

December 2015

# The Painter, the Warrior, and the Sultan: The World of Marco Polo in Three Portraits

Sharon Kinoshita

*University of California, Santa Cruz, sakinosh@ucsc.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg>

Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Classics Commons](#), [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Medieval History Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Kinoshita, Sharon (2015) "The Painter, the Warrior, and the Sultan: The World of Marco Polo in Three Portraits," *The Medieval Globe*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol2/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Medieval Institute Publications at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Medieval Globe by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).

Footer Logo

# THE MEDIIEVAL GLOBE



Volume 2.1 | 2016

ARC MEDIEVAL PRESS

*Copyeditor*

Shannon Cunningham

*Editorial Assistant*

Kelli McQueen

*Page design and typesetting*

Martine Maguire-Weltecke

### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

**© 2016, Arc Medieval Press, Kalamazoo and Bradford**



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence.

The authors assert their moral right to be identified as the authors of their part of this work.

Permission to use brief excerpts from this work in scholarly and educational works is hereby granted provided that the source is acknowledged. Any use of material in this work that is an exception or limitation covered by Article 5 of the European Union's Copyright Directive (2001/29/EC) or would be determined to be "fair use" under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Act September 2010 Page 2 or that satisfies the conditions specified in Section 108 of the U.S. Copyright Act (17 USC §108, as revised by P.L. 94-553) does not require the Publisher's permission.

ISSN 2377-3561 (print)

ISSN 2377-3553 (online)

**[www.arc-humanities.org](http://www.arc-humanities.org)**

# THE PAINTER, THE WARRIOR, AND THE SULTAN: THE WORLD OF MARCO POLO IN THREE PORTRAITS

SHARON KINOSHITA

FEW MEDIEVAL WORKS have greater name recognition than the text commonly known as Marco Polo's *Travels*. Composed in a Genoese prison in 1298 as the product of a collaboration between the Venetian merchant and an Arthurian romance writer called Rustichello of Pisa, it is widely regarded as a key text in the history of travel writing; at the same time, because of its many inaccuracies and apparent inventions, it has also been dismissed as a work produced from the imagination, rather than actual observation. Counterintuitively for modern readers, it was originally composed in Franco-Italian—the language of choice for nonclerical Italian writers seeking a broad, international audience—and then quickly translated and retranslated into French, Latin, Tuscan, Venetian, and a spate of other European languages.<sup>1</sup> Typically for the Middle Ages, no two versions were the same, and early manuscripts circulated under three different titles: *Le Devisement du monde* (*The Description of the World*), *Le Livre du grand Caam* (*The Book of the Great Khan*), or *Le Livre des merveilles* (*The Book of Marvels*). Arguably, the text was not categorized as travel literature until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Venetian humanist Giovanni Battista Ramusio published an Italian print translation (1559) in his series *Delle navigationi et viaggi*—a version augmented by many passages found in no other recension.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, the Marco-Rustichello text is received as an early exemplar of travel writing, reflected in the title of its modern English translations and reinforced by introductions authored by travel writers such as Jason Goodwin or Colin Thubron, in recent Modern Library (2001) and Everyman's Library (2008) editions, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

---

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their generous suggestions and bibliographical recommendations, almost all of which I have tried to incorporate. Any remaining gaps or inaccuracies are of course my own.

**1** On Franco-Italian, see Gaunt, *Marco Polo's "Le Devisement,"* 78–112. This opening is adapted from my essay, "Reorientations," 40–41.

**2** Sanjay Subrahmanyam links the development of travel literature as a genre to the expansion of travel in the early modern period—by Asians as well as Europeans. See Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories," 737.

**3** These editions are updated reissues of William Marsden's early nineteenth-century translation of Ramusio, as revised by Thomas Wright (1854) and Manuel Komroff (1926).

Yet understanding this text as “the travels” constitutes, I suggest, something of a category error. As a genre, the modern travel narrative brings with it expectations of eyewitness adventures whose “truth” is guaranteed by the author’s firsthand experience, presumed to be both heroic and unique.<sup>4</sup> Classifying the text as a travel narrative, with Marco as the quintessential explorer-adventurer, thus exposes its author to accusations of fraud: *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* asks Frances Wood in a book whose title aggressively suggests that he did not.<sup>5</sup> Though historians have largely rejected Wood’s argument, even to raise the question distorts our understanding of what the text signifies as a product of its historical time and place.<sup>6</sup> To restore it to its original context, I reconsider the Marco-Rustichello text as *Le Devisement du monde*, the title it bears in the extant version acknowledged to be closest to the lost original.<sup>7</sup> According to its prologue, it was originally composed in 1298, placing it almost exactly at the midpoint of the extraordinary century chronicled by Janet Abu-Lughod in *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350*, in which the *pax mongolica* created by the conquests of Chinggis Khan and his successors momentarily produced a cosmopolitan world of trans-Asian travel, communication, and the circulation of people, goods, and ideas on an unprecedented scale.<sup>8</sup>

*Le Devisement du monde* is a textual witness to that world. Ranging from Anatolia in the west to Dadu (modern Beijing) in the east and the Indian Ocean in the south, it sets out explicitly to showcase “the diverse races of men and the diversities of diverse regions of the world” (“les deverses jenerasions des homes et les deversités des deverses region dou monde,” §1.1).<sup>9</sup> Yet readings of the *Devisement*

---

Translations into other modern European languages, in contrast, frequently bear one (or more) of the text’s medieval titles.

**4** For an overview, see Youngs, *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*.

**5** In rebuttal, Igor de Rachewiltz, an historian of the Mongols, calls Wood’s book “deceptive,” its execution “unprofessional,” and concludes that “her major arguments cannot withstand close scrutiny”; De Rachewiltz, “Marco Polo,” 89–90.

**6** For more on the modern reception of Marco Polo, see Kinoshita, “Traveling Texts.”

**7** It is also the title given in some subsequent Old French translations. On the preeminence of the Franco-Italian recension (the “F” text preserved in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 1116), see Gaunt, *Marco Polo’s “Le Devisement,”* 28–29.

**8** This precapitalist “world system” was produced by the linkage of eight overlapping subsystems. Seven of these had very long histories (the European subsystem consisting of the cities of the Champagne trade fairs, Flanders, and the maritime republics of Genoa and Venice being a newcomer) but had rarely been so active at the same time. See Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 34.

**9** All quotations are from the edition of Gabriella Ronchi, based on the principal manuscript

ment that do not merely pigeonhole Marco Polo as an explorer-adventurer tend to consider him together with, on the one hand, mendicant friars like John of Plano Carpini or William of Rubruck, who both undertook missions to the Mongol court in the 1240s and 1250s; or with John Mandeville (1356), whose “travels” have been revealed to be a savvy synthesis of textual sources, including the Franciscan Odoric of Pordenone’s *Relatio* (composed in the 1330s about his journey to India and China in the previous decade).<sup>10</sup> Neither comparison does the *Devisement* justice. The friars’ accounts, however keenly observed, remain essentially intelligence reports on a recently discovered Other, rendered up to the pope and to the king of France, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Marco, in contrast, spent over two decades in Mongol service, honing his skills as an observer and narrator of “the news, customs, and practices” (“les noveles et les costumes et les usajes,” §16.4) of the far-flung reaches of the Mongol empire, remembered and reproduced for Khubilai Khan’s entertainment. And unlike John Mandeville’s text, his description of “the diversities of the world” is drawn not from texts but from a judicious combination of eyewitness testimony and reliable hearsay.

The present essay, meant as an exercise in connected history, displaces attention from Marco Polo the *man* to the richness and complexity of the *world* that he and Rustichello describe.<sup>12</sup> To do this, it approaches that world through the portraits of three remarkable figures (two of them Marco’s exact contemporaries) from different parts of Asia whose lives intersected with and were conditioned by Abu-Lughod’s remarkable century: the Southern Song *literatus* Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), a noted artist and calligrapher who changed the canons of Chinese painting; Takezaki Suenaga (ca. 1245–ca. 1324), a provincial warrior who helped repel the Mongols’ attempted maritime invasion of Japan and later commissioned a set of scrolls commemorating his role in the campaign; and al-Ashraf Umar, the polymath sultan of Yemen (r. 1295–96) who authored scientific treatises and compiled registers that document the prosperity of late thirteenth-century Aden.

---

(see n. 7), with my translations: Polo, *Milione*. On diversity as an organizing principle of the Marco-Rustichello text, see Gaunt, *Marco Polo’s “Le Devisement,”* 145–71.

**10** See Mandeville, *Book*, ed. Higgins. Examples of the pairing of Marco Polo and Mandeville may be found in Akbari and Iannucci, *Marco Polo and the Encounter*.

