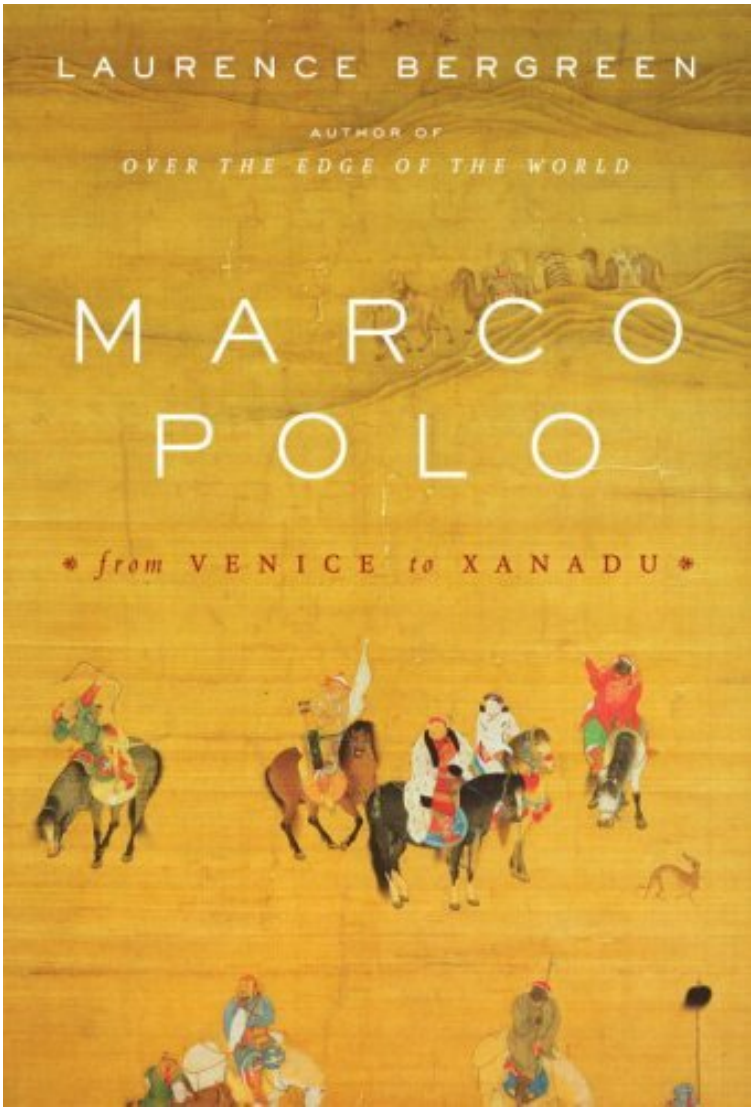
Marco Polo



Par Laurence Bergreen
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(Free download) Marco Polo

Par Laurence Bergreen : Marco Polo before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Marco Polo:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAs the first European to travel extensively throughout Asia, Marco Polo was the earliest bridge between East and West. His famous journeys took him across the boundaries of the known world, along the dangerous Silk Road, and into the court of Kublai Kahn, where he won the trust of the most feared and reviled leader of his day. Polo introduced the cultural riches of China to Europe, spawning centuries of Western fascination with Asia.In this lively blend of history, biography, and travelogue, acclaimed author Laurence Bergreen separates myth from history, creating the most authoritative account yet of Polo's remarkable adventures. Exceptionally narrated and written with a discerning eye for detail, Marco Polo is as riveting as the life it describes.ExtraitChapter One: The Merchants of Venice Then all the charm Is brokenall that phantom-world so fair Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread. . . . She hid from her

enemies amid a seductive array of islands, 118 in all. Damp, dark, cloistered, and crowded, she perched on rocks and silt. Fortifications and spectacular residences rose on foundations of pinewood piles and Istrian stone. In Marco Polo's Venice, few edificeswith the exception of one huge Byzantine basilica and other large churchesstood entirely straight; most structures seemed to rise uncertainly from the water. Marco Polo came of age in a city of night edging toward dawn; it was opaque, secretive, and rife with transgressions and superstitions. Even those who had lived their entire lives in Venice became disoriented as they wandered down blind alleys that turned without warning from familiar to sinister. The whispers of conspiracy and the laughter of intimacy echoed through narrow passageways from invisible sources; behind dim windows, candles and torches flickered discreetly. In the evening, cobwebs of mist arose from the canals, imposing silence and isolation, obscuring the lanterns in the streets or in windows overlooking the gently heaving canals. Rats were everywhereemerging from the canals, scurrying along the wharves and streets, gnawing at the city's fragile infrastructure, bringing the plague with them. The narrow streets and passageways, some barely shoulder-width, took bewildering twists and turns until, without warning, they opened to the broad expanse of the Grand Canal, which divided one-half of the city from the other before running into the lagoon and, beyond that, the expanses of the Adriatic Sea. In winter, the city hosted Carnival (literally, the playful "bidding farewell to meat" before Lent). Carnival became the occasion for orgies taking place just out of sight behind high courtyard walls and opaque curtains. Rumors of foul play ran rife amid the gaiety and sensuality of the Republic. Venetians bent on evil preferred quiet means of imposing death, such as poisoning or strangulation, and they usually got away with it. In an uncertain world, thirteenth-century Venetians could feel certain of a few things. Two hundred years before Copernicus and three hundred before Galileo, it was an article of faith that the Sun revolved around the Earth, that the heavenly spheres were perfectly smooth, and that Creation occurred exactly 4,484 years before Rome was founded. Jerusalem was considered "the navel of the world." Entrances to Heaven and Hell existed, somewhere. The day, for most people, was subdivided into times for prayer: matins at midnight, lauds three hours later, prime at daybreak, terce at midmorning, sext at noon, none at midafternoon, vespers at sunset, and, at bedtime, compline. In the Age of Faith, science consisted largely but not entirely of spurious pursuits such as alchemythe effort to transmute so-called base