

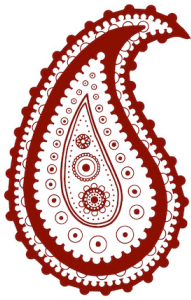
# DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE  
JOURNAL OF  
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 2 (2017)



*The* UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

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## **From the Faculty Advisor**

This second volume of *DĀNESH* represents a significant expansion of the journal, both in terms of the scope of topics covered by the published articles, and by the growth of the journal's editorial team. Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase original research produced by Iranian Studies undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma. This volume of the journal was produced through the able leadership of **Elizabeth "Libby" Ennenga** (BA, 2017), as the journal's editor-in-chief. Under Libby's editorial leadership *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

This year also marks the maturing of OU's Iranian Studies program into the newly christened **Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies**. As the program has grown, so too has the interest and dedication of OU students in the field of Iranian Studies. The publication of *DĀNESH*, a peer-reviewed journal published under the auspices of OU's Farzaneh Center and the OU College of International Studies, is also dedicated to highlighting the growing undergraduate program in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present the second volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi  
Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History  
Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

## **From the Editor-in-Chief**

I am honored to have been a part of the creation of Volume Two of *DĀNESH*. After an exceptionally successful inaugural edition of the journal, I have been more than impressed to see the quality of this new edition. This journal is made up of outstanding research examining the rich history, numerous religions, complex political climate, and vibrant culture of Iran. I believe in the transformative power of knowledge, and each article published in *DĀNESH* proves the academic dialogue on Iranian Studies is thriving at the University of Oklahoma.

Many students worked diligently to create the second edition of the journal. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the associate editors who were consistently a positive hardworking team throughout this process. I would also like to recognize the authors of Volume Two; whose distinguished works are the reason the journal is possible. Each author remained professional, involved, and patient throughout the entire process — and for that I thank you. To the University of Oklahoma Libraries and Printing Services, thank you for your necessary assistance to help make *DĀNESH* accessible to readers both digitally and in physical copies.

The quality of work and endless support given to this journal is a direct reflection of the growth of the Iranian Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma. Thank you to the Farzaneh family for their generous donations that have allowed students to continue to pursue their interests in Iranian Studies. Most of all, my sincerest gratitude goes to Dr. Afshin Marashi. Neither this journal, nor the Iranian Studies Program would be possible without your continued support of the students and their work. Your guidance, assistance, and support have made all the difference.

Libby Ennenga (BA 2017)  
Editor-in-Chief

## Marco Polo in Iran: Cultural Encounters in Medieval History

Coleton Winters

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Human history is filled with legendary characters whose names are remembered to this day. One such person is the travelling merchant, Marco Polo. As far back as the fourteenth century, there are those who claim that no man had seen as much of the world as Marco Polo.<sup>1</sup> His travels are famously recorded in a book that has passed down through the centuries under titles like *Description of the World*, *Marvels of the World*, and *The Travels of Marco Polo*. While many consider the various versions of the text to be genuine, there have also been skeptics who do not believe that Marco Polo saw the things he claimed. In Jacopo d'Acqui's *Imago Mundi*, written in the fourteenth century, d'Acqui makes the claim that when Marco Polo fell ill for the last time he was urged to excise the exaggerated portions of the book so closely associated with him.<sup>2</sup> While the author may not be able to tell if that event happened, it still serves as evidence that a large number of people believed that the stories were fabricated. This is easily understandable as many of the tales are quite fantastical. Though for every one of the far-fetched stories included, there seems to be a half dozen practical descriptions of a location.

Some of the most fantastical tales in the book are those covering the Middle-East and Iran, areas Polo passed through on his way to Asia. But in passing he also recorded a great deal of information about the cities, peoples, and geography of the region. He even records information about the Arabian horse trade. This paper will examine where in Iran and the surrounding areas Marco Polo went, and what he saw and would have seen

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Latham, trans., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958) 344-345.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Jackson, "Marco Polo and His 'Travels,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61 (1998): 82-101.

there in the thirteenth century. By exploring Marco Polo's texts, modern readers will have the chance to see what Iran was like in the thirteenth century through the eyes of the Italy's most famous tourist.

