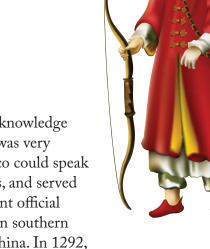# Famous Explorers:
Marco Polo

The Fra Mauro map, published c. 1450 by the Venetian monk Fra Mauro.

Have you ever played the game "Marco Polo?" Do you know where the name comes from? Marco Polo (1254-1324) was a famous explorer born in Venice, Italy, where he was raised by an aunt and uncle after his mother died. They taught him merchant skills like **appraising**, or finding out how much something is worth, and how to run a cargo ship. His father Niccolo Polo and uncle Maffeo Polo were successful merchants and travelers, but Marco did not meet them until he was sixteen. By that time, his father and uncle had already traveled through much of Asia and met the famous warlord Kublai Khan in Dadu, which is now Beijing, China.

The Khan asked the brothers to take a letter to the Pope asking for 100 Christian men who could teach him more about European culture. The Polo brothers had to wait to fulfill this request as Pope Clement IV died in 1268 and would not be replaced with a new pope until 1270. While they waited for a new pope to be selected, the brothers journeyed home to Venice so that they could bring Marco along for their future journeys. Marco left Venice with his father and uncle in 1271 and traveled for 24 years, during which he covered 15,000 miles and acquired countless riches and treasures.

When the Polos returned to Kublai Khan with letters from the new Pope, the Khan wouldn't let them leave. Marco writes that this was probably because the Khan thought their knowledge as merchants was very valuable. Marco could speak four languages, and served as a government official for the Khan in southern and eastern China. In 1292, Kublai Khan's great-nephew came to China from Persia (now called Iran) to find a wife. When the nephew's wedding party left, they asked to take the Polos with them on a fleet of 17 junks, or Chinese sailing ships.

The wedding party traveled south from Quanzhou in southern China to Singapore, north to Indonesia, and west to Sri Lanka. Marco described the Pandyan kingdom in Sri Lanka as the richest empire he'd ever seen. The party then traveled across the Arabian Sea to Hormuz in Persia. During the two years at sea, only eighteen out of six hundred passengers survived. The Polos were three of them. The three men finally left the wedding party and traveled by land to Trabzon, a port in Turkey by the Black Sea.

Marco, his father and his uncle were all thrown in prison shortly after returning Venice, which was fighting a fierce war with Genoa for control of Mediterranean trade routes. While in jail, Polo told his story to his cellmate, Rustichello da Pisa, who wrote a book now known as The Travels of Marco Polo. Marco Polo was eventually released and lived the rest of his life as a wealthy merchant. He died in 1324.

Famous Explorers: Marco Polo

Reading Comprehension:

Briefly describe how Marco Polo became an explorer.

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Why was Kublai Khan reluctant to let the Polo family leave China?

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Writing Prompt:

Some historians have argued that Marco Polo never visited China, because he doesn't mention things like chopsticks in his book. However, it's likely that Marco Polo didn't want to include this information because he respected China and didn't want other Europeans to think that the Chinese were silly due to small cultural differences. Historians now mostly agree that Polo's stories are generally accurate, even if they aren't all 100% true. Why do you think that it's so hard to know what really happened back then? What about the past makes it easy to **embellish**¸ or exaggerate, especially when we compare it to the present day?

Write your response on a separate sheet of paper.

Activity:

Marco Polo brought back a map from China which was used to draw the 1453 Fra Mauro map, said to be one of the greatest examples of medieval **cartography**, or the art of mapmaking. With a parent's help, go online and find an image of the Fra Mauro map. What places and countries do you recognize? What countries and continents are missing entirely from the map?

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Define these Terms:

Appraising

Embellish

Cartography