

It's Saturday! Which means it's time for my #ItalianThread. Today, I want to talk about one of the most famous Italians... or should I say, Venetians. Be ready to learn the true story of

## ■ MARCO POLO ■

and his most famous travel

1/?

Most of you, I bet, are familiar with the figure of Marco Polo. For some reason (orientalism) he has become quite popular in western culture - the westerner who travelled all the way to the ~ mysterious ~ Asian continent and was welcomed in the court of Kublai Khan 2/?

But I guess not many of you are familiar with the details of his life and travels! That awfully incorrect series 'Marco Polo' does not count. So... in this thread, I will give you an overview of the very interesting life of MP, without the orientalism I hope! 3/?

Marco was born in Venice, in 1254, from a rich merchant family. At the time, this meant he was born into an incredibly cosmopolitan environment - Venetian merchants had many contacts with a lot of people across the Mediterranean and beyond. 4/?

In fact, the Polo family was scattered in Venice, Constantinople and the shores of the Black Sea.

In 1265 Marco's father and his brother travelled to Kublai Khan's court and back, with a message from the Khan to the Pope, asking for missionaries. 5/?

(yes, the Mongols - who ruled China at the time - had a correspondence with the Pope! They were historically allied with Crusaders! History is much more fun when you don't make it western-centric isn't it?) 5bis/?

After one year, the Polo family planned another trip to China - both for commercial reasons and for bringing another letter from the Pope to Kublai Khan. This time, though, the younger son - our Marco - joined the journey! 6/?

The journey itself was long and difficult. Marco was very young, likely 17 yo, and fell ill during the journey. He, his father and his uncle managed to reach Chameifu after THREE YEARS! Never gonna complain about a Bologna-Milan trip anymore 7/?

Anyway, once they reach Chameifu, they were warmly welcomed. The Mongols, which at the time controlled not only China but most of Asia, were in fact very eager to commerce and thus very interested in foreigners. 8/?

Kublai Khan in particular took a liking to young Marco. He was young and bright, with a talent in learning languages, and thus the Khan trained him as a sort of diplomatic assistant. 9/?

Marco was tasked with travelling all across the Mongol empire, performing various administrative tasks. He even became governor of a city! He travelled not only through China, but also all the way to India, Myanmar, Indonesia, Persia... all as an ambassador of the great Khan 10/?

He lived in Asia for seventeen years, and came back to Venice only in 1295 (with a journey that took him seven years!) when he was already 40 yo. 11/?

At the time, Venice was engaged in various naval skirmishes with the Republic of Genoa for the control of trade routes in the Mediterranean. Marco took part of one of the battles, and ended up prisoner of the Genoese! 12/?

Luck has it, his cellmate was a writer from Pisa (another enemy of Genoa) who specialised in chivalric poems. Marco, either convinced by the Genoese (who wanted to trade with Asia as well) or to pass the time during his captivity, started telling him of his journey 13/?

Thus, the famous Il Milione was born! It became an instant bestseller (by medioeval standard) and was shared across all Europe. Most Europeans were shocked that such complex civilisations as described by Marco could exist outside of the West! 14/?

Marco was, luckily, freed in 1299 and came back to Venice, where he married and had three daughters. He kept working as a merchant, tho never travelled far. He died in 1324. 15/?

Many people doubted his tales, but they are actually quite sound as confirmed by the meticulously kept Chinese archives. Marco's life is, imho, a beautiful example of the sharing of knowledge, goods and people between the West and

the East that was common since Roman times 16/?

I loathe that he is painted as some sort of ""explorer"" discovering ""exotic lands""... there were already relations, albeit not common, between European powers and China. And Marco himself was as much Asian, by culture, as he was Venetian. He grew up there! 17/?

Marco Polo's tale has been rebranded in a very orientalist way, but his true life was far more interesting and inspiring. 18/?

Also, fun fact! The image of Westerners in Asia was tied to the Venetians. It was so interesting to see this statue of 'a westerner' in Bangkok, sporting a typical Venetian coat! A legacy of the Polo family reaching us to this day :) 19/?

<https://t.co/ZJApysLrBd>



I hope you found this thread interesting! If you are curious for more Italian history, you can find other threads following this link 20/20 <https://t.co/oE011HH410>