

Polos Talk - notes

Outline

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Travels and sources

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Venice and Trade

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The Republic of Venice was one of the so-called "Maritime Republics" along with Genoa, Pisa, and Amalfi. It was a major financial and maritime power during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and a staging area for the Crusades, as well as a very important centre of commerce (especially silk, grain, and spice) and art in the 13th century up to the end of the 17th century. Its strategic position at the head of the Adriatic made Venetian naval and commercial power almost invulnerable. The city became a flourishing trade centre between Western Europe and the rest of the world (especially the Byzantine Empire and Asia) with a naval power protecting sea routes from Islamic piracy. By the late 13th century, Venice was the most prosperous city in all of Europe. At the peak of its power and wealth, it had 36,000 sailors operating 3,300 ships, dominating Mediterranean commerce. Venice's leading families vied with each other to build the grandest palaces and support the work of the greatest and most talented artists.

Venice was closely associated with Constantinople, being twice granted trading privileges in the Eastern Roman Empire, through the so-called Golden Bulls in return for aiding the Eastern Empire to resist Norman and Turkish incursions. Venice's relations with the Byzantines were temporarily disrupted by the Fourth Crusade (1202–04) when the Crusaders sacked Constantinople and its aftermath. Genoa took advantage of the opportunity to expand into the Black Sea and Crimea.

Genoa's political zenith came with its victory over the Republic of Pisa in 1284, and with a temporary victory over its rival, Venice, at the naval Battle of Curzola in 1298.

According to a later tradition (16th Century) recorded by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, Marco Polo was one of those among the Venetian prisoners and he dictated his book during the few months of his imprisonment; but when and where he was actually caught is unclear.

The Polo family

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The first recorded Polo is Venetian Domenico Polo who was mentioned in 971 regarding the prohibition of trade with the Arabs.

The family 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, the matter was of little importance in Venice, a city of republican and mercantile traditions.

Niccolò Polo (1230—1294 (?)) and **Maffeo or Matteo Polo** (1230–1309) were Italian traveling merchants best known as the father and uncle, respectively, of the explorer Marco

Polo. The brothers went into business before Marco's birth, established trading posts in Constantinople, Sudak in Crimea, a western part of the Mongol Empire.

Marco Polo was born in 1254 in Venice Republic, his exact date and place of birth are unknown.

What Europeans knew about the East in late 12th century.

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Western world became dimly aware of a central Asia and Afghanistan as result of Alexander the Great's conquests, he defeated the Persian Emperor Darius III in 330BCE then travelled East to Babylon and got as far as the Indus river. Greek soldiers went back to Macedonia and told tales of the things they had seen; many Greek soldiers and camp followers stayed in the east providing a lasting influence of Greek art and culture especially in areas which are now in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Romans called the East Ceres, the Land of Silk

Nestorian Christians in many areas of the East of local or middle eastern origin. Possibly the origin of legend of Prester John, the Christian king in the far East, first mentioned in texts dated 1122.

Contact between Europeans and Mongols began around 1220, with occasional messages from the papacy and European monarchs to Mongol leaders such as Genghis and later Great Khans. The first official communications between Western Europe and the Mongol Empire occurred between Pope Innocent IV (fl. 1243–1254) and the Great Khans, via letters and envoys that were sent overland and could take years to arrive at their destination. Communications tended to follow a recurring pattern: the Europeans asked the Mongols to convert to Western Christianity, while the Mongols responded with demands for submission and tribute. European attitudes began to change in the mid-1260s, from perceiving the Mongols as enemies to be feared, to potential allies against the Muslims. The Mongols sought to capitalize on this, promising a re-conquered Jerusalem to the Europeans in return for cooperation.

It is thought that thousands of Europeans lived in central Asia during the period of Mongol rule, in places such as the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Many were slaves captured in Eastern and Central Europe. European missionaries and merchants travelled around the Mongol realm during a period of time referred to by historians as the "Pax Mongolica".

European missionaries in the Far East

Giovanni (John) da Pian del Carpine was the first Christian monk to reach Karakorum in 1246. Catholic missionaries soon established a considerable presence, due to the religious tolerance of the Mongols, due in no small part to the Khan's own great tolerance.

William of Rubruck (c. 1220 – c. 1293) was a Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer. His account is one of the masterpieces of medieval geographical literature. He

travelled to various places of the Mongol Empire in Asia before his return to Europe. His travels were 1263-1255.

