

Marco Polo's World

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Marco Polo. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/z29ru87>.

This module was developed for a seventh-grade world history and geography course in Tennessee. It is particularly applicable to Tennessee standard 7:06—"Summarize the effects of the Mongolian empires on the Silk Roads, including the importance of Marco Polo's travels on the spread of Chinese technology and Eurasian trade"—and to other Tennessee state seventh-grade history and geography standards as well.

However, the content and pedagogical activities in the module are applicable to middle school teachers throughout the nation who are responsible for instructional activities encompassing thirteenth-century China, the Mongols, and Eurasian and global trade. The module is "high expectations" and may also be applicable to high school instructors and students.

Estimated module length: two hours and forty minutes

Overview

Global connections during the thirteenth-century featured both continuity and significant changes. Marco Polo's world intersected with several cultures during the Middle Ages. In the

1200s, the Mongol presence was dominant on the Eurasian continent. The fall of Baghdad, considered the academic center of the Muslim world, came at the hands of Mongols and is often viewed as the start of the decline of the Golden Age of Islam. In western Africa, Sundiata Kieta formed the Malian Empire in 1235 and eventually brought the rule of Mansa Musa. Several Christian crusades to reclaim Jerusalem took place prior to and during the time of the Mongol Khans. During this time, Europeans' increased contacts with other cultures resulted in increased demand for East Asian goods and technology. Marco Polo's travels, and especially his time in China, are a vivid individual illustration of the cross-cultural contacts that helped spread information and change world history.

Instructors should keep in mind that Marco Polo's story is a versatile one that can be inserted at different points in the study of history and geography during the school year. For example, it can be incorporated in the following units of study:

China: Marco Polo can be used as a means to teach the achievements of the Yuan dynasty and the Mongols' impact on world history.

The Crusades: Marco Polo's routes were altered due to cities and regions being controlled by Muslims. He interacts with Muslims a multitude of times.

Medieval Europe: Marco Polo's story takes place within the late Medieval period, when the merchant class expanded and Asian goods were becoming more in demand.

Age of Exploration: Europeans longed for East Asian goods and had to seek new routes and improvements in shipbuilding and cartography to obtain them.

This document-based approach to teaching the story of Marco Polo is also versatile. Although a teacher could assign this Document Based Question (DBQ) module in its entirety, it can be divided into parts, each with its own focus in classrooms that utilize learning centers. Each part features related primary source excerpts and questions. The level of direct teaching involved with these parts will depend upon the characteristics of your particular students.

Objectives:

Students will:

Learn about Marco Polo's life, travels, and adventures through biography.

Understand the role and impact of Venetian and other Italian city-states in international trade and intercultural contacts, particularly with non-Western regions.

Analyze the impact of physical geography, existing trade routes, and intercultural interactions on Marco Polo's trade routes.

Realize the significance of the Mongols in Chinese history and world commerce through learning about Polo's relations with the great Kublai Khan and his travels on the Silk Roads.

Prerequisite knowledge

Students should be able to identify and locate various locations and physical features in Europe, Southwest Asia, and East Asia that are pertinent to this topic, specifically the Arabian Peninsula, Arabian Sea, Baghdad, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, China, Constantinople, Gobi Desert, Himalayan Mountains, Italy, Jerusalem, Mediterranean Sea, Pacific Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Venice. Many (but not all) of these locations and physical features are embedded in sixth-grade standards in Tennessee. Additionally, students should already know about Eurasian connections regarding trade on the Silk Road.

What follows is a set of activities involving DBQs, video, and geography work that can be used as a self-contained unit or separately. Instructors considering utilizing these digital materials can first review student activities and then, review teacher notes ([accessible here](#)) I developed that provides links to digital resources that should be downloaded or accessed online when teaching all or components of this module, possible student answers to questions, and other useful information.

Module introduction

The teachers' notes for this module also appear at the end of the module for the convenience of teachers wishing to use all or part of these digital materials.

