

Marco Polo on Mongol Women

Marco Polo: On the Tartars (Mongol Women) from his *Travels of Marco Polo*, 1310 CE

Their women are not excelled in the world for chastity and decency. Of conduct, nor for love and duty to their husbands. Infidelity to the marriage bed is regarded by them as a vice not merely dishonorable, but of the most infamous nature; while on the other hand it is admirable to observe the loyalty of the husbands towards their wives, amongst whom, although there are perhaps ten or twenty, there prevails a highly laudable degree of quiet and union. No offensive language is ever heard, their attention being fully occupied with their traffic (as already mentioned) and their several domestic employments, such as the provision of necessary food for the family, the management of the servants, and the care of the children, a common concern. And the virtues of modesty and chastity in the wives are more praiseworthy because the men are allowed the indulgence of taking as many as they choose. Their expense to the husband is not great, and on the other hand the benefit he derives from their trading, and from the occupations in which they are constantly engaged, is considerable; on which account when he receives a young woman in marriage, he pays a dowry to her parent. The wife who is the first espoused has the privilege of superior attention, and is held to be the most legitimate, which extends also to the children borne by her. In consequence of this unlimited number of wives, the offspring is more numerous than amongst any other people. Upon the death of the father, the son may take to himself the wives he leaves behind, with the exception of his own mother. They cannot take their sisters to wife, but upon the death of their brothers they can marry their sisters-in-law. Every marriage is solemnized with great ceremony.

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