

Medieval Exploration

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the late 400's, Europe was divided into small kingdoms and other states. For about the next 600 to 800 years, most Europeans had neither the means nor the desire to engage in exploration. During this same period, Muslims--that is, followers of the religion of Islam--established a huge empire that eventually extended throughout the Middle East and across northern Africa. Many Muslims became expert navigators. Muslim merchant ships with lateen (triangular) sails ranged throughout the Indian Ocean, going as far as East Africa and Southeast Asia.



This map shows how much of the world's lands (yellow) and seas (blue) were known to Europeans by the A.D. 1300's.

By about the 1200's, the Chinese and Europeans had a renewed interest in exploration. By that time, explorers could find their direction more easily because of the development of the magnetic compass. Some scholars believe that the Chinese were the first to use the compass for navigation about 1100 and that it was quickly adopted by Muslims and northern Europeans. Others believe that Muslims and northern Europeans independently developed the use of the compass for ship navigation.

Muslims studied the writings of ancient authorities and produced outstanding geographies and maps. During the 1100's, for example, al-Idrisi (*uhl ih DREE see*) traveled widely throughout the Middle East. After moving to the court of King Roger II of Sicily, al-Idrisi prepared an important geographical treatise, often called *The Book of Roger*. Completed in 1154, it surveyed all the countries of the world known to Europeans and Muslims of that time.

The most celebrated Muslim explorer was Ibn Battuta (*IHB uhn bat TOO tah*), who was born in Morocco. From 1325 to 1354, he traveled as far as India and China. He also visited the Mali Empire in western Africa south of the Sahara. His account of his travels is often called *Rihla* (Journey).

The most important European explorers from the fall of the Roman Empire to about the 1000's were the Vikings, who originally came from Scandinavia. About 800, they settled the Shetlands, the Faroes, and other islands in the North Atlantic Ocean. About 860, a storm drove a Viking ship to a large island that was later named Iceland. The Norse began to settle Iceland about 870, and it became the base for later voyages.

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About 900, Gunnbjorn Ulfsson, a Viking leader, sighted Greenland. About 982, Eric the Red began exploring the coast of this huge island. Eric and other Vikings later established colonies there.

About 986, another Viking leader, Bjarni Herjolfsson (*BYAHR nee hehr YOHLF suhn*), was driven off course while sailing from Iceland to Greenland. Herjolfsson sighted a coastline to the west--probably North America--but he did not land there. Instead, he went on to Greenland. About 1000, Leif Ericson, son of Eric the Red, led an exploring party to the land Herjolfsson had sighted. He set up a base at a place he called *Vinland*. No one knows exactly where *Vinland* was, but most experts believe that it lay in what is now the Canadian province of Newfoundland. Vikings made several other voyages to *Vinland* and established a colony there. But conflicts with the local peoples and other problems led the Vikings to abandon the colony about 1014.

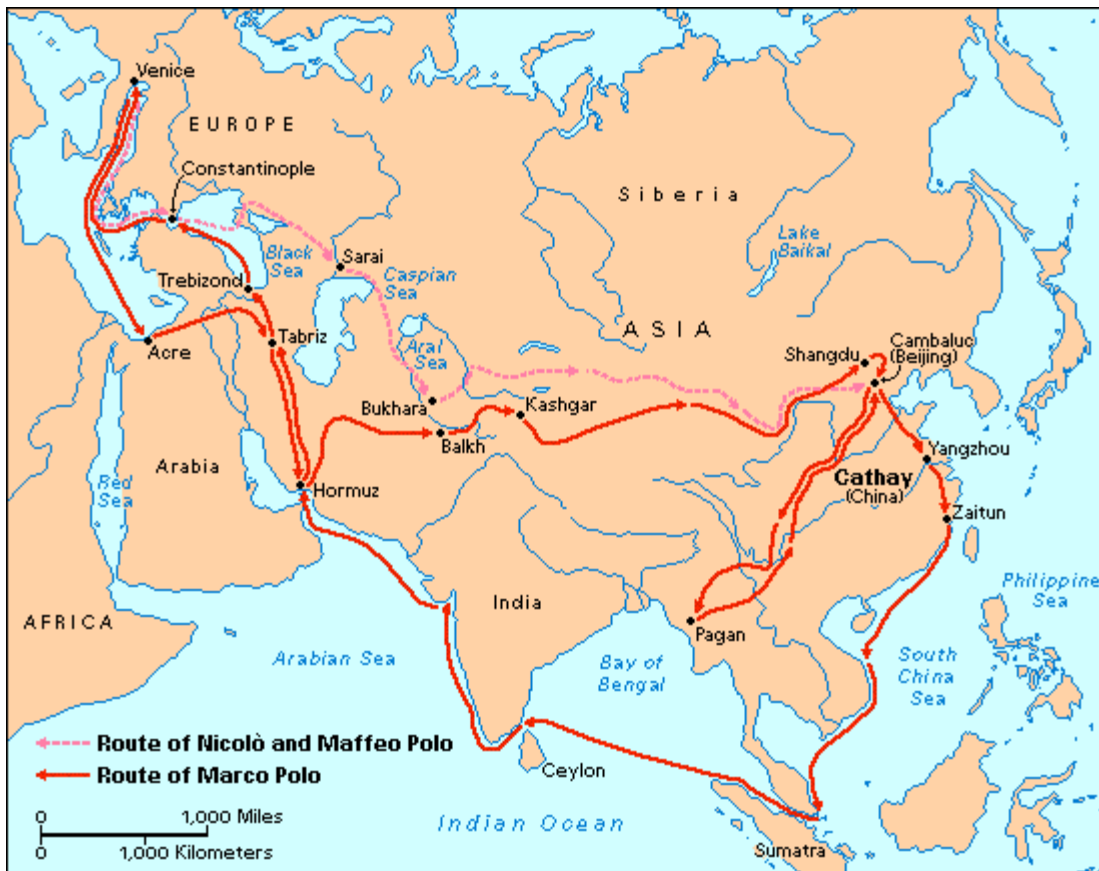


The Vikings sailed from Scandinavia in three main directions from the A.D. 700's to the 1000's. The Danes went south and raided Germany, France, England, Spain, and the Mediterranean coast. The Norwegians traveled to North America. The Swedes went to Eastern Europe.