Class No. 1: Italy and a changing Europe

Estimated time: thirty minutes

Have students working individually or in small groups place Marco Polo and his family within the framework of European history by reading and thinking about what follows:

Because of the Crusades, the Middle Ages saw a rapid expansion of trade and commerce in Europe. Due to its relative position in the Mediterranean Sea, Italian city-states featured prominently in leading this new capitalistic venture, producing a rising merchant class. The Polo family members are prime examples of Venetian merchants.

Excerpt 1: Although not attributed to Marco Polo, this note (provided by historian John Masefield) describes Venice's merchant class at the time:

The prosperity, riches, and political importance of the state of Venice having arisen entirely from its commerce, the profession of a merchant was there held in the highest degree of estimation, and its nobles. (11)

How does the emergence of the merchant class change the traditional feudal model?

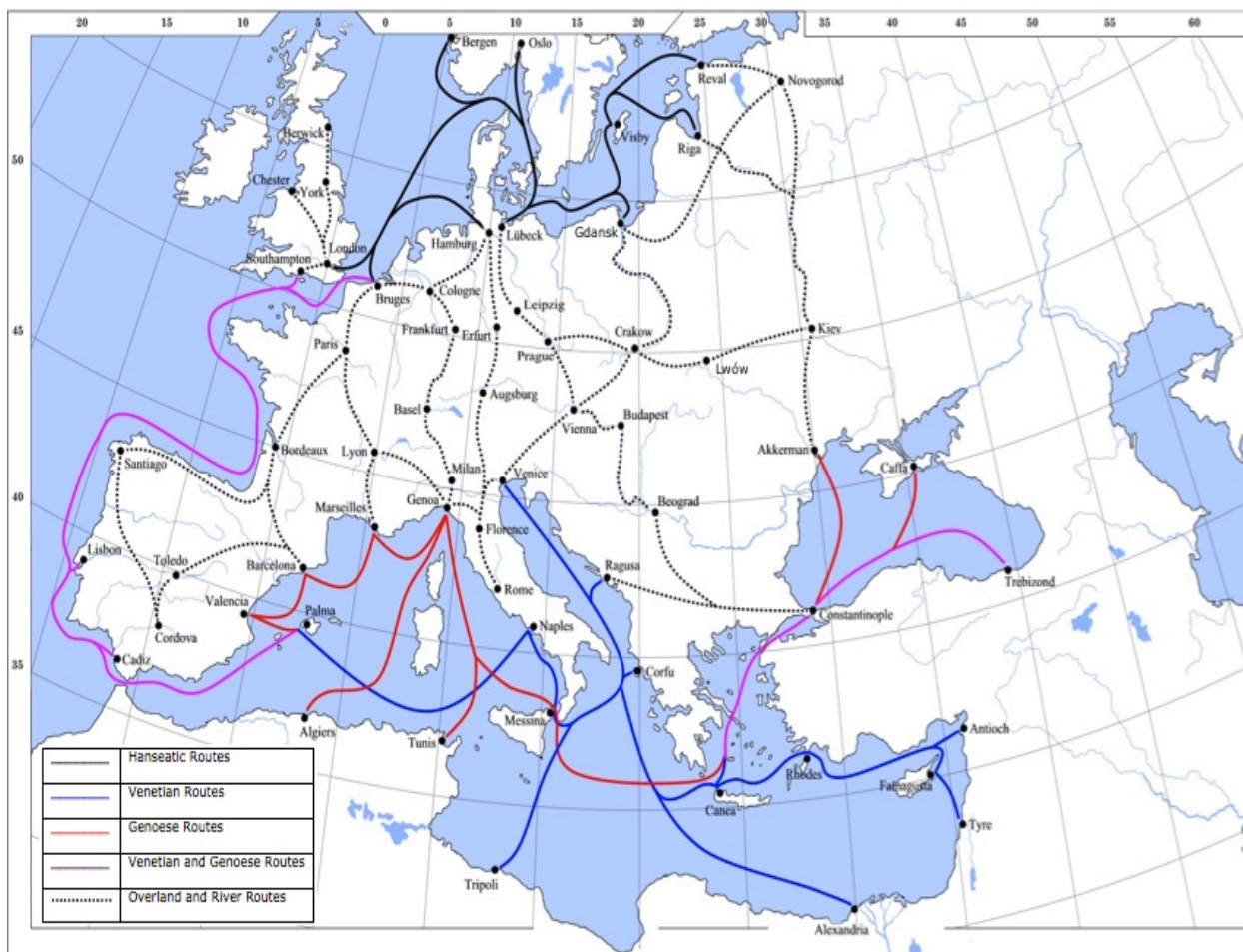
Excerpt 2: Marco Polo described the importance of the port city Laiassus (the contemporary site located in southern Turkey, near Syria).

