later they became part of the permanent structure of ships. They were known as the after-castle or summer castle and the fore-castle. It is from the latter word that we derive our modern "fo'c'sle."





The navigational chart that originated from Zheng He's 15th century voyages and published in 1621 consists of forty sheets similar to the two illustrated here. Unfolded, the entire chart measures nearly seven meters (~23 feet). It depicts the sea route from Nanjing, down the Yangtze, across the China Sea and Indian Ocean to East Africa, passing the mouth of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. The orientation changes frequently, and the scale varies depending on the detail required. Critical features such as compass direction and computation of distance differ from sheet to sheet. With their amply printed sailing instructions, experienced Chinese navigators might find these charts from Zheng He most useful. To the Western eye, however, they are confusing and abstract in their lack of uniformity. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable, unique artifact traceable to a little-known historical period in China. J. V. G. Mills wrote in 1954 that "the map provides a remarkable picture of the sea-routes from China to Persia and Africa: as a mariner's chart it has a real value. It remains the most interesting of the Chinese coastal maps and constitutes a most fascinating subject for research."



European explorations were often also funded by governments. But they were followed rapidly by traders and colonists. Private property and trade built the economic strength of the European colonies. Even those who came to the New World to create planned societies, like the Pilgrims, ended up adopting free enterprise instead.

A world-wide economic boom from the mid-thirteenth through the mid-14th century created possibilities for trade and travel which had not existed since the days of the Roman and Han Empires. Goods for export, an increasing demand for exotic imports, and merchants in eager pursuit of profits fuelled, if briefly, a global economy. Textiles, easily transported and high in value, were one of the primary goods shipped back and forth—linens and woollens from the West and silks from the East. At the same time, the political situation changed. The *Pax Mongolica* made travel along the great central Asian caravan routes safer than it had been, and the caravan towns such as *Urgench*, *Almalyk*, and *Samarkand*, enjoyed a burst of prosperity. In Europe, the Crusades had encouraged travel to the eastern Mediterranean, and, once the Latin kingdom began to fall apart in the late 12th century, Christian rulers were interested in finding an ally

against the great Muslim empire centered in Egypt. Rumors of a potential Christian ally in the East caused ambassadors to join the steady stream of merchants, missionaries, and adventurers traveling the long roads between East and West.

At home readers had always had an appetite for travel books, but now they were intrigued by those of their own time. The early crusaders had written exciting accounts of the conquests of 1099. Not all of them were writers, but others returned with tales of adventure, heroism, and hardship to tell to those at home. As more Christians settled in the East, those at home began to be aware of a wider world beyond the holy land, learning by such messengers of events from farther Asia. Writers such as Jacques de Vitry and William of Tyre, and his continuators, added to their books information about other lands and peoples formerly unknown to the west. The appeal of the eyewitness challenged the classical lore, possibly appealing to a more popular audience, and readers were thrilled by the line, "*and I was there and saw it with my own eyes.*" It was this desire that inspired Giovanni di Pian di Carpine to add to the eight analytical chapters of his *Historia Mongolorum* a ninth retailing his itinerary and his sufferings on his epic journey. The first-person adventure book became so popular that it even inspired those who had not been away to compose travel fictions, based on the works of other, real travelers.

The travelers of the 13th and 14th centuries presented a challenge to the traditional world map format. Those who went to Africa south of the Sahara or to China or to the Indian Ocean saw not only places formerly unknown in Europe but also an arrangement of geographical space different from that conveyed by the *mappaemundi*. If we think of the *mappamundi* as a paradigm of the conception of the organization of the world in the High Middle Ages, we see that the data brought back by explorers, coupled with the challenge of the new way of mapping seen in the sea charts, began to break it apart. Mapmakers took the challenge of eyewitness reports seriously and tried to find room on their maps for such places as *Tartary*, *Cathay*, *Java*, and *Ghana*. The enclosed Caspian Sea and the open Indian Ocean, with its wealth of islands, had to be incorporated. In some early attempts, such as the Sanudo/Vesconte world map and the *Catalan Atlas*, the mapmakers attempted to blend the new data with the old picture. The tension between these two world visions became even greater in the 15th century.



CARAVANS

A caravan was a group of travelling camels and traders, which usually consisted of **5-12** camels roped together.



Caravans could travel **30 miles** a day.

CARAVANSERAI (large guesthouses) were situated every **20/30 miles** along inland routes. They consisted of large courtyards, with rooms for people, resting places for animals and storerooms for goods. Free to stay in, the owners made money from selling meat and supplies.

DANGERS

- **Thieves and bandits**
- **Vast deserts** such as the Gobi and the Taklamakan
- **Huge Mountains** such as the Tien Shan and the Karakoram
- **Marauding Mongols**
- **Starvation** and lack of **water**



TRADING CENTRES

Xian



The ancient imperial capital was the eastern departure point for the Silk Road, and was exposed to Western products, fashions, ideas and technology. Its markets teemed with exotic goods.

Kashgar



The crossroads of the Silk Road where China, the Indian Subcontinent and Europe met was a huge trading post and strategically important city. Here traders could exchange pretty much anything. Its Sunday Market is still a thing to behold today.

Bukhara



This old oasis city became an important centre in the Persian Empire and later the Islamic caliphate. Today this Uzbek city is the most complete example of a medieval city in Central Asia, with splendid monuments and minarets.

Balkh



*In the Silk Road's heyday this Afghan city was unrivalled. Several trade routes intersected here and the region was famed for its grapes, oranges, melons, and Bactrian camels. The Silk Road brought Buddhism to Balkh and it became a centre of learning. The city never fully recovered from being **sacked by the Mongols in 1220 AD.***



FOOD ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Food spread along the Silk Road from all corners of the globe.



Pasta, rhubarb
and ginger from
China



Lemon, pepper
and mustard from
India



Tomatoes (via South America),
grapes and olive oil from the
Mediterranean



Carrots and apples
from **Central Asia**



DECLINE

When Vasco de Gama
discovered a sea route to
India round the Cape of
Good Hope,

trade along
the Silk Road declined
– travel by sea was safer
and more efficient.



RELIGIONS ALSO TRAVELLED ALONG THE SILK ROAD



- **Zoroastrianism** was the official religion of Persia from **600 BC** up until **650 AD**, and spread along the Silk Road to East Asia.
- In the **2nd Century BC** Buddhism reached China and South East Asia from India. Many temples and pagodas were built along the route.
- Around **50 AD**, Christianity began to spread from the West.
- In the **7th Century**, Islam became dominant, and is still the main religion of much of the Middle East and Central Asia.