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## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NOTES OF ITALIAN TRAVELLERS OF THE 13<sup>TH</sup> – 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES IN CENTRAL AND EAST ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of the research paper* is to analyse the notes of Italian travellers of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries about Central and East Asia for the reliability of their information and attitude to the culture of the peoples of the East.

*The scientific novelty* of this study lies in the analysis of medieval Italian travellers' notes, which illuminates the process of mutual understanding and cultural interpenetration between Eastern and Western civilisations.

*Conclusions.* The 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time when a fairly extensive number of works appeared, written by Europeans who had visited Central and East Asia. This phenomenon was determined by the emergence of the vast Mongol Empire, which at first was perceived as a threat to Western Europe, and then began to be seen as a window of opportunity for trade and missionary activity. Italians predominated among travellers, as medieval Italian cities were the flagship in trade with the East, and the Papal See led the activities of missionaries and stood at the forefront of diplomatic activity. Depending on the type of activity, the travellers in their notes drew attention to various aspects of the life of the countries they visited. However, each of them wanted to emphasise the remarkable phenomena and peculiar miracles that they had seen.

In the notes of Italian travellers, the countries of Central and East Asia were presented as a land of fabulous wealth, ruled by despotic autocratic rulers. The countries farthest from the ecumene were initially depicted as lands inhabited by spectacular monsters, and later began to be understood as areas inhabited by dense savages with barbaric manners. The records of medieval Italian travellers about Central and East Asia served as a kind of window to Asia for their readers. They formed a certain image of the Eastern countries, which became entrenched in European culture. The experience of travelling to the countries of the East in the Middle Ages laid the foundations for future travel in the era of the Great Geographical Discoveries.

In the future, it would be useful to investigate the influence of oriental literature on the works of European travellers and how significantly these texts influenced the attitude of Europeans towards the countries of Central and East Asia.

*Keywords:* travelogue, Mongol Empire, Great Silk Road, diplomatic mission, orientalism, Central and East Asia, Italian travellers, Middle Ages

## НАРАТИВНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ЗАПИСОК ІТАЛІЙСЬКИХ МАНДРІВНИКІВ 13-15 СТ. ПО ЦЕНТРАЛЬНІЙ І СХІДНІЙ АЗІЇ

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### АНОТАЦІЯ

**Метою роботи** є аналіз записок італійських мандрівників 13-15 ст. про Центральну та Східну Азію щодо достовірності їх відомостей і ставлення до культури народів Сходу.

**Наукова новизна дослідження** полягає в аналізі записок середньовічних італійських мандрівників, які висвітлюють процес взаєморозуміння та культурного взаємопроникнення між східними та західними цивілізаціями.

**Висновки.** 13-15 століття стали часом появи досить великої кількості праць, написаних європейцями, які відвідали Центральну та Східну Азію. Це було зумовлено виникненням величезної Монгольської імперії, яка спочатку сприймалася як загроза Західній Європі, а потім почала розглядатися як вікно можливостей для торгівлі та місіонерської діяльності. Серед мандрівників переважали італійці, оскільки середньовічні італійські міста були флагманами у торгівлі зі Сходом, а Папський престол керував діяльністю місіонерів і стояв на передньому краї дипломатичної діяльності. Залежно від роду діяльності мандрівники у своїх записах звертали увагу на різні сторони життя відвідуваних ними країн. Однак кожному з них хотілося підкреслити примітні явища та своєрідні дива, які вони бачили.

У записах італійських мандрівників країни Центральної та Східної Азії представлялися як земля казкових багатств, керована деспотичними самодержавними правителями. Країни, найбільш віддалені від ойкумени, спочатку зображувалися як землі, населені величними чудовиськами, а пізніше стали розглядатися як території, населені дрімучими дикунами з варварськими манерами. Записи середньовічних італійських мандрівників про Центральну та Східну Азію служили їх читачам своєрідним вікном до Азії. Вони формували певний образ країн Сходу, що закріпився в європейській культурі. Досвід подорожей країнами Сходу доби Середньовіччя заклав основи майбутніх подорожей в епоху Великих географічних відкриттів.

Надалі було б корисно досліджувати вплив східної літератури на праці європейських мандрівників і те, наскільки суттєво ці тексти впливали на ставлення європейців до країн Центральної та Східної Азії.