**11** On the subtlety of William of Rubruck’s account in particular, see Khanmohamadi, *In Light of Another’s Word*, 57–87.

**12** I borrow this concept from Subrahmanyam’s “Connected Histories,” which he elaborates in relation to the early modern period. Subrahmanyam contrasts connected history to comparative history, which assumes states or cultures to be discrete and separate units. On the paucity of information about Marco Polo dating from his lifetime (as opposed to the legends that developed after his death), see Jacoby, “Marco Polo.”

Through these vignettes of the Painter, the Warrior, and the Sultan, we glimpse something of the complexity and interconnectedness of the world described in the *Devisement*, including the adaptive strategies of individuals in the face of the Mongol sweep to power.

### The Painter: Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322)

When Marco Polo, with his father and uncle, arrived at Khubilai Khan's summer court at Shangtu in ca. 1274, the Mongols were in the final stages of their campaign against the Southern Song.<sup>13</sup> They completed the conquest in 1276, bringing under their rule the rich lands south of the River Huai, including the fabulously wealthy capital of Quinsai (Hangzhou), the largest city in the thirteenth-century world, and Zaitun (Quanzhou), the great seaport on the Strait of Taiwan that was China's maritime gateway to trade with the Indies and the Islamic world. But the same conquest that opened the way for Marco to explore the southern kingdom he called "Mangi" (from the northern Chinese name for the southern "barbarians") made the Southern Song elite into subalterns in their own native land—among them our first figure, the Chinese painter, calligrapher, and literatus Zhao Mengfu.

Born in 1254 into a family of scholar-officials, Zhao Mengfu was a direct descendent of the founding emperor of the Song dynasty, Taizu. Growing up, he received the kind of traditional literati training that would have prepared him for a position in the imperial bureaucracy—much like his father, Zhao Yuyin (1213–65), who served as superintendent of salt and tea reserves in Jiangxi and as prefect of both Pingjiangfu (Suzhou) and Hangzhou.<sup>14</sup> With the fall of the Southern Song as a result of the 1276 conquest, however, his entire class of scholar-officials became *yimin* (leftover subjects) occupying the bottom tier of the four-part hierarchy newly imposed on their native land.<sup>15</sup> Zhao withdrew to his birthplace, Wux-

---

**13** Khubilai's uncle Ögödei had conquered northern China—Marco's "Cathay"—in 1234. It had been ruled for just over a century by the Jurchen (dynastic name: Jin), a Manchurian forest people who had pushed the native Chinese Song dynasty south of the Huai River in 1125. Shangtu—Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Xanadu"—in Inner Mongolia, is described by Polo in *Milione*, §75.

**14** McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 15, 21–22, 27.

**15** The "permanent legal definitions" established under Khubilai were: (1) Mongols; (2) Semu, or "people of various categories" from western and central Asia, including Turkic peoples (especially Uighurs), Persians, and Arabs; (3) the population of the former Jin territories of northern China (including Khitans, Jurchens, and Koreans); and (4) Nanren, or "southerners" (the Chinese inhabitants of the recently conquered Southern Song empire). See Mote, *Imperial China*, 489–90. Needless to say, as the case of Zhao Mengfu attests, there were great variations of status and influence within and across groups.

ing (present-day Huzhou, about sixty miles north of Hangzhou, the former capital), on the southern shore of Lake Tai. There, in the picturesque landscape that inspired the cultivation of arts and letters, he devoted himself to study, painting, and calligraphy amidst a cohort of scholars retrospectively known as the “Eight Talents of Wuxing.” Traditionally, this period has been described as kind of self-imposed internal exile on the part of Southern Song loyalists who wanted nothing to do with the Mongol regime.<sup>16</sup> But the lived reality of this turbulent transitional period was much more complex. As “numerous Yuan bureaucrats of diverse races and cultures arrived in posts all over former Southern Song territory” (including Wuxing), they may have been, in Shane McCausland’s words, “stereotyped by disgruntled locals as pretentious arrivistes” (as reported in a gossipy late Yuan source). Yet at the same time, contrary to expectation:

even Song loyalists—the more dyed-in-the-wool Confucians and older men generally—welcomed opportunities to become acquainted with the newcomers [and] northern Chinese, central Asians, and even Mongols became integrated into southern literati circles, which also included the so-called poet-monks (*shiseng*) [...] and clerics in the Buddhist and Daoist establishments.<sup>17</sup>

This scenario of contact and acculturation goes a long way in contextualizing Zhao’s decision to accept a high-ranking post in the Yuan administration in 1286. Officials explicitly appointed to recruit southern literati into Mongol service countered whatever political and cultural reluctance they may have felt by appeal to historical legends of two Han-era generals faced with capture by the Central Asian Xiongnu “barbarians” then invading China: one, Su Wu, resisted and was reduced to sheep herding; but the other, Li Ling, surrendered to and took service with the foreigners.<sup>18</sup> In any case, Zhao, after ten years of self-imposed retreat, finally agreed to join the Mongol administration, arriving in the new capital of Dadu (present-day Beijing) in 1287. The *Yuanshi* (History of the Yuan)<sup>19</sup> describes him as an

---

**16** McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 28–30. On Zhao Mengfu’s older contemporary Qian Xuan, see Hearn, “Painting and Calligraphy,” 186–90. Zhao’s wife Guan Daosheng from nearby Nanxun was herself a painter and a poet, the most important woman artist of the Yuan era. McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 39.

**17** *Ibid.*, 30. Yuan is the dynastic name adopted by Khubilai Khan in 1270.

**18** *Ibid.*, 30–31. McCausland (154) rejects the suggestion that Zhao’s celebrated ink drawing *Sheep and Goat* alludes to this legend.

**19** The *Yuanshi* was the official chronicle (including an extensive biographical section consisting of entries on the lives of distinguished individual subjects) composed, in accordance with custom, at the outset of the following dynasty, the Ming.

“outstanding talent and a luminary character, a man who would not have been out of place among immortals,” a very handsome man of aristocratic bearing:

Emperor Shizu [Khubilai] was pleased as soon as he saw him and commanded him to sit in a position superior to that of the minister of the left, Ye Li. Some said that it was inappropriate for Mengfu, a son of the Song imperial family, to be in such close proximity to the emperor, but the emperor would not hear their complaint. Indeed, the emperor immediately sent him to the Chancellery, commanding Mengfu to draft an edict to be promulgated to the nation. When the emperor read it, he was delighted and said: “You have grasped what I had in mind to say.”<sup>20</sup>

Zhao was appointed first secretary in the Ministry of War (the department responsible for the Mongols’ famed postal service). On the one hand, it is not surprising to find him in the highest echelons of the Yuan administration: as *wangsun*—a “prince descendent” of the Sung imperial house—he would have contributed considerable prestige and credibility to the Mongol regime. On the other, given what McCausland felicitously calls the Mongols’ “government technophilia,” the prominence he achieved must also reflect his capacities and talent, and he is soon found consulting on important policy issues, eventually earning the confidence of Arghun Sali, one of Khubilai Khan’s senior advisors. Over the next several years, Zhao shuttled frequently between the capital and the south, conducting government business but also painting, writing poetry, and making connections with other artists and scholars.<sup>21</sup>

This account of the Great Khan’s taking a personal interest in a talented young newcomer, singling him out for a distinguished career, bears more than a passing resemblance to the tale of Marco Polo’s own arrival at Khubilai’s court.<sup>22</sup> In the prologue to the *Devisement du monde*, Rustichello recounts that the Great Khan, seeing that Marco was “wise and prudent beyond measure [...] was very well disposed toward him,” immediately sending him on a mission to a distant land. On his return, Marco—having noted that the Great Khan “would rather hear about the news and the customs and practices of the foreign country” than about the affairs on which his envoys had been dispatched—regaled him with tales of “all the novel-

<sup>20</sup> *Yuanshi*, cited and translated in McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 14, 340–41.

<sup>21</sup> McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 38, 51–54.

