

Paths to the East: first by land, then by sea

The land-faring pioneers of Europe's first Age of Discovery who went eastward in the mid-thirteenth century needed resources quite different from those of the later, the seafaring, age.

By Sea:

Columbus would have to raise a large sum of money via the crown or rich merchants, find ships, enlist and organize crews, secure supplies, keep the crews happy and un-mutinous, and navigate a trackless ocean.

By Land:

Quite other talents were required of the earlier overland travelers such as Marco Polo. They could go with one or two companions along main-traveled roads—though the roads had not been frequented by Europeans before them. They could live off the land, finding food and drink along the way. While they did not need to be fund-raisers or master organizers, they had to be adaptable and affable.

Paths to the East: The Crusades

The Normans, descendants of the Norsemen who had swept in the tenth century into "Normandy" on the northern coast of France, were converted to Christianity, and sent their conquering force in all directions. William the Conqueror led them north to England in 1066. They roamed the Mediterranean, overran southern Italy and by 1130 had set up the Kingdom of Sicily, where Christians, Jews, and Arabs exchanged knowledge, arts, and ideas.

When **Pope Urban II** became pope in 1088, his Church was in dire need of reform—rotten with the buying and selling of pardons and church offices, and split by the claims of an anti-Pope. A muckraking reformer, he used his organizing talents and his eloquence to cleanse and to heal.

Alexius Comnenus, the Eastern Emperor, seeing the capital of his Byzantium Empire threatened by militant Islam, sent envoys to Urban appealing for military aid.

Urban saw his opportunity to unite the Churches of East and West

To a historic **Council at Clermont** in south-central France he summoned French bishops and representatives of the faith from across Europe