**Ключові слова:** подорожні записи, Монгольська імперія, Великий Шовковий шлях, дипломатична місія, орієнталізм, Центральна та Східна Азія, італійські мандрівники, Середньовіччя

## INTRODUCTION

After the establishment of the Mongol Empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, European interest in Central and East Asia increased significantly. The creation of a single political space over a vast territory contributed to the intensification of European travel to Central and East Asia for diplomatic or commercial purposes. Italian travellers were the leaders in this process, which is due to the leading position in international trade of Italian cities and the diplomatic activity of the Holy See. Some of the Italian travellers left notes describing the countries of Central and East Asia. Works that are sketches of travellers in scientific literature are called travelogues (from English – travel)<sup>1</sup>. The notes of Italian travellers show how Europeans perceived the cultures of eastern countries unfamiliar to them. Their analysis helps to determine what the image of the countries of the East was in the minds of medieval Europeans. The study of such a specific meeting of different cultures is unambiguously relevant.

*The purpose of the study* is to analyse the texts of Italian travellers who visited the countries of Central and East Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, in terms of their historical authenticity, content, and perception of the countries and cultures of the East. According to the purpose, the following objectives are set: a) to give a general description of the most significant works of Italian travellers of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries about Central and East Asia; b) to determine the meaning of the notes of Italian travellers as historical sources.

## LITERATURE AND SOURCES REVIEW

The notes of Italian travellers of the Late Middle Ages about the countries of Central and East Asia attracted the attention of many researchers who studied various aspects described in these records. The researchers emphasised the importance of contacts between the peoples of the West and the East at the designated time, and argued that the travelogues of Italian travellers expanded the knowledge of Europeans about Asia. However, researchers have also pointed out the exaggerations and inaccuracies made by the authors of travelogues, which, in turn, contributed to the development of stereotypes.

One of the features of the perception of distant countries among medieval Europeans was that the countries most remote from the ecumenical world were perceived as inhabited by some mysterious creatures or monsters. As the acquaintance with countries far from Europe increased, this perception changed, but the most inaccessible countries in the European environment were perceived as wild, inhabited by people with horrible customs. On the other hand, the 'civilised' countries of the East were described by travellers as fabulously rich lands where expensive goods were not considered of any value. Such a perception fired the imagination and served as the starting point for the European expansion to the East, which took place in the Modern Age.

One of the most popular medieval Italian travellers is Marco Polo, the interest in whose book is still alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among the modern researchers who have studied his work are D. Vijajan and M. Li<sup>2</sup>. In their study, the researchers deal with the

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<sup>1</sup> Сабиров Н.К. Жанровые признаки литературного путешествия // Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences. 2022. № 2 (10). P. 1001-1006. URL: <https://bit.ly/42LPt0D>

<sup>2</sup> Vijajan D., Li M. Marco Polo on China and India: The rhetoric of otherness // Exchanges and Parallels between Italy and East Asia. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. P. 7-22.

perception of India and China by an Italian traveller through the rhetoric of foreignness. Being a European and having written his book for European readers, Marco Polo perceived the countries he visited as those that, in their way of life, were extremely different from those he was used to. It is on this 'foreignness', according to the researchers, that his work is largely based. Marco Polo wanted to surprise his readers with a kind of oriental exoticism, and his text was not without references to 'monsters' inhabiting the most remote territories. In general, the researchers correctly noted the "rhetoric of foreignness" as one of the key features of the book 'The Description of the World'. This feature fits perfectly into the context of the era in which Marco Polo lived, and the principles of the genre of literature in which the text is written. On the other hand, the researchers did not correctly identify the reasons why Marco Polo used such rhetoric. It is hardly possible to agree with the researchers' thesis that the Venetian was moderately carried away by the rhetoric of foreignness.