<sup>22</sup> Since Zhao arrived at court in 1287 and the Polos are presumed to have begun their long journey back to Venice in 1291, the two would have overlapped in the Great Khan’s service for four brief years. On the extraordinary career of another Mongol official—Bolad, a Chinese-speaking Mongol of humble birth who rose to the highest level of the imperial administration—see Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 63–71.

ties and strange things” he had seen, “so well and intelligently that the Great Khan and everyone who heard him marveled, saying to each other: if this young man lives, he will surely become a man of great wisdom and valor” (§§16–17).<sup>23</sup> Marco, of course, would have occupied a much humbler place in the Yuan bureaucracy than Zhao Mengfu—holding, perhaps, “some minor nominal posts,” whereas Zhao, as scion of the former imperial house, would have conferred prestige on the Yuan regime by his service.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Zhao’s varied activities and movements during his years under Khubilai reveal the administrative networks plied by the kind of Mongol officials in whose retinues the Polos might plausibly have traveled.<sup>25</sup>

Zhao Mengfu exemplifies the transculturation that had begun to develop within a decade of the conquest of the Southern Song, countering the prevailing impression of the Mongols’ complete marginalization of the former imperial elite.<sup>26</sup> More evidence for the forms such transculturation could take comes from an unexpected source: the *Record of Clouds and Mist Passing Before One’s Eyes* (1296), an inventory of the art held by forty-seven different collectors in Hangzhou in the 1280s and 1290s. It was compiled by Zhou Mi, scion of one of the Southern Song *yimin* families displaced by Mongols, whose own art collection had been destroyed in the conquest. Though Zhou was a generation older than Zhao Mengfu (being a friend and contemporary of the latter’s father, Zhao Yuyin), their reactions to the fall of the Southern Song were both parallel and complementary. After his family estate in the picturesque Lake Tai district of Wucheng was looted in the conquest, Zhou (inverting Zhao’s trajectory) moved to Hangzhou, where he composed nostalgic memoirs of life under the fallen regime. By the mid-1280s, however, he began to show interest in reports from northern China, Central Asia, and the Yuan court as his circle of acquaintances widened to include the high officials, including

---

**23** “miais ameroit oir les noveles et les costumes et les usajes de celle estranjes contree [...] toutes le nuvités et toutes les stranges chauses [...] si bien et sajement que le grant kan, et celç tuit que l’oient, en unt grant mervoie, et distrent entr’aus: se cest jeune vif por aajes il ne puet falir qu’il ne soit home de grant senç et de grant valor.”

**24** As Europeans, the Polos would have figured among the Semu, the “varied peoples” who constituted the second of the four rankings under the Yuan. Mote, *Imperial China*, 490.

**25** These activities have been reconstructed from a biography by Zhao’s protégé Yang Zai, written in the year of his death, and his biographical entry in the *Yuanshi*. McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 14, 347.

**26** Timothy Brook, for example, writes that the Yuan dynasty “constructed its administration across the divide between north and south, effectively perpetuating the distinction by relying on northerners whenever possible and distrusting southerners who had resisted Mongol rule.” Brook, *Troubled Empire*, 35–36.

some Central Asians, now in charge of administering the south.<sup>27</sup> Compiled in the same years that Zhao Mengfu was making a career at the Mongol court, the *Record of Clouds and Mist* offers “a composite portrait of the rich and famous of early Yuan Hangzhou.”<sup>28</sup> Strikingly, some of the connoisseurs whose collections Zhou Mi catalogued were Central Asian high Yuan officials—the same people who had made life so uncomfortable for cultured scholars like the “Eight Talents of Wuxing.” In the wake of the 1276 conquest, members of the new bureaucratic elite seeking to accrue cultural capital had snapped up pieces from the collections of former imperial and aristocratic families that now flooded the art market—guided in their purchases by connoisseurs such as Zhou Mi:

in the day-to-day activities of the elite classes, art collecting provided a social lubricant, a point of contact for men of widely differing backgrounds. Yuan officials and Song loyalists met to show and view their collected items; they argued over points of connoisseurial interest and negotiated the sale and trade of artworks.<sup>29</sup>

Remarkably soon after the conquest, art collecting had become a shared activity that “allowed for casual social and intellectual intercourse between northern and southern Chinese, and [...] therefore played an important role in the growing accommodation of southerners to Yuan rule in the 1280s and 1290s.”<sup>30</sup> As for Zhou Mi himself, his composition constitutes a de facto “record of his acceptance of the new realities of his world and his accommodation with the new structure of power in his community.”<sup>31</sup>

Zhao Mengfu was one of the connoisseurs whose collection is catalogued in *Record of Clouds and Mist*. In 1295, following Khubilai’s death (and the same year the Polos arrived back in Venice), Zhao retired to his family estate in Wuxing—ostensibly for reasons of ill health, but probably spurred by his wariness at the accession of Khubilai’s grandson Temür. Now resettled in the south, he exchanged

---

**27** Weitz, introduction to Zhou Mi’s *Record of Clouds and Mist*, 11–13.

**28** *Ibid.*, 3–4. The title *Record of Clouds and Mist* comes from a line written by a late eleventh-century connoisseur to describe the ephemeral and precarious nature of art collecting.

**29** *Ibid.*, 4. Among the non-Chinese collectors were Lian Xigong, a highly sinicized Uighur whose brother was of one of Khubilai’s close advisors; Gao Kegong, a scribe who rose to high office in Hangzhou and Dadu and was himself a painter; and Cui Yu, “one of the most powerful men in the Yuan government in the late 1280s and 1290s,” who helped recruit southern scholars into Mongol service. *Ibid.*, 141, 151, 174.

**30** *Ibid.*, 13, 20.

**31** *Ibid.*, 15.

poems with Zhou Mi and showed him his collection of calligraphy and painting.<sup>32</sup> The *Record of Clouds and Mist* lists twenty-seven paintings and over a dozen pieces of decorative art (jade figurines and jewelry, bronze vessels, stones and inkstones of various kinds) from among the items in Zhao Mengfu's Crystal Palace Pavilion, "so numerous that they cannot all be recorded here."<sup>33</sup> Zhao may have inherited some pieces from his father, Zhao Yuyin;<sup>34</sup> others he likely acquired in Hangzhou, either during one of his frequent visits to the former southern capital or upon his return; still others he brought back from the north, affording the Southern Song elite their first access to such fine works since their ancestors had lost northern China to the Jin dynasty almost two centuries earlier. The paintings in Zhao's collection include works inscribed by the Tang emperor Gaozong and the Northern Song emperor Huizong, whose own extensive collection was the subject of a massive catalogue.<sup>35</sup>

This brings us to Zhao's own work. In 1296, shortly after retiring to Wuxing, he produced two extraordinary figure paintings: *Horse and Groom* (today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *Man Riding* (in the Palace Museum in Beijing), both ink-and-color handscrolls on paper. This move to small-format handscrolls (in contrast to the large-scale murals or hanging silk scrolls of the late Southern Song) typified trends in painting under the early Yuan: intended for private viewing and done on paper rather than silk, handscrolls could easily be exchanged. Different scholar-officials (which might include the artist or viewers) would create calligraphic poems and colophons that spurred ongoing conversations around the visual text, adding layers of commentary that belied the images' apparent simplicity.<sup>36</sup> These changes in format and modes of circulation went hand-in-hand with shifts in theme, style, and social function. Far from perpetuating the canons of their Southern Song predecessors and compatriots, painters of the early Yuan

---

**32** McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 355–56.

**33** Zhou, *Record of Clouds and Mist*, entry no. 32, 176–82. The jewelry includes a pair of bracelets in white jade that "must be from the Jin dynasty imperial harem" (180). The stones and inkstones are identified by their geographical places of origin. See also McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 59–60.

**34** Zhou, *Record of Clouds and Mist*, 176n162, 190–92.

**35** On the cultural politics of Emperor Huizong's collection and the catalogue, see Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture*. The imperial collection was confiscated as war booty in the Mongol conquest of the Southern Song. McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 48–49.

**36** On paper handscrolls, see Hearn, "Painting and Calligraphy," 182. Zhao's early painting, *Landscape of Wuxing* (McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 194, fig. 3.1), is done on silk. On the changing practice of colophon-writing as a forum for political commentary and cultural negotiation, see McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 50–58.

created a body of work that McCausland characterizes as “more deeply autobiographic and more deeply imbricated in a system of social-political alliances and animosities.”<sup>37</sup> For Zhao and his contemporaries—both those who took service with the Mongols and those who did not—animal and figure painting in particular became “a way of talking about humanity, values and [...] the role of the Chinese ethical-political tradition in a Mongol-run world.”<sup>38</sup>

For early Yuan artists, horse imagery (which had virtually disappeared under the late Song) became a favored means of expression. Thematically, it evoked ancient historical-legendary equestrian connoisseurs Bole and Jiufang Gao, whose expertise had become a metaphor for assessing the talents (especially hidden ones) of literati and scholar-officials.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, depictions of fine horses could not help but appeal to the Mongol elite, barely a generation removed from life on the steppe, for whom the procurement, maintenance, and regulation of horses was an essential part of empire.<sup>40</sup> Zhao Mengfu, for his part, had long used horse imagery to reflect on the complexities of his relationship to the Yuan regime. The earliest surviving examples are verbal rather than visual. Already in the early 1280s, his “Song on a Painting of a Rouge Colt” celebrated a spirited steed with a big heart, sparkling eyes, and heroic bearing that “gives it his all, not restrained by the halter man puts on him,” in contrast to fat “pampered but work-shy” horses—a description that has been read as an appeal on the part of an ambitious and talented but undiscovered scholar-official.<sup>41</sup> Zhao himself is portrayed on horseback by his Wuxing compatriot Qian Xuan in *Young Nobleman Holding a Bow* (1290),

---

**37** Ibid., 116.

**38** Ibid., 115. Zhao was equally a noted calligrapher who, after the Mongol conquest, continually experimented with styles from earlier dynasties (Tang, Jin), likewise in an ongoing negotiation with and commentary on the predicament of life under Mongol rule: Ibid., 112–11.