There are two possibilities described in Marco Polo's text to enter Iran: Baghdad and Tabriz. While Baghdad may not be a part of Iran, it stands to note that Marco Polo did not include Tabriz as part of Iran either. These are merely stops along the way that serve as convenient transition points. I will start with the larger city of Baghdad since that is the order they appear in the text. There is very little description of Baghdad itself, other than that it is the largest and most splendid city in that area and that an unnamed river flows through it to a city called Kais. He also says merchants follow the river, since according Marco Polo, Kais is where they enter the Indian sea. The text also lists the goods that are produced in Baghdad and says the city is a center of learning and study of Islamic law and various sciences, such as astronomy, but that is about it for the actual description of the city. The section on Baghdad also includes two or three stories, depending on how they are counted. The first one is about a greedy caliph with a great deal of wealth who was conquered by the Khan Hulagu. When his treasure trove was discovered, the Khan locked the caliph in it to starve to death since he had not used the treasure to defend his city. There is another story of a group of Christians who must move a mountain through prayer to avoid being executed. The mountain is moved by a devout shoe maker, who had his own short story about how he gouged out one of his own eyes when he saw a woman's leg and was tempted by it.<sup>3</sup> But it is very unlikely Marco Polo ever actually travelled to Baghdad. Some of the most obvious evidence of this is the meager description of the city, which in many ways is not actually a description of the city itself. The best evidence, however, is Marco Polo's mention and description of the river that flows through Baghdad. A Major Sykes of the Royal Geographical Society explained this in his correspondence published in the *Geographical Journal*,

The above arguments are, however, but minor, if we consider the utterly inaccurate description of his supposed onward journey. To quote the text: "A very great river flows through the city, and by this you can descend to the Sea of India. There is a great traffic of merchants with their goods this way; they descend some eighteen days from Baudas, and then

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<sup>3</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 51-57.



come to a certain city called Kisi, where they enter the Sea of India. There is also on the river, as you go from Baudas to Kisi, a great city called Bastra, surrounded by woods in which grow the best dates in the world." Now, in both these paragraphs there is separate and independent mention and inference that Kisi is at the mouth of the Sea of India or the Persian Gulf, whereas it is situated some 400 miles from the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab, which is the name given to the united streams of the Tigris and Euphrates. Would Marco Polo have been guilty of such an astounding statement? Having studied his works carefully in parts where I can check it, I unhesitatingly answer in the negative.<sup>4</sup>

This evidence shows that Marco Polo clearly did not travel to Baghdad. Regarding the stories that he attributed to the location, it is probable that he picked them up from Christian circles in the east during his travels. This is supported by other tales, very much like these ones, coming up in other sources.<sup>5</sup> Why did Marco Polo include Baghdad in his tales if he had never actually been to the city? The fact that he did so reveals that Marco Polo isn't recounting his own travel itinerary. Instead Baghdad had to be included to make a more complete and encyclopedic description of the world.

This leaves Tabriz as Marco Polo's entry point into Iran. Though Marco Polo himself did not consider Tabriz as a part of Iran despite its location on the Iranian plateau.<sup>6</sup> The route through Tabriz seems far more likely than through Baghdad. When the descriptions of the two cities are compared, the one of Tabriz seems extremely detailed. Similarly to Baghdad, it provides information on the goods made there, but goes a step farther in describing the people of the city: "There are Armenians and Nestorians, Jacobites and Georgians and Iranians; and there are also worshippers of [Mohammed], who are the natives of the city and are called Tabrizis." It even notes that many Italian merchants are found here buying goods. Marco Polo also notes that he admired the fruit that grew in the orchards around the city<sup>7</sup> an same admiration shared by an Arab named Ibn

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<sup>4</sup> P. Sykes, "Marco Polo's Travels," *The Geographical Journal* 26.4 (1905): 462-466.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, "Marco Polo and His Travels," 90.

<sup>6</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 57.

Hawqal, who in his own writings noted the fertility of Tabriz's fruit gardens.<sup>8</sup> The Italian merchants also corroborate this to some degree: "Tabriz was one of the [centers], which exchanged goods with Venice and Italy because the silk of Iran reached Europe through Venice and Italy."<sup>9</sup> So there is little doubt that this center of commerce is the city the Italian merchant family travelled through on their way to the court of Kublai Khan.

