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Marco Polo
The Travels



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The Travels of
MARCO POLO

(c. 1254-1324)



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MARCO POLO



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The Travels of Marco Polo



First published in the United Kingdom in 2024 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 173 0

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

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www.delphiclassics.com

The Translation



Jacopo de' Barbari's 'View of Venice', Museo Correr, 1500 — Marco Polo was born in Venice in 1254.



'Miracle of the Cross at the Bridge of S. Lorenzo' by Gentile Bellini, Gallerie dell'Accademia, c. 1500

Brief Introduction to Marco Polo



The great Venetian adventurer and merchant Marco Polo came from a pioneering family of explorers. His father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo had traded with the Middle East for a long time, acquiring considerable wealth and prestige. Although it is uncertain if the Polos were of the nobility, it was of little importance in Venice, a city of republican and mercantile traditions. The Polos appear to have been shrewd, alert and courageous men. In 1260 they foresaw a political change in Constantinople, due to the Crusaders' overthrow of the city. The merchants quickly liquidated their property there, invested their capital in jewels and set off for the Volga River, where Berke Khan, sovereign of the western territories in the Mongol Empire, held court at Sarai or Bulgar. The Polo family managed their affairs competently at Berke's court, where they doubled their assets. When political events prevented their return to Venice, they traveled eastward to Bukhara and completed their journey in 1265 at the grand khan's summer residence, Shangdu, which has been immortalised as 'Xanadu' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem. Forging friendly relations with the great Kublai Khan, they eventually returned to Europe as his ambassadors, carrying letters asking the pope to send Kublai 100 intelligent men "acquainted with the Seven Arts". They also bore gifts and were asked to bring back oil from the lamp burning at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Very little is known about Marco Polo's early years, save that he likely grew up in Venice. He was about 15 years old when his father and uncle returned to meet him and learned that Pope Clement IV had recently died. Niccolò and Maffeo remained in Venice anticipating the election of a new pope, but in 1271, after two years of waiting, they departed with Marco for the Mongol court. In Acre (in modern day Israel) the papal legate, Teobaldo of Piacenza, gave them letters for the Mongol emperor. The Polos had been travelling on the road for only a few days when they heard that their good friend Teobaldo had been elected as Pope Gregory X. Returning to Acre, they were given proper credentials, and two friars were assigned to accompany them, though these friars abandoned the Polos shortly after the expedition resumed.

From Acre the Polos proceeded to Ayas (now in southeastern Turkey). During the early part of 1272, they passed through Erzurum (eastern Turkey) and Tabrīz, in what is now northern Iran, later crossing inhospitable deserts teeming with brigands, prior to reaching Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. There the Polos decided not to risk a sea passage to India and beyond, but to proceed overland to the Mongol capital. They traveled on through deserts toward the Khorasan region in what is now eastern Iran. Turning gradually to the northeast, they reached more hospitable lands. In his writings, Marco states that they remained there for a year — possibly detained by suffering malaria. During this period it is also believed that he visited territories to the south (other parts of Afghanistan, Kafiristan in the Hindu Kush, Chitral in what is now Pakistan, and Kashmir).

Leaving Badakhshān, the Polos proceeded toward the Pamirs, but the route they followed to cross these Central Asian highlands remains unclear. Descending on the north-eastern side of the chain, they reached Kashi in what is now the Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, China. By this time, the Polos were on the main Silk Road, and they probably followed along the oases to the south and east of the Takla Makan Desert.

For the next 17 years the Polos lived in the emperor's dominions, which included Cathay (North China) and Mangi (South China). They may have moved with the court from Shangdu, to the winter residence, Dadu (modern day Beijing). As Marco's book of his travels is only an incidental autobiography, it is difficult to ascertain where the Polos went and what they did during these years. Still, it is well known that many foreigners were in the employ of the state, as the Mongol rulers had little trust in their Chinese subjects; so it would have been natural for the Polos to fit in with this assorted society. The extent of their success and the specific roles they filled remains a matter of debate. The elder Polos were almost certainly employed in some technical capacity. Once and very abruptly in the text, a glimpse is presented of them acting as military advisers during the siege of Saianfu, a city that was finally taken, according to Marco, due to some missile-throwing engines built according to their specifications.