**39** Ibid., 126–28.

**40** Ibid., 124. On the Mongol regulation of horses (including their requisitioning and the re-establishment of a Court of the Imperial Stud), see Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, 129. Another artist well known for his depiction of horses (and whose life dates, 1255–1328, likewise correspond with Marco Polo’s) is Ren Renfa, who entered Mongol service as a specialist in watercourse management: see McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 38; and Hearn, “Painting and Calligraphy,” 202–06. On the development of a coeval equine culture in South India, see Elizabeth Lambourn’s article in this issue.

**41** McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 126–27. Not all depictions were positive: Gong Kai’s famous ink-on-paper handscroll of an emaciated horse (today in the Osaka Municipal Museum of Fine Arts) expressed a Song loyalist’s staunch resistance to Mongol rule.

explicitly based on an eighth-century work by Han Gan, *Knight Errant of Wuling*, which Zhou Mi's *Record of Clouds and Mist* places in Zhao's own collection.<sup>42</sup>

Composed during what would prove to be only a hiatus in Zhao Mengfu's service to the Mongols, his two 1296 horse paintings not only thematize the predicament of the literati but exemplify the innovations he brought about in painting during the Yuan. *Horse and Groom* depicts a bearded groom in black cap and long belted tunic holding a white stallion.<sup>43</sup> His "light grip on the halter rope and his bearing and body language [...] indicate that he is a formidable horseman, able to control a hugely powerful animal with the lightest of touches, but also that the horse is a fine animal worthy of his attention." In its subject matter, it looks back to the work of the late eleventh-century Song master Li Gonglin—in particular, his portrait *Five Horses and Grooms* (1098–90) from the imperial stables.<sup>44</sup> However, the fact that the groom "gazes intently" out of the frame explicitly interpolates the viewer into the scene as the Bole or Jiufang Gao figure asked to render expert judgment on the quality of the steed—a conventional metaphor, as we have seen, for recognizing the talents of gifted scholar-officials like the "blue-blooded" Zhao, who "believed he was born and bred for high office."<sup>45</sup> His style likewise alludes to the world of the literati: where the art of the late Song had tended to privilege technical virtuosity in the service of realism, the simplicity of line and color evokes the calligraphic tradition, of which Zhao was an acknowledged master. Thus, in the estimation of art historian McCausland, "Zhao's work reinvented figure painting as an art about the self, through a meaningful dialogue with a canon of old master sources, in order to shape dialogue about the contemporary role of the individual in the society and the state."<sup>46</sup>

Zhao Mengfu's retirement to Wuxing turned out to be but a brief break in a long career in Yuan service. Even during this hiatus he maintained active relations

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 131–35; Zhou, *Record of Clouds and Mist*, §32.6

<sup>43</sup> See McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 122–24; and *Horses and Grooms* on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website <<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/40507>> [accessed September 26, 2015]. Space limitations preclude a discussion of *Man Riding* (30 × 52 cm), which may portray Zhao's younger brother Mengyu and his decision to enter Mongol service: McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu*, 135–45 (esp. 140–41).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 116–18. In a poem-colophon, Zhao contrasted the liveliness of Li Gonglin's horses, "transmitted through calligraphy and painting," to the stone horses of a Tang imperial mausoleum, "[c]rumbl[ing] through the years of ages." At the same time, the poem's rhyme scheme, as Shane McCausland explains, makes dense intertextual reference to a celebrated poem of the eighth-century Tang poet Du Fu.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 122–24, 128–29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 116.

with court administrators and participated in an imperial project to transcribe the entire Buddhist canon. By 1299, he finally yielded to rejoin the administration—this time in Hangzhou, as head of Confucian education for Jiangnan (the Lower Yangzi region, or southeast China). Then in 1310, summoned to Beijing by the new heir apparent (who became Emperor Renzong the following year), he began his second stint as a “metropolitan scholar official,” culminating in his appointment in 1316 as head of the Hanlin Academy;<sup>47</sup> duties included drafting imperial proclamations (a high honor reserved to the most qualified and distinguished literati), writing out texts for commemorative steles, and curating the imperial art collection.<sup>48</sup> Three years later, around the time of the death of his wife Guan Daosheng, Zhao once more withdrew from service and retired to Wuxing, this time permanently. His official biography recorded in the chronicle of the Yuan dynasty reports:

The emperor sent an envoy bearing gifts of clothing and cash to humour him into returning to court, but pleading ill health, Mengfu never returned [...]. In [1322], he received imperial favours to the extent of two suits of clothing. He died in the sixth month of the year, aged sixty-nine; he was subsequently enfeoffed as duke-of-state of Wei and posthumously honoured with the name Wenmin [cultural perspicacity].<sup>49</sup>

In the historiography of medieval China, the period of Yuan (Mongol) rule, which followed that of the Liao (Khitans) and Jin (Jurchen) in the north, is sometimes cast as a kind of interregnum between the fall of the Song and the “restoration” of the native Ming dynasty in 1368.<sup>50</sup> It is tempting to equate a period of conquest and foreign domination with a decline in artistic and cultural traditions. Paradoxically, however, whatever hardships Mongol rule spelled for much of the population, it was also a productive time of intense creativity in the arts, including drama and calligraphy; painting, in particular, was transformed in ways that set the standards for subsequent eras. With the exception of deliberate imitation, painting after the Yuan rarely looked back to anything from before ca. 1300. Thus one art historian likens the painting of the Yuan era to that of the Renaissance in

**47** *Ibid.*, 75, 81, 83. The Hanlin Academy was imperial court’s center for Confucian scholars.

**48** Hearn, “Painting and Calligraphy,” 198–99.

**49** *Yuanshi*, trans. McCausland in *Zhao Mengfu*, 346.

**50** Consider the title of the apposite volume in *The Cambridge History of China*: vol. 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*. Recent historiography has begun to pay greater attention to continuities, rather than ruptures, between the Yuan and the Ming, as in Brook, *Troubled Empire*. See Smith, “Problematizing the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition.” The essays in the volume itself pose the question in relationship to topics such as population, urban development, family law, publishing culture, and medicine.

Europe for its significance in transforming later artistic traditions.<sup>51</sup> At the center of this transformation was Marco Polo's contemporary, Zhao Mengfu, whose decisive influence over the artistic tradition resulted, as we have seen, not despite but in ongoing reaction to the Mongol conquest of China.

### The Warrior: Takezaki Suenaga (ca. 1245–ca. 1324)

Our second figure is Takezaki Suenaga, a provincial Japanese *gokenin* (houseman or retainer) who fought on the front lines to repel the Mongols' two failed invasions of the island of Kyushu (1274 and 1281) during the first decade of Marco's service to the Great Khan.<sup>52</sup> Today, Suenaga is remembered for two *emaki* (picture scrolls) he commissioned commemorating his role in the invasions and their aftermath. Executed in a blend of central and local styles attributed to four different artists and accompanied by calligraphed texts in five distinct hands, these scrolls are unique in having been produced not for a member of the central elite but for a provincial warrior on the literal periphery of power.<sup>53</sup> Compared with other surviving *emaki*, all produced in the sophisticated style of the capital of Kyoto, Suenaga's scrolls have been found "coarse in brushwork" and lacking in refinement; nevertheless, they show, as one art historian writes, "a vividness and authenticity absent from other similar scrolls, which record battles of the more distant past," resulting from the unique circumstances of their composition, with Takezaki Suenaga himself "relat[ing] his experience in fighting the Mongol invader directly to the artist, so that his own exploits could be recorded for posterity."<sup>54</sup> For our purposes, the scrolls afford an exceptional account of an invasion sketchily recorded in the *Devisement du monde* (which focuses primarily on the second of the two failed campaigns), filtered through the eyes of an eyewitness who, like Zhao Mengfu, was a close contemporary of Marco Polo.

