The Mongols were a nomadic, or wandering, people who lived in Central Asia between China and what is now Russia—the area of modern-day Mongolia. For a brief period during the 1200s, this small nation of warriors controlled much of the known world, thanks to a series of conquests begun by Genghis Khan (JING-us KAHN; c. 1162–1227). Under his leadership and that of those who followed, the Mongols took control of an area that stretched from the Korean Peninsula to the outskirts of Vienna, Austria, a distance of about 4,500 miles.

After Genghis, the greatest Mongol khan, or ruler, was Kublai Khan (KOO-bluh; 1215–1294; ruled 1260–1294), who led the Mongols in the conquest of China. For centuries, the Chinese had regarded the Mongols and other nomadic tribes with distrust, and they regarded Kublai’s victory over them in 1279 as a disaster. Yet the short-lived Mongol empire also had the effect of opening up trade routes, and as a result there was more contact between East and West than ever before.

This situation made possible one of the most celebrated journeys in history, by Marco Polo (1254–1324) and his father and uncle. Marco won such great favor with Kublai Khan...

“I repeat that everything appertaining to this city is on so vast a scale, and the Great Kaan’s yearly revenues therefrom are so immense, that it is not easy even to put it in writing, and it seems past belief to one who merely hears it told.”

Excerpt from The Book of Ser Marco Polo
the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East
Published in 1903
Marco Polo

In 1271, when he was seventeen years old, Marco Polo set out from his hometown of Venice, Italy, with his father and uncle. Today one can fly from Venice to China in just a few hours; but the Polos’ journey—which took them through Persia, Afghanistan, northern India, and into China—lasted three years. Along the way, Marco learned several languages, skills that would help them when they got to their destination.

China at that time was under the control of the Mongols, a nomadic tribe from Central Asia, and the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan was perhaps the most powerful man on Earth. Marco became a minister in the Khan’s government, which gave him the opportunity to travel throughout southeastern Asia in the coming years.

By 1287, however, when Marco was thirty-three years old, his aging father and uncle were ready to return home. It took some time to obtain the Khan’s approval for them to leave, and the return journey by ship was every bit as difficult as the trip out had been; but finally, in 1295, they returned to Venice.

In 1298, during a war with the rival Italian city of Genoa (JIN-oh-uh), Marco was captured and thrown into a Genoese prison. There he met a writer named Rustichello, to whom he told the story of his travels, and Rustichello began writing a book that would become known in English as The Book of Ser Marco Polo. The book would later be recognized as the basis for scientific geography, and greatly expanded Europeans’ understanding of the world.

that the ruler made him a trusted official in his government, and as a result he had an opportunity to travel to lands that no European had ever seen. Marco marveled at the wonders of the Mongols’ government, and at the highly advanced civilization of the Chinese they had conquered. Later, when he returned to his hometown of Venice, Italy, he recorded these
and other observations in a work the English title of which became *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East.* (Ser is an abbreviation of the Italian term for “mister.”)

**Things to remember while reading the excerpt from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian***

- The passage that follows contains Marco Polo’s description of a city in eastern China that he called Kinsay (kinky-SY), but which is known today as Hangzhou (hahng-ZHOH). That city had been the capital of China prior to the Mongol conquest. He also used the term Manzi (mahn-ZEE) to describe southern China, and Cathay (kah-THY) for China as a whole. As for the port he described at Ganfu (gahn-FOO), that city has since been covered by ocean. Marco’s use of the term “Ocean Sea” reflects a pre-modern European belief that all the world’s land was surrounded by a single body of water.

- When Marco referred to “miles,” he was probably using a Chinese unit called a *li* (LEE), equal to about two-fifths of a mile. He also used an alternative spelling of *khan*, kaan. Other spellings in this document, such as *armour* or *honour*, however, are not necessarily Marco’s but those of the translator, who was British. This also explains the use of the British term *burgess* for “citizen.”