The first places mentioned after entering Iran hardly receive any description; however, there are still some interesting references. The first city mentioned is Saveh, and unlike some cities, the text directly implies that Marco Polo was there. Though the only thing mentioned about the city is the burial place of the three wise men, which the young traveler apparently wished to investigate.<sup>10</sup> The next town mentioned in the narration, a few days' travel from Saveh, describes "fire-worshippers" who tried to keep a fire "perpetually burning."<sup>11</sup> So in the course of looking for information on the three wise-men, it appears Marco Polo had located some Zoroastrians. As the more centrally located Zoroastrian communities were the ones least affected by the invasion of the Mongols, this location is likely accurate.<sup>12</sup>

The next city brought up by Marco Polo is Yazd, which he describes as a "very fine and splendid city and center of commerce."<sup>13</sup> Despite this recommendation, only thirty-one words are devoted to the city itself--forty-eight words less than this paragraph. So despite being in the logical path to Hormuz and being a famous city, there is little that can be said of the Polos' time there.

Seven days travel from Yazd is the city of Kerman, which receives a much more detailed analysis than most cities in Polo's narrative.. There are a few reasons this could be. The most obvious possibility is that this is a city that Marco Polo visited at least three times, both on his way to China and on his way back to Iran when he was escorting Kōkōchin to marry Arghun Khan. Another is that Kerman was a very important city that

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<sup>8</sup> Maryam Mir-Ahmadi, "Marco Polo in Iran," *Oriente Moderno* 6 (2008): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Mir-Ahmadi, "Marco Polo in Iran," 5.

<sup>10</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-60.

<sup>12</sup> Massoume Price, "Zoroaster and Zoroastrians in Iran," *Iran Chamber Society*, [http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/zoroaster\\_zoroastrians\\_in\\_iran.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/zoroaster_zoroastrians_in_iran.php) Accessed January 4, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 62.

received much attention for a variety of reasons. According to Maryam Mir-Ahmadi,

Section 35 is about Kirmān, which always received considerable attention due to strategic and political reasons, and also for its borders with eastern territories [sic], and because it was exposed to boundary dangers and attacks. Kirmān province [sic] is the Carmani... of the ancient geographers. By the time of Marco Polo's visit in 1271 it had become an emporium for traders from the Persian Gulf, Khorāsān, and Central Asia. Kirmān was also important because it produced lots of Iranian goods and owned numerous mines.<sup>14</sup>

These mines and Iranian goods were not overlooked by the young Marco Polo, who noted the turquoise that was mined out of the mountains as well as the veins that went on to produce steel. The city was also a great manufacturer of weapons and armor, as the text reads, "The inhabitants excel in the manufacture of all the equipment of a mounted warrior – bridles, saddles, spurs, swords, bows, quivers, and every sort of [armor] according to local usage."<sup>15</sup> The young Italian's attention was also caught by the local falcons, which the text claims are the best in the world and that they are so fast no bird can escape them.

There is quite a lot of travelling and various descriptions thereof before coming to the next city of note. Marco Polo passed through the region of Rudbar, which is marked in the passage as being a lush region with all sorts of produce: Grains, apples of paradise (known to us today as bananas), dates, and even pistachios. He describes many of the animals he sees as well, especially the turtle-doves: "Turtle-doves flock here in multitudes because of the quantities of berries they find to eat. There is no end to their numbers. The Saracens never eat them, because they hold them in abhorrence."<sup>16</sup> While he also notices the francolins of the region, it is the white oxen that seem to capture most of his attention, as "they are the loveliest things in the world to look at."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mir-Ahmadi, "Marco Polo in Iran," 10.

<sup>15</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Like with anything in life, bad always comes with good, and in this part of the book the effect is two-fold. Marco Polo claims that all the villages and towns here have earthen walls, due to a group of people called the Qaraunas. They are described as having a mixed heritage of Tartar fathers and Indian mothers; a marauding group of people that are a plight on the land. The claim that these raiders use “diabolical arts” to bring about a “great darkness” across the land during the day is an example of the kind of fantastical elements that weaken this section of the book. Marco Polo writes that it is in this darkness that thousands of them will ride side by side so that when they cross over the land none can escape. The people are captured and held for ransom or sold into slavery. They answer to a king named Neguder who Marco Polo claimed was ruling over a city called Dilivar, and in some texts (notably Ramusio’s manuscript) it is from this city they learned their dark arts. His Qaraunas followers are called Neguderis after him.<sup>18</sup> The second fault of the passage stems from the fact that his account of these bandits is hard to confirm, since Marco Polo himself is one of the few sources of information about them. Neguder himself certainly is a real figure, as were his followers. He was a Mongolian commander from the Golden Horde. As the khanates started to splinter he and his followers found themselves abandoned in the Khorasan region. Even the later Mughal emperor Babur noted that this group existed in the mountains.<sup>19</sup> The rest of the entry seems much more confused, as the Sultan named Asidin in Polo’s tale has been historically identified as “Izz al-Din Kushlu Khan.” This causes problems for the city Dilivar though. The city itself is believed to be Lahore, as Polo calls it “citta di Lavar”, but there is no record of Kushlu Khan having ruled over this city, let alone having lost it to Neguder. Kushlu Khan himself was the ruler of the region called Sind.<sup>20</sup> This confusing account suggests that it is another example of a story that was told to the traveler in passing. This belief though is somewhat contradicted by the text itself which makes a brief assurance that Marco Polo himself barely escaped capture by the sorcerous bandits near a town called Kamasal and that many of his companions did not.<sup>21</sup> It is possible, however, that Marco Polo’s group was attacked by this group of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>19</sup> Sunil Kumar, “The Ignored Elites: Turks, Mongols and a Persian Secretarial Class in the Early Delhi Sultanate,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43.1, (2009): 51-52.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Military and Political History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 115-116.