---

**51** Cahill, *Hills Beyond a River*, 3.

**52** Born around 1245, Suenaga is last attested in 1324 at the age of seventy-nine. The scrolls have been the object of intense reconstructions, described by Conlan in the introduction to his translation, *In Little Need*, 11–15, and illustrated at <<http://www.bowdoin.edu/mongol-scrolls/>> (accessed April 1, 2014).

**53** On the number of different artists and hands, see Conlan in the introduction to his translation, *In Little Need*, 2 and notes. The scrolls are tentatively dated ca. 1293 and 1314, respectively, though the first may have intentionally been backdated by Suenaga himself for political reasons. *Ibid.*, 5–7.

**54** Okudaira, *Emaki*, 88.

The Kamakura era (1185–1333) marked the beginning of what modern historians call the “medieval” or “feudal” period of Japanese history.<sup>55</sup> Four turbulent decades of plots, counterplots, and proliferating factionalism had effectively led to the transfer of power from the imperial capital at Heian (Kyoto) to a regime (*bakufu*) of warrior elite centered in Kamakura (southwest of present-day Tokyo). This split resulted in a power-sharing arrangement that, paradoxically, brought a century of relative peace and stability: a complex but culturally rich period that one historian has termed “a world upside down.”<sup>56</sup> The *Mōko shūrai ekotoba* (scrolls of the Mongol invasion) belong to the genre of long horizontal scrolls (*emaki*) originally introduced to Japan, along with Buddhism, from Tang China in the mid-sixth century, that reached their height of popularity in the Kamakura era.<sup>57</sup> Although religious themes had previously predominated, in this period the social mobility and wide-reaching changes characterizing this “world turned upside down” produced a diversity of subject matter, reflecting the complexity of the age and bringing the form to new heights of popularity. Alongside representations of Heian romances and diaries that bespoke a nostalgia for aristocratic culture were landscapes, depictions of ordinary working people, and “real life” scenes that included a “Scroll of Diseases and Deformities,” “The Story of Minister Kibi’s Trip to China,” and “The Story of the Warrior Obusama Saburo.”<sup>58</sup> A product of this same milieu of political, social, and cultural transformation, Takezaki Suenaga’s scrolls of the Mongol invasions paint an astonishing portrait of this

---

**55** On the emergence of structures resembling Western feudalism (itself a contested category), especially in eastern Japan, see Souyri, *World Turned Upside Down*, 36–43.

**56** Beyond the two capitals, there was the political and cultural division between “a western Japan of sea, ships, and piracy [and] a more continental eastern Japan, a land of plains and horses, of warriors practicing the ‘way of the bow and the horse’”: *Ibid.*, 13.

**57** After the Tang, Chinese preferences shifted to vertical hanging scrolls, while in Japan, horizontal scrolls remained the norm, eventually expanding to accommodate a range of secular as well as religious subjects.

**58** Okudaira, *Emaki*, 76–78, 80, 84. Like early Yuan rule in China, the Kamakura era in Japanese history was a period of cultural innovation amidst political and social upheaval. In the religious sphere, it saw the foundation of popularizing forms of Buddhism (such as Pure Land and Nichiren), as well as the Rinzai school of Zen (which enjoyed the support of the early Hojo shoguns). *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*), an orally transmitted epic account of the defeat of the Heike (or Taira) by the Genji (or Minamoto), eventual founders of the Kamakura regime, was composed ca. 1210–20, “a true synthesis of the literary genres of the time.” On religion, see Souyri, *World Turned Upside Down*, 70–80; on the *Heike*, 80–81. On the distinctive art of the period, see Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 147–203. See also the essay by Elizabeth Oyler in this issue.

world-historical event filtered through the preoccupations of an embattled provincial warrior.

The first Mongol invasion of Japan took place in 1274, the year that the Polos likely arrived at Khubilai's court. According to Marco, Mongol interest in Japan was stimulated by the island's great wealth, its "gold beyond measure" and "pearls in abundance" (§159).<sup>59</sup> Both the expedition and the diplomatic correspondence that preceded it were triangulated through Koryô (Korea), which had itself recently become a Mongol vassal state after a long campaign of resistance. Already in 1268, Khubilai (following up on a letter sent two years before that had failed to reach its destination) had sent the Japanese an overture cum ultimatum:

From time immemorial, rulers of small states have sought to maintain friendly relations with one another. We, the Great Mongolian Empire, have received the Mandate of Heaven and have become the master of the universe. Therefore, innumerable states in far-off lands have longed to form ties with us. As soon as I ascended the throne, I ceased fighting with Koryo [Korea] and restored their land and people. In gratitude, both the ruler and the people of Koryo came to us to become our subjects; their joy resembles that of children with their father. Japan is located near Koryo and since its founding has on several occasions sent envoys to the Middle Kingdom. However, this has not happened since the beginning of my reign. This must be because you are not fully informed. Therefore, I hereby send you a special envoy to inform you of our desire. From now on, let us enter into friendly relations with each other. Nobody would wish to resort to arms.<sup>60</sup>

This letter, in contrast to its predecessor, reached its destination but elicited no response from either Kyoto or Kamakura. Finally, in 1274 (after helping quell a revolt that had temporarily toppled their Korean client-king), the Mongols launched their attack. Crossing the Korean strait to the north coast of Kyushu, the fleet anchored in Hakata Bay. The defenders who met them were, in the main, *gokenin* like Suenaga—vassals who, in exchange for an office granting rights to land, were obligated to make war under the orders of the provincial military governor.<sup>61</sup> After some initial skirmishes, the Japanese eventually retreated inland. For its part, the Mongol-Korean force withdrew and was hit by a storm at some

---

**59** "le or [...] outre mesure [...] perles en abondance."

**60** Cited and translated by Ishii, "Decline of the Kamakura Bakufu," 131–32.

**61** In peacetime, *gokenin* were required to maintain a guard at their own cost, either in Kamakura (near the shogun) or in Kyoto (at the palace of the shogun's representative). Souyri, *World Turned Upside Down*, 54.

point in their retreat, such that by the time the fleet returned to Korea, a third of the expedition had been lost.<sup>62</sup>

This is the campaign depicted in the first of Takezaki Suenaga's two scrolls, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*. As they have been reconstructed, the scrolls are divided into twenty-one scenes: ten scenes depicting the first invasion of 1274 on the first scroll, and, on the second, eleven scenes depicting the invasion of 1281. Unfurling from right to left, they are interspersed with calligraphic passages giving Suenaga's own retrospective account. What survives of the first scroll begins in medias res: the Mongols have already landed, and the *gokenin* of Kyushu have been ordered out to meet them. As Suenaga tells the story, his fiery enthusiasm for fighting the invaders is inseparable from his quest for recognition to help him in political disputes which have left him landless. For Suenaga, this means being the first to confront the "foreign pirates" (§1). Thus, when the commander sends word to hold back so that they all may attack together, he protests: "Waiting for the general will cause us to be late to battle. Of all the warriors of the clan, I Suenaga will be first to fight from Higo [province]" (§1). Riding past the commander's encampment and disobeying an order to dismount, he explains: "We five horsemen are going to fight before you [...]. I have no purpose in my life but to advance and be known [...] I want [my deeds] to be known by his lordship" (§2).<sup>63</sup>

This becomes Suenaga's leitmotif. Even as the scroll's images depict warriors riding across the terrain or peering at the enemy (depicted as fearsome) through clusters of trees, the text of the first scroll devotes much less space to the actual engagement with the invaders than to Suenaga's trek to Kamakura the following year to protest the fact that his name had not figured in the official report of the battle. Arriving in the capital after a long two-month journey, he makes the rounds of "any number of officials" but is ignored "because I appeared to be a minor warrior with only one low-ranking follower." After visiting a shrine to invoke the aid of the gods, he finally procures an interview with the governor (*shugo*) for Higo at the office of appeals. Suenaga presents his case at length, repeating nearly verbatim much of the material recounted in the earlier passage, including the plea he had made to the military commander:

---

**62** Ishii, "Decline of the Kamakura Bakufu," 138–40. This is the famous *kamikaze* (divine wind), credited with twice saving Japan from Mongol invasion. The legend, however, must be treated with caution: "For the Mongols, the typhoons provided the perfect excuse to justify a devastating defeat, for it left their military reputation untarnished, while for the priestly or courtly chroniclers of Japan, these winds 'proved' the miraculous nature of their victory over an overpowering adversary." Conlan, commentary on Suenaga, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*, 259.

**63** Suenaga, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*, 23, 40. "His lordship" is the commander's brother, the military governor (*shugo*) of Higo province (40n2).