The Franciscan missionary **John of Montecorvino**, (1247-1328) was commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV to preach Christianity in the Nearer and Middle East, especially to the Asiatic hordes then threatening the West, he devoted himself incessantly from 1275 to 1289 to the Eastern missions. He arrived in China in 1294, (after the Polos had left) translated the New Testament into the Mongol tongue, and converted 6,000 people (probably mostly Turks and Mongols rather than Chinese).

First journey of of Niccolo and Maffeo

Marco's book is the only source for their travels, and is quite brief.

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1252 or 1253 they set out for Constantinople possibly before Marco was born. The two brothers lived in the Venetian quarter of Constantinople, where they enjoyed diplomatic immunity, political chances and tax relief because of their country's role in establishing the Latin Empire in the Fourth Crusade of 1204, when the city was sacked. The 4 bronze horses on St Mark's cathedral came from there.

Slide leaving Venice

Got wind of coming trouble as the Greeks with Genoese help were planning to recover the City; so in 1259 or 1266 they converted their goods into jewels and travelled to the Venetian colony of Soldaia (modern Sudak) in the Crimea.

Their decision proved wise. Constantinople was recaptured in 1261 by Michael Palaeologus, who promptly burned and razed the Venetian quarter and re-established the Byzantine Empire.

This was a Mongol territory (Golden Horde), they encouraged trade so long as taxes paid. Trading not easy as many merchants in the same business and rival Genoese there.

Looking for better opportunities the Polo brothers set off for the Golden Horde capital, Sarai, 1000 km away on a tributary of the lower Volga. Sarai was a Mongol "city" of tents and wagons. Welcomed by the Mongol leader Berke, a grandson of Genghis, who ruled the Golden Horde. They stayed a year making a good profit then decided it was time to return home.

Slide Western Silk road

BUT the route back not possible as the Greeks and Genoese controlled the Black Sea and Bosphorus. Alternative overland route through the Caucasus and western Persia but this was closed as Berke was at war with his cousin Hulagu who controlled much of Persia and central Asia. The only way out was an even longer eastern detour.

In summer 1262 the Polos put together a caravan of horses, camels and wagons and set out east across steppe and desert, after 2 months and 1000km they reached Bukhara. A major city on the "silk road".

Slides Bukhara then and now

They were trapped in Bukhara for the next 3 years by the war between the Mongol cousins Berke and Hulagu. Dispute over control of the Caucasus and Hulagu's treatment of the Caliph in Baghdad. (Berke had converted to Islam).

Mongol Empire after Genghis Khan

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Genghis Khan c. 1162 – August 18, 1227

Several years before his death, Genghis Khan assigned Ögedei Khan as his successor and split his empire into khanates among his sons and grandsons. He divided his empire among his sons Ögedei, Chagatai, Tolui, and Jochi (Jochi's death several months before Genghis Khan meant that his lands were instead split between his sons, Batu and Orda) into several Khanates designed as sub-territories: their Khans were expected to follow the Great Khan, who was, initially, Ögedei.

His descendants extended the Mongol Empire across most of Eurasia by conquering or creating vassal states in all of modern-day China, Korea, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and substantial portions of modern Eastern Europe, Russia, and Southwest Asia.

		Genghis d 1227	
Jochi d 1227	Chagatai d 1242	Ögedei d 1241 *	Tolui d 1232
Batu d 1255		Guyuk d 1248 *	Möngke d 1259 *
Berke d 1267			Kublai d 1294 *
			Hulagu d 1265
Western lands Golden Horde	Central Asia	Eastern Asia including China	Yuan Dynasty
			Ilkhanate

* Became the Great Khan (Khagan)

The [Khanates](#) as Genghis Khan assigned them:

Empire of the Great Khan: Ögedei Khan, as *Great Khan*, took most of Eastern Asia, including China; this territory later to comprise the Yuan dynasty under Kublai Khan.

Mongol homeland (present day Mongolia, including Karakorum): Tolui Khan, being the youngest son, received a small territory near the Mongol homeland, following Mongol custom.

Chagatai Khanate: Chagatai Khan, Genghis Khan's second son, was given Central Asia and northern Iran. He was Khan of the Chagatai Khanate from 1226-1242. He inherited most of what are now the five Central Asian states

Blue Horde to Batu Khan, and **White Horde** to Orda Khan, both were later combined into the Kipchak Khanate, or Khanate of the Golden Horde, under Toqtamysh. Genghis Khan's eldest son, Jochi, had received most of the distant Russia and Ruthenia. Because

Jochi died before Genghis Khan, his territory was further split up between his sons. Batu Khan launched an invasion of Russia, and later Hungary and Poland, and crushed several armies before being summoned back by the news of Ögedei's death.