When he reached Cathay, Marco was about twenty years old. Although he knew little or no Chinese, he could speak some of the many languages that were being used in East Asia at the time, including Turkish as spoken among the Mongols, Persian, Uighur and perhaps Mongol. The youth was noticed favourably by Kublai, who took great delight in hearing of his adventures in strange countries and repeatedly sent him on fact-finding missions to distant parts of the empire. One journey took Polo to Yunnan (south-western China) and perhaps as far as Tagaung in Myanmar. On yet another adventure, he visited southeastern China, as revealed in his high-spirited account of the city of "Quinsay" (now Hangzhou) and the populous regions lately conquered by the Mongols. Marco Polo may have held several other administrative responsibilities, including inspection of the customs duties and revenues collected from the trade in salt and other precious commodities. According to some versions of his book, he governed the city of Yangzhou for a time between c. 1282 and 1287.

In c. 1292 the Polos offered to accompany a Mongol princess to Persia to become the consort of Arghun Khan. Marco wrote that Kublai had been unwilling to let them go, but finally granted permission. They were eager to leave, as Kublai was nearly 80, and his death and the consequent change in regime might have become dangerous for a group of isolated foreigners. Naturally, they also longed to see their native Venice and their families again.

The Polos, the princess and some 600 courtiers and sailors boarded 14 ships, which left the port of Quanzhou and sailed southward. The fleet stopped briefly at Champa (modern Vietnam) as well as a number of islands and the Malay Peninsula, before settling for five months on the island of Sumatra to avoid monsoon storms. There Polo was impressed by the fact that the North Star appeared to have dipped below the horizon. The fleet then passed near the Nicobar Islands, touched land again in Sri Lanka, followed the west coast of India and the southern reaches of Persia, and finally anchored at Hormuz. The expedition then proceeded to Khorāsān, where they handed over the princess not to Arghun, who had died, but to his son Maḥmūd Ghāzān.

The Polos eventually departed for Europe, though their movements at this point are unclear. They possibly remained for a few months in Tabrīz. Unfortunately, as soon as they left the Mongol dominions and set foot in a Christian country, at Trebizond (Turkey), they were robbed of most of their hard-won earnings. After further delays, they reached Constantinople and finally Venice in 1295. The enduring story of their dramatic recognition by relatives and neighbours, who had thought them long since dead, is a part of the Polo lore that still captivates readers today.

Soon after his return to Venice, Polo was taken prisoner by the Genoese, who were great rivals of the Venetians at sea, following a skirmish in the Mediterranean. He was

then imprisoned in Genoa, where he had a fortunate encounter with a prisoner from Pisa, Rustichello da Pisa or 'Rustichello', a fairly well-known writer of romances and a specialist in chivalry and its lore, which at that time was a fashionable subject. Polo may have intended to write about his experiences of twenty-five years in Asia, though he possibly did not feel sufficiently comfortable writing in either Venetian or Franco-Italian. However, with Rustichello at hand, he began dictating his tale. The language employed was Franco-Italian — a composite tongue fashionable during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Polo was soon freed and returned to Venice. The remainder of his life has been reconstructed through the testimony of legal documents. He seems to have led a quiet existence, managing a not too conspicuous fortune and dying at the age of seventy. His will set free a "Tatar slave" who may possibly have followed him from East Asia. A famous tale relates how Polo was asked on his deathbed to retract the "fables" he had invented in his book; his answer was that he told barely half of what he actually saw.