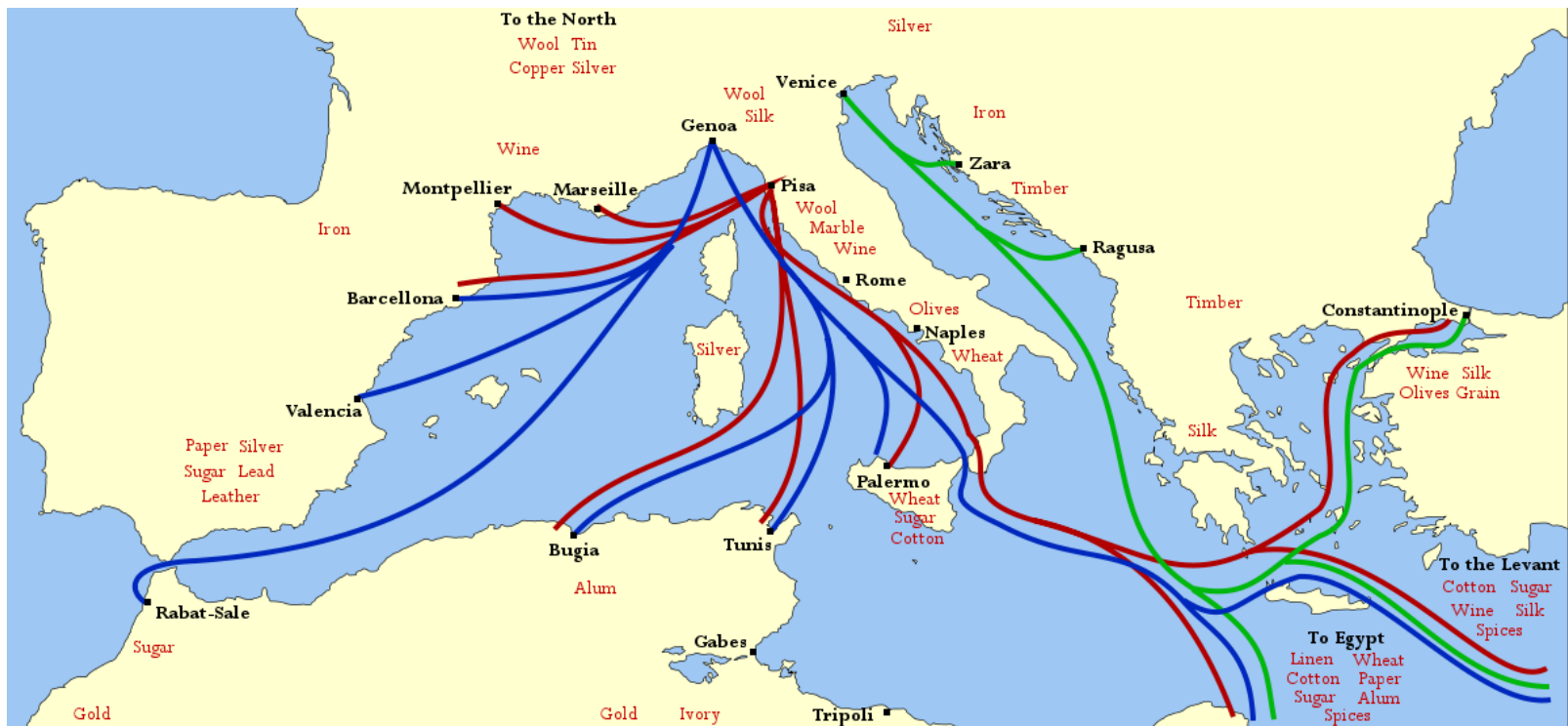


Thus, Europeans were on the move...

The merchants of **Venice, Genoa, and Pisa** who prospered by selling exotic Eastern commodities had themselves, of course, never seen India or China. Their Eastern contact was in the ports in the eastern Mediterranean.

Their precious stock had been brought by one of two main routes.

One, the fabled **Silk Road**, was an all-land route from eastern China through central Asia, by way of Samarkand and Baghdad, finally reaching the coastal cities of the Black Sea or the eastern Mediterranean.



By 1200, Venice and Genoa were in highly competitive business of trading with the Arabs in the Mid-East.

The other came through the **South China Sea Route**, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea, either up the Persian Gulf to Basra or up the Red Sea to Suez. To reach the European market these goods would still have to go overland, across Persia and Syria or else through Egypt.

On either of these routes, Frankish and Italian merchants found their way blocked as soon as they tried to advance eastward from the Mediterranean ports. Muslims gladly traded with them at Alexandria or even in Aleppo or Damascus, but the Muslim Turks would not allow Europeans to advance a step farther. **This was the Iron Curtain of the late Middle Ages.**



How the Mongols Opened the Way

If credit must be given for opening the way to China, it must go to the **Mongol people from central Asia, also known as The Tartars.**

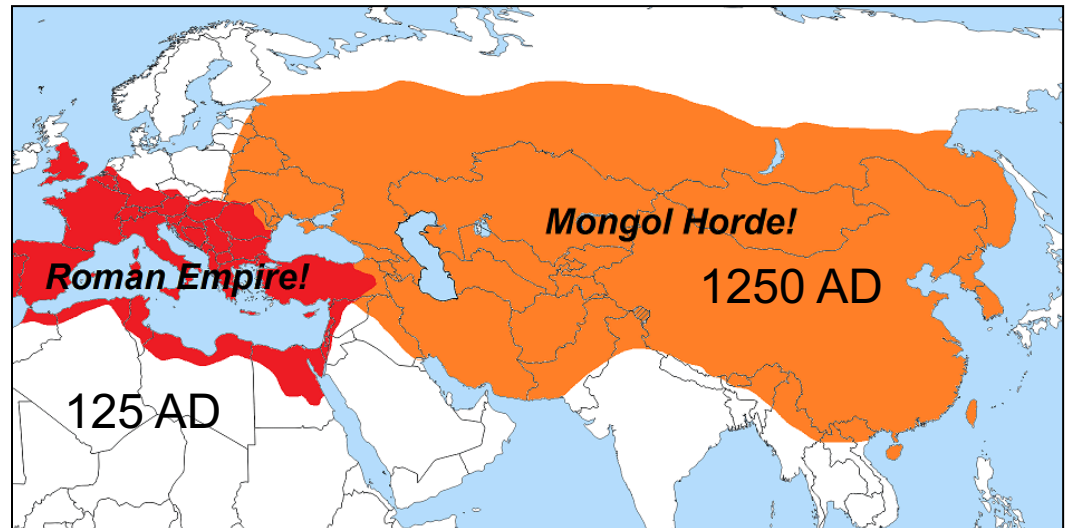
A threat to Europe in the Middle Ages, they have been much maligned.