Second half 13th century a traveller could ride from the Danube to the Yellow sea in Mongol territory.

Slide Khanates

Journey resumes

The ambassador was amazed to find Europeans there and persuaded them that Kublai would be very interested to meet them and invited the Polos to join his caravan returning to China. By this time they spoke Mongolian and Turkic dialects well.

1265 a change of fortune. The marooned Polo brothers were abruptly rescued in Bukhara by the arrival of a VIP. Kublai Khan, the Khagan (Great Khan) was having problems from his younger brother Ariq, send an embassy to his brother Hulagu in Persia for assistance. Things had resolved and the ambassador and entourage were returning from Babylon to China via Bukhara.. The Mongol ambassador persuaded the brothers that Great Khan would be delighted to meet them for he had never seen any Latins and very much wanted to meet one. They left Bukhara for Samarkand and Kashgar.

Slides Caravanserai, traders 1890s

Marco gives no details of the route taken or the nature of their journey, he was reporting second hand. They possibly used the northern route around the terrible Taklamakan desert they reached Turfan and Hami, then headed south-east to Dunhuang.

Sven Hedin quote on Taklamakan Man 57-58

They finally reached the new capital of the Great Khan, Beijing in 1266.

They were the first Europeans known to have visited China.

Slide meeting KK

The Great Khan Kublai, was indeed hospitable. He had set up his court at Beijing, which was not a Mongol encampment but an impressive city built by Kublai as his new capital after the Mongols took over China in 1264. Kublai asked them all about their part of the world, the Pope and the Roman church. He was juggling Buddhist and Daoists who were competing for influence so interested in Christianity as a counterweight. Nestorian Christians well known, had been in central Asia and Mongolia for a long time; Kublai's mother had been a Nestorian.

Niccolo and Matteo, who spoke Turkic dialects perfectly, answered truthfully and clearly. The Polo brothers were well received in the Great Khan's capital. One year later, the Great Khan sent them on their way with a letter in Turki addressed to Pope Clement IV asking the Pope to send him 100 learned men to teach his people about Christianity and Western science. He also asked Pope to procure oil from the lamp at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

To make sure the brothers would be given every assistance on their travels, Kublai Khan presented them with a golden tablet (or paiza in Chinese, gerege in Mongolian) a foot long and three inches wide and inscribed with the words "By the strength of the eternal Heaven, holy be the Khan's name. Let him that pays him not reverence be killed." The golden tablet was the special VIP passport, authorizing the travellers to receive throughout the Great Khan's dominions such horses, lodging, food and guides as they required.

Slide passport

. Even with the pass they took 3 years to reach the Mediterranean in April 1269. Marco gives no information on their route he just comments they had bad weather. They arrived at the crusader port of Acre where they were delayed. The Pope had died and no successor elected. The papal ambassador, Teobaldo Visconti, realized the importance of Kublai's request so suggested they wait to see if there is a conclusion to the conclave. After a few weeks they gave up waiting and returned to Venice in 1269 after an absence of 16 years.

Two years later in summer 1271 Niccolo and Maffeo Polo set off again for Xanadu with Niccolo's 17 year old son Marco.

Second Journey

Outward leg

Slide

Marco's book claims it took 3,5 years to reach China but this is improbably long; possible delays due to war or threat of war amongst the Mongols.

Cardinal Visconti become Pope (Gregory X) and gave letter to be delivered to KK

Left Venice for Acre about Sept 1271

Detour to Jerusalem to get holy oil from the Sepulchre

Left acre with 2 priests (not 100 KK had asked for), the priests backed out not long into the journey.

Slide Map of route

Route through E Turkey to Armenia then on to Persia. Went south to port of Hormuz (modern Bandar e-Abbas) across mountains and v hot plains, summer 1272. They might have been looking for a ship to India. No joy so returned to Kerman then east to Afghan border.

Across N Afghanistan and the important city of Balkh.

Slide mountains and deserts

Here Pamir, Hindu Kush and Karakorum mountain ranges meet. A 200km corridor between them, Wakhan corridor following the Wakhan river, 16km at narrowest. Marco was first European to describe the area and not again until 19th century

Possibly travelled over the Wakhjir pass (about 16,000ft/5000m), impassable for 6 months.

Slides Wakan and track

Once over the high Pamirs they were in KK's territory so could use their paize (official passport).

Then on to Kashgar, no details of the route or description of the journey. Possibly travelled via Tashkurgan then an important border town.

Marco gives a brief description of Kashgar.