<sup>21</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 65.

bandits, and thus the likely reason why someone told them the stories about the Neguderis in the first place. Though it seems just as likely this could be nothing more than an embellishment on the part of the romantic writers that recorded Polo's tale. In either case, it is difficult to prove the young Italian's claims from this part of the book.

Marco Polo then comes to the major port city of Hormuz. As a result of the prominent trade location, Polo's list of goods from Hormuz is one of the narrative's most diverse, naming everything from gems and elephant ivory to gold and silk. Marco Polo also makes a point of mentioning that many of these goods are brought from India by ship,<sup>22</sup> an important detail to consider, in understanding Marco Polo's journey through Iran. Otherwise it would seem that Marco Polo was simply zig-zagging over the plateau with no real destination in mind. The following passage is also important to consider:

Their ships are very bad, and many of them founder [sic], because they are not fastened with iron nails but stitched together with thread from coconut husks. They soak the husk till it assumes the texture of horsehair; then they make it into threads and stitch their ships. It is not spoilt by the salt water, but lasts remarkably well. The ships have one mast, one sail, and one rudder and are not decked; when they have loaded them, they cover the cargo with skins, and on top of these they put the horses which they ship to India for sale. They have no iron for nails; so they employ wooden pegs and stitch with thread. This makes it a risky undertaking to sail in these ships. And you can take my word that many of them sink, because the Indian Ocean is often very stormy.<sup>23</sup>

Considering the cities that Marco Polo visited since Tabriz, it is likely that the merchant family was heading to this port. There is no apparent evidence in the text to dispute this idea. A ship after all is far more convenient to travel in than it is to walk and it would easily save the travelers a lot of time to take a ship to a location much closer to the Khan's court. Being Venetians they would also be accustomed to travelling by sea. So I believe the merchant family was heading to this trading port on purpose with the intention of taking a ship. However this is clearly not what happened since there is no description of a sea journey in this part of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>23</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 66-67.

the book. Instead it talks about a return route to Kerman. The above passage offers some insight into this-- the Venetians were accustomed to shipbuilding, and as such they were highly critical of the ships they encountered in Hormuz. While they may have travelled to the port with every intention of taking a ship, it is likely that the possibility of drowning on the stormy Indian Ocean because of an untarred ship changed their minds. This sudden reversal of plans explains the pattern of Polo's stops along his journey, as it leaves the family of merchants taking a detour north to Khorasan to travel over land to China.

The family leaves Hormuz and heads back North to Kerman, marking Polo's second visit to the city, but notably they follow a different route. However, the description is very much the same. The only real addition made at this point is the mention of natural hot baths, which are supposedly very good for curing various ailments.<sup>24</sup> Thermal and mineral hot springs are still very much around in the province of Kerman in Iran, possibly even the same ones that Marco Polo himself visited.<sup>25</sup>

The account of Marco Polo's journey into the Northern provinces and toward the frontiers of Iran is one of the book's most interesting. As a Venetian who had been raised beside the sea, the dryness and desolation of the Iranian Plateau seems to have had a profound effect on him, as demonstrated by his detailed examination of the deserts he passes through. He claims that there were no beasts because of the lack of vegetation and that what little running water can be found is brackish and green, requiring that travelers carry their drinking water with them. In fact he claims the water starved region "is all a desolate and arid waste."<sup>26</sup> Marco Polo is in no way exaggerating the harshness of the environment, though it is nothing compared to the ones he will soon see farther East. Though three days from Kerman he gets a chance to rest from the arid environment. He describes an underground stream that has carved out caverns with plentiful access to water, where travelers rest with their animals and replenish their water supplies.<sup>27</sup> Despite Marco Polo's recollections of this being a river, more contemporary historians believe that this was actually a "qanāt,"<sup>28</sup> that is,

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<sup>24</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 68. Ibid, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Zargham Mohammadi and Hassan Sahraie Parizi, "Hydrogeochemistry of the Jowshan thermal springs, Kerman, Iran," *Latest Trends on Engineering Mechanics, Structures, Engineering Geology* 87, 505-509.