Featured in our European historical pantheon as reckless destroyers, their very name has become an English synonym for barbarian.

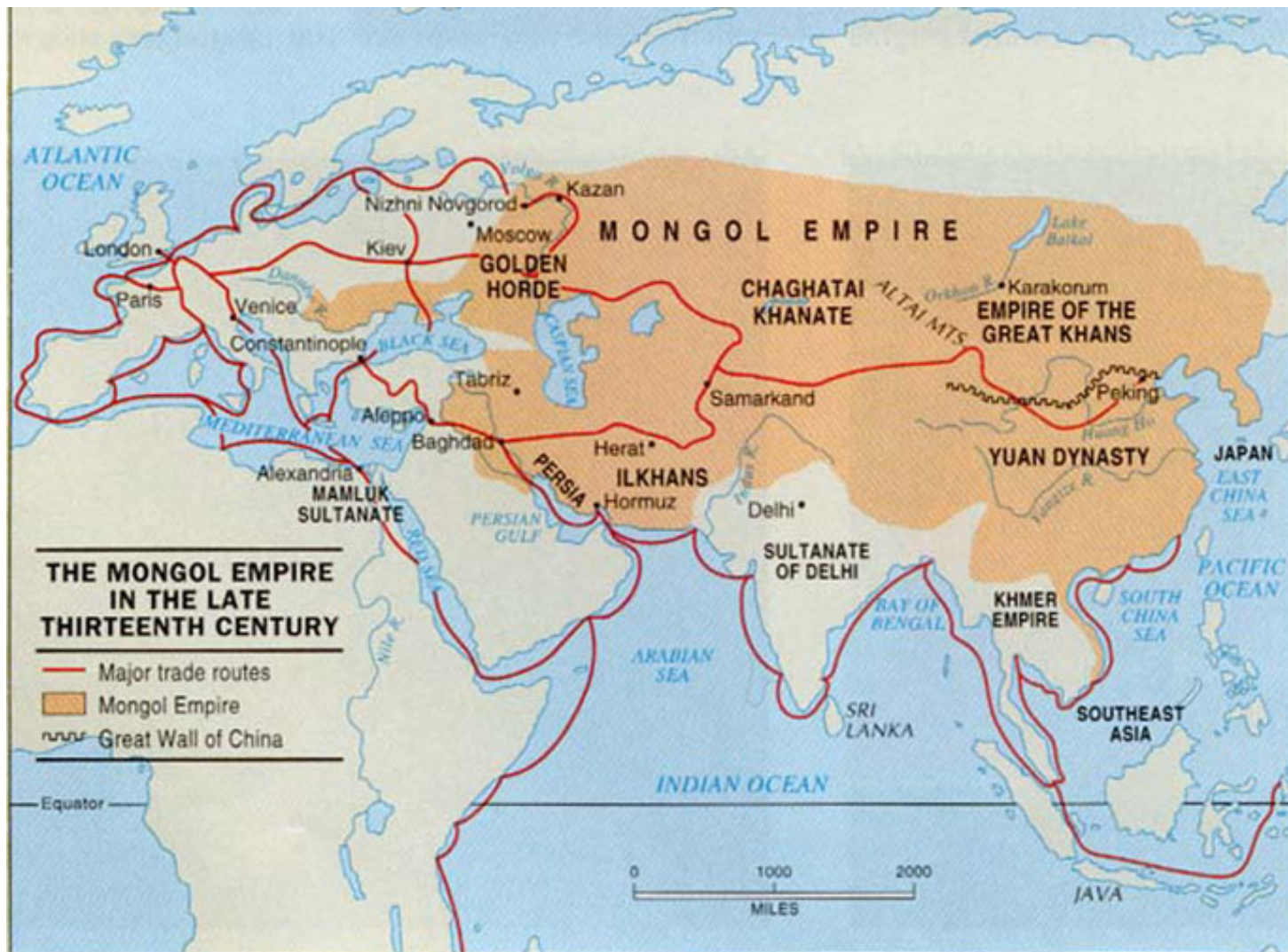
The Mongolian Empire was the largest contiguous empire in history!