The history of the interpenetration of Western and Eastern cultures through the missionary activities of the Catholic Church and the travels of Europeans along the Great Silk Road attracts the attention of researchers of Chinese origin. Among them is S. Dong, whose study is devoted to the activities of Catholic missionaries in East Asian countries and their description of the peoples they wanted to convert to Christianity<sup>3</sup>. The researcher emphasises that in the European understanding, starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the vast lands in the East, which occupied the entire Great Steppe and Siberia, were called by the term 'Tartary'. Accordingly, the peoples living here were referred to as 'Tatars'. This term was especially applied to the steppe Turkic and Mongolian peoples. This perception, which remained as a legacy in memory of the Mongol Empire, eventually became the basis for stereotypes. This practice distorted the understanding of the Eastern peoples and did not contribute to their Christianisation. The researcher grasped how the European missionaries perceived Tartary and the Tatars in the corresponding era, considering the steppe peoples the heirs of fierce and aggressive Mongols. On the other hand, the researcher mistakenly transfers such acceptance of Tartary to the majority of travellers, while each of them perceived the 'Tatars' in their way through personal experience.

The records of European travellers as a source of knowledge about the rights and customs of the Eastern peoples were considered by T. Jones<sup>4</sup>. Studying the legal system of the Genghisid state, the researcher says that European travellers who visited the territory of the Mongol Empire in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, in particular, Marco Polo and da Pian del Carpine, noticed the specific features of the political structure, discipline, and organisation of the army of the Mongol Empire. The researcher notes that certain features of the social structure of the Mongolian state could have escaped the attention of European travellers. Thus, European travellers note the absolute and indisputable power of the khan over his subordinates. According to the researcher, in the Mongol Empire, there were disagreements within the Genghisid dynasty that limited the absolute power of one khan. However, such

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<sup>3</sup> Dong S. The Tartars in European missionary writings of the seventeenth century // *Foreign Devils and Philosophers: Cultural Encounters between the Chinese, the Dutch, and Other Europeans, 1590-1800*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. P. 82-103 DOI: 10.1163/9789004418929\_005

<sup>4</sup> Jones T. The objects of loyalty in the early Mongol Empire (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) // *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*. 2023. № 61 (2). P. 196-220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2021.1915701>

nuances remained beyond the attention of travellers. The researcher conducted a thorough study, and it is quite reasonable to agree with the main thesis. On the other hand, European travellers were observers who paid attention to certain points that were of interest to them and assessed the social life of the Mongolian elite from their European perspective. Therefore, it is unlikely to be correct to make demands on European travellers regarding their knowledge of the nuances of an alien society that they do not understand.

The study of the records of Italian travellers of the Late Middle Ages about the countries of Central and East Asia has been the focus of many researchers who turned their attention to various aspects of travelogues, from their authenticity to their cultural influence. A. Mukhametkali investigated<sup>5</sup> the first and most famous Italian travelogues about Central and East Asia – ‘The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars’ by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine<sup>6</sup>, and ‘The description of the world’ by Marco Polo<sup>7</sup>. The researcher notes that the emergence of the Mongol Empire, which pursued a policy of religious tolerance, contributed to the intensification of contacts between Europe and Asia. Marco Polo’s journey from Venice to China and back has gone down in history forever and has aroused the interest of Europeans in travel.

R.Yu. Pochekaev analysed the notes of Italian missionaries on the Mongol Empire as a historical source for the study of the customary law of the Mongols and, in particular, the Golden Horde<sup>8</sup>. According to the researcher, the Italian missionaries, who intensified their activities in the East in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, made interesting observations regarding the system of punishments in Mongolian society, which significantly expands the understanding of the Mongolian legal system.

G. Bedelova and A. Tynyshtykbay, in turn, studied the records of Italian travellers from the standpoint of a historical source for the analysis of the economic system of the Golden Horde<sup>9</sup>. Marco Polo’s book, as an important source for studying the political situation in the Central Asian region, in particular, in the Pamir communities, notes M.Kh. Pirumshoev<sup>10</sup>.

J.K.U. Davlatov<sup>11</sup> and L.Sh. Rakhimzhanova<sup>12</sup> consider such aspects of the history of Central Asia as the Islamisation of the population and urban growth. Italian travellers, according to researchers, left important information that allows tracing the process of

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<sup>5</sup> Мухаметкали А. Характер экспедиций итальянских путешественников в Центральную Азию в XIII веке // Bulletin of KazNU. Historical Series. 2023. № 108 (1). P. 151-160. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26577/ИИ.2023.v108.i1.016>

<sup>6</sup> da Pian del Carpine G. The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars. Wellesley: Branden Publishing Company, 1996. 136 p.