He mentions Yarkand, Khotan and Charchen so probably took the southern route around the Taklamakan. Probably early 1275.

Slide Tarim basin

Marco's quote on desert sounds Man p 61.

Arrives in Dunhuang, 1000km. from Kashgar. No mention of the Buddhist caves at Mogao near Dunhuang, Marco dismissive of Buddhism.

Mentions a fibre which when processed is fire resistant (ie asbestos), is sent to KK in Beijing.

They continue eastwards probably following the line of the decaying great wall which was just an earth rampart, to Zhangye (Ganzhou) at the western end of the Hexi corridor. KK and officials well aware of the Polo's progress as the Mongol had an excellent communications system of horse relay stations. In theory, KK could send a letter to a cousin in Iraq or southern Russia in 3 weeks. Kashgar to Beijing is about 3,500km. KK heard that the Polos were back he sent messengers on a 40 day mission to meet the Polos.

Marco does not say how they negotiated the great bends in the Yellow river and the Ordos desert. By summer 1275 they arrived in Datong then to Xuanhua. And finally KK's summer residence at Shangdu (Xanadu). Marco gives a detailed description of Shangdu

Slide of town plan

Welcomed and entertained by KK They deliver the Pope's letter and the holy oil from Jerusalem.

They join KK's entourage for the migration back to the main capital Dadu (Beijing, Khanbaliq) in Sept 1275. Marco makes no mention of the huge exercise in moving the entire Imperial court, maybe because he did it so often himself in the years they were in China.

Shengdu was like a Mongol encampment on the grasslands with Chinese elements. Beijing has been the capital in some earlier times and was much expanded by KK.

Marco's travels within China

Slide Marcos travels

KK took a shine to young Marco and he possible become an officer in KK's court. He was trusted to go on trips to parts of the Empire and to report back what he found and saw. Marco did not record dates or details of his journeys, but he does mention almost 70 place names, most of which have been identified. His first trip, probably sometime between 1276 and 1280 was to Yunnan which KK had conquered 20 years previously. KK was impressed by his reports. Marco made 1 or 2 more trips to Yunnan as KK was interested in expanding into the

neighbouring territories (Vietnam and Burma). He probably got to Burma but his report on Bengal was likely based on hearsay. On one trip he appears to have reached Tibet.

He records place names with hardly a hint of landscape or difficulties of travel. He has stock phrases to describe each town which are just repeated. Cities visited include the former capital Xian, Chengdu.

Slide Yuan China

[Man 195-6 for details of trip to Burma]

Marco also journeyed down the Grand Canal from Beijing to the old Song capital of Hangzhou which he visited several times. Hangzhou had an estimated population of 1.5 million. The canal also linking the Yellow River and Yangtze River. The oldest parts of the canal date back to the 5th century BC, although the various sections were finally combined during the Sui dynasty (581–618 AD). Parts had fallen into disuse and were restored by KK. By 1288 Marco could have travelled the entire length of the canal.

The total length 1,776 km (1,104 mi).

Marco on Guazhou and Grand Canal Man p198

Marco is mystified by Chinese paper money; he has not come across paper or wood block printing before. Other novelties include fireworks, asbestos fibre

Marco claims to have visited places or attended events which were totally made up or hearsay reports. He goes into great detail on the siege of Xiangyang which KK needed to capture to get to the Song capital Hangzhou. Marco describes siege engines and tells KK he knows someone in the west who can build even better ones. This is rubbish as the siege ended about 2 years before the Polos entered China.

The Polos were in China for 17 years, they could not just leave to go home they needed KK's permission.

Homeward journey

Slides Homeward and map again

By the late 1280's KK drinking heavily, obese and judgement failing. Disasterous attempt to invade Japan. Polo's wanted to get away while they still had official travel passport before he died but still refused permission. Finally their luck changed.

The Persian ruler of the Il Khanate, Arghun (r 1284-1291) was a descendent of Genghis. His main wife died in 1286, she said he should remarry a woman from her "family". Arghun sent embassy to KK (as Great Khan) in 1287 to find a suitable bride. A 17 yr Mongol princess Cocachin (?Khokhjin) was chosen. After some toing and frowing it was agreed she would be Arghun's bride and a large escort was prepared to take her to Persia, a journey of about a year. Arghun's embassy suggested they use the Grand Canal which was fully open to Hangzhou and that Marco accompany them as a guide as he had travelled that way several times. Marco had been away on another trip for KK and had recently returned. KK reluctantly gave permission for the Polos to leave with the delegation, they were to return to China as soon as possible after Cocachin was delivered. They were given 2 piazis (passports).