<sup>26</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 68-69.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>28</sup> Mir-Ahmadi, "Marco Polo in Iran," 10.

“a gently sloping underground channel or tunnel constructed to lead water from the interior of a hill to a village below.”

After a further four days, Marco Polo reaches Kuhbanan. The city is ancient, dating back to the Neolithic Era, and while the surrounding regions have many areas of archeological interest the traveler has very little to say.<sup>30</sup> He says the city is large and the population is Muslim, also mentioning that the city is rich in metals. A special mention is made of the large steel mirrors produced here, which he describes as being of “exceptional quality”. He also briefly describes the process used here to produce a salve for the eyes.<sup>31</sup>

Upon leaving the city, Marco Polo entered the Dasht-e Lut, or the Emptiness Desert. This being one of two massive and inhospitable deserts on the Iranian Plateau. The other is called Dasht-e Kavir, which is the most lifeless place on Earth where not even bacteria lives. To this day, the desert that Marco Polo travelled through is entirely uninhabited. It is one of the hottest places on Earth and it holds the record for highest recorded surface temperature on the planet at one hundred and fifty nine degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>32</sup> Marco Polo’s account has them carrying everything they may possibly need on their journey over the desert, since the region lacks any sort of trees or fruit. Water too is hard to find, this being one of the driest places in the world. The only water that can be found is the bitter brackish kind that Polo described before reaching Kuhbanan. However it is this water that the animals are forced to survive on. The text claims that the animals can be tempted into drinking it by mixing flour into it, otherwise even they are reluctant to drink the foul water.<sup>33</sup>

After travelling over Dasht-e Lut, Marco Polo comes to Tun and Qayen. Polo describes this region as having “cities and towns in plenty”; however, the description of the region is far less interesting than the fantastical tales he shares about the area. The first of which is of a solitary tree in the northern borders of Iran. On one side of the tree all its leaves are green, and on the other side its leaves are white. This tree stands alone in a vast plain, and in all but one direction it is the only tree for one hundred

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>31</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> “Iran Geography|Deserts, Forests, Mountains, seas,” *Trip to Persia*, <http://triptopersia.com/iran-nature/geography>, Accessed January 4, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 69.

miles The people of the region are said to be extremely attractive and they benefit from “an abundance of good things of every sort.”<sup>34</sup>

It is the story that is told right after though that is of real interest. It is a story of drugs, murder, and mysticism. Marco Polo came across a tale of a sheikh of a mountain fortress and his secretive order of hashishiyyin. A tale that has passed down even into the popular culture of today, for example the popular video game franchise *Assassin's Creed* was inspired by this order.<sup>35</sup> In fact even the word assassin is believed to have originated here.<sup>36</sup> Our narrator starts the retelling of his tale by assuring the reader that he will tell the story in the same way that many people have told it to him, all but confirming the suspicion that the fantastical stories coming out of the Iranian sections of the book are just stories Marco Polo himself heard while travelling. He then goes on to tell how the “Sheikh of the Mountain,” who is much more commonly known as the “Old Man of the Mountain,”<sup>37</sup> began to create a paradise on Earth:

He had had [sic] made in a valley between two mountains the biggest and most beautiful garden that was ever seen, planted with all the finest fruits in the world and containing the most splendid mansions and palaces that were ever seen, ornamented with gold and with likeness of all that is beautiful on earth, and also four conduits, one flowing with wine, one with milk, one with honey, and one with water. There were fair ladies there and damsels, the loveliest in the world, unrivalled at playing every sort of instrument and at singing and dancing. And he gave to his men to understand that this garden was Paradise. That is why he made it after this pattern, because [Mohammed] assured the Saracens that those who go to Paradise will have beautiful women to their hearts' content to do their bidding, and will find there rivers of wine and milk and honey and water. So he had

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<sup>34</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 69-70. Ibid, 69-70.