On the sea-coast there is a city named Laiassus, a place of considerable traffic. Its port is frequented by merchants from Venice, Genoa, and many other places, who trade in spiceries and drugs of different sorts, manufactures of silk and of wool, and other rich commodities. (31)

How does this excerpt highlight the importance of Italian city-states during the late Middle Ages?

Students should then examine [Figure 1: The Venetian–Genoese trade routes map](#) provided from *Wikipedia*

Figure 1: Venetian–Genoese trade routes



Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/y7pbzh94>.

The city-states of Venice and Genoa fought during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries for control of lucrative trade routes, located in the Mediterranean Sea, to distant lands. This map highlights the nature of their rivalry.

Student question: Provide reasons that demonstrate why Venice and Genoa would fight wars over these routes. If one of the city-states controlled both the blue and red routes, what continents, countries, and major cities could they reach?

By the thirteenth century, international contacts were dramatically increasing for a variety of reasons. We will learn much more about these events through the eyes of one man, Marco Polo, who has gone down in history as a merchant, traveler, and particularly as a European who

aroused widespread interest in China among people on that continent—interest that would change the course of history. The story begins in the city of Venice on the peninsula we know today as Italy.

Class No. 2: Influence of geography and culture on Marco Polo's journey

Estimated time: one hour, forty minutes for Parts 2, 3, and 4

Note to teachers: Please show the five-minute and twenty-three second long [PBS Learning Media](#) video on Marco Polo.

Excerpt 3: In these excerpts, Marco Polo described the port city of Ormus (present-day Hormuz):

At length you reach the border of the ocean, where, upon an island, at no great distance from the shore, stands a city named Ormus, whose port is frequented by traders from all parts of India who bring spices and drugs, precious stones, pearls, gold tissues, elephants teeth, and various other articles of merchandize. (63–64)

The vessels built at Ormus are of the worst kind, and dangerous for navigation, exposing the merchants and others who make use of them to great hazards. (67)

What would make Marco Polo want to go to Ormus?

How was his journey changed by what he found there (reference Figure 3)?

Excerpt 4: Marco Polo described how geopolitical events influenced his return trip from China in the late thirteenth century:

An Abyssinian prince desired to visit the Holy Sepulcher of Christ (the locale of a church built on the site of Christ's crucifixion and burial) in Jerusalem as was the custom of many of his subjects. However, he was discouraged by his government officers; having been informed of the dangers to which he would expose himself in passing through so many places belonging to the Saracens [Muslims], his enemies. (400, abridged)

What event would have caused the change of Jerusalem's control?

Using the [silk and spice routes map](#) and the [route of Marco Polo map](#), do you think Marco Polo created a new route or depended upon existing trade routes? Use evidence to support your claim.

