

# Marco Polo & his "Travels" to the Imperial Court of Kublai Khan

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TOP: A 14th-century illuminated map depicting the Polos. Images: MIDDLE TOP: A drawing of Marco Polo. Images: Big History Project

Marco Polo served Emperor Kublai Khan in China at the height of the Mongol Empire. When Polo returned to Venice, his account of his experiences gave Europeans some of their earliest information about China.

## Background

In the 13th century, the people of Venice, Italy, believed that the Sun revolved around the Earth. They thought the Universe was created exactly 4,484 years before Rome was founded. As Christians, they considered Jerusalem the center of the world because it was where Jesus died. Maps of the time put Jerusalem right at the center.



Most historians believe Marco Polo was born in Venice in 1254. Venice was a city-state located on the eastern coast of Italy. Trade with Asia was increasing during this time. Venice served as a gateway to Asia's riches. Goods flowed like water through the city. Ships from around the eastern Mediterranean Sea docked at its port. Merchants and traders set sail from Venice. From there they traveled to Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) and the Black Sea. They would fetch goods from Russia and from merchants traveling the Silk Road. The Silk Road was a system of trading routes to and from China. It ran east to west, and west to east. It crossed through the mountains and deserts of Central Asia.

When Marco was born, his father, Niccolo, and two uncles were away trading. They had gone to cities on the Black Sea. But their adventures had actually taken them all the way to China. They had stayed in the Mongol capital Khanbaliq (city of the Khan). There they had met the most powerful ruler of the day, Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan was the grandson of Genghis Khan. Years before, Genghis Khan had founded the Mongol Empire.

The three Polo men returned to Venice after 16 years. When he returned, Niccolo found that his wife had died and that he had a 15-year-old son named Marco. He hadn't even known Marco existed.

## Travels

Two years later, in 1271, Niccolo Polo and his brother, Maffeo, set off again. They took 17-year-old Marco with them. This time the Polos headed straight to Kublai Khan. The Polos planned to bring him documents from the pope and holy oil from Jerusalem. Kublai Khan had given the Polos a gold passport. It allowed them to use lodgings and horses posted by the Mongols along the Silk Road routes. Even then, they took 3 1/2 years to arrive. They finally reached the palace of Kublai Khan in 1275. Niccolo offered Marco to the emperor as a servant.



Fifteenth-century illustration showing the Polos sailing from Venice in 1271

Marco was a talented young man. On the way to China he learned several languages. He had picked up Mongolian (though not Chinese). He had mastered four written alphabets. Two years before Marco's arrival, Kublai Khan had conquered all of China. In some areas, people did not want the Mongols ruling them. Kublai Khan needed non-Mongols to be in charge there. He sent Marco on various diplomatic and administrative missions.

After more than 16 years in China, the Polos asked Kublai Khan to let them return home to Venice. They had been very useful to the khan. He did not want them to leave, but finally he agreed. He sent them to escort a Mongolian princess who was to marry a Persian khan. The Polos were free to head back west.



A painting of Marco Polo at the court of Kublai Khan

This time they traveled by sea in Chinese ships. After many difficulties they delivered the princess. But before they could reach Venice, Kublai Khan died. With the khan gone, local rulers reasserted their power. They now demanded payment from traveling traders. The Polos were forced to hand over 4,000 Byzantine coins to local rulers on the Black Sea. The payment was a large portion of their fortune.

## Return

The Polos returned to Venice in 1295. They had been away 24 years. Their relatives had thought them long dead. They returned wearing Mongolian clothes with valuable gems hidden in them.

Soon Venice went to war with Genoa. It was a rival city-state on the west coast of Italy. Like other wealthy merchants, Marco Polo paid for his own warship. He was captured during a naval battle and ended up in prison in Genoa.

One of his cellmates was a writer named Rusticello from Pisa. Rusticello had written romantic novels. Polo entertained the other prisoners with his adventures in China. Rusticello wrote them down in French. This is how Polo's accounts were created.

