

**MEDIEVAL VENICE:
MARCO POLO AND HIS
TRAVELS**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including selections from the Travels of Marco Polo, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of Marco Polo's adventures in Asia, how he described what he saw during his visit to China, and how Polo's book inspired later generations of dreamers, merchants and monarchs across Europe in their push to explore the world looking for his riches.

Subjects

English / Language Arts
European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Marco Polo Airport, Venice
- Marco Polo House, Venice
- Polo Memorial, Yangzhou, China

Essential Questions

- Who was Marco Polo? Why is he famous for traveling to China? How long did he stay in the East before returning to Venice?
- How and why did Polo write his book, The Travels of Marco Polo? Why was it commonly referred to as *il Milione* in Italy?
- Were Polo's descriptions of his 13th century travels more fantasy or based in reality?
- How did Polo's tales on the riches and wonders of the East impact Europeans in the centuries following the publication of his Travels?

Academic Summary

When you have left the city of Changan and have travelled for three days through a splendid country, passing a number of towns and villages, you arrive at the most noble city of Kinsay, a name which is as much as to say in our tongue "The City of Heaven," as I told you before.

... for the city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan the conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. I will tell you all the truth as it was set down in that document. For truth it was, as the said Messer Marco Polo at a later date was able to witness with his own eyes. And now we shall rehearse those particulars.

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city of Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it twelve thousand bridges of stone, for the most part so lofty that a great fleet could pass beneath them. And let no man marvel that there are so many bridges, for you see the whole city stands as it were in the water and surrounded by water, so that a great many bridges are required to give free passage about it. And though the bridges be so high the approaches are so well contrived that carts and horses do cross them.

The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, were so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. And I should have told you with regard to those masters of the different crafts who are at the head of such houses as I have mentioned, that neither they nor their wives ever touch a piece of work with their own hands, but live as nicely and delicately as if they were kings and queens. The wives indeed are most dainty and angelical creatures! Moreover it was an ordinance laid down by the King that every man should follow his father's business and no other, no matter if he possessed 100,000 bezants.

... both men and women are fair and comely, and for the most part clothe themselves in silk, so vast is the supply of that material, both from the whole district of Kinsay, and from the imports by traders from other provinces. And you must know they eat every kind of flesh, even that of dogs and other unclean beasts, which nothing would induce a Christian to eat.

You must know also that the city of Kinsay has some 3000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world; large enough for persons to bathe together.

... and inside the walls are the finest and most delectable gardens upon earth, and filled too with the finest fruits. There are numerous fountains in it also, and lakes full of fish. In the middle is the palace itself, a great and splendid building. It contains 20 great and handsome halls, one of which is more spacious than the rest, and affords room for a vast multitude to dine. It is all painted in gold, with many histories and representations of beasts and birds, of knights and dames, and many marvelous things. It forms a really magnificent spectacle, for over all the walls and all the ceiling you see

nothing but paintings in gold. And besides these halls the palace contains 1000 large and handsome chambers, all painted in gold and diverse colors. There is one church only, belonging to the Nestorian Christians.

Note: Nestorian Christianity, declared to be heresy by the mainstream Christian Church in the 5th century, takes its name from Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople (428-431) who declared that Christ's divinity and humanity existed as separate entities within the same body, and therefore when Jesus died, only his human part died. According to Nestorius, God was eternal and could not die. The mainstream church excommunicated Nestorius, but some of his loyal followers later established churches in different parts of Asia, where they remain to this day.

Neither grapes nor wine are produced there, but very good raisins are brought from abroad, and wine likewise. The natives, however, do not much care about wine, being used to that kind of their own made from rice and spices. From the Ocean Sea also come daily supplies of fish in great quantity, brought 25 miles up the river, and there is also great store of fish from the lake, which is the constant resort of fishermen, who have no other business. Their fish is of sundry kinds, changing with the season; and, owing to the impurities of the city which pass into the lake, it is remarkably fat and savory. Anyone who should see the supply of fish in the market would suppose it impossible that such a quantity could ever be sold; and yet in a few hours the whole shall be cleared away; so great is the number of inhabitants who are accustomed to delicate living. Indeed they eat fish and flesh at the same meal.