Because my [land] dispute (*honso*) has not been settled, I have only five mounted warriors. Therefore, I have no choice but to fight visibly against the enemy. Other than advancing and having my deeds known, I have nothing else to live for. I want to lead the charge and have this reported to the lord. (§7)

The *shugo*, however, explains that since he took no enemy heads and none of his men was killed in battle, his deeds were “not sufficient” to merit inclusion in the report. Suenaga, in turn, asks that the commander who witnessed his exploits be consulted. When this request is rejected on the grounds that there is “no precedent” for such an appeal, he retorts:

If this concerned disputes over land rights or if it were a battle involving only Japan I know I could not make such an unprecedented request. *But this is a battle involving a foreign court. Precedent does not apply.* It seems that I cannot be questioned or have [my reports] viewed by the lord for lack of precedent! How then can I maintain my martial valor? (§7)<sup>64</sup>

Told to go home to await the court’s decision, he protests that since his property dispute is still pending, “I am landless. I don’t know where to go to live.” The magistrate then concedes that Suenaga’s position is “most difficult indeed” and agrees to bring his case to the attention of the regent. As a result, Suenaga receives, “as a reward for your service,” a formal edict confirming his land holdings and—more significantly to him—a “fully equipped” horse:

I was speechless for having been so honored. Respectfully I received a chestnut horse with a saddle decorated with a small, comma-shaped heraldic device. Saeda Goro, master of the stables, provided the horse’s bridle and other well-made accoutrements.<sup>65</sup>

In a separate passage, he elaborates: “well over one hundred men received praise but only I received an edict and a horse. What could [exceed] my honor [as a man of the way] of the bow [and arrow]?”<sup>66</sup> For Suenaga, the Japanese stand against the Mongol invasion matters less for its world historical importance than for the honor and recognition it finally brings him.

In the aftermath of the 1274 invasion, Kamakura extended and systematized its control over western Japan (previously in Kyoto’s orbit), appointing new gover-

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 89, emphasis added. On the elaborate bureaucratic procedures in place for determining each warrior’s contribution to battle, see Conlan’s commentary in Ibid., 260.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 89–90, 106–07.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., §14 and 185.

nors, making unaffiliated warriors (*higokenin*) into vassals (by “confirming” their rights to lands that were not the *bakufu*’s to confer), and establishing a special administration over Kyushu. Meanwhile, the Mongols were completing their conquest of the Southern Song (1276–79), which both freed up military resources and gave them new maritime bases in the south. In 1281 they launched a second invasion of Japan—a two-pronged attack (from Korea and from the ports of south China) much larger than in 1274. As before, the fleet began by ravaging the islands off the coast, especially Tsushima.

Then they landed on Kyushu. But this time, the Japanese warriors knew their enemy. Thanks to stone walls [constructed in the interim] and battle expertise, the samurai kept the formidable Mongol cavalry from deploying and pinned it to the coast. After a week of fierce combat, the Mongols managed to establish a small beachhead, but they later had to abandon it and withdraw to the already conquered small islands to regroup. Then a second storm arose, coming to the rescue of the defenders. The Mongol armada was dispersed, sunk, broken. Thirty thousand Mongol, Chinese, and Korean survivors, unable to leave the islands, fell to Japanese swords.<sup>67</sup>

The *Devisement*’s account of this Mongol debacle accounts for the defeat by attributing responsibility for the “ill adventure” to the enmity between the two “barons” leading the expedition from the southern Chinese ports of Zaytun and Quinsai. For though they were “wise and brave,” there was “great envy” between them, “and one did not do a thing for the other” (§159). Interestingly, the narrative of the military engagement itself makes no explicit mention of either “baron.” When the Japanese landed on the island in pursuit of the invaders who had taken refuge there, the Mongols snuck around and boarded their empty ships. Sailing to another (unnamed) island:

they disembarked, and with the banners and pennants of the lord of the island, they went to the capital. Those who saw the pennants truly believed that these were their people; they let them into the city. And they, finding old men, took the city and chased all the people out, excepting only some beautiful women that they kept to serve them. And in the way that you have heard, the Great Khan’s men took the city. (§160)

In Marco’s account, the Mongols endured a seventh-month siege, but since they were unable to “alert the Great Khan to what was happening [...] there was noth-

---

<sup>67</sup> Souyri, *World Turned Upside Down*, 62. Some advice in countering this second invasion came from Southern Song elite who had fled to Japan at the Mongols’ conquest of southern China (*Ibid.*, 79).

ing they could do,” and eventually they capitulated to the Japanese, negotiating a pact so they “they all lived.” However, because the Great Khan “had found out that they conducted themselves badly in this affair,” he had one of the “barons who was the head of the army” beheaded and sent to other back to the island “where he had destroyed [lost?] many people” and had him executed there. The narrative then concludes with a “marvel” of the Mongols’ inability to behead eight prisoners-of-war because of an enchanted stone that protects its bearer from being killed by iron. Undeterred, the Mongols clubbed the prisoners to death with maces, then “took the stones [...] and held them very dear”—this “story of the discomfiture of the Great Khan’s people” thus being (partially) redeemed and deflected by the account of the miraculous stone and its acquisition.

Suenaga’s scroll, as might be expected, recounts this second failed Mongol campaign from quite a different perspective. Like the first, it opens in the midst of the action. The Mongols are retreating from Kyushu with the Japanese in pursuit—Suenaga among them. Passing a line of stone fortifications, he calls out to its commander: “Have my deeds reported to the lord. If you survive, tell all” (§9).<sup>68</sup> Suenaga, with no boat of his own, narrates his attempts to secure a place in one of the warboats depicted in the scroll’s imagery (the text at this point being riddled with lacunae).<sup>69</sup> Thrown off or denied access to one boat after another, he finally manages to talk his way onto one, leaving his retainers behind and crafting an impromptu helmet from a pair of shinguards. As in the first scroll, the account focuses less on the skirmish itself than on Suenaga’s determination to be in the middle of the fray and in collecting witnesses to attest to his efforts:

When I attacked the enemy and was wounded, [various members of] Hisanaga’s forces [...] stood as witnesses for me. After Raijo had been wounded, I threw away my bow and picked up a *naginata* [a kind of halberd]. I tried to hurry my rowers by yelling “Get close! I want to board!” But when I said this the boatmen stopped using their oars and started pushing the boat back with their poles in order to flee. I had no choice but to switch boats again. (§13)<sup>70</sup>

Though Suenaga and his men are wounded, he has the satisfaction of noting that “this was reported to the *shugo* at Ikinomatsubara. We were the first from our

<sup>68</sup> Suenaga, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*, 119.

<sup>69</sup> In some of the images, captions identify individuals warriors seated in the craft. One caption, reflecting Suenaga’s sensitivity to due recognition, reads: “Raijo fought bravely in many battles, but because he was a retainer of the Echizen lord, [his deeds] were not recorded in documents of praise”: *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>70</sup> Suenaga, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*, 179.

province whose names were recorded in a report" (§13). Suenaga's preoccupations here closely mirror the warrior ethos expressed in near-contemporary tales like the *Heike monogatari* (*Tale of the Heike*). Fighting explicitly as "an individual seeking reward for his battlefield successes," he displays an aggressivity that takes the conventional form of competition to be "first in battle" (*sakigake, senjin*). Contemporary accounts represent warriors "'striving to be first' (*ware saki ni*; literally, 'Me first!'), 'contending for the lead' (*saki o arasou*), or determined to be 'second to none' (*ware otoraji*)," even when this means contravening orders: fame "depended on having one's exploits properly witnessed."<sup>71</sup>

As reconstructed over the centuries, the *Mōko shūrai ekotoba* conclude somewhat abruptly with two compelling passages, both referring back to Suenaga's expedition to Kamakura in 1275. The first acknowledges his debt of gratitude to Adachi Yasumori, the official who had rewarded him for his exploits against the Mongols the previous year (§14, cited above). The second recounts a dream he had had on his journey to Kamakura. This dream, about the deity of the Kosa shrine, presages (Suenaga believes) his eventual title to Kaito shrine—lands that originally belonged to Kosa and possession of which allowed him to expand his own lordship.<sup>72</sup> Taken together, the two passages highlight both the political and the divine recognition of his role in repelling the first Mongol invasion of 1274. Seen through Suenaga's eyes, the much larger-scale campaign of 1281 appears to be something of an anticlimax: an opportunity to confirm the honors hard won in the aftermath of the first expedition, but not one that requires divine intervention.

### The Sultan: al-Ashraf Umar (r. 1295–96)

Our third portrait begins with an artifact: an astrolabe now on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, made "by [the] hand and under [the] supervision" of 'Umar ibn Yusuf ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn Rasul al-Muzaffari.<sup>73</sup> Dated by inscription to 1291, it belongs to the time the Polos were beginning their long journey home from China and its creator, better known to history as al-Ashraf 'Umar, was the crown prince and soon-to-be Rasulid sultan of Yemen.<sup>74</sup> During the

<sup>71</sup> Varley, *Warriors of Japan*, 94–95, 97. As referenced above (n. 58), the *Heike monogatari*, compiled in the early thirteenth century, follows the fortunes of Taira clan, whose defeat in 1185 marked the end of the Heian period: Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 80.