By all accounts, Marco's book, *Il milione*, was an instant success, spreading throughout Italy in a few months. It was not intended to be a collection of personal recollections, which leaves Polo's own personality elusive, but a book "to end all books on Asia". However, details concerning travel, distances covered and seasons are rarely stated; the panorama is observed from an impersonal distance. Polo often branches off into descriptions of places probably visited not by him, but by his relatives or people he knew. Typical digressions are those on Mesopotamia, the Assassins and their castles, Samarkand, Siberia, Japan, India, Ethiopia and Madagascar. *Il milione*, therefore, is better understood not as biography, but as part of the vernacular didactic literature, of which the Middle Ages offered many examples.

The text is often marked by uncertainty and controversy. The origin of the popular title, *Il milione*, for example, is unclear. Although it most likely comes from Polo's nickname, due to his tendency to describe the *millions* of things he saw in the Mongol empire, it may have been sourced from the idea of a "tall story," or from an epithet running in the family, possibly traceable to a corruption of Aemilione ("Big Emil"). The history of the text itself is characterised by similar uncertainty. There is no authentic original manuscript, and even if there was, it would likely not represent what Polo dictated, since Rustichello asserted his own personality and familiar phraseology, especially in the standardised description of battles. Polo also seems to have made emendations on various copies of the work during the last twenty years or so of his life. Some editors found many of Polo's descriptions or interpretations impious or dangerously near to heresy and therefore heavily bowdlerised the text. Furthermore, since all this happened long before the invention of printing, professional scribes or amateurs made dozens of copies of the book, as well as free translations and adaptations — often adding to or subtracting from the text with little or no respect for authenticity. Consequently, there are some 140 different manuscript versions of the text in three manuscript groups, in a dozen different languages and dialects — an immensely complex and controversial body of material representing one of the most enigmatic philological problems of the Middle Ages.



Marco Polo traveling in a caravan, Catalan Atlas, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1375



Marco Polo, his uncle and his father presenting the pope's letter at the court of Kublai Khan, as depicted in an illuminated manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford



Portrait of Kublai Khan by Araniko, drawn shortly after the emperor's death in 1294. His white robes reflect his desired symbolic role as a religious Mongol shaman. It is a post-mortem portrait, made to make Kublai appear about 30 years younger.



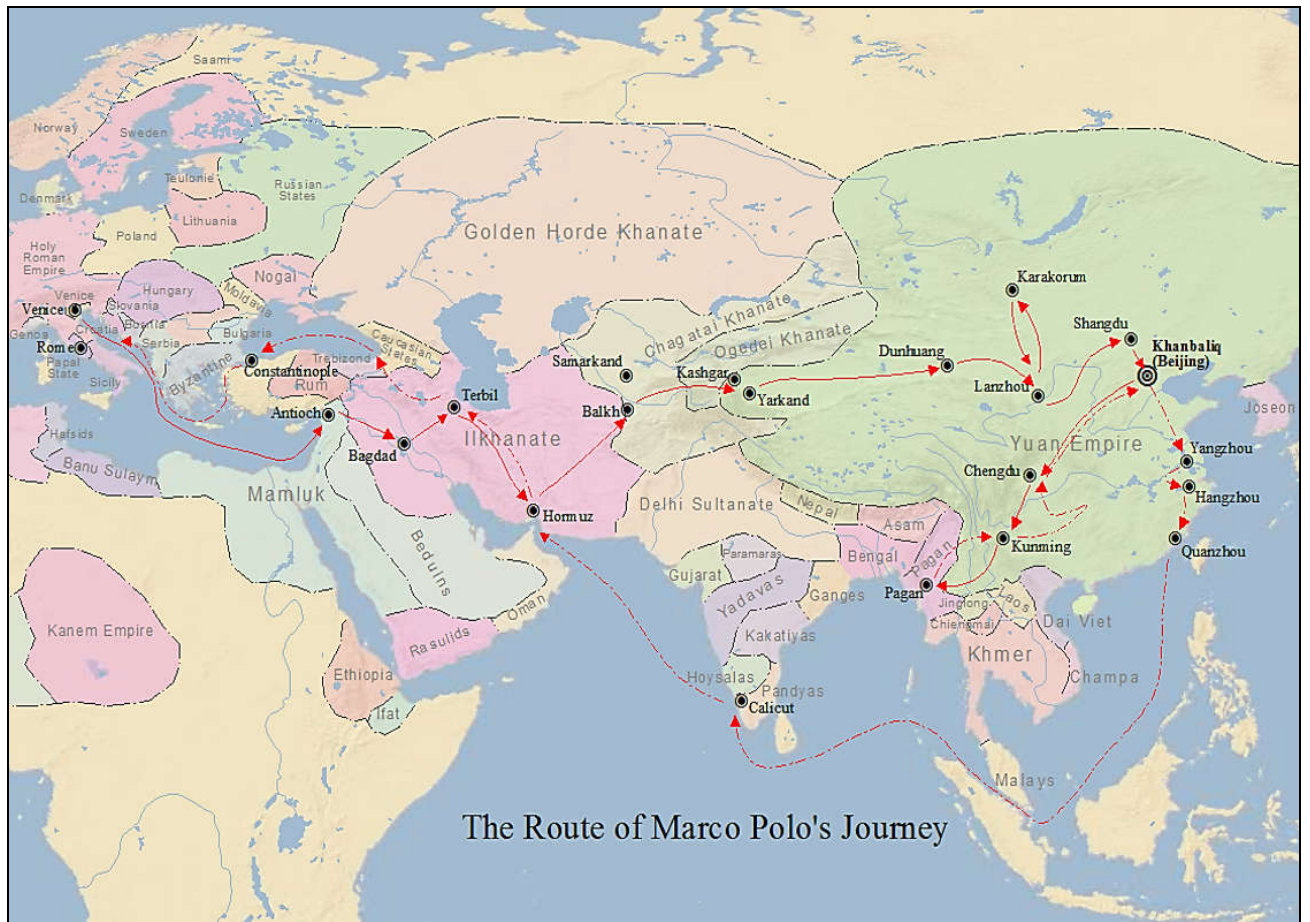
Frontispiece depicting Marco Polo, from an early German edition of his travels.



