

## Marco Polo

Marco Polo is one of the most well-known heroic travelers and traders around the world. In my paper I will discuss with you Marco Polo's life, his travels, and his visit to China to see the great Khan. Marco Polo was born in c.1254 in Venice.

He was a Venetian explorer and merchant whose account of his travels in Asia was the primary source for the European image of the Far East until the late 19th century. Marco's father, Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo had traveled to China (1260-69) as merchants. When they left (1271) Venice to return to China, they were accompanied by 17-year-old Marco and two priests.

## Early Life

Despite his enduring fame, very little was known about the personal life of Marco Polo. It is known that he was born into a leading Venetian family of merchants. He also lived during a propitious time in world history, when the height of Venice's influence as a city-state coincided with the greatest extent of Mongol conquest of Asia (Li Man Kin 9). Ruled by Kublai Khan, the Mongol Empire stretched all the way from China to Russia and the Levant. The Mongol hordes also threatened other parts of Europe, particularly Poland and Hungary, inspiring fear everywhere by their bloodthirsty advances. Yet the ruthless methods brought a measure of stability to the lands they controlled, opening up trade routes such as the famous Silk Road. Eventually, the Mongols discovered that it was more profitable to collect tribute from people than to kill them outright, and this policy too stimulated trade (Hull 23).

Into this favorable atmosphere a number of European traders ventured, including the family of Marco Polo. The Polos had long-established ties in the Levant and around the Black Sea: for example, they owned property in Constantinople, and Marco's uncle, for whom he was named, had a home in Sudak in the Crimea (Rugoff 8). From Sudak, around 1260, another uncle, Maffeo, and Marco's father, Niccolò, made a trading visit into Mongol territory, the land of the Golden Horde (Russia), ruled by Berke Khan. While they were there, a war broke out between Berke and the Cowan of Levant, blocking their return home. Thus Niccolò and Maffeo traveled deeper into Mongol territory, moving southeast to Bukhara, which was ruled by a third Cowan. While waiting there, they met an emissary traveling farther eastward who invited them to accompany him to the court of the great Cowan, Kublai, in Cathay (modern China). In Cathay, Kublai Khan gave the Polos a friendly reception, appointed them his emissaries to the pope, and ensured their safe travel back to Europe (Steffof 10). They were to return to Cathay with one hundred learned men who could instruct the Mongols in the Christian religion and the liberal arts.

In 1269, Niccolò and Maffeo Polo arrived back in Venice, where Niccolò found out his wife had died while he was gone (Rugoff 5). Their son, Marco, who was only about fifteen

years old, had been only six or younger when his father left home; thus, Marco was reared primarily by his mother and the extended Polo family—and the streets of Venice. After his mother's death, Marco had probably begun to think of himself as something of an orphan (Rugoff 6). Then his father and uncle suddenly reappeared, as if from the dead, after nine years of traveling in far-off, romantic lands. These experiences were the formative influences on young Marco, and one can see their effects mirrored in his character: a combination of sensitivity and toughness, independence and loyalty, motivated by an eagerness for adventure, a love of stories, and a desire to please or impress (Li Man Kin 10).

#### Life's Work

In 1268, Pope Clement IV died, and a two- or three-year delay while another pope was being elected gave young Marco time to mature and to absorb the tales of his father and uncle. Marco was seventeen years old when he, his father and uncle finally set out for the court of Kublai Khan (Steffoff 13). They were accompanied not by one hundred wise men but by two Dominican friars, and the two good friars turned back at the first sign of adversity, another local war in the Levant. Aside from the pope's messages, the only spiritual gift Europe was able to furnish the great Kublai Khan was oil from the lamp burning at Jesus Christ's supposed tomb in Jerusalem. Yet, in a sense, young Marco, the only new person in the Polos' party, was himself a fitting representative of the spirit of European civilization on the eve of the Renaissance, and the lack of one hundred learned Europeans guaranteed that he would catch the eye of the Khan, who was curious about "Latins" (Hull 29).

On the way to the Khan's court, Marco had the opportunity to complete his education. The journey took three and a half years by horseback through some of the world's most rugged terrain, including snowy mountain ranges, such as the Pamirs, and parching deserts, such as the Gobi. Marco and his party encountered such hazards as wild beasts and brigands; they also met with beautiful women, in whom young Marco took a special interest. The group traveled numerous countries and cultures, noting food, dress, and religion unique to each (Li Man Kin 17). In particular, under the Khan's protection the Polos were able to observe a large portion of the Islamic world at close range, as few if any European Christians had. By the time they reached the Khan's court in Khanbalik, Marco had become a hardened traveler. He had also received a unique education and had been initiated into manhood.