<sup>72</sup> Suenaga, *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*, §§15 and 4.

<sup>73</sup> "Astrolabe of 'Umar ibn Yusuf ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn Rasul al-Muzaffari." Inscription translated by David A. King, <<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/444408>> [accessed September 26, 2015].

<sup>74</sup> Originally a Turcoman dynasty, the Rasulids had arrived in the Yemen as military lieu-

long reign of his father, al-Muzaffar (r. 1249–95), he developed into quite the royal polymath. Besides a treatise on the astrolabe, works ascribed to him include the *Kitab al Tabsirah fi 'ilm al-nujum* (Book of Instruction in the Science of Astronomy and Astrology), a compilation of received knowledge and new observations on topics as varied as the winds and rains, the growth of plants, animal husbandry, tax collection, the cultivation of fruits, the collection of aromatic plants, and the seasons for navigation (dated 1271, the year Marco first set out for the east); and a genealogical treatise claiming his dynasty's ancient Arab (rather than Turcoman) descent.<sup>75</sup> At his accession in 1295 (the year the Polos finally reached Venice), al-Ashraf 'Umar assembled registers of documents from his father's reign: *Nur al-ma'arif* (The Light of Knowledge) included inventories and price lists of artisanal and agricultural products, foodstuffs and textiles to be supplied to the palace, gift recipients, amounts paid soldiers and administrative officers for various tasks; and taxes levied on products in the great port of Aden.<sup>76</sup>

Located in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula where the Indian Ocean meets the Red Sea, Aden was the entrepôt connecting the maritime trade route from China and the Indies to Egypt and the Mediterranean.<sup>77</sup> Over the centuries, successive ruling dynasties had added to its natural advantages as a protected port free of underwater hazards by cultivating both its physical and institutional infrastructure in a manner consistent with other Indian Ocean ports.<sup>78</sup> The Rasulids, who had established their rule in Yemen earlier in the century, were particularly aggressive in this regard, expanding the infrastructure both of the port

---

tenants of the Ayyubid sultans of Egypt (1171–1250) but had wrested autonomy from Cairo in 1228. They ruled until 1454.

**75** Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 64, 86. The agricultural section of this book (chapter 32) has been translated by Daniel Varisco as *Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science*. An autograph version of the treatise on the astrolabe, preserved in Cairo, contains certifications by the prince's teachers of his competence in this art, as well as a description of the very piece preserved at the Metropolitan Museum.

**76** Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 70–71.

**77** Trade via the Red Sea corridor had increased in relation to the Persian Gulf with the Fatimid conquest of Egypt (969)—one symptom of the relative decline of Baghdad. Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade*, 27. In the twelfth century, Aden was an important hub in the "India Trade" of Jewish merchants based in Old Cairo (Fustat), whose correspondence and other household records survive in the Cairo Geniza—the treasure trove of documents "rediscovered" in the late nineteenth century and subsequently mined by historians (notably S. D. Goitein) for its evidence of life in the medieval Mediterranean. For its importance as an emporium over time, see Power, *Red Sea*, 175–78.

**78** Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade*, 10. This included a special tax levied on Indian Ocean vessels to pay for armed galleys to patrol against pirates. Smith, "Port Practices," 212.

and of its connections to the hinterlands. Under al-Ashraf 'Umar's father, al-Malik al-Muzaffar (r. 1249–95), Aden had benefited from the disruption of trans-Asian land routes by the Mongol conquest and by Crusader-Mamluk struggles over its terminus at Acre.<sup>79</sup> The result was a substantial increase in trade: custom house accounts compiled at al-Muzaffar's death in 1295 list nearly three hundred commodities, compared to only thirty-three in a description of Ayyubid Yemen from earlier in the century.<sup>80</sup> Aden had risen to the rank of a major international emporium during the years of the Polos' sojourn in the East.<sup>81</sup>

Marco Polo likely never saw Aden: the Polos' return route from China to Venice took them via the Persian Gulf through the lands of the Ilkhans of Persia (descendants of Khubilai's brother Hülegü), the political rivals of the Mamluks, who controlled shipping on the Red Sea.<sup>82</sup> He accurately describes it, however, as "the port where all the ships from India come"—the transshipment point through which "the Saracens of Alexandria" get all their pepper, spices, and other precious merchandise (§194).<sup>83</sup> The lack of eye-witness authenticity does not undermine his authority; rather, his account reflects his access to knowledge of Aden's pivotal role in the all-important Indian Ocean trade, known to most Venetians only through their trading connections in Alexandria.<sup>84</sup> In the previous section, on Abyssinia, the sultan of Aden figures as the villain in a tale of a Christian bishop taken captive while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and forcibly circumcized (i.e., converted to Islam) in order to "shame and spite" his lord the king, prompting a war between them. In the section on Aden proper, the fact that the sultan contributed his own troops to the Mamluk conquest of Acre is attributed to "the ill he wished on Christians" rather than "any love" for the sultan of Babylon [Cairo].<sup>85</sup> Typically for the *Devisement*,

---

**79** Jazim and Marino, "Nur al-Din et al-Muzaffar," §28.

**80** Smith, "Port Practices," 211–12.

**81** The cosmopolitanism of Rasulid interests may be gauged from the so-called "Rasulid Hexaglot" compiled under al-Ashraf 'Umar's fourteenth-century successor al-Abbas ibn Ali ibn Daud (r. 1363–77)—the multilingual glossaries in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian, and Mongol. See Allsen, "The *Rasulid Hexaglot*."

**82** These are the separate circuits described by Abu-Lughod in her chapters "Sindbad's Way: Baghdad and the Persian Gulf" and "Cairo's Monopoly under the Slave Sultanate," respectively: *Before European Hegemony*, 185–247.

**83** "le port, la u toutes les nes de Indie hi vienent [...] les saracin d'Alexandre."

**84** Latin Christians' access to the port of Alexandria, however, had been cut off by papal sanctions against trade with the Mamluks in the run-up to and aftermath of their conquest of Acre, the Crusaders' last mainland outpost, in 1291.

**85** In fact, surviving registers show that the Rasulid administration used the title "sultans of Abyssinia" for the Christian rulers of Ethiopia and the Muslim princes of Ifat alike, not

however, most of the passage is devoted to commercial affairs: the text correctly identifies “handsome Arabian warhorses” as a major export to the Indian Ocean and reports that “the sultan of Aden gets a lot of income and great treasure from the great tolls he takes from the ships and the merchants who go and come in his land; [...] for this reason [...] he is one of the richest kings in the world.”<sup>86</sup>

As for al-Ashraf ‘Umar’s astrolabe, if there is a signature object that emblemizes the transmission and expansion of medieval science across linguistic, cultural, and religious frontiers, that object is the astrolabe. Originating in Greek antiquity, the astrolabe was first introduced to the Muslim world in eighth-century Harran (upper Mesopotamia), and treatises detailing its use or construction were composed by some of the best-known names in Islamic mathematics and science, including al-Khwarizmi in the ninth century, al-Biruni in the tenth century, and al-Tusi in the thirteenth.<sup>87</sup> Al-Ashraf ‘Umar’s work on the astrolabe situates him within a recognizable model of medieval rule: the polymath prince with an interest in science and technology. While this interest most commonly took the form of patronage (particularly in the commissioning of scientific works or their translation), the future sultan’s hands-on involvement finds precedents in figures like al-Mu’tamin ibn Hud, the late eleventh-century king of Saragossa (in Muslim Spain), a noted mathematician whose *Kitab al-Istikmal* (Book of Perfection) was studied and copied across the Mediterranean into the fifteenth century and beyond, and the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II (r. 1220–50), who corresponded with philosophers (working in Arabic as well as Latin and Greek) and authored a noted treatise on falconry, *De arte venandi cum avibus*.<sup>88</sup> To the concerted military, diplo-

---

differentiating them by religion. Vallet, *L’Arabie marchande*, 417. On measures taken to restrict Mamluk trade in the Red Sea, see Jazim and Marino, “Nur al-Din et al-Muzaffar,” §30.

**86** On the patronage network the sultan of Aden had forged with a network of Muslim communities on the western and southeastern coasts of India, see Lambourn, “India from Aden.”