Et dit de la bataille qui fu entre loit et le montain au grant haan et

le roy de yndi.
 Et quant le dieu chanter loit as tartars lor ordonnance que
 le roy lui tenoit faire a si grant gent si dubta pour ce que il
 n'avoit que vii. hommes a cheval. mais sans faille il estoit
 moult vaillant homme d'armes et sage et acoustumez y
 d'armes a bataille et moult bons chevaliers loit. et avoit
 n'admirer. Il ordonna moult et amonnesta bien sa gent et bien pourveut
 pour defendre lui et sa gent car il avoit moult bone gens d'armes avec soy.
 Et pourquoy vous savez l'ordonnance. Sachies que loit des tartars qui vin
 rent tout ensemble au a cheval au plain de yndi. a l'ens amens trillier
 les amonnesta a bataille. Et ce ficeur y par grant sens et par bon chevalier que
 il avoit. car trouva et plain avoit un plain moult grant et moult s
 plain arbes en tute maniere attendoit les tartars leurs amens. Et l'at
 s'ens un peu a parir des tartars car bien y mouvens pouchoient et
 parois de l'ens amens. Et sachies que quant le roy men sa saonnes au
 son ost. si le parment d'ice ou il estoit et le m'ent ala voie et d'induit au
 plain de yndi. la ont les tartars estoit tout appareille. Et quant il furent
 venus en ce plain pas a l'ens amens a une mille sy fist appareille le roy
 les chptans a tous les chptans et les hommes de l'ens pour combatre. Et
 puis ordonna les hommes a cheval et a pie moult engement et bien come
 saiges roys que il estoit. et quant il ot ordonne et adrept tout son affaire sy
 commença a aller contre les amens a bataille. Et quant les tartars les

A page from 'The Travels of Marco Polo' originally published during Polo's lifetime, c. 1300