In 1299, Genoa and Venice declared peace. Polo was released and returned to Venice. He married and had three daughters. Polo's remaining days were spent as a businessman. He died in Venice in 1324.

## Marco Polo's book

Polo could have been forgotten to history. But his book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, slowly gained widespread interest. It could be circulated only one copy at a time. Book printing in Europe did not begin until almost 200 years later. About 120 to 140 early manuscripts of *The Travels* survive. Each was hand-printed. Each of them is different. The earliest readers were scholars, monks, and noblemen. Soon, translations of *The Travels* appeared in Venetian, German, English, Catalan, Gaelic, and Latin. It took more than a century for the book to become commonly known in Europe.

Few texts have been more controversial than *The Travels of Marco Polo*. It's not clear who the author is — Polo or Rusticello? Sometimes the text is in the first-person voice. Sometimes it is in the third-person voice. How much of the text is based on Polo's firsthand experience? And how much did the author(s) insert secondhand accounts by others? Certainly it is a mix. What was reported seemed bizarre to Europeans of the time. Readers often assumed that everything was made up. Yet historians have largely confirmed the facts in Polo's account of the Mongol dynasty.

Polo was a skilled storyteller. He found Mongolian customs fascinating. While in China he had seen the use of paper money. He had also watched the Chinese burn coal for heat (see excerpts below). Paper money had already been used in China for several hundred years by then. And coal had been burned in China since the beginning of agriculture.

Polo also missed a few innovations. He failed to notice the books being sold in southern China. Books were widely available there. The Chinese were already printing books widely. They used movable type made of wood, clay, or tin. Movable type was not in Europe then. It wasn't invented there until 1440, by Johannes Gutenberg, a German printer.

## THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

1271 TO 1295



When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492, he hoped to reach China. He brought a copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo* with him. He expected it would be useful. Columbus never made it to China. He discovered the Americas instead. But, the book remained Europe's primary source of information about China until the 19th century.

### From *The Travels of Marco Polo*:

#### Book 2, Chapter 18

##### OF THE KIND OF PAPER MONEY ISSUED BY THE GRAND KHAN

*In this city of Cambalu [another spelling for Khanbaliq] is the mint of the grand khan. He may truly be said to possess the secret of the alchemists, as he has the art of producing money by the following process. He causes bark to be stripped from those mulberry-trees the leaves of which are used for feeding silk-worms. He takes from it that thin inner ring. This is steeped to soften it. And afterwards it is pounded in a mortar, until reduced to a pulp, and made into paper. When ready for use, he has it cut into pieces of money of different sizes, nearly square, but somewhat longer than they are wide...*

*When thus coined in large quantities, this paper currency is circulated in every part of the grand khan's dominions. No person dares, at the peril of his life, to refuse to accept it in payment. (pp. 145–147)*

**Book 2, Chapter 23**

OF THE KIND OF WINE MADE IN THE PROVINCE OF CATHAY. AND OF THE STONES USED THERE FOR BURNING IN THE MANNER OF CHARCOAL

*The greater part of the inhabitants of the province of Cathay [now China] drink a sort of wine made from rice mixed with a variety of spices and drugs. This beverage, or wine as it may be termed, is so good and well-flavored that they do not wish for better. It is clear, bright, and pleasant to the taste. And being made very hot, has the quality of inebriating sooner than any other.*

*Throughout this province there is found a sort of black stone, which they dig out of the mountains, where it runs in veins. When lighted, it burns like charcoal, and retains the fire much better than wood. It retains fire so much that it may be preserved during the night, and in the morning be found still burning. These stones do not flame, excepting a little when first lighted. But, during their ignition give out a considerable heat. It is true there is no scarcity of wood in the country. But the multitude of inhabitants is immense. And their stoves and baths are continually heating. The baths are so numerous, that the quantity could not supply the demand; for there is no person who does not frequent the warm bath at least three times in the week. Every man of rank or wealth has one in his house for his own use; and the stock of wood must soon prove inadequate to such consumption; whereas these stones may be had in the greatest abundance. (p. 155)*