**87** The earliest extant Arabic treatise is by al-Khwarizmi. Al-Tusi (1202–74), who developed a linear (as opposed to planispheric) astrolabe, entered the service of Hülegü Khan (Khubilai’s brother) after Hülegü’s conquest of Baghdad (1258). He directed the construction of the Maragha Observatory, the “first research institution on a large scale with a recognizably modern administrative structure.” King, “Astrolabes, Quadrants, and Calculating Devices”; and North, *Cosmos*, 197, 204–05. The astrolabe was transmitted to Europe from Iberia in the eleventh century; the excitement it generated may be measured by the name the ill-fated lovers Abelard and Heloise chose for their son in the mid-twelfth century, and by the unfinished *Treatise on the Astrolabe* that Geoffrey Chaucer composed for his son in the late fourteenth.

**88** Djebbar, “Al-Mu’taman ibn Hüd,” 201. For a suggestion of how Frederick’s learning participated in his cultivation of a recognizably Mediterranean model of kingship, see Kinoshita, “Translatio/n, Empire,” 376.

matic, and economic measures mobilized by his father and grandfather, Al-Ashraf 'Umar's added the profile of a scholar-prince whose works both documented the sultanate's prosperity and enhanced its dynastic prestige.

Unlike the majority of sites described in the *Devisement du monde*, Aden never came under Mongol rule, and the Polos, as we have noted, likely did not know it from firsthand experience. At the same time, it was a crucial pivot between Indian Ocean system, source of the coveted spices and other exotic commodities that formed an important part of Venetian trade, and the commercial networks of the medieval Mediterranean.<sup>89</sup> The ebb and flow of its prosperity was inseparable from the larger dynamics of trans-Asian communication, the competition between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf maritime routes, the connection or disruption of land routes through Mongol-controlled regions.

## Conclusion

History on the scale of the Mongol century sometimes calls forth a desire for human agency, for the intimacy of the biographical. In the case of the *Devisement du monde*, this has on occasion taken the form—misleadingly, as I have suggested elsewhere—of construing Marco Polo not simply as the author/narrator but as the heroic first-person protagonist of his own adventure tale.<sup>90</sup> This essay, in contrast, has taken the *Devisement* as a matrix on which to build a connected history, a framing device to link the lives of extraordinary individuals like Zhao Mengfu and Al-Ashraf 'Umar and more ordinary ones like Takezaki Suenaga, caught up in the sweep of a turbulent time. Assembling their stories, in turn, animates the places and cultures Marco Polo passes in review, giving us a more textured understanding of the new political, economic, and cultural conditions that helped to enable his journey and that formed his book in the first place.

---

**89** On the sultan of Aden's active influence in the Indian Ocean at the time of Marco Polo, see Lambourn, "India from Aden."

**90** Kinoshita, "Traveling Texts."

## Bibliography

### Medieval Sources

- Ibn Rasul al-Muzaffari, Umar ibn Yusuf ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ali. *Astrolabe*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York <<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/140001577>> (accessed April 10, 2012).
- Mandeville, John. *The Book of John Mandeville with Related Texts*. Edited and translated by Iain Macleod Higgins. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011.
- Polo, Marco. *Milione: il Milione nelle redazioni toscana e franco-italiana = Le divisa-ment dou monde*. Edited by Gabriella Ronchi. Milan: Mondadori, 1982.
- Suenaga, Takezaki. *Mōko shūrai ekotoba*. Translated by Thomas D. Conlan as *In Little Need of Divine Intervention: Takezaki Suenaga's Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2001.
- Umar ibn Yusuf. *Tabṣīrah fī 'ilm al-nujūm*. Translated by Daniel Varisco as *Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science: The Almanac of a Yemeni Sultan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.
- Zhao Mengfu. *Horse and Groom*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art <<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/40507>> (accessed April 17, 2014).
- Zhou Mi. *Record of Clouds and Mist Passing Before One's Eyes*. Translated by Ankeney Weitz. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

### Secondary Studies

- Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Akbari, Suzanne Conklin, and Amilcare A. Iannucci, eds. *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- Allsen, Thomas T. *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . "The *Rasulid Hexaglot* in Its Eurasian Cultural Context." In *The King's Dictionary: The Rasulid Hexaglot—Fourteenth-Century Vocabularies in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian, and Mongol*, edited by Peter B. Golden, translated by Tibor Halasi-Kun et al., 25–49. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Brook, Timothy. *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010.
- Cahill, James. *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yüan Dynasty, 1279–1368*. New York: Weatherhill, 1976.
- Djebbar, Ahmed. "Al-Mu'taman ibn Hūd, roi de Saragosse et mathématicien." In *Les Andalousies de Damas à Cordoue: Exposition présentée à l'Institut du monde*

- arabe du 28 novembre 2000 au 15 avril 2001*, 201. Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 2000.
- Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.
- Franke, Herbert, and Dennis Twitchett, eds. *Cambridge History of China*. Vol. 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Gaunt, Simon. *Marco Polo's "Le Devisement du Monde": Narrative Voice, Language, and Diversity*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2013.
- Hearn, Maxwell K. "Painting and Calligraphy Under the Mongols." In *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty*, edited by James C. Y. Watt, 181–240. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010.
- Ishii, Susumu. "The Decline of the Kamakura Bakufu." Translated by Jeffrey P. Mass and Hitomi Tonomura in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, 3:128–74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Jacoby, David. "Marco Polo, His Close Relatives, and His Travel Account: Some New Insights." *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21 (2006): 193–218.
- Jazim, Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahim, and Brigitte Marino. "Nur al-Din et al-Muzaffar: La Construction de l'État rasoulide au Yémen." *Chroniques Yéménites* 6 (1997): 68–91.
- Khanmohamadi, Shirin A. *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.
- King, David A. "Astrolabes, Quadrants, and Calculating Devices." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by Gudrun Kramer et al. 3rd ed. Leiden: Brill Online, 2008.
- Kinoshita, Sharon. "Reorientations: The Worlding of Marco Polo." In *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages*, edited by John Ganim and Shayne Legassie, 39–57. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- . "Translatio/n, Empire, and the Worlding of Medieval Literature: The Travels of *Kalila wa Dimna*." *Postcolonial Studies* 11 (2008): 371–85.
- . "Traveling Texts: Marco Polo's *The Description of the World* and the World Empire of Letters." In *Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge*, edited by Gesa Mackenthun, Andrea Nicolas, and Stephanie Wodianka. Münster: Waxmann, forthcoming.
- Lambourn, Elizabeth. "India from Aden: *Khutba* and Muslim Urban Networks in Late Thirteenth-Century India." In *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1400–1800*, edited by Kenneth R. Hall, 55–97. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2008.
- Margariti, Roxani Eleni. *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art*. New York: Abrams, 1993.

- McCausland, Shane. *Zhao Mengfu: Calligraphy and Painting for Khubilai's China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011.
- Mote, Frederick. *Imperial China, 900–1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- North, John. *Cosmos: An Illustrated History of Astronomy and Cosmology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Okudaira, Hideo. *Emaki: Japanese Picture Scrolls*. Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1962.
- Power, Timothy. *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500–1000*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012.
- Rachewiltz, Igor de. "Marco Polo Went to China." *Zentralasiatische Studien* 27 (1997): 34–92.
- Rossabi, Morris. *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Smith, G. Rex. "More on the Port Practices and Taxes of Medieval Aden." *New Arabian Studies* 3 (1998): 208–18.
- Smith, Paul Jakov. "Problematizing the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition." In *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, edited by Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, 1–34. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003.
- Souyri, Pierre François. *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*. Translated by Käthe Roth. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia." *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735–62.
- Twitchett, Denis, and Herbert Franke, eds. *The Cambridge History of China*. Vol. 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Vallet, Eric. *L'Arabie marchande: état et commerce sous les sultans Rasulides du Yémen (626–858/1229–1454)*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010.
- Varley, Paul. *Japanese Culture*, 4th ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000.
- . *Warriors of Japan as Portrayed in the War Tales*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994.
- Youngs, Tim, ed. *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

---

**Sharon Kinoshita** (sakinosh@ucsc.edu) teaches world literature and cultural studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (2006) and numerous other works in medieval French and Mediterranean Studies. She has translated Marco Polo's *Description of the World* for Hackett Press and is currently at work on a book provisionally entitled *Re-Orientations: The Worlding of Marco Polo*.

---

**Abstract** In the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and postcolonial theory, Marco Polo is often cast as a quintessentially Western observer of Asian cultures. This essay seeks to break his text out of the binaries in which it is frequently understood. Returning the text to its original title, "The Description of the World," it reconstructs the diversity of late thirteenth-century Asia through the portraits of three figures who were Marco's contemporaries.

---

**Keywords** Marco Polo, Mongol empire, Yuan painting, medieval Japan, astrolabe.