



# DOMINICAN STUDY INSTITUTE

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International Conference

## **TRAVELLING TO THE EAST** *Marco Polo and the Mendicant Friars*

Friday 25 - Saturday 26 October 2024

*Istituto di Studi Ecumenici "San Bernardino", Biblioteca monumentale  
Sestiere Castello 2786 – 30122 Venezia*

Marco Polo, whose seven centuries since his death (1254 - 1324) will be celebrated in 2024, can be considered, in his own right, a privileged witness of fruitful intercultural relations between the Western and Eastern worlds. According to St. Augustine, the world is a book and those who do not travel read only a page of it. The Venetian traveller was undoubtedly an extraordinary reader of the book of the world: a man of wonder and curiosity....

His voyage, very long in time and space (three and a half years, between 1271 and 1275, and a distance of some 12,000 kilometres), crosses mythical lands, of different cultures and religions, from Venice to Xanadu (China): through Armenia, the Iranian plateau and the mountains of the Hindu Kush, passing by the territories of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea; between fertile lands, steppes and the inhospitable deserts of the Taklamakan and the Gobi. If the outward journey was almost entirely by land, the return to Venice (24 years after departure) will be mainly by sea: through the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Bay of Bengal, Ceylon, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf.

Marco Polo with his accounts arouses curiosity, great wonder. Although he is a typical western man and Christian educated, he observes facts and situations without too many prejudices and cultural blocks, even if there is a certain hostility towards Muslims, probably to be found in a historical-political context characterised by the Crusades.

Marco's voyage, with his father Niccolò and his uncle Matteo Polo, becomes much more than a simple and never-ending commercial voyage: it is an epic in which various actors join in, often by small strokes, including religious and ecclesiastical figures, an expression of the Pope of Rome's desire to understand the real extent of those 'borders of the world', towards which the missionary mandate of evangelical memory was oriented.

Undoubtedly, members of the Order of the Black Friars (Dominican Preachers), already well present in Marco Polo's Venice, were among these ecclesiastical avant-garde wished by the pontiff. However, Fra Francesco Pipino, a Dominican friar who translated Marco Polo's *Il Milione* into Latin between 1302 and 1315, partly condensing it and providing it with a new prologue, was not Venetian. Pippin, for this translation, perhaps the best known of all, did not however use the original text, but had recourse to a Venetian vulgarization. There was probably another Dominican Latin version of *Il Milione*, as can be deduced from archive documents showing links between the Venetian traveller and the Dominicans of the *Serenissima*. Members of the Order of Preachers, they advocated the spreading of the text in their preaching and teaching, not only in Italy, but also in France and England, combining approaches based on codicology, diplomatics, history, philology, religion and art history.

During the two days that will take place in Venice on 25 and 26 October 2024, the aim is to celebrate the story of Marco Polo through a multidisciplinary approach that sees Polo as the most famous figure but also covers themes and characters equally worthy of in-depth study. The papers will be divided into three sections: the first will be of a historical-philological nature and the history



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of thought (*The Dominicans and Marco Polo*); the second dedicated to the discovery of the literary genre linked to the journey, with particular reference to the missionary one (*The Periegetic and the Missions to the East*); and finally a third section focusing on artistic aspects and cultural exchanges (*The East of Silk and the Arts, Maps and Polo's Iconographies*).

## Subjects of specific interest for the thematic sections:

- Dominican manuscripts and *scriptoria* between Venice, Padua and Constantinople, locations of *Dominican Studiorum*
- Mendicant Friars Narrators, between chronicle and apologetics
- Travel narratives and geographical knowledge at the end of the Middle Ages
- The reception and diffusion of travel texts from antiquity, in the medieval period, between fiction and reality
- Travel and otherness: encounter-clash between cultures and religious traditions
- Between West and East: exchanges and identity claims among Christian communities in constant interaction
- Marco Polo's Iconographies
- The depiction of the Mendicant Friars and the mediated image of the East
- Oriental souvenirs: trade between Europe and the Far East (the role of the missions)

Scholars and young academics are invited to send, **by 7 April 2024**, the title of their contribution and an abstract of at least 1500 characters, with a short CV to the following email address: [dosti.marcopolo@gmail.com](mailto:dosti.marcopolo@gmail.com)  
Proposals in Italian, English and French are accepted.

The Scientific Committee reserves the right to allocate some of the contribution proposals directly to the collection of proceedings to be published by the *Institutum Historicum Ordinis Praedicatorum*.

The Conference Scientific Committee