metals into goldand astrology, which went hand in hand with astronomy. People depended on wind, water, and animals for power. In Western Europe, coal had yet to be exploited as an energy source; paper money and the printing press also lay two hundred years in the future. The most advanced technology consisted of shipsconsidered a marvel of transport, though very dangerousand devices capable of sawing wood, pressing olives, and tanning hides. Throughout Europe, travel was exceedingly slow and hazardous. Crossing the English Channel was a dreaded undertaking; those who completed the ordeal would claim that the effort had impaired their health. Over land, people moved no faster than a horse could take them; the average land journey covered eight to ten miles a day, or under special circumstances, for brief durations, fifteen to twenty miles. Superstition led those who undertook such journeys to seek shelter at nightfall in primitive inns, infested with vermin, where two or three sojourners shared a single bed. It took five harrowing weeks to ride by cart from Paris to Venice. But in Venice, conditions were very different. Tiny in size, yet global in outlook, Venice was entering the Late Middle Ages, a period of economic expansion, cultural achievement, and the lowering of barriers to commercial activity. Travel was not the exception, it was the norm. Everyone in Venice, it seemed, was a traveler and a merchant, or aspired to be. Across Europe, political power, formerly scattered among disorganized and crumbling empires reaching back to Roman times, had coalesced in well-armed and well-organized city-states, such as Venice. The growth in commerce among European city-states contributed to rapid advances in art, technology, exploration, and finance. The compass and clock, windmill and watermillall vital to the smooth functioning of European economiescame into being, and great universities that survive to this day were being founded. As a result of all these advances, Veniceindeed, all of Europe as we know itbegan to emerge. Veniceseductive, Byzantine, and water-boundwas among the most important centers of commerce and culture in thirteenth-century Europe, a flourishing city-state that lived by trade. Her economy thrived thanks to her aggressive navy, which vigorously defended the city from repeated onslaughts by rapacious Genoese rivals and Arab marauders. Unlike other medieval cities, Venice had no walls or gates. They were not necessary. The lagoon and swamps protected Venice from invaders by land or by sea. As the gateway to the riches of the East, Venice gave rise to a sophisticated merchant aristocracy, including the Polo family, known for frequent journeys to the East, especially Constantinople, in search of jewels, silks, and spices. Venice was highly structured, fiercely independent and commercial, and based on a unique combination of

feudal obligation, and global outlook. Because Venice was compact, hemmed in by the lagoon and by its enemies, the sense of common cause among its inhabitants was strong. "By virtually confining the Venetians to so restricted a space," says the historian John Julius Norwich, "it had created in them a unique spirit of cohesion and cooperation . . . not only at times of national crisis but also, and still more impressively, in the day-to-day handling of their affairs. Among Venice's rich merchant aristocracy everyone knew everyone else, and close acquaintance led to mutual trust of a kind that in other cities seldom extended far outside the family circle." As a result, Venetians developed a reputation for efficient and thorough business administrationthe most advanced in Europe. "A trading venture," Norwich says, "even one that involved immense initial outlay, several years' duration, and considerable risk, could be arranged on the Rialto in a matter of hours. It might take the form of a simple partnership between two merchants, or that of a large corporation of the kind needed to finance a full-sized fleet or trans-Asiatic caravan." Either way, Norwich