<sup>7</sup> Polo M. The description of the world. London: Routledge, 1938. 595 p.

<sup>8</sup> Почекаев Р.Ю. Право и суд Улуса Джучи (Золотой Орды) в записках католических миссионеров конца XIII-XIV вв. // Вестник Евразийского национального университета имени Л.Н. Гумилева. Серия: Исторические науки. Философия. Религиоведение. 2021. № 136 (3). С. 62-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2021-136-3-62-73>

<sup>9</sup> Bedelova G., Tynyshtykbay A. Some data on the peculiarities of the economic system formation of Jochi’s khanaite // Norwegian Journal of Development of the International Science. 2018. № 5 (17). P. 38-41.

<sup>10</sup> Пирумшоев М.Х. Памир в период владычества монголов в Средней Азии (начала XIII – первой половине XIV вв.) // Муаррих-Историк-Historian. 2023. № 2 (34). С. 85-91.

<sup>11</sup> Давлатов Дж.К.У. Исламизация Чагатайского улуса как важный фактор укрепления государственности в кочевой степи // Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences. 2021. № 1 (9). С. 931-938.

<sup>12</sup> Рахимжанова Л.Ш. Градостроительство кочевой знати в степях Центральной Азии в средние века // Concorde. 2023. № 4. P. 51-73.

gradual Islamisation of the region and making sure that Central Asia was a hotbed of rich urban culture. Thus, the researchers studied various aspects of the designated topic. The issues of mutual influence of travelogues and the evolution of perception of eastern countries and remote territories in the minds of educated Europeans in the Middle Ages remain poorly investigated.

The history of Italian travelogues and their significance in culture is the subject of a collective study by B. Falcucci et al.<sup>13</sup> The researchers considered the specifics of Italian travellers' notes about the East in the context of the development of this genre of literature and Italians' perception of the countries of the East. The researchers claim that travelogues have had a significant impact on Italian literature, culture, and society. In their opinion, the records of Italian travellers about the countries of the East became a basis for further perception by Europeans of eastern countries far from Europe, which marked the beginning of Orientalism of the Modern Age. There was also a reinterpretation and a new reading of these texts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It contributed to the growth of the national consciousness of Italians and the development of the canon of classical Italian literature, which, in turn, influenced the establishment of a unified Italian nation. The investigation is interesting from the standpoint of the researchers' perception of the records of medieval Italian travellers about the East and the context in which the authors studied them. Despite the general correctness of the conclusions, the influence of medieval travelogues on modern Italy is hardly worth exaggerating.

Thus, the researchers considered various aspects of this topic. Most of them correctly noted the cultural influence of the notes of medieval Italian travellers about the countries of the East. The researchers noticed that the appearance of such literature in medieval Europe, on the one hand, expanded the knowledge of enlightened Europeans about the East, and on the other hand, formed a certain set of stereotypes about Central and East Asia and created the basis for the establishment of European Orientalism.

One of the goals of European travel to the Far East in the Middle Ages was the spread of Christianity, but the results of the missionaries' activities were more than modest, which is also emphasised by the researchers. This turn of events, to some extent, contributed to the fact that the East began to be perceived as a land inhabited by ignorant pagans, which influenced the further aggravation of relations between the West and the East. On the other hand, it is hardly worth overestimating the role of Italian travellers' records on global processes that have occurred in the Modern Age, as some researchers do. For various reasons, for a long time, a rather narrow group of people remained readers of travelogues.

The research sources were the records of Italian travellers who visited the countries of Central and East Asia at the designated time: 'The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars' by the diplomat Giovanni da Pian del Carpine<sup>14</sup>, 'The description of the world' by the merchant Marco Polo<sup>15</sup>, notes by Franciscan missionaries Giovanni da Montecorvino, Odorico da Pordenone, and Giovanni de

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<sup>13</sup> Falcucci B., Giusti E., Trentacoste D. Rereading travellers to the East: Shaping identities and building the nation in post-unification Italy. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2022. 232 p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-5518-579-0>

<sup>14</sup> da Pian del Carpine G. The story of the Mongols...

<sup>15</sup> Polo M. The description of the world...

