MARCO POLO’S ACCOUNT OF CENTRAL ASIA: GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND TRADE CONNECTIONS

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of Central Asia in Marco Polo’s Devisement du monde, one of the most influential geographical accounts of the European Middle Ages. It explores the text’s descriptions of geographical regions, place names, trade connections, peoples, customs, and political structures, with particular attention to the ways in which geographical knowledge was organized and transmitted to European audiences. The study also considers the methodological challenges associated with using Polo’s account as a historical source, including questions of authorship, the reliability of geographical information, and the distinction between personal observation and second-hand reports.

Key words: Marco Polo; Central Asia; medieval travel literature; historical geography; trade routes; Devisement du monde; European cartography.

Introduction. Marco Polo's Devisement du monde (Description of the World), dictated to Rustichello da Pisa in a Genoese prison around 1298, stands as one of the most consequential geographical texts of the European Middle Ages. The work was the first vernacular account of travel into Asia composed by a layman, and Polo spent more time in the East than any previously known European, providing unprecedented observations on Eastern peoples, customs, plants, animals, and trade. His text introduced Europe to place names and regions previously unknown, including the first European mentions of Indonesia, Japan, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and numerous cities in China. The work's survival in approximately 141 manuscripts and fragments across Latin and various European vernaculars attests to its extraordinary reach and appeal.

Yet Polo's geography is not a straightforward travel diary. The text functions as a "toponymic dictionary" in which most chapters present a place name followed by descriptions of externally observable phenomena rather than subjective narrative. Its arrangement reflects geographical relationships — proximity on the page often indicates the contiguity of regions — making the mise en livre itself a form of mapping. Scholars have long noted that the account presents authorial and textual problems: no holograph or definitive urtext survives, scholars remain uncertain which manuscript is oldest, and the narrative voice is often ambiguous. The text is a generic hybrid fusing elements of folklore, myths, hagiographies, epics, romances, commercial handbooks, and

encyclopedic summae. These complexities make Polo's geography a site of ongoing scholarly debate about accuracy, authorship, and influence.

Main part. Polo's account is organized not as a chronological narrative but in what Abu-Lughod characterized as "geographic atlas form," a jumbled tale told by region rather than by sequence of travel. This structure is deliberate: Polo and Rustichello were aware of the need to contextualize place names, and a main preoccupation of the account is creating descriptive associations — geographical, political, religious, cultural, and commercial — for each toponym. The text reflects late medieval encyclopedism in how it uses the space of the book to organize information, with the arrangement of chapters mirroring the toponyms' geographical relationships.

Polo's geographical nomenclature is predominantly Persian, Mongolo-Persian, or Sino-Persian in form, suggesting he preferred Persian forms of Central Asian place names and may have been proficient in that language. However, Stephen Haw argues there is no clear evidence that Polo learned Persian, noting apparent misunderstandings of Persian terms in the text. The text's descriptions focus on externally observable phenomena — landscapes, climate, plants, animals, peoples, customs, and political structures — rather than the narrator's subjective response, distinguishing it from the cosmographical tradition of symbolic representations.


PROBABLE VIEW
OF
MARCO POLO'S OWN GEOGRAPHY
TRAMONTAINE
LAND OF DARKNESS
Approximate Scales
ITALIAN MILES
JOURNEYS
MESTRE
OROECH
ROSIA
Dominion of Conchi
Bargu
Chorcha
GREC
TARTARS
Comania
PONENT
GREAT TURKEY
CATHAY
Chipangu
Gazaria
Gothia
Greater Sea
Sea of Rochelle
Sea of England
G. Armenia
Armenia
Tenocain
PERSIA
TEBET
MANZI
Sea of Chin
Jerusalem
Babylon
Alexandria
EGYPT
GREATER INDIA
LESSER INDIA
Bengala
MIEN
Zardandan
Cangigu
Lucac
Angamanain
Seilan
Necuveran
Java the Greater
Java the Less
Malaiur
Madeigascar
12700 Islands in this Sea
Ocean Sea
ABASH
or
MIDDLE INDIA
LEVANT
PONENT

The question of whether Polo actually visited the lands he described has generated sustained scholarly controversy. Frances Wood's influential skeptical position asks why Polo omitted such fundamental aspects of Chinese life as tea, foot-binding, and the Great Wall, and why no record of the Polo family exists in Chinese sources. Many scholars argue that Polo did not actually visit many localities he claims to have seen — including Burma, the Arabian Sea, the Indian subcontinent, Java, and some Chinese cities — and that he reported hearsay acquired from Italian merchant colonies around the Black Sea. Polo's knowledge of distant and unknown lands is much more biased and susceptible to mythologization than his descriptions of places he visited, with distortions arising from the complex interplay of distance, source quality, personal beliefs, and Rustichello's narrative style.

Supporters counter that Polo's return journey from China is historically recorded in Chinese sources, and that his detailed descriptions of paper money and salt production provide corroborating evidence. Archaeological evidence has recently been marshaled: a Chinese porcelain jar in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice has been dated to Polo's era and associated with his journey, providing rare material support. Digital verification using Google Earth and Wikimapia has been applied to reconstruct Polo's itineraries — from Beijing to Xanadu, from Sheberghan to Kashgar across the Pamirs, and from Kashgar to Xanadu — with results described as encouraging for the broad authenticity of the travels. A mid-point position holds that Polo did visit China but exaggerated and falsified details, perhaps serving in the Imperial Salt Monopoly at Yangzhou but not as a governor.

Despite the novelty of Polo's geographical information, its direct influence on world cartography was surprisingly limited in the immediate aftermath of the text's composition. The Catalan Atlas of c. 1375 is the first map that bears the unequivocal influence of the Polo travels, appearing more than three-quarters of a century after their return to Venice. Polo himself appears to have drawn no maps recording his experience, and apart from the Catalan Atlas, his narrative had very little effect on contemporary world cartography — much less than the novelty of its information would suggest. The so-called "Marco Polo maps" — a collection of fourteen maps and texts in a private Italian-American collection claimed to derive from the Polo family — remain unverified; their vellum dates to 1463–1633, no ink analyses have been performed, and their provenance is elusive.

Conclusion. Polo's influence grew substantially in the Renaissance. His descriptions of the Far East offered vivid information to cosmographers and cartographers producing images of regions that remained largely unsurveyed by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century travelers. The edition printed in the Novus Orbis in 1532 appears to have been the most read and provided most quotations

from the Devisement later found in cosmographies, maps, and literary works. Christopher Columbus owned and annotated a Latin translation of Polo's work, and his marginalia reveal he was almost exclusively concerned with material things — gold, pearls, and spices associated with specific places — using cross-referencing to organize regions hierarchically by resource value. Toponyms from Polo appear on maps as late as the sixteenth century, and the text played a key role in both mapmaking and exploration.