- Europeans during the Middle Ages did not bathe on a regular basis, thinking it was unhealthy to do so; but Marco could not help being impressed—understandably so—by the cleanliness of the Chinese. In the latter part of this passage, he reveals the ill-will of the Chinese toward their Mongol conquerors, who they regarded both as outsiders and as barbarians, or uncivilized people; yet to judge from this account at least, they did not seem to treat Marco with similar scorn.

- One fact that makes Marco’s history of his journeys so entertaining is that he was more open-minded than most Europeans of his time; one would have to be to travel so far from home. Yet it was sometimes hard to keep his prejudices from showing through, as for instance when
he referred to the Chinese as idol-worshipers. In fact the people of China subscribed to a number of religions, few of which could be considered any more idolatrous than the worship of saints practiced by European Christians at the time.

Excerpt from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*

You must know also that the city of Kinsay has some 3,000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world; large enough for 100 persons to bathe together.

And the Ocean Sea comes within 25 miles of the city at a place called Ganfu, where there is a town and an excellent haven, with a vast amount of shipping which is engaged in the traffic to and from India and other foreign parts, exporting and importing many kinds of wares, by which the city benefits. And a great river flows from the city of Kinsay to that sea-haven, by which vessels can come up to the city itself. This river extends also to other places further inland....

I repeat that everything appertaining to this city is on so vast a scale, and the Great Kaan’s yearly revenues therefrom are so immense, that it is not easy even to put it in writing, and it seems past belief to one who merely hears it told. But I will write it down for you.

First, however, I must mention another thing. The people of this country have a custom, that as soon as a child is born they write down the day and hour and the planet and sign under which its birth has taken place; so that every one among them knows the day of his birth. And when any one intends a journey he goes to the astrologers and gives the particulars of his nativity in order to learn whether he shall have good luck or no. Sometimes they will say no, and in that case the journey is put off till such day as the astrologer may recommend. These astrologers are very skillful at their business, and often their words come to pass, so the people have great faith in them.

**Haven:** Harbor.

**Appertaining:** Pertaining, or with regard to.

**Astrologers:** People who study the stars and planets with the belief that their movement has an effect on personal events.
They burn the bodies of the dead. And when any one dies the friends and relations make a great mourning for the deceased, and clothe themselves in hempen garments, and follow the corpse playing on a variety of instruments and singing hymns to their idols. And when they come to the burning place, they take representations of things cut out of parchment, such as caparisoned horses, male and female slaves, camels, armour, suits of cloth or gold (and money), in great quantities, and these things they put on the fire along with the corpse, so that they are all burnt with it. And they tell you that the dead man shall have all these slaves and animals of which the effigies are burnt, alive in flesh and blood, and the money in gold, at his disposal in the next world; and that the instruments which they have caused to be played at his funeral, and the idol hymns that have been chanted, shall also be produced again to welcome him in the next world; and that the idols themselves will come to do him honour....

There is another thing I must tell you. It is the custom for every burgess of this city, and in fact for every description of person in it, ""
Was Marco Polo Telling the Truth?

The journeys of Marco Polo were as remarkable in the Middle Ages as travel to another planet would be in modern times, and the information he brought back to Europe greatly expanded human knowledge. But his stories about faraway lands sounded so outrageous, and involved so many big numbers, that his neighbors nicknamed him “Marco Millions.”

Some modern scholars have been similarly inclined to disbelieve Marco’s tales. For instance, they point out that many of the words he used were in Farsi, the language of Persia, which would imply that he never actually went any farther east than modern-day Iran. But Farsi was the language of international trade at that time, much as English is today, so it is understandable that educated local people would have conversed with Marco in that language.

Harder to explain is the fact that Marco failed to mention either the Great Wall of China or the practice of foot-binding, or wrapping a young girl’s feet in strips of cloth to prevent them from growing. This caused a grown woman to have tiny feet, something the Chinese at the time considered the height of beauty, but something a European would have found shocking. As for the Great Wall, his route should have taken him near it, and with its enormous size, it is hard to miss.