Marignoli, published in a collection edited by the English orientalist Henry Yule<sup>16</sup>, and notes by the merchant Nicolò de' Conti<sup>17</sup> and the adventurer Ludovico di Varthema<sup>18</sup>.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Various methods were used during the study: analysis and synthesis, historical and critical method, comparative method, content analysis, and dialectical method. The analysis method provided an opportunity to study the records of Italian travellers, identifying their features and defining the key characteristics of each relevant work. The analysis helped to make the initial collection of data, based on which it was possible to conclude the historical value of a particular source. Using the synthesis, it was possible to find common ground in the records of Italian travellers about Central and East Asia of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This method determined the principles of writing notes by Europeans about travelling to distant countries, which are characteristic of the time and place under study.

The historical and critical method helped to consider the records of Italian travellers from the context of the time in which they were created. This method helped to study the material under study for historical authenticity, not literally, but considering the personality of each traveller and the purpose with which they wrote their travelogue. The historical and critical method helped to identify historical data in the records of travellers, separating it from outright fiction and understanding which of the travellers was more reliable in their work. In addition, this method helped to understand the reasons why certain authors deliberately distorted the facts in their travel notes.

The comparative method helped to compare the characteristics of travelogues of Italian travellers in East Asia and to understand the common and differences in each of the books. Using the comparative method, it was possible to obtain data on what different authors paid attention to and what remained out of their field of view. Among other things, the comparative method provided an opportunity to understand the differences in the notes of travellers of earlier and later times, determining how the perception of the countries of Central and East Asia changed among European researchers of distant lands.

Using the content analysis, it was possible to determine the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the travelogues studied. The indicated method helped to understand how much a particular text is more informative. It was possible to understand which of the authors provides more complete information and describes a larger number of countries. The content analysis helped to determine the quality of the information provided, finding out which of the authors gave more fiction in their notes than the actual things they saw. The dialectical method allowed, by contrasting data, to investigate the process of the emergence of interest in the countries of Central and East Asia among Europeans. This method helped to clarify the process of gradual understanding by Europeans of the specific features of the cultures of the East, and how the interpenetration of cultures and civilisations of Eurasia developed in the Late Middle Ages.

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<sup>16</sup> Yule H. *Cathay and the Way Thither; Being a collection of Medieval Notices of China*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1866. 525 p.

<sup>17</sup> *de' Conti N.* Nicolò de' Conti's voyage to India (1414-1439). Paris: Chandeigne, 2004. 176 p.

<sup>18</sup> *di Varthema L.* The travels of Ludovico di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India and Ethiopia, A.D. 1503 to 1508. London: Hakluyt Society, 1863. 492 p.

**EUROPEAN INTEREST IN CENTRAL AND EAST ASIA AND THE ROLE OF ITALIAN TRAVELLERS**

The growing interest of Europeans in Central and East Asia in the 13th century was associated with the Mongol conquests that shook Eurasia at that time. The Western campaign led by Batu Khan in 1236-1242 seriously worried the European elites. In the minds of Europeans, the Mongols were perceived as the Gog and Magog peoples, known from the Apocalypse, and whom, according to legend, Alexander the Great locked up behind the mountains. At the same time, the exoethnonym 'Tatars' used by Europeans of that time about the Mongols was consonant with the word 'Tartarus', the name of the underworld in ancient Greek mythology. Thus, the Mongols were perceived as a people who had come out of hell<sup>19</sup>. The horrors told about the consequences of the Mongol invasion inspired even greater fear among Europeans towards the Mongols. The completion of the Western campaign of the Mongols on the doorstep of Western Europe began to be perceived as a miracle. However, the reality of the Mongolian threat was still felt in European political communities. The interest of the mysterious conquering people and the emergence of a unified Mongol Empire in a vast area contributed to the strengthening of European contacts with the countries of the Middle and Far East since the middle of the 13th century<sup>20</sup>.

Most of the travel records about visiting the countries of Central and East Asia in the 13th-15th centuries belong to Italian travellers. The primacy of Italians in awareness of Eastern countries over other Europeans is explained by several factors.