The senior Polos had been trading during their 17yrs in China and become wealthy, they converted their assets into jewels (rubies sapphires etc) which they had sewn into their

clothing for safety. A contemporary Chinese source mention the “Latins” in the delegation; this is the only reference to them being in China.

By early 1291 (Cocachin was now 21) everything was in place so the large delegation set off down the Grand Canal taking a month to reach Hanzhou. Then to the port of Zaiton (Quanzhou) where the Chinese navy was mustering for an invasion of Java. MP says taking 5 days but more likely 3 weeks.

Some ships were requisitioned for the delegation, Marco mentions 3 “mother ships” which much bigger than European ships, plus 9 or 10 supporting ships. They sailed down the coast of China and across to the northern tip of Sumatra. MP describes seeing there pygmies, giant nuts (coconuts) and unicorns (probably black rhinos).

[In the meantime Arghun had died but there was no way of contacting the delegation].

They sailed via the Andaman Islands to Sri Lanka. MP records his usual mixture of fact and fiction about the places they put in. In the book he says they go north up the east coast of India, which is daft. He hears about the supposed tomb of apostle St Thomas near Madras.

They sail up the west coast of India then across top of the Arabian ocean to Persian port of Hormuz. Persian sources describe arrival of the Princess and the delegation.

Slide Persia and home

Although Arghun is dead Mongol custom allows Cocachin to marry a son of the dead ruler.

The Polos are welcomed by the Khan and stay in Persia for 9 months. They are given an escort to the border of the Khanate at the Black Sea. Now they are on their own where the Mongol passport is useless.

To Trebizond (Trabzon in Turkey), the Greek ruler of the small territory hated Venetians and Mongols from Persia. They were arrested and all their money and valuables confiscated, then let them go on their way. (The jewels were not found)

They finally arrived back in Venice in 1296 after an absence of 25 years. Everyone had thought they died years ago so how to convince people who they were? Marco does not say.

Endings

Slide

Story by Ramusio in 16th century; they held a reception in their house (how did they get access?) for relatives and friends. They got out their old travelling clothes, split the seams and showed all the jewels they had carried from China. So they were accepted as the missing Polos.

Full quote of Ramusio Man p 254-55

Marco died in Jan 1324 aged 69 or 70

Niccolo died before 1300

Maffeo died in 1309

KK died in Feb 1294

Marco Polo's book

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The book was written in Old French by romance writer Rustichello da Pisa, who worked from accounts which he had heard from Marco Polo when they were imprisoned together in Genoa. It describes Marco Polo's travels through [Asia](#) between 1276 and 1291, and his experiences at the court of Kublai Khan.

The book is Polo's account of his travels to China, which he calls Cathay (north China) and Manji (south China). *The Travels* is divided into four books. Book One describes the lands of the Middle East and Central Asia that Marco encountered on his way to China. Book Two describes China and the court of Kublai Khan. Book Three describes some of the coastal regions of the East: Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and the east coast of [Africa](#). Book Four describes some of the then-recent wars among the Mongols and some of the regions of the far north, like Russia.

The book was translated into many European languages in Marco Polo's own lifetime, but the original manuscripts are now lost. The oldest surviving Polo manuscript is in Old French heavily flavoured with Italian. A total of about 150 copies in various languages are known to exist. During copying and translating many errors were made, so there are many differences between the various copies. The first attempt to collate manuscripts and provide a critical edition was in a volume of collected travel narratives printed at Venice in 1559. The editor, Giovan Battista Ramusio, collated manuscripts from the first part of the fourteenth century,^[16] which he considered to be "*perfettamente corretto*" ("perfectly correct").

From the beginning, there has been incredulity over Polo's sometimes fabulous stories, as well as a scholarly debate in recent times. Some have questioned whether Marco had actually travelled to China or was just repeating stories that he had heard from other travellers. Doubts have also been raised in later centuries about Marco Polo's narrative of his travels in China, for example for his failure to mention a number of things and practices commonly associated with China, such as the Chinese characters, [tea](#), chopsticks, and footbinding. In particular, his failure to mention the Great Wall of China had been noted as early as the middle of seventeenth century.^[20] The Great Wall familiar to us today is a Ming structure built some two centuries after Marco Polo's travels. In addition, the difficulties in identifying many of the place names he used also raised suspicion about Polo's accounts. Also, practices such as footbinding was not common even among Chinese during Polo's time and almost unknown among the Mongols. Marco Polo himself noted (in the Toledo manuscript) the dainty walk of Chinese women who took very short steps.

There are virtually