

# Niccolò De' Conti Encyclopedia Article

## Niccolò De' Conti

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# Niccolò De' Conti

c. 1396-1469

## Italian Explorer

For a quarter-century beginning in 1419, Venetian merchant and adventurer Niccolò de' Conti engaged in an adventure recalling that of his countryman Marco Polo (1254-1324). Conti's journeys took him primarily along sea routes, from the Middle East to India to the East Indies, and when he returned to Europe he found himself an object both of fascination and (because he had renounced Christianity) disapproval.

Conti came from a wealthy trading family in Venice, then Europe's center for overseas trade. In the past his family had done a brisk trade with Egypt, but in 1419 Niccolò resolved to extend the Contis' reach by traveling to Syria. He remained in the latter country long enough to learn Arabic, one of the essential languages for Eastern trade in those days; then he traveled on to Baghdad, in what is now Iraq, and Persia (modern-day Iran). In the latter he established a trading company, and added a second key trading language, Farsi, to his repertoire.

At some point it must have become clear to Conti that he was not returning to Europe any time soon, because over the course of many voyages from Persia along the Indian Ocean, he married an Indian wife. They raised a family, and he renounced Christianity, though whether he did this out of necessity or conviction is not known.

In time he wound up much further east, where he traveled throughout the East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) and Southeast Asia. There he encountered numerous cultures and religions: parts of the East Indies were Hindu, others Buddhist—as was Burma, which he also visited. The Malay Peninsula, home to the modern-day nation of Malaysia, was fiercely Muslim. He ended up on the island of Java, from whence he finally resolved to return to Venice.

After a return trip that took him up the Red Sea and the Gulf of Suez, Conti arrived in his hometown in 1444. There his Indian family attracted widespread curiosity, but his renunciation of Christianity earned him a rebuke from Pope Eugene IV. The punishment Eugene meted out as penance was not a harsh one, however: the pontiff ordered Conti to write an account of his journeys. These records, dictated to Vatican secretary Poggio Bracciolini, were not publicly released until their 1723 publication as *Historiae de veritate fortunae*.