Excerpt 5: Marco Polo described how geopolitical events influenced his route:

Samarcan (contemporary Samarkand) is a noble city, adorned with beautiful gardens, and surrounded by a plain, in which are produced all the fruits that man can desire. The inhabitants, who are partly Christians and partly Mahometans [Muslims] ... there is perpetual strife and frequent wars between them. (93–94)

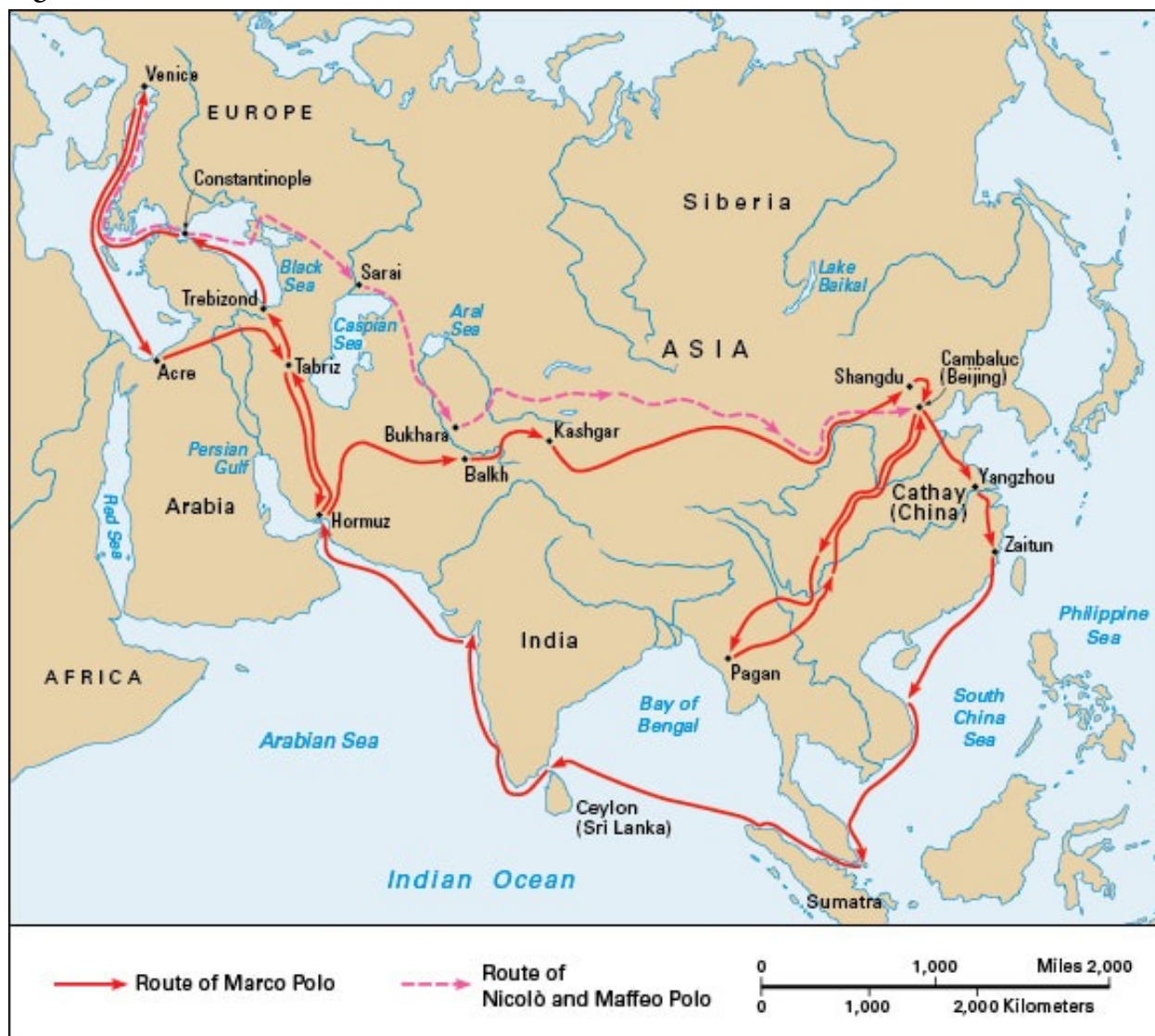
Using the silk and spice routes map (Figure 2) and the route of Marco Polo map (Figure 3), you will notice that Marco Polo avoided Samarkand (Samarcan). Please provide an explanation that would justify his route choice.