<sup>35</sup> Rus McLaughlin, “The History of Assassin’s Creed,”  
<http://www.ign.com/articles/2011/11/12/the-history-of-assassins-creed>,  
Accessed January 4, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Andrea Stanton, *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa: An Encyclopedia*. 4 vols. (Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications, 2012) Vol. 1, 21.  
Could just cite volume one and only list 21 as page number.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967): 9.



had [sic] this garden made like the Paradise that [Mohammed] promised to the Saracens, and the Saracens of this country believed that it really was Paradise.<sup>38</sup>

The narrative continues by revealing that all the men permitted to enter the false paradise are unknowingly on the path to become assassins for the “Old Man.” He would drug young men and bring them to the garden, so that they would wake up in Paradise. When he needed men to kill for him, he would take the youths from the garden while they slept so that they would wake in the castle, after which these youths would go to the Old Man, who would assure them that they really had come from the Paradise that was promised to them by Mohammed. The young men would of course want to die so that they could return to the afterlife they had unwillingly left. Playing on this desire, the Old Man would send them on a simple mission to kill a man nearby, and he would have other men shadow them to judge their worth. Once they had killed their target, whichever ones had avoided capture and displayed the most skill would be sent on real missions to assassinate key targets. Marco Polo also recorded how this castle fell under siege in 1262 by the Mongols, and was eventually captured three years later when the defendants had run out of supplies.<sup>39</sup> Marco Polo’s story is fantastical and many of its aspects do not line up with the real facts; however, they are not nearly as incorrect as one might expect. For example, Marco Polo’s story implies that the organization was short lived, while its actual lifespan was an estimated three centuries. In which time the organization of assassins managed to kill not only one, but two caliphs; as well as numerous sultans, crusaders, and other public figures. However the Old Man and his castle are both very much real. His name was Hassan-i Sabbah, and his castle headquarters was Alamut in the Elborz Mountains. Under his leadership the secretive cult of assassins spread their influence and power from Iran and began to capture more castles to operate from.<sup>40</sup> This is something Marco Polo also comes close to the truth about when he says that the Sheikh of the Mountain had dispatched his lieutenants to carry on their practices in other locations.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 70-71.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-73.

<sup>40</sup> Stanton, *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa: An Encyclopedia Vol 1*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 73.

The last city covered in this paper is Balkh, described as standing on “East-north-easterly frontier of Iran.”<sup>42</sup> Before the Mongols had come so far to the west, the city had been rich and prosperous. It had been a great producer of silk, and from its agricultural produce “was the granary of the whole of Khorasan and Khwarazm.”<sup>43</sup> The city had roughly two-hundred-thousand inhabitants at the start of the thirteenth century; however, after the Mongols came and killed the majority of its population, the city became little more than derelict ruins. A full century after Marco Polo passes through the area, travelers still report seeing the same deserted sights he does.<sup>44</sup> Describing some proof of the city’s past grandeur, he writes that there are many palaces that lay shattered there from the Mongols. To further illustrate how grand the city had been, there is one interesting detail recorded in *The Travels* about the city: apparently, per the locals, this was the city in which Alexander the Great married the daughter of King Darius III, Barsine.<sup>45</sup> While the accuracy of these local reports is not essential to assessing the grandeur of the city, even the possibility that such an event could take place there is proof that the city had to have been exceptional. All of the various manuscripts that record his adventures were written decades later and therefore do not capture what his thoughts were at the time.

Marco Polo’s first-hand account of his adventures is extremely useful, not only for the readers of this paper, but for scholars and travelers as well. Marco Polo tried to faithfully convey the things that he had learned, and its influence was tremendous-- the book was one of the few sources of information widely available on the lands of the East, and manuscripts of it have even been found bound to crusade treatises.<sup>46</sup> The tales that Marco Polo brought back continue to capture peoples’ imaginations, inspiring films and even a big budget television show on Netflix.<sup>47</sup> Italy’s most

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>43</sup> Ed. J Boyle, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 5, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968): 487

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>45</sup> Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Jackson, “Marco Polo and His ‘Travels,’” 88.

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Eadicicco, “Netflix Is Creating One Of The Most Expensive TV Shows In The World — Here’s Why It’s So Important,” *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/netflix-marco-polo-tv-show-budget-2014-11>, Accessed January 4, 2017.

famous tourist has clearly been a huge asset to history by capturing a living picture of the thirteenth century world.