... Certain of the streets are occupied by the women of the town, who are in such a number that I dare not say what it is. They are found not only in the vicinity of the market places, where usually a quarter is assigned to them, but all over the city. They exhibit themselves splendidly attired and abundantly perfumed, in finely garnished houses, with trains of waiting-women. These women are extremely accomplished in all the arts of allurements, and readily adapt their conversation to all sorts of persons, insomuch that strangers who have once tasted their attractions seem to get bewitched, and are so taken with their blandishments and their fascinating ways that they never can get these out of their heads. Hence it comes to pass that when they return home they say they have been to Kinsay or the City of Heaven, and their only desire is to get back thither as soon as possible.

... To give you an example of the vast consumption in this city let us take the article of pepper; and that will enable you in some measure to estimate what must be the quantity of victual, such as meat, wine, groceries, which have to be provided for the general consumption. Now Messer Marco heard it stated by one of the Great Kaan's officers of customs that the quantity of pepper introduced daily for consumption into the city of Kinsay amounted to 43 loads, each load being equal to 2-23 lbs.

Treating of the Great Yearly Revenue That the Great Kaan Hath from Kinsay

Now I will tell you about the great revenue which the Great Kaan draws every year from the said city of Kinsay and its territory, forming a ninth part of the whole country of Manzi.

First there is the salt, which brings in a great revenue. For it produces

every year, in round numbers, fourscore tomans of gold; and the toman is worth 70,000 saggi of gold, so that the total value of the fourscore tomans will be five millions and six hundred thousand saggi of gold, each saggio being worth more than a gold florin or ducat; in sooth, a vast sum of money!

You must know that in this city and its dependencies they make great quantities of sugar, as indeed they do in the other eight divisions of this country; so that I believe the whole of the rest of the world together does not produce such a quantity, at least, if that be true which many people have told me; and the sugar alone again produces an enormous revenue.- However, I will not repeat the duties on every article separately, but tell you how they go in the lump. Well, all spicery pays three and a third per cent on the value; and all merchandize likewise pays three and a third per cent. But sea-borne goods from India and other distant countries pay ten per cent. The rice-wine also makes a great return, and coals, of which there is a great quantity; and so do the twelve guilds of craftsmen that I told you of, with their 12,000 stations apiece, for every article they make pays duty. And the silk which is produced in such abundance makes an immense return. But why should I make a long story of it? The silk, you must know, pays ten per cent, and many other articles also pay ten per cent. And you must know that Messer Marco Polo, who relates all this, was several times sent by the Great Kaan to inspect the amount of his customs and revenue from this ninth part of Manzi, and he found it to be, exclusive of the salt revenue which we have mentioned already, 210 tomans of gold, equivalent to 14,700,000 saggi of gold; one of the most enormous revenues that ever was heard of. And if the sovereign has such a revenue from one ninth part of the country, you may judge what he must have from the whole of it! However, to speak the truth, this part is the greatest and most productive; and because of the great revenue that the Great Kaan derives from it, it is his favorite province, and he takes all the more care to watch it well, and to keep the people contented.

Marco Polo, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East: The Glories of Kinsay, approx. 1300 CE