Kublai Khan greeted the Polos warmly and invited them to stay on in his court. Here, if Marco's account is to be believed, the Polos became great favorites of the Khan, and Kublai eventually made Marco one of his most trusted emissaries (Great Lives from History 16765). On these points Marco has been accused of gross exaggeration, and the actual status of the Polos at the court of the Khan is much disputed. If at first it appears unlikely that Kublai would make young Marco an emissary, upon examination this seems quite

reasonable. For political reasons, the khan was in the habit of appointing foreigners to administer conquered lands, particularly China, where the tenacity of the Chinese bureaucracy was legendary. The khan could also observe for himself that young Marco was a good candidate. Finally, Marco reported back so successfully from his first mission-informing the khan not only on business details but also on colorful customs and other interesting trivia-that his further appointment was confirmed. The journeys specifically mentioned in Marco's book, involving travel across China and a sea voyage to India, suggests that the khan did indeed trust him with some of the most difficult missions (Rugoff 25).

The Polos stayed on for seventeen years, another indication of how valued they were in the khan's court. Marco, his father, and his uncle not only survived-itself an achievement amid the political hazards of the time-but also prospered (Great Lives from History 1678). Apparently, the elder Polos carried on their trading while Marco was performing his missions; yet seventeen years is a long time to trade without returning home to family and friends. According to Macro, because the khan held them in such high regard, he would not let them return home, but as the khan aged the Polos began to fear what would happen after his death (Hull 18). Finally an opportunity to leave presented itself when trusted emissaries were needed to accompany a Mongol princess on a wedding voyage by sea to Persia, where she was promised to the local khan. The Polos sailed from Cathay with a fleet of fourteen ships and a wedding party of six hundred people, not counting the sailors. Only a few members of the wedding entourage survived the journey of almost two years, but luckily the survivors included the Polos and the princess. Fortunately, too, the Polos duly delivered the princess not to the old khan of Persia, who had meanwhile died, but to his son (Li Man Kin 21).

From Persia, the Polos made their way back to Venice. They were robbed as soon as they got into Christian territory, but they still managed to reach home in 1295, with plenty of rich goods. According to Giovanni Battista Ramusio, one of the early editors of Marco's book, the Polos strode into Venice looking like rugged Mongols (Steffoff 17). Having thought them dead, their relatives at first did not recognize them, then were astounded, and then were disgusted by their shabby appearance. Yet, according to Ramusio, the scorn changed to delight when the returned travelers invited everyone to a homecoming banquet, ripped apart their old clothes, and let all the hidden jewels clatter to the table (Great Lives from History 1676).

The rest of the world might have learned little about the Polos' travels if fate had not intervened in Marco's life. In his early forties, Marco was not yet ready to settle down. Perhaps he was restless for further adventure, or perhaps he felt obliged to fulfill his civic duties to his native city-state. In any event, he became involved in naval warfare between Venetians and their trading rivals, the Genoese, and was captured. In 1298, the great traveler across Asia and emissary of the khan found himself rotting in a prison in Genoa-an

experience that could have ended tragically but instead took a lucky turn. In prison Marco met a man named Rustichello from Persia, who was a writer of romances (Steffoff 21). To pass the time, Marco dictated his observations about Asia to Rustichello, who, in writing them down, probably employed the Italianized Old French that was the language of medieval romances.

Their book was soon circulating, since Marco remained in prison only a year or so, very likely gaining his freedom when the Venetians and Genoese made peace in 1299 (Rugoff 32). After his prison experience, Marco was content to lead a quiet life in Venice with the rest of his family and bask in his almost instant literary fame. He married Donata Badoer, a member of the Venetian aristocracy. eventually grew up to marry nobles. Thus Marco seems to have spent the last part of his life moving in Venetian aristocratic circles. After living what was then a long life, Marco died in 1324, only seventy years of age. In his will he left most of his modest wealth to his three daughters, a legacy that included goods which he had brought back from Asia. His will also set free a Tartar slave, who had remained with him since his return from the court of the great khan (Li Man Kin 25).

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