Genghis Khan



“For a single century, from **CE 1250 to 1350**, the iron curtain was lifted, and there was **direct human contact between Europe and China.**” (p 125; pp 126-127)



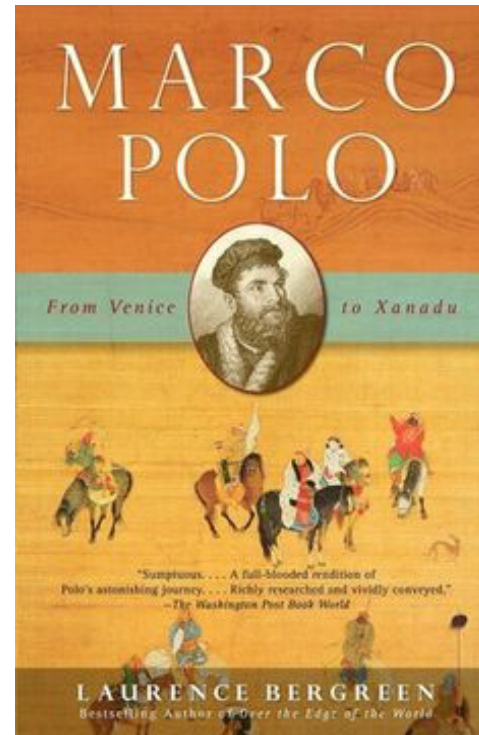
The Mongols extended their hegemony over a major part of the Eurasian landmass, from the Danube to the Pacific for the better part of two centuries.

The Travels of Marco Polo - The Discovery of Asia



Marco Polo from 1271 to 1295

MARCO POLO excelled all other known Christian travelers in his experience, in his product, and in his influence. Marco Polo's journey lasted **twenty-four years**. He reached farther than any of his predecessors, beyond Mongolia to the heart of Cathay. **He traversed the whole of China all the way to the Ocean, and he played a variety of roles, becoming the confidant of Kublai Khan and governor of a great Chinese city.** He was at home in the language, and immersed himself in the daily life and culture of Cathay. For generations of Europe, his copious, vivid, and factual account of Eastern ways was the discovery of Asia.



Some comparative travels in 1200s through the 1400s.



The Iron Curtain Comes Back Down

The land paths to the East that were so abruptly opened in the mid-thirteenth century were closed no less abruptly only one century later.

By the mid-fourteenth century famine in the north and disastrous flooding of the Yellow River in China multiplied problems for the ruling Mongols. There were outbreaks of rebellion all over the country.

But the Chinese people resisted. The climax came in 1368, when Hung Wu (Chu Yuän-chang, 1328-1398), a self-made man of great talents, emerged as the leader of Chinese rebellion and then became Emperor of China while founding the Ming dynasty.

HOW THE MONGOLS FELL

But the Mongols had forgotten to suppress the Chinese custom, at the coming of the full moon, of exchanging little round full-moon cakes, decorated with pictures of the moon hare and which, like a fortune cookie, carried a piece of paper inside. The wily rebels, we are told, used these innocent-looking moon cakes for their messengers.

Inside were instructions for the Chinese to rise and massacre the Mongols at the time of the full moon in August 1368.



By 1405, the great cities along the Silk Road were ruins and rubble. The Chinese went into isolation.

The weapon that brought down an empire and ultimately led to the sea race, the discovery of a new continent, and the globalization of humanity.

The stage is now set.

The Arabic Iron Curtain is re-established starting in 1350 and slammed shut by 1405.

Europeans, who have now had their eyes opened and their culture transformed, are cut off from direct contact with the East. The sudden change was a shock to the European economy and way of life.

Not being able to traverse the land for direct trade of goods and commodities, Europeans looked for ways to bypass the Arabic middle men.

It would take a rejection of Christian Dogma about the earth, a revival of scientific geography, and bold individuals.