During the mid-1200's, Europeans came into more direct contact with central and eastern Asia than ever before. At that time, most of Asia was ruled by the Mongols, a nomadic people who were superior fighters. European leaders hoped to convert the Mongols to Christianity and persuade them to become allies against Muslim rulers in the Middle East and northern Africa. In the 1240's and 1250's, several Franciscan and Dominican friars, including William of Rubruck, John Plano of Carpini, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Marignola, Jordanus Catalanus and a few others. John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, visited the camp of the *khan* (Mongol leader) at *Karakorum* in what is now Mongolia. The friars failed to convert the *khan* to Christianity, but they brought back much information about eastern Asia. A great discussion of these European travelers' writings can be found in "Beyond the Horizons of Legends: Traditional Imagery and Direct Experience in Medieval Accounts of Asia" by Jana Valtrava (*Numen* 57 (2010) 154-185) see the article attached to this web page.

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The most famous European traveler in Asia in the 1200's was Marco Polo, a native of Venice. In 1271, when Marco was 17, he accompanied his father, Nicolo, and his uncle Maffeo to *Cathay* [China]. Nicolo and Maffeo Polo were merchants. They had visited China in the 1260's and had been well received by Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor of China. During Marco's visit, he made such a favorable impression on Kublai Khan that the Mongol ruler sent him on official missions throughout the kingdom. After returning to Venice in 1295, Marco was taken prisoner during a conflict between Venice and Genoa. While in captivity, he dictated an account of his travels. This widely read book, called *Description of the World*, was the first to provide Europeans with detailed and accurate information about China's impressive civilization.



Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled from Venice to Asia in the mid-1200's. Their route is shown on the map as a dashed line. The Polos, this time accompanied by Marco, set out again for *Cathay* in 1271 and reached *Shangdu* in 1274. Marco Polo's travels took him as far as *Pagan* in what is now Myanmar. The three Polos stayed in *Cathay* until 1292 and returned to Venice in 1295. Marco's route is shown as a solid line on the map.

In 1405, the Chinese eunuch admiral Zheng He set forth with a fleet of 317 ships crewed by 27,870 men. Their two-year mission: to seek out new life forms and new civilizations (and make them submit to the Emperor). Between 1405 and 1431, the exploration fleets made seven major voyages, traveling to India, Ceylon, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa (some scholars going so far as speculating on the expedition circumnavigating Africa). They brought back curiosities such as zebras, ostriches, and

giraffes (and the king of Ceylon, who did not appreciate their visit). They also distributed lavish foreign aid on those princes who swore fealty to the Chinese Emperor.

Then, they stopped. The entire program was shut down. The mighty shipyards no longer produced long-range vessels. Ownership of oceangoing ships was forbidden to Chinese citizens. Foreign trade of any kind was discouraged, whether by land or sea. In 1479, the War Ministry destroyed the official records of the journeys. Chinese exploration might never have happened, for all its effect on future generations.

European exploration got off to a later start, on a shoestring compared to the Imperial budgets of the Chinese. The Europeans did not succeed because of superior ship technology, either. Zheng He's exploration vessels had compasses, stern post rudders, and multiple watertight compartments. Scholars estimate the largest of the vessels were over 400 feet long, and displaced up to 3,000 tons. (The *Nina*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* of 1492 are thought to have been smaller than 100 tons; they could have served as lifeboats for Zheng He).

The difference between European and Chinese exploration was simple. Chinese explorations were huge government projects whose goal was prestige (and perhaps shipbuilding contracts for the politically favored?). They were not followed by traders or settlers, because the Emperors valued control over their subjects' lives above all else. The Emperors did not believe in individual rights or private property apart from that granted by the all-powerful state. The Chinese Age of Exploration was founded squarely on the ideal of government control of- everything.

European explorations were often also funded by governments. But they were followed rapidly by traders and colonists. Private property and trade built the economic strength of the European colonies. Even those who came to the New World to create planned societies, like the Pilgrims, ended up adopting free enterprise instead.

The European travelers of the 13th and 14th century set out on their journeys with certain predetermined images of the East in mind; these were based on earlier accounts by authors of antiquity, who wrote primarily about "India," as well as by the authorities of the Christian era, above all Isidore of Seville (†636) and other encyclopedists. Even the exact meaning of the term "India" often varies in ancient and medieval sources. It was used not only to designate the Indian subcontinent, but also parts of China, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula or Ethiopia. Among the most important ancient authors writing about India Ctesias of Knidos and Megasthenes can be mentioned.

Images of the East were also widely reflected in the fine arts. During their journeys, the medieval missionaries had to confront their expectations with reality, which in many cases completely differed from what they had imagined. The proportion of space these authors devoted to traditional imagery and to their personal observations, as well as the manner in which they reconciled the two, differs among the texts. The differences are based on a range of factors, including the genre and purpose of the work, the intended audience and, last but not least, potential interventions by later editors.

What was then the traditional image of the mythical East in the minds of these missionaries as they were setting out on their journeys? There was obviously no authoritative canon, and images of the East appeared in different numbers and modifications. Yet some can be described as almost universal, including those that appear, for example, in the world maps from that time, for example the maps from Hereford (around 1276–83, #226) or Ebstorf (around 1235, #224).

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