The story was as legendary in the late medieval era as it is today. Marco Polo, a late 13th century, 17-year-old Venetian merchant traveling with his father and brother, embarked on a series of adventures in the East. In the 24 years they were away, the Polos visited China and India. When he returned from his travels, Polo found himself involved in a war between Venice and Genoa, and he was subsequently captured while leading a naval expedition. While in prison, Marco dictated a detailed account of his travels to another inmate, Rustichello of Pisa. The tale was later published in French and Italian as *Book of the Marvels of the World*. By the end of the 14th century, copies of the book could be found across Europe, a remarkable feat considering they all had to be hand-copied as the printing press was still decades away. Over the course of the 15th century, hundreds (some sources say thousands) of copies were printed on the new press, and the book became one of the most read works of the age, inspiring dreamers, merchants and monarchs who longed to share in the riches Marco Polo described. A copy of Polo's book even inspired a 15th century young Genoese sailor and navigator named Christoforo Colombo, giving rise to ambitions that would by the end of that century forever change the world's destiny. A well-worn copy of Polo's *Travels*, heavily annotated in the young sailor's own hand, can be found today in the Columbus Library in Seville.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including selections from the *Travels of Marco Polo*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of Marco Polo's adventures in Asia, how he described what he saw during his visit to China, and how Polo's book inspired later generations of dreamers, merchants and monarchs across Europe in their push to explore the world looking for his riches.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the story of Marco Polo's adventures in Asia.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Marco Polo described what he saw on his visit to China.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Marco Polo's book, *Travels*, inspired later generations of dreamers, merchants and monarchs across Europe in their push to explore the world looking for the riches he described.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Why is Marco Polo remembered in history? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Marco Polo (20 min)
- Video – Marco Polo (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read sources and articles about Marco Polo and his *Travels*. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: See websites below for specific AP/Advanced reading selections.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was the story of Marco Polo's adventures in Asia? How did he describe what he saw? How did Polo's book, *Travels*, inspire later generations of Europeans in their push to explore the world looking for his riches? (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Using examples and information from the sources, explain in detail the story of Marco Polo's adventures in Asia, how he described what he saw during his visit to China, and how Polo's book inspired later generations of dreamers, merchants and monarchs across Europe in their push to explore the world looking for his riches.

Extension

On tour: Case di Marco Polo, Venezia

While on tour, students in Venice can visit the Marco Polo House, which can be found nearby the St. John Chrysostom Church (San Giovanni Chrisostomo), only a few minutes' walk from the Ponte Rialto. The house is said to be the one the Polo family lived in at the end of his life. There is a small museum on Polo there as well. Look for a small concrete plaque with Marco Polo's name on it. For those students flying into Venice, have them take note that the airport is named after Polo. There is also a statue of the famous Venetian in the main terminal.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/marcopolo.html
Marco Polo: Travels in China (primary source) – excerpts from Polo's book. Recommended for all students and teachers.
- afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/polo_short.pdf
Excerpts from the Book of Ser Marco Polo (primary sources with DBQs) – from the East Asia Institute at Columbia University. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced Students.
- www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Polo.html
Travels of Marco Polo (primary source). Full text online version of Polo's book by Nicholas J. Pappas, History Professor at Sam Houston State University (TX). Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/polo-kinsay.asp
Marco Polo: The Glories of Kinsay (primary source) – from the Medieval Sourcebook at Fordham University.
- website.lineone.net/~mcrouch/marcopolo/book.htm
The Travels of Marco Polo (website). A great place to start for all students and teachers when studying Marco Polo. This site is divided up into manageable sections dealing with Marco Polo and his travels.
- www.silk-road.com/artl/marcopolo.shtml
Marco Polo and his Travels (website) – from the Silkroad Foundation
- acme.highpoint.edu/~amosj05/amos/Marco%20polo.ppt
Marco Polo (PowerPoint) – from Johnathan C. Amos, History Education Major, High Point University (NC)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeFxWaxOR2o
Marco Polo (video)
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwdrxIR8BBc
Marco Polo – Journey to the East (video). This 45-minute video, produced by A&E, is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it, as it traces Marco Polo's journey from Venice to China and back. It also discusses the impact of Polo's book on European society. Highly recommended for students and teachers, even if it is seen out of class.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marco_Polo
Marco Polo – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Travels_of_Marco_Polo
The Travels of Marco Polo – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice
On the Road: Venice – from Passports Educational Travel
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice_a_special_introduction

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-
tales](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-
tales)
Medieval England – Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215
Medieval England – Magna Carta 1215
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy
Medieval France – The Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge
Medieval / Renaissance Venice - The Doge: Merchant Rulers of the Republic
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague 1348
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno
Medieval Europe – Dante's Inferno
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso
Medieval Europe – Dante's Paradiso
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio
Medieval Europe – Dante's Purgatorio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-
travels](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-
travels)
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade
Medieval Venice – Fourth Crusade
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain 711-1492
- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-
1054](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-
1054)
Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox
- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-
constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-
constantinople-1453)
Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453

Key Terms

- Chronicle
- Marco Polo
- Silk Road
- Venice