Figure 2: The silk and spice routes



Source: UNESCO at <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road>.

Figure 3: Marco Polo's routes



Source: World Book Online at www.worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar100060.

In the following excerpts, Marco Polo described how physical geography presented challenges. First, read about these travel struggles of Marco Polo, and then use clues in the excerpts. Complete the drawing and labeling exercises below to understand the physical geography and the locale of the excerpts.

Excerpt 6:

For twelve days, the course is along this elevated plain [Pamir] . . . So great is the height of the mountains, that no birds are to be seen near their summits; and however extraordinary it may be thought, it was affirmed, that from the keenness of the air, fires when lighted do not give the same heat as in lower situations, nor produce the same effect in dressing victuals [cooking food]. After having performed this journey of twelve days, you have still forty days to travel in the same direction, over mountains, and through valleys, in perpetual succession, passing many rivers and desert tracts,

without seeing any habitations . . . Every article of provision must therefore be carried along with you. (91–92)

Excerpt 7:

During these thirty days the journey is invariably over either sandy plains or barren mountains; but at the end of each day's march you stop at a place where water is procurable; not in deed in sufficient quantity for large numbers, but enough to supply a hundred persons, together with their beasts of burthen. At three or four of these halting-places, the water is salt and bitter, but at the others, amounting to about twenty, it is sweet and good . . . this desert [Gobi] is the abode of many evil spirits, which amuse travelers to their destruction with most extraordinary illusions. If . . . they are led away by it [the evil spirits] from the direct road, and not knowing in what direction to advance, are left to perish. (100–101)

Draw and label the following physical features on the route of Marco Polo map (Figure 3) provided. Links with images and information on these physical features are hyperlinked below from *World Book Online* and *Wikipedia*.

[Fertile Crescent](#)

[Himalayas](#)

[Gobi Desert](#)

[Plateau of Tibet](#)

[Taklamakan Desert](#)

How did physical features affect Marco Polo's route? Use evidence to support your claim.

Class No. 3: Kublai Khan

Have students read the short introduction below to the most famous part of Marco Polo's life (his time in China).

Background information on Kublai Khan and Marco Polo

From Helen Hundley, *Key Issues in Asian Studies: The Mongol Empire in World History* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian Studies): 71–76:

Kublai Khan (1215–1294) was the grandson of Genghis Khan who had founded the Mongol dynasty. Kublai Khan was the founder of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), the first foreign dynasty in Chinese history. Kublai established his capital in Dadu (now Beijing) in 1264. Eight years after Kublai Khan created the Yuan dynasty, his forces conquered China's southern Song dynasty and ruled all of China. For the first time in history, foreign invaders had conquered all of China. Under Kublai's rule, art and science flourished, trade expanded, and cultural relations were established with countries throughout the world.

From "[Lesson 5: On the Road with Marco Polo: Marco Polo in China](#)," EDSITEment,

In the 13th century, Marco Polo set out with his father and uncle on a great adventure to China. Following the Silk Roads and other known overland trade routes, they traveled east and became the first Europeans to visit the Chinese capital (modern Beijing). Marco impressed Kublai Khan enough to be appointed to the imperial court.

The Polo family finally returned to home; using the water routes that pass through Indonesia, around the subcontinent of India, back to Hormuz, and then using overland routes back to Venice. "Marco later wrote a book about his experiences, which inspired new generations of explorers to travel to the exotic lands of the East."

From *The Travels of Marco Polo*:

Marco was held in high estimation and respect by all belonging to the court. He learnt in a short time and adopted the manners of the Tartars, and acquired a proficiency in four different languages, which he became qualified to read and write. Finding him thus accomplished, his master was desirous of putting his talents for business to the proof . . . [test] (21).