concludes, "it would be founded on trust, and it would be inviolable." The contractual underpinnings of a journey such as the one undertaken by the Polo family to China were a bit more formal than a mere handshake or oath. Marco Polo came of age in a city teeming with commerce. Venetian merchants had developed all sorts of strategies for dealing with the vagaries of their livelihood, global trade. In the absence of standard exchange rates, the many types of coins in use created a nightmare of conversion. The Byzantine Empire had its bezants, Arabic lands their drachmas, Florence its florins. Venice, relying on the ratio of gold to silver in a given coin to determine its true value, tried to accommodate them all. Merchants such as the Polos sought to circumvent the vexed system of coins, with its inevitable confusion and debasement, by trading in gems such as rubies and sapphires, and in pearls. To meet these sophisticated and exotic financial needs, Venice developed the most advanced banking system in Western Europe. Banks of deposit on the Continent originated there. In 1156, the Republic of Venice became the first state since antiquity to raise a public loan. It also passed the first banking laws in Europe to regulate the nascent banking industry. As a result of these innovations, Venice offered the most advanced business practices in Europe. Venice adapted Roman contracts to the needs of merchants trading with the East. Sophisticated sea-loan and sea-exchange contracts spelled out obligations between shipowners and merchants, and even offered insurancemandatory in Venice beginning in 1253. The most widespread type of agreement among merchants was the commenda, or, in Venetian dialect, the collegantia, a contract based on ancient models. Loosely translated, the term meant "business venture," and it reflected prevailing customs of the trade rather than a set of consistent legal principles. Although these twelfth- and thirteenth-century contracts seem antiquated, they are startlingly modern in their calls for precise accounting. Contracts like these reflected and sustained a rudimentary form of capitalism long before the concept came into existence. For Venetians, the world was startlingly modern in another way: it was "flat," that is to say, globally connected across boundaries and borders, both natural and artificial. They saw the world as a network of endlessly changing trade routes and opportunities extending over land and sea. By ship or caravan, Venetian merchants traveled to the four corners of the world in search of valuable spices, gems, and fabrics. Through their enterprise, minerals, salt, wax, drugs, camphor, gum arabic, myrrh, sandalwood, cinn...Revue de presse"As enthralling as a rollicking travel journal."-- New York Times Book "With his polished, authoritative storytelling, Bergreen makes the world of Marco Polo very pertinent."--Entertainment Weekly"Mesmerizing . . . This is lively history that is richly detailed and destined to be the definitive account of Marco Polo and his adventures for decades to come."--Tucson Citizen"Illuminating . . . A window into the most exotic of places and times."--St. Petersburg Times"Fascinating . . . A constant surprise and delight."--The Plain Dealer"[An] exciting reconstruction of the extraordinary life of Marco Polo . . . impressively researched and deftly composed."--Booklist"This is an enthusiastic retelling of Marco Polo's timeless story. Laurence Bergreen draws from a broad range of the surviving Polo manuscripts to create a convincing portrait of how Marco was able to get to thirteenth century China, and of what he saw, felt and did when he got there. Readers unfamiliar with Polo's adventures will find much pleasure here." --Jonathan Spence, author of Emperor of China"At last! Marco Polo comes to life! Laurence Bergreen, perhaps America's liveliest biographer, has created a triumph of fascinations, a classic portrait that now surely can never be bettered."--Simon Winchester, author of The Map That Changed the World