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## **ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION ON EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE WORK OF MARKO POLO**

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### **Abstract**

Medieval travelers are known for the historical, cultural, and religious significance of their journeys across vast geographical territories. In their works, they left valuable information about the social, political, and cultural structures of their time. Their exploration was not limited to geography—they also studied new cultures, religious beliefs, and social systems. Their writings are widely used today in the fields of history, geography, cultural studies, and religious studies.

This article is dedicated to the history of the early Christian communities as presented in the travelogues of European travelers of the 13th century. The article analyzes information about the first Christians mentioned in Marco Polo's "Book of the Diversity of the World."

**Keywords:** Early christian communities, nestorians, jacobites, saracens, manuscript, "the Million".

Medieval Western travelers were European explorers, merchants, missionaries, and pilgrims who traveled to Asia, Africa, and the Near East during the 13th to 15th centuries, recording their experiences. Their works played a major role in shaping the Western world's early perceptions of the East.

Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant who gained wealth in the China of Kublai Khan and returned to his homeland Italy in 1295 after an approximately twenty-five-year-long journey. He later dictated his memoirs while imprisoned in Genoa and passed away in his hometown in 1324<sup>1</sup>. French writer Édouard Charton (1807–

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<sup>1</sup> Olshki L. Marco Polo's Asia. University of California Press, 1960 . P. 97.



1890), in his four-volume anthology “Ancient and Modern Travelers,” compared Marco Polo to Herodotus as a discoverer of the East, saying: “Before him, the central and northern parts of Asia were blank, dark spaces on the maps.”<sup>2</sup> The great French scholar, encyclopedist, traveler, and writer Jules Verne also acknowledged Marco Polo’s invaluable contributions.

From 1271 to 1295, Marco Polo traveled across Asia together with his father Niccolò and uncle Maffeo. They reached the southeastern shores of Asia Minor by sea and continued overland through the Armenian Highlands, Mesopotamia, the Iranian Plateau, the Pamirs, and Kashgar, finally arriving in China<sup>3</sup>.

“The description of Marco Polo’s travels” in Asia and Africa between 1276 and 1291 is recorded in the “Book of the Marvels of the World” (*Livres des merveilles du monde*), written in Old French by a writer named Rustichello da Pisa.

There are differing opinions regarding the title of the book. In England, it is known as “The Travels of Marco Polo”, while Italians call it “Il Milione<sup>4</sup>” However, this work is not merely a tale of Marco Polo’s journeys; rather, it is considered a “book of the description of the world and its wonders” and is regarded as one of the earliest examples of scientific geography<sup>5</sup>.

There are around 150 copies of the book<sup>6</sup>, with three ancient manuscripts recognized as particularly significant:

1. Franco-Italian text – preserved in the National Library of Paris (MS. français 1116), famously known as the F manuscript.
2. Italian version – written by G.B. Ramusio and first published in 1559, known as the R manuscript.

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<sup>2</sup> Гаркавец А.Н. Марко Поло по прозвищу Миллион и его «Книга о разнообразии мира» // Золотоордынское обозрение. 2017. Т. 5, № 3. С. 522– 565. DOI: 10.22378/2313-6197.2017-5-3.522-565

<sup>3</sup> Поло : [арх. 3 января 2023] / К. А. Чекалов // Большая российская энциклопедия : [в 35 т.] / гл. ред. Ю. С. Осипов. — М. : Большая российская энциклопедия, 2004—2017.

<sup>4</sup> Marko Polo always spoke of Kublai Khan's glory, his annual income estimated at ten to fifteen million in gold, and the riches of those lands. He recounted all of this by repeatedly using the word "millions," which is why he was given the nickname "Messer Marko Millioni."

<sup>5</sup> Marco Polo. The Description of the World / Ed. by A.C. Moule, P. Pelliot. — London: G. Routledge and Sons Limited, 1938. — T. I. — P. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Mund S. Constitution et diffusion d'un savoir occidental sur le monde «russe» au Moyen Age (fin Xe-milieu XVe siècle) // Le Moyen Age. — 2004. — T. CX. — Vol. 3. — P. 577.



3. Latin text – kept in the Cathedral Library of Toledo, known there as the Z manuscript.

The travelogue is divided into four parts:

- The first part describes the regions of the Near East and Central Asia that Marco Polo visited on his way to China.
- The second part details China and the court of Kublai Khan.
- The third part discusses coastal regions and countries such as Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and the eastern coast of Africa.
- The fourth part narrates some wars between the Mongols and their northern neighbors.

Shortly after its creation, the book was translated into Venetian and Latin, and later from Latin into French. During translation and copying, the text underwent changes—some sections were added or removed. For this reason, the oldest surviving manuscript is considered to be the F manuscript<sup>7</sup>.

The first scientific Russian translation of the book was done in 1880 by Professor Ivan Pavlovich Minayev<sup>8</sup>.

The Uzbek translation of the book about Marco Polo's travels is available under the title "The Amazing Adventures of Marco Polo." This edition is based on Marco Polo's original stories and was prepared by Willy Maync and published by the "O'zbekiston NMIU" publishing house<sup>9</sup>.

Religious themes in Marco Polo's travels are evident from the very beginning of the book. For example, in the translation by I.P. Minaev titled "The Travels of Marco Polo," there is an episode describing how Niccolò and Maffeo Polo traveled to Jerusalem, obtained holy oil from the lamp burning above the Holy Sepulchre, and received a blessing from the Pope. This story is told in the chapter about their return

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<sup>7</sup> *Critchley J. S. Marco Polo's Book* (англ.): New edition Edition — United Kingdom: Variorum, 1993. — ISBN 978-0-86078-361-9

<sup>8</sup> Минаев, Иван Павлович (1840-1890). Путешествие Марко Поло : Пер. старофр. текста / И. П. Минаев ; Импр. рус. геогр. о-во ; Под ред. действ. чл. В. В. Бартольда. - СПб. : тип. М. М. Стасюлевича, 1902. - XXIX, [5], 355 с.

<sup>9</sup> Майнк Вилли. Марко Полонинг ажойиб ва таройиб саргузаштлари. (Кисса). М. Мирзоидов ва Э. Носиров тарж. Т., «Шарк» НМК, 1994. - 416 б.



from China and their preparation for a new diplomatic mission at the request of the Khan<sup>10</sup>.

During his travels across Asia, Marco Polo encountered various Christian communities spread from one end of the continent to the other. His book is considered the most comprehensive and accurate source of information about the spread of Christianity in Asia during the Middle Ages. This spread peaked during the period when the Polo family made their journeys to the East. The book covers not only sects belonging to ancient Asian traditions but also European churches.

Marco Polo primarily wrote about the Nestorians—the only Christian denomination in Asia at the time—emphasizing their distinct church hierarchy. He also noted that they were recognized and protected by the Mongol Empire. For example, in Georgia, whose capital was Tbilisi, Christian communities of the Armenian tradition lived in castles and villages nestled in the mountains. Among them were also small numbers of Saracens and Jews.

When describing the Kingdom of Mosul, located in the southern part of Armenia, Marco Polo mentioned that Nestorians and Jacobites lived there. He wrote that they believed in the “religion of Christ,” but not in the way defined by the Roman Church, implying that they held certain doctrinal errors. However, he did not specify what these errors were.

In conclusion, the history of early Christian communities has rarely been studied by medieval scholars in comparison to other periods. This is reflected in the works of several 13th-century travelers, where such information is embedded within travelogues, thus blending historical narrative with personal journey accounts.

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