



Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World

By John Larner

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After many years in Asia, Marco Polo wrote one of the most influential books of the past millennium. No mere travel account, Polo's *Book* is a work that played a key role in the development of European overseas expansion. In this engaging and authoritative book, historian John Larner explores for the first time the full range of influence of Polo's *Book* on the history of geography and exploration. Larner assesses the findings of modern scholarship and offers an original account of Polo and his family, of how and why the *Book* came into being, and of its reception over the centuries.

Beginning with a discussion of the extent of European knowledge of Asia early in the thirteenth century, Larner considers what is known about Marco Polo's life and the composition of his text. He examines the *Book's* scope and sources (vindicating its author from recent claims that he never visited China), as well as the nature of Polo's cooperation with his co-author Rustichello da Pisa. He traces the manuscript forms and translations of Polo's *Book* in the Middle Ages, its influence on Western cartographers, its fortunes in the climate of fifteenth-century humanism, the possible extent of its encouragement to Columbus, and its later evolution into such new guises as the object of historical scholarship and exotic curiosity. Finally, Larner provides a fresh view of the enigmatic Polo, who, despite a deliberate cultivation of impersonality, continues today to engage the attention of readers.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Marco Polo is important not because he traveled extensively in Asia--other 13th-century Europeans did that--but because he wrote down his experiences for others to read. In this excellent study, John Larner of Glasgow University assesses the impact of Polo's *Travels* on the intellectual society of his day. The book's contribution to learning was immense, giving medieval Europeans new information that forever changed their understanding of Europe's place in the world. Larner analyzes different versions of the book, originally written in a Genoa prison and translated into many languages within Polo's lifetime. He illustrates a number of fascinating early maps and analyzes Polo's influence on later geographical and literary treatises. Though Polo says very little about himself, Larner finds clues to his personality. Polo left Venice when he was 17 and remained in Asia until he was 41; Europe must have seemed strange to him, even uncouth, after his decades of service to Kublai Khan, Mongol emperor of China, the richest and most sophisticated country in the world at the time. Polo formed a strong affinity with the Mongolians, which may explain his failure to learn the Chinese language or mention Chinese customs such as tea-drinking or foot binding, occasionally suggested as evidence that he never in fact visited China. *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* demonstrates in straightforward language and with satisfying detective work how the record of a man's travels became one the most influential books of the millennium. --John Stevenson

From Library Journal

Larner (Culture and Society in Italy 1290-1420) focuses on the book that Marco Polo produced. After setting the stage, he introduces us to both Marco Polo and the man he believes was his coauthor, Rustichello da Pisa (whom Polo met when both were prisoners of the Genoese). He makes his case by arguing that the type of occupation-specific education that Polo, a member of Venice's mercantile class, had received before his journey to China would not have enabled him to write a literate narrative. Rustichello, on the other hand, was a minor author of literary romance, an ideal partner to sort out Polo's notes and arrange them into the work that captivated a generation. (Its geographical content, descriptions of Chinese cities and Mongol customs, and emphasis on the wealth of the East, Larner argues, inspired the Age of Discovery.) He also refutes Frances Wood's theory (in *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*, LJ 9/1/95) that he never went to China by presenting reasoned proof that he couldn't have been anywhere else for 24 years. Of interest to students and lay readers with an interest in history; for academic and larger public libraries. A Robert James Andrews, Duluth P.L., MN

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Review

In *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, John Larner aims to demonstrate the Venetian's contribution to the age of European discovery by comparing 'what was generally believed about the geography of the world' before Polo wrote his book with what it was afterward. -- William McGurn, *Wall Street Journal*

Larner shows us that the accounts of Polo's experiences opened up for his contemporaries a sensuous world that was wholly new to them. His book gave the West a body of geographical knowledge previously unmatched in scale. The information the book, at first ignored, but later embraced by cartographers, changed forever the European understanding of the world. In this engaging and authoritative study of Polo's great masterpiece, John Larner teases out a fresh sense of the enigmatic man himself. -- Don DeNevi, *Palo Alto Daily News*

Much is alien and strangely wondrous in the history of the book. So John Larner makes clear in his learned

history of the book of travels that Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant who became a minor official of a Mongol khan, co-authored in a 13th century Genoese prison. -- *Tom Engelhardt, Los Angeles Times*

[An] erudite and highly personal book. -- *Jonathan Spence, The New York Times Book Review*

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Amanda Bell:

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