On the other hand, Marco certainly would have known about the Great Wall, which had been built in the 200s B.C. Therefore if he had been falsifying his account, he would have had every reason to mention it as a way of making his record seem more accurate. As for foot-binding, because this was a Chinese and not a Mongol practice—and because Marco was associated with the Mongols, who were foreigners in the view of the Chinese—perhaps he did not become intimately acquainted enough with the Chinese to learn about this practice.

Inmates: Inhabitants or residents.

Sovereign: Ruler.

Hosteler: Innkeeper or hotel manager.

Surnames: Family names—in European-influenced cultures, the last name, but in China the first name.
ereign hath the means of knowing, whenever it pleases him, who come and go throughout his dominions....

Other streets are occupied by the Physicians, and by the Astrologers, who are also teachers of reading and writing; and an infinity of other professions have their places round about those squares. In each of the squares there are two great palaces facing one another, in which are established the officers appointed by the King to decide differences arising between merchants, or other inhabitants of the quarter. It is the daily duty of these officers to see that the guards are at their posts on the neighbouring bridges, and to punish them at their discretion if they are absent....

The natives of the city are men of peaceful character, both from education and from the example of their kings, whose disposition was the same. They know nothing of handling arms, and keep none in their houses. You hear of no feuds or noisy quarrels or dissensions of any kind among them. Both in their commercial dealings and in their manufactures they are thoroughly honest and truthful, and there is such a degree of good will and neighbourly attachment among both men and women that you would take the people who live in the same street to be all one family.

And this familiar intimacy is free from all jealousy or suspicion of the conduct of their women. These they treat with the greatest respect, and a man who should presume to make loose proposals to a married woman would be regarded as an infamous rascal. They also treat the foreigners who visit them for the sake of trade with great cordiality, and entertain them in the most winning manner, affording them every help and advice on their business. But on the other hand they hate to see soldiers, and not least those of the Great Kaan’s garrisons, regarding them as the cause of their having lost their native kings and lords....

What happened next ...

As it turned out, Marco Polo had seen China during the height of the Mongols’ power. Already in 1274 and 1281, Kublai Khan had shown that his forces could be defeated when he launched two failed invasions of Japan; and in 1293...
he suffered another defeat in trying to take the island of Java in what is now Indonesia. Kublai died in the following year, and the Mongol dynasty rapidly declined thereafter. In 1368, the Chinese overthrew it and established the Ming dynasty, which would rule until 1644.

Marco’s account of his travels, which he began while in prison in 1298, became one of the most important works of geography ever written. It provided Europeans with their first exposure to many lands and peoples of the East, and increased their interest in learning more. As this interest grew, it led to expeditions and voyages of exploration that in turn advanced Europeans’ knowledge even more. The Chinese, by contrast, had little interest in learning about people outside their realms. Though they sent ships to far-flung regions in the early 1400s, the purpose of these voyages was not exploration or even conquest; rather, it was to display Chinese achievements. While China turned inward, Europeans’ thirst for knowledge ultimately gave them an advantage over the civilization that had created printing, firearms, and many other inventions that would change the world.

One reader later inspired by Marco’s account was a fellow Italian named Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). Coincidentally, Columbus came from Genoa, a rival city of Venice that had imprisoned Marco and thus indirectly influenced him to write about his travels. In 1492, as every student knows, Columbus set out to reach China by a sea route, but found the New World instead.

**Did you know ...**

- Marco Polo’s book provided Europeans with their first knowledge of the Pamir (puh-MEER) range between
Afghanistan and China. The Pamirs are among the world’s highest mountains, and while there, Marco saw an animal that was later named the “Marco Polo sheep” in his honor.

• During Marco’s lifetime, Kublai Khan sent a journeyer westward: Rabban Bar Sauma (ruh-BAHN BAR sah-OO-muh; c. 1220–1294). Born in China, Bar Sauma was a Turkish monk of the Nestorian faith, a breakaway group of Christians. In Europe, he met with the pope, and the two joined in an unsuccessful attempt to raise a crusade or “holy war” against the Muslims in the Middle East.

For More Information

Books


Web Sites