The Route of Marco Polo's Journey

The route of Marco Polo's journey to the east



An eighteenth century print of Marco Polo wearing a Tartar outfit

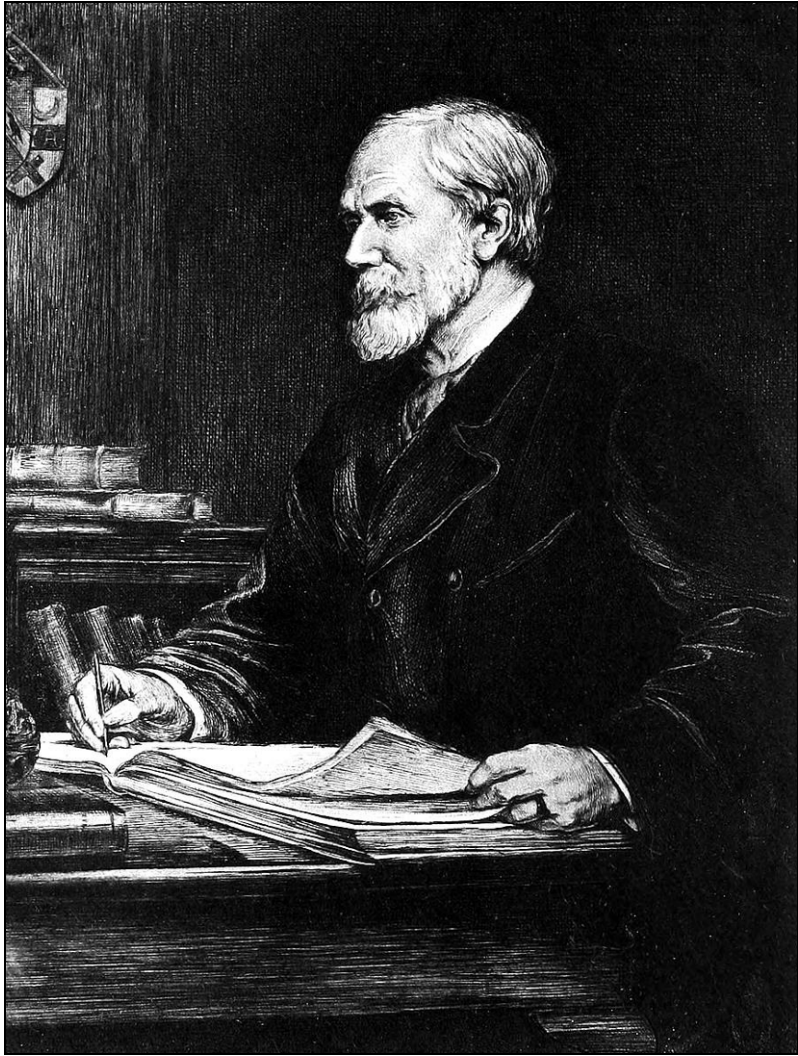
The Travels of Marco Polo (c. 1300)



THE COMPLETE YULE-CORDIER EDITION

Translated by Sir Henry Yule and edited by Henri Cordier, 1903

Sir Henry Yule (1820-1889) was a renowned Scottish Orientalist and geographer, who published many travel books, including his celebrated translation of *The Book of Marco Polo* (1871), for which he received the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society the following year. In c. 1900 Henri Cordier (1849-1925), a French linguist, historian, ethnographer and Orientalist was asked to revise the translation and add numerous notes and explanations. Cordier was President of the Société de Géographie in Paris and a prominent figure in the development of East Asian and Central Asian scholarship in Europe in the early twentieth century. Though he had little actual knowledge of the Chinese language, he had a particularly strong impact on the development of Chinese scholarship, and was a mentor of the noted French sinologist Édouard Chavannes. Embellished with 198 illustrations and a total of 32 maps, the Yule-Cordier edition of Marco Polo remains a seminal classic of modern Polo scholarship in the English language.



The original frontispiece: Sir Henry Yule



Portrait of Henri Cordier by Gustave Caillebotte, 1883

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Mosaic of Marco Polo displayed in the Palazzo Doria-Tursi, Genoa, Italy, 1867

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