. . . during seventeen years that he [Marco Polo] continued in his [Kublai Khan's] service, he rendered himself so useful, that he was employed on confidential missions to every part of the empire and its dependencies; and sometimes also he travelled on his own private account, but always with the consent, and sanctioned by the authority, of the grand khan. (22)

At varying times, Marco Polo described the treatment of foreign religions under the reign of Kublai Khan.

In the following excerpts, he describes the founder of a religion. Tenets (beliefs and practices) of the religion then follow.

Excerpt 8:

He was the son of a king . . . who devoted himself to an ascetic life, refusing to accept of kingdoms or any other worldly possessions, although his father endeavored . . . to divert him from the resolution he had adopted . . . the young man fled privately to this lofty mountain, where, in the observance of celibacy and strict abstinence, he at length terminated his mortal career. (373)

Excerpt 9:

They shave their heads and beards like the others, and wear hempen garments of a black or dull color; but even if the material were silk, the color would be the same. They sleep upon coarse mats, and suffer greater hardships in their mode of living than any people in the world. (151)

Excerpt 10:

They believe the soul to be immortal, in this sense, that immediately upon the death of a man, it enters into another body, and that accordingly as he has acted virtuously or wickedly during his life, his future state will become, progressively, better or worse. (220)

Excerpt 11:

[They] do not deprive any creature of life, nor shed blood, and if they are inclined, to eat flesh-meat. (89)

What religion did Marco Polo describe?

Provide three details to support your claim.

In the following excerpt, Marco Polo provides an example of Kublai Khan's religious tolerance. Although Mongols had a deserved reputation for extraordinary brutality in military actions, they were in general exceptionally tolerant of other religions.

Excerpt 12:

Marco Polo described the people of Tangut (in northwestern China):

The people are worshippers of idols [Buddhists] ... with a few Nestorian Christians and Mahometans [Muslims] They are not a commercial, but an agricultural people, having much wheat. There are in this country a number of monasteries and abbeys, which are filled with idols of various descriptions. (103)

Excerpt 13:

Marco Polo described part of Kublai Khan's birthday celebration:

Upon this day likewise all the Christians, idolaters [Buddhists], and Saracens [Muslims], together with every other description of people, offer up devout prayers to their respective gods and idols, that they may bless and preserve the sovereign, and bestow upon him long life, health, and prosperity. (187-188)

Excerpt 14:

Marco Polo described how Kublai Khan celebrated Easter in 1287 after a major victory against his uncle Nayan (Navan), a Nestorian Christian who had rebelled against Kublai:

Being aware that this was one of our principal solemnities, he commanded all the Christians to attend him, and to bring with them their Book, which contains the four Gospels of the Evangelists. After causing it to be repeatedly perfumed with incense, in a ceremonious manner, he devoutly kissed it, and directed that the same should be done by all his nobles who were present. This was his usual

practice upon each of the principal Christian festivals, such as Easter and Christmas; and he observed the same at the festivals of the Saracens [Muslims], Jews, and idolaters. Upon being asked his motive for this conduct, he said:

There are four great Prophets who are revered and worshipped by the different classes of mankind. The Christians regard Jesus Christ as their divinity; the Saracens [Muslims], Mahomet [Mohammad]; the Jews, Moses; and the idolaters, Sogomombar-kan [Buddha], the most eminent amongst their idols. I do honor and show respect to all the four, and invoke to my aid whichever amongst them is in truth supreme in heaven. (158)

How do these excerpts demonstrate Kublai Khan's openness to outsiders?

How did the khan treat those of differing religious backgrounds?

What is a misconception that the khan had about non-Christians?

Class No. 4: Marco Polo on missions for the khan

Marco Polo traveled within the empire, at times on his own accord and, at other times, on behalf of Kublai himself—usually to report on the potential for commercial opportunities. Prior to reading the following excerpts, draw and label the following physical features on the route of Marco Polo map (Figure 3) provided:

[Yangtze River](#)

[Yellow River](#)

[Plateau of Tibet](#)

What do the Yangtze and Yellow rivers have in common?