First of all, the reason for this was that it is on the territory of Italy that the residence of the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, is located. In the Middle Ages, the Pope was not only a religious leader, but he was also the head of the Papal Region, a state that occupied the central part of Italy, as well as an active political player. Being a kind of centre of the Western Catholic world, the Holy See took the initiative to establish diplomatic contacts with the newly established Mongol Empire.

Another reason why the Papacy took the initiative to intensify diplomatic contacts with the Mongols was that the Mongols were seen as possible allies in the fight against Muslims in the Middle East. Since information reached Europe that there were Christians among the Mongols, and they had some relation to the eastern Christian kingdom of Prester John, which was legendary in Europe at that time<sup>21</sup>.

In addition, an important factor contributing to the primacy of Italians in contacts with Central and East Asia was the trade activity of Italian cities, primarily Venice, the former centre of the merchant Republic of Venice. Due to its advantageous geographical location and diplomatic influence, the Republic of Venice has become a leading player in trade between the West and the East. This contributed to the fact that Venetian merchants visited eastern countries and were better informed about the affairs and life of the East than other Europeans<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Jackson P. *The Mongols and the West, 1221-1410*. Oxford: Routledge, 2018. 452 p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351182843>

<sup>20</sup> Montalbano K.A. *Misunderstanding the Mongols: Intercultural communication in three thirteenth-century Franciscan travel accounts // Information & Culture*. 2015. № 50 (4). P. 588-610. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lac.2015.0019>

<sup>21</sup> Мухаметкали А. *Характер экспедиций итальянских путешественников...*

<sup>22</sup> Sardelić M. *John of Plano Carpini vs Simon of Saint-Quentin: 13th century emotions in the Eurasian steppe // Golden Horde Review*. 2017. № 5 (3). P. 494-508. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22378/2313-6197.2017-5-3.494-508>

**THE TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF GIOVANNI DA PIAN DEL CARPINE AND MARCO POLO**

Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and Marco Polo were the most famous Italian travellers who visited Central and East Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and discovered the Far East to Europeans. Both were the authors of important works that have become one of the most famous travelogues about Eastern countries – ‘The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars’ and ‘The description of the world’.

Due to the different purposes for which the authors wrote their works, the contents of both works differ somewhat from each other. ‘The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars’ by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine is an account of a diplomatic mission to the Mongol Empire led by a Franciscan monk on behalf of Pope Innocent IV<sup>23</sup>. One of the diplomat’s assignments was of an intelligence nature: da Pian del Carpine had to learn the specifics of the structure of the Mongolian state, the nature and power of their army, and understand how real a threat the Mongol Empire poses to Western Europe. In this regard, a significant part of his book was devoted to the characteristics of the Mongols. The author talks in detail about their ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mores, religion, customs, and worldview. In particular, the author reports in detail about the Mongolian army, its structure and discipline, the specifics of combat, and how the Mongols took cities. In addition, the author briefly tells about the personality of the founder of the Mongol Empire – Genghis Khan, his conquests and the establishment of the Mongol state.

The other part of the book is devoted to the actual journey of da Pian del Carpine. The author quite accurately reports on the countries he visited and about the people he met, in particular with the Russian princes, Batu Khan himself, and the great Khan Guyuk and his mother Doregene. An important moment described in the book was the kurultai of 1246, at which Guyuk was proclaimed the great khan, whose election was witnessed by da Pian del Carpine.

Based on the fact that the text served as a report on the diplomatic mission, the information provided by the author is generally reliable and devoid of excessive exaggerations or outright inventions. This is especially true for data gleaned from the author’s personal experience, and not a retelling of information provided by da Pian del Carpine by his interlocutors. In general, the author objectively evaluates the Mongols and their state. Speaking about the cruelties of the conquerors, he simultaneously speaks about their discipline, honesty, and nobility.

Although the text as a whole is devoid of any fantastic details, certain elements have penetrated it, which are the subject of popular fiction. When talking about the peoples with whom the Mongols had wars, the author reports on the cynocephalic people with dog heads. According to his words, in which he refers to Russian clerics, only men were dog-headed in this people, and women “had the appearance of monsters”<sup>24</sup>. The presence of such a fantastic passage in the diplomatic report can be explained by two reasons. First, the author retold information obtained from third-hand sources. Secondly, in medieval Europe, the belief in cynocephali was widespread, as in a very real people living far to the north. In the minds of people of that time, distant countries had to be inhabited by monsters. Not only did da Pian del Carpine himself believe in dog-headed people, but his readers fully expected to see

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<sup>23</sup> *da Pian del Carpine G. The story of the Mongols...*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

information about them in his work. Paradoxically, if there were no such information in the work, no one would have believed the author<sup>25</sup>.

