

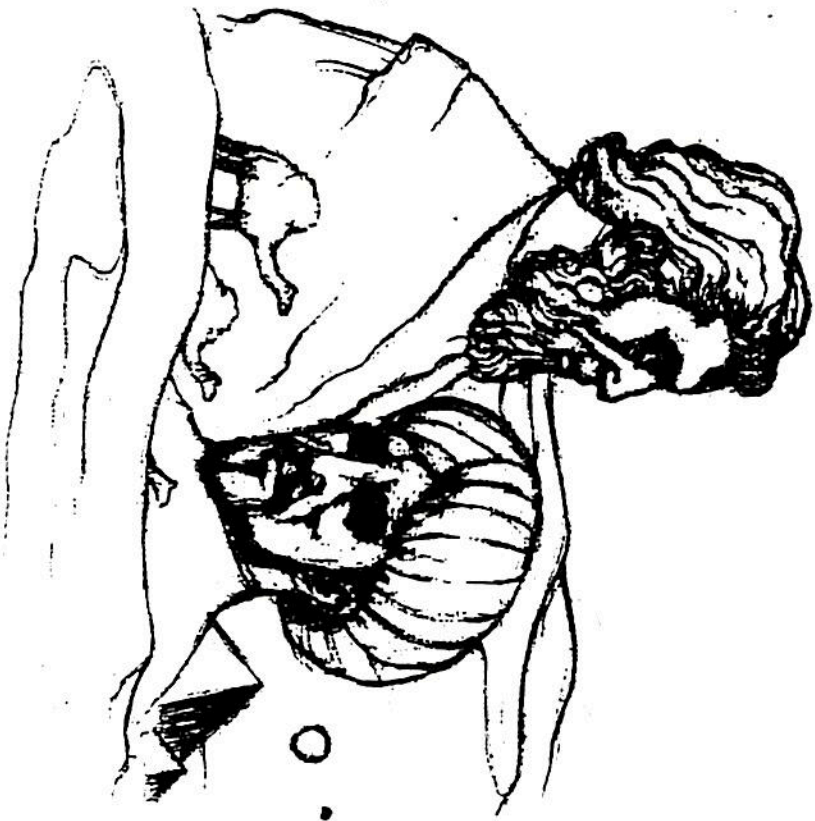
Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta: The Merchant and the Pilgrim

How did the predispositions of two famous medieval travelers color what they reported—and how they reported it? What was the most important difference and the most important similarity in the stories of these two travelers?

Today the word *travel* carries with it images of excitement: we can move hundreds of miles by automobile or thousands of miles by air in a few hours. When we arrive at our destination, we can usually relax comfortably in a home or motel. Such was not the case seven centuries ago, when the English word *travel* originally meant the same as *travail*, that is, hard work that exhausted the body and tested the will.¹ Imagine how stressful it would be to live “out of a suitcase” for over twenty years and in the process risk serious illnesses and survive dangers posed by bandits, shipwrecks, pirates, trackless deserts, and frozen mountains.

These were only some of the problems faced by the two most famous world travelers in the pre-modern period. In 1271, Italian Marco Polo (1254–1324) set out with his father and uncle on a journey to the court of the Mongol Emperor of China, Kubilai Khan; he would not return to his native Venice until 1295. In 1325, a year after Polo’s death, Islamic jurist Ibn Battuta (1304–1368) left his native city of Tangier in Morocco to begin a journey to the East that would take him a total of seventy-five thousand miles; he did not return home permanently until 1354.²

The thirteenth-century travels of Marco Polo and those of his fourteenth-century Muslim counterpart, Ibn Battuta, illustrate both the dangers travel posed in this period and the ways such dangers could be overcome. The Polo family was aided by the “Pax Mongolica,” the period of peace established by Mongol rulers in the



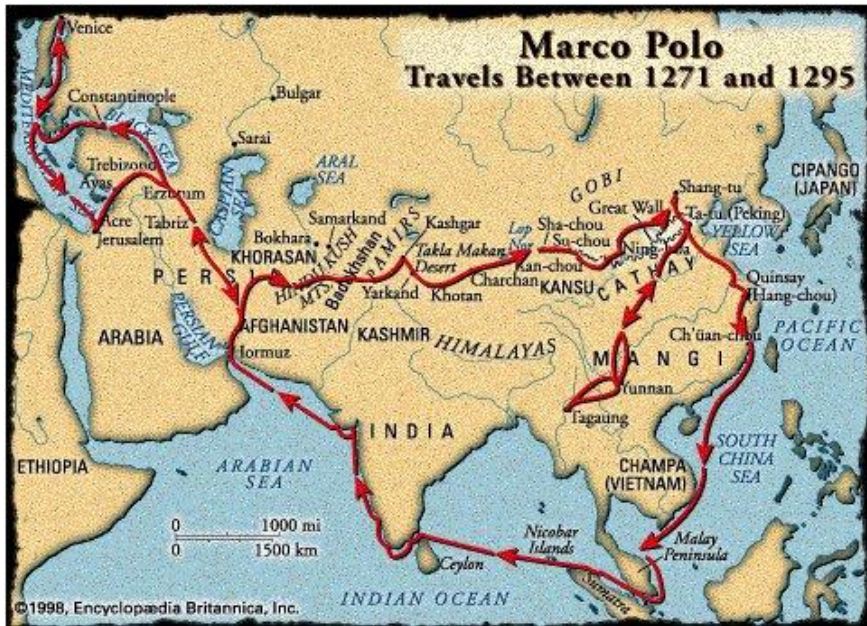
Asian steppelands from about 1250 to 1350. The strong control exercised by these rulers, in an empire which stretched from Persia to China, allowed the Polos safe passage to China and back. Fifty years later, when Ibn Battuta began his journey, the Pax Mongolica was more precarious, but hospitality and safety were provided to Muslims by a network of Muslim traders and rulers extending from Southeast Asia to the strait of Gibraltar.

Ibn Battuta traveled primarily in Muslim-ruled lands, the *Dar al-Islam* [House or Abode of Islam], while the Christian Polo, son of a European merchant, lived and worked in countries whose cultures and religions were foreign to him. This difference makes a comparison of their works most interesting. Marco Polo's knowledge of four Asian languages as well as Italian allowed him to communicate with foreigners and even work as an administrator for the Chinese emperor. Yet, in all his travels, he remained culturally an "outsider" to the peoples he met, and this fact enhanced his power of observation and stimulated his natural curiosity. By contrast, Ibn Battuta usually traveled as an "insider," and his hosts accepted him as a respected Muslim jurist (*qadi*) and student of Islamic mysticism (Sufism). Traveling to more than sixty Muslim courts, where he met rulers and their officials, Ibn Battuta was able to judge the behavior of his hosts in light of the Muslim scripture, the *Koran*, and the precepts of Islamic law. For him, the difference between their native cultures and his own North Arabic culture was of secondary importance.

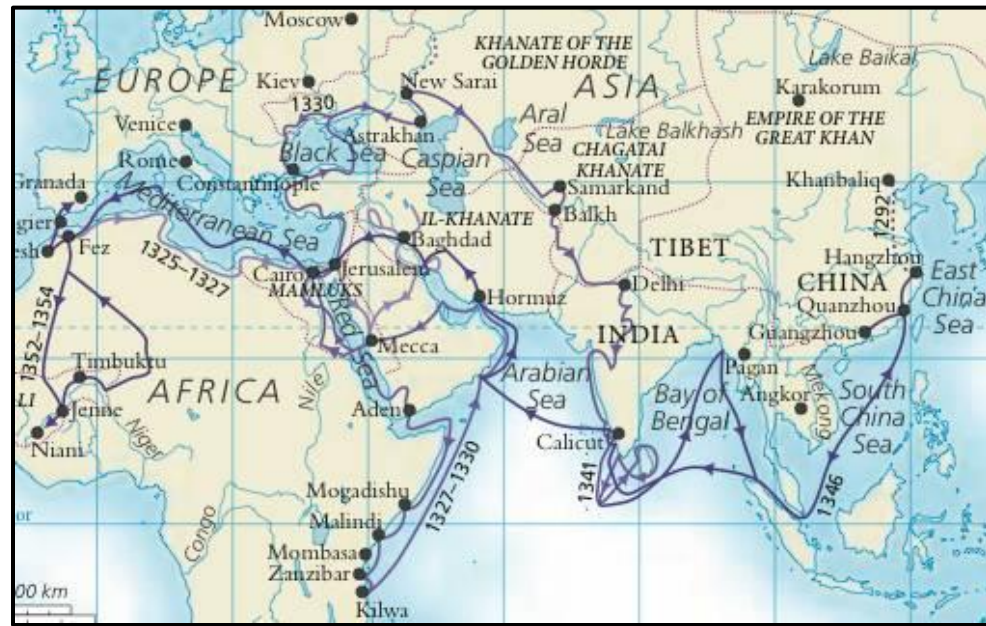
We can be thankful that both men dictated accounts of their travels after they returned home—Polo, while in a Genoese prison in 1298, and Ibn Battuta, to a Moroccan scribe, Ibn Juzayy, 1354–1355. Since neither was trained to report objectively on the unusual customs of foreigners, both Polo and Ibn Battuta judged those they encountered by their own standards. Both travel accounts reveal the great diversity in Eurasian cultures during this period; both are laced with "miraculous" happenings and both amaze readers with fairly accurate accounts of the enormous wealth rulers had at their disposal. The chief difference between the two works is one of focus. Polo's *Travels* was written with a "merchant's eye for flourishing manufactures." It is marked, in the words of one biographer, with a "mercantile stamp."³ Polo tells us little about himself but much about the social and economic practices of those he meets. He systematically discussed commerce, government, and customs with

some attention to the spectacular and exotic. By contrast, Ibn Battuta focused on the purity of Islamic ritual and belief in the lands he visited. He was much more willing than was Polo to describe his own difficulties and good fortune and much less concerned with trade, commerce, and the forms of government. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* (Arabic for *Travels*) described a personal journey, a pilgrimage. Indeed, Ibn Battuta began his journey intending to make only the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hadj*) required of all pious Muslims once in a lifetime.

Journeys of Marco Polo



Journeys of Ibn Battuta



In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, two intrepid, adventurers, Marco Polo (c.1254-1324) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1368) traveled throughout much of the known world, where few others had journeyed. The stability established by the Pax Mongolia made their separate journeys possible. Their accounts stimulated the interest of their respective literate public to further explore Africa and Asia as possible sources of wealth. To this day, Polo's and Battuta's travel accounts remain important sources for historians regarding Afro-Eurasian cross-cultural encounters in late medieval times.