Excerpt 15:

They subsist by trade and manufactures, and have provisions in abundance . . . a city named Tudin-fu [between Beijing and Nanjing] is rendered a delightful residence by the gardens which surround it, stored as they are with handsome shrubs and excellent fruits. Silk is produced here in wonderfully large quantities. It has under its jurisdiction eleven cities and considerable towns of the empire, all places of great trade, and having abundance of silk. (269)

What do Beijing and Nanjing have in common? For possible hints, click [here](#).

What resource is in abundance?

Excerpt 16:

Some of these rivers [in Manzi-Southern China] are half a mile in width, others are two hundred paces, and very deep, over which [are] built several large and handsome stone bridges, eight paces in breadth, their length being greater or less according to the size of the stream. From one extremity to

the other there is a row of marble pillars on each side, which support the roof; for here the bridges have very handsome roofs, constructed of wood, ornamented with paintings of a red cooler, and covered with tiles. Throughout the whole length also there are neat apartments and shops, where all sorts of trades are carried on. One of the buildings, larger than the rest, is occupied by the officers who collect the duties upon provisions and merchandise, and a toll from persons who pass the bridge. In this way, it is said, his majesty receives daily the sum of a hundred besants [coins] of gold. These rivers, uniting their streams below the city, contribute to form the mighty river called the Kian [Yangtze River], whose course, before it discharges itself into the ocean, is equal to a hundred days journey. (235)

What conclusion can you make regarding the Yangtze River's influence on the economy?

Excerpt 17:

Having crossed this river [Yellow] and travelled three days journey, you arrive at a city named Kachan-fu whose inhabitants are idolaters. They carry on a considerable traffic, and work at a variety of manufactures. The country produces in great abundance, silk, ginger, galangal [root similar to ginger; but with a citrus flavor], spikenard [the oil from this flower can be used for perfume], and many drugs that are nearly unknown in our part of the world. Here they weave gold tissues, as well as every other kind of silken cloth. (231)

Editor's note: The exact modern location of this western Chinese city cannot be identified. What conclusion can you make regarding the Yellow River's influence on the economy?

Excerpt 18:

On Thebeth [Tibet] these people use no coined money, nor even the paper money of the grand khan, but for their currency employ coral . . . Its rivers, lakes, and mountains are numerous. In the rivers gold dust is found in very large quantities. Not only is the coral used for money, but the women also wear it about their necks, and with it ornament their idols. There are manufactures of camlet [cloth woven from camel hair] and of gold cloth, and many drugs are produced in the country that have not been brought to ours. (239)

The money of salt has equal currency. Their profits are considerable, because these country people consume the salt with their food, and regard it as an indispensable necessary; whereas the inhabitants of the cities use for the same purpose only the broken fragments of the cakes, putting the whole cakes into circulation as money. (242)

What was used for currency in Tibet?

Excerpt 19:

(Thai-gin; a prominent fortress) ... travelling about twenty miles, you come to a river called the Kara-moran [Yellow River], which is of such magnitude, both in respect to width and depth, that no solid bridge can be erected upon it... On its banks are many cities and castles, in which a number of trading people reside, who carry on an extensive commerce. The country bordering upon it produces

ginger, and silk in large quantities. Of birds the multitude is incredible, especially of pheasants, which are sold at the rate of three for the value of a Venetian groat [silver coins]. Here likewise grows a species of large cane, in infinite abundance (230)

Editor's note: The exact location of Thai-gin is lost to history and translation; however, it is believed that Polo is traveling along the Yellow River at a western point closer to the Plateau of Tibet and heading toward eastern China.

If you were the grand khan, would you consider Tibet valuable? Explain.

Polo's last mission was to escort a Mongolian princess to India for marriage prior to returning to Venice. Kublai Khan requested (and expected) the Polo family to return in the future. Alas, they did not, and the grand khan died soon after their departure. Regardless, they were sent out in style:

Excerpt 20:

... preparations were made for the equipment of fourteen ships, each having four masts, and capable of being navigated with nine sails ... Among these vessels there were at least four or five that had crews of two hundred and fifty or two hundred and sixty men ... when they had first taken their leave of the grand khan, who presented them with many rubies and other handsome jewels of great value. He also gave directions that the ships should be furnished with stores and provisions for two years. (26–27)

What conclusion can you make regarding the status of the grand khan's navy?

Class No. 5: On the Indian Ocean

Estimated time: thirty minutes

Using Marco Polo's life to teach world history and geography presents an important opportunity to introduce students to the Indian Ocean, a body of water about which most Americans are ignorant but that has historically played important global economic and geopolitical roles. With contemporary globalization, the Indian Ocean, the third-largest in the world and whose waters border Asia, Africa, and Australia, and extends to the Southern or Antarctic Ocean, is more important than ever. Historically, Marco Polo's account of what he experienced in the Indian Ocean directly affects European demand and lays the groundwork for the Age of Exploration.

At varying times, Marco Polo described several places in the Indian Ocean:

Excerpt 21: On Java

The country abounds with rich commodities. Pepper, nutmegs, spikenard, galangal [a type of ginger], cubebs [a type of pepper], cloves, and all the other valuable spices and drugs, are the produce of the island; which occasion it to be visited by many ships laden with merchandise that yields to the owners considerable profit. The quantity of gold collected there exceeds all calculation and belief. (334)

Excerpt 22: On Nocueran (an island in present-day Indonesia)

Their woods abound with the noblest and most valuable trees, such as the white and the red sandal [this aromatic wood can retain its fragrance for years], those which bear the Indian (coco)nuts, cloves, and sappan [has medicinal properties and can produce red dye]; besides which they have a variety of drugs. (347)

Excerpt 23: On Zeitan (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka)

The island produces more beautiful and valuable rubies than are found in any other part of the world, and likewise sapphires, topazes, amethysts, garnets, and many other precious and costly stones. (349)

Excerpt 24: On Maabar (southern India)

In this operation, they persevere during the whole of the day, and by their exertions accumulate (in the course of the season) a quantity of oysters sufficient to supply the demands of all countries. The greater proportion of the pearls obtained from the fisheries in this gulf, are round, and of a good luster. (352)

Excerpt 25: On Malabar (West India)

In this kingdom there is vast abundance of pepper, ginger, cubebs, and Indian nuts; and the finest and most beautiful cottons are manufactured that can be found in any part of the world. The ships from Manji [southern China] bring copper as ballast; and besides this, gold brocades, silks, gauzes, gold and silver bullion, together with many kinds of drugs not produced in Malabar; and these they barter for the commodities of the province.

How did the discovery of these goods motivate Europeans to increase trade with Asia?

How did the development of these trade routes expand the role of merchants?

How did strained relationships in southwestern Asia, ultimately ending with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, influence Europeans to seek new routes to southern and eastern Asia?

What would Europeans need to make worldwide exploration a reality?

References and resources

<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ff32837d-b085-40d4-8d60-ac9a676cb857/marco-polo-pbs-world-explorers/>: This video, available through PBS LearningMedia, provides an overview on Marco Polo.

<http://exploration.marinersmuseum.org/resources/>: These are educational resources on the Age of Exploration, found on *The Mariners' Museum* website.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/marco_polo.htm

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/figures/figu_polo.htm: These are links to *Asia for Educators'* numerous excerpts in which Marco Polo details Kublai Khan's court, wealth, and the splendor of the larger cities.

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/marco-polo>

<http://www.history.com/topics/kublai-khan>: These are *History* web entries on Marco Polo and Kublai Khan.

<https://archive.org/details/marcopolo00polouoft>: This is a link to a scanned book version of *The Travels of Marco Polo: The Venetian* where excerpts are used in this module.

Digital Materials for the Module “Marco Polo’s World”

Teacher’s Notes

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules1/smith/teachersnotes.docx>