Unlike 'The story of the Mongols, whom we call the Tartars', Marco Polo's book 'The description of the world' was not a diplomatic report, but served as an entertaining story about distant countries in which the Venetian spent a quarter of a century<sup>26</sup>. The work of Marco Polo is much larger in volume than the treatise by da Pian del Carpine. The book is divided into 232 chapters in total. Most of the work is a story about various Asian countries, their inhabitants, customs, and characteristic features. Marco Polo visited some of the described countries personally, and the data about them in his book is more complete. The author has heard about other countries from the stories of his interlocutors, so there is much less data about them, or they may be distorted<sup>27</sup>.



Fig. 1. Marco Polo's geography  
(Source: H. Yule<sup>28</sup>)

There is still no clear opinion on which countries exactly Marco Polo visited. It can be unequivocally stated that he visited Asia Minor, Persia, China, and the cities of

<sup>25</sup> Sardelić M. John of Plano Carpini vs...; Hester N.C. Italian travel writing // The Cambridge History of Travel Writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. P.206-220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316556740.014>

<sup>26</sup> Polo M. The description of the world...

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Yule H. The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East. London: John Murray, 1871. 525 p.

Central Asia that lay on the Great Silk Road (fig. 1). The question remains whether the author was in Southeast Asia, India. The author describes these countries, as well as Indonesia, in his work, but not in as much detail as China, so one can express doubts about the fact that he personally visited here. In addition, doubts should be expressed as to which specific historical events Marco Polo took part in. The lack of any detailed information about him makes it possible to doubt that the Venetian played an important role at the court of the great Khan Kublai and carried out his important assignments<sup>29</sup>. The book 'The Description of the World' was written to surprise the reader by telling about distant, unknown countries. It had a much greater cultural impact than 'The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars' by da Pian del Carpine. Thanks to Marco Polo, Europeans have expanded their knowledge of the countries of Central and East Asia. Marco Polo's book also greatly influenced Europeans' perception of East Asia as a rich, exotic land<sup>30</sup>.

### MISSIONARY AND TRADE EXPEDITIONS OF ITALIAN TRAVELLERS IN ASIA

After da Pian del Carpine and Marco Polo, several more Italians visited Central and East Asia and left their notes about the countries they visited. The existence of a single political space in the form of Mongolian uluses contributed to more convenient communication between Europe and Asia. This state of affairs helped both the activities of missionaries and merchants.

After the da Pian del Carpine mission, which reported on the general religious tolerance of the Mongolian authorities, the Holy See set a goal to develop missionary activities in the Far East to spread the Catholic faith. In this regard, several more Italian Franciscan missionaries visited the countries of East Asia, among them Giovanni da Montecorvino, who became the first archbishop of Beijing<sup>31</sup>. Giovanni da Montecorvino was one of the first Europeans to describe India in detail in his 'Epistle on India' of 1292<sup>32</sup>. Montecorvino's work was continued by the Franciscan missionary monk Odorico Pordenone, who was one of the first Europeans to visit and describe Sumatra, Java and Borneo, as well as Giovanni de Marignoli, who went to China to the court of the great Khan through the lands of Central Asia. Marignoli's notes contain detailed descriptions of cities such as Sarai-Berke, Urgench, and Almalyk<sup>33</sup>.

Being missionaries, these travellers, in their records, first of all, paid attention to the religion of the peoples living in the countries they visited. They also pointed to the presence of Christian communities in a particular country. In addition, missionaries wrote about the customs and customs of peoples, evaluating them through the prism of Christian morality. These travellers also wrote about the wealth and population of the countries they visited.

The original successors of Marco Polo were merchants and adventurers Ludovico di Varthema and Nicolò de' Conti. The first, who posed as a pilgrim, visited the countries of the Middle East, as well as Persia and India. The second one spent a long

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<sup>29</sup> *Polo M.* The description of the world...; *Bergreen L.* Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu. London: Quercus, 2007. 460 p.; *Xue Y., Hu Y.* Traveling with Marco Polo: Selected excerpts // Chinese Literature Today. 2021. № 10 (2). P. 20-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21514399.2021.1990681>

<sup>30</sup> *Liu B.* The Mongol in the text. In: Under the Influence. Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile. Leiden: Brill, 2005. P. 291-326. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405986\\_015](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405986_015)

<sup>31</sup> *Dong S.* The Tartars in European missionary...

<sup>32</sup> *Yule H.* Cathay and the Way Thither...

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem.*

time in Southeast Asia and, for some time, engaged in piracy there<sup>34</sup>. Based on the fact that both travellers were adventurers, they could intentionally distort some information in their notes.

Thus, Nicolò de' Conti reports that the great Khan is still in power in China, although this refers to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the Mongol domination over China ended in 1368. Both travellers actively use the geographical term India in their notes. It is used quite widely, being applied not only to India itself, but also to neighbouring countries. For example, de' Conti even refers to China as India. Thus, in the understanding of these authors, India is all the lands located to the east of Persia. Speaking of distant countries, these travellers, wishing to surprise the reader, talked about the extraordinary peoples with wild customs who inhabited them.

It is worth noting that in travelogues of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, unlike similar works of the previous era, there are no reports of monster peoples, but, on the other hand, stories about savages with terrible customs appear in them. Travellers did not spare the stories of wild peoples who practice cannibalism. The same Nicolo Conti, speaking about the peoples inhabiting the Andaman Islands, mentions the wildest people he has met. His notes also contain information about 'head-shrinkers' who lived on the islands of Indonesia<sup>35</sup>.

Since the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Italians' travels to the east of Asia have abruptly stopped. This is due to the Ottoman expansion and the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans, which significantly hampered the free movement of Europeans across Eurasia from West to East. The collapse of the Mongol Empire and, as a result, the disappearance of a single political space also contributed to the disappearance of the opportunity for such travel. The rise to power of the Muslim dynasties in India and the overthrow of the Mongols in China put an end to the policy of religious tolerance that had existed at the beginning of the Mongol era. This situation contributed to the cessation of Christian missions from the West in the Far East. Nevertheless, familiarity with the cultures of the East and with the economic potential and wealth of the Eastern countries had a serious impact on Europeans. The desire to find new ways to contact the Far East contributed to the beginning of the era of Great Geographical Discoveries and the beginning of the Modern Age.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time when a fairly extensive number of works appeared, written by Europeans who had visited Central and East Asia. This phenomenon was determined by the emergence of the vast Mongol Empire, which at first was perceived as a threat to Western Europe, and then began to be seen as a window of opportunity for trade and missionary activity. Italians predominated among travellers, as medieval Italian cities were the flagship in trade with the East, and the Papal See led the activities of missionaries and stood at the forefront of diplomatic activity. Depending on the type of activity, the travellers in their notes drew attention to various aspects of the life of the countries they visited. However, each of them wanted to emphasise the remarkable phenomena and peculiar miracles that they had seen.

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<sup>34</sup> *di Varthem L.* The travels of Ludovico di Varthema...

<sup>35</sup> *de' Conti N.* Nicolò de' Conti's voyage to India...

In the notes of Italian travellers, the countries of Central and East Asia were presented as a land of fabulous wealth, ruled by despotic autocratic rulers. The countries farthest from the ecumene were initially depicted as lands inhabited by spectacular monsters, and later began to be understood as areas inhabited by dense savages with barbaric manners. The records of medieval Italian travellers about Central and East Asia served as a kind of window to Asia for their readers. They formed a certain image of the Eastern countries, which became entrenched in European culture. The experience of travelling to the countries of the East in the Middle Ages laid the foundations for future travel in the era of the Great Geographical Discoveries.

The scientific originality of the study is conditioned by the fact that it examines little-studied aspects of the history of European travel to Central and East Asia in the Late Middle Ages, in particular, the evolution of travelogues and their mutual influence. In the future, it would be useful to investigate the influence of oriental literature on the works of European travellers and how significantly these texts influenced the attitude of Europeans towards the countries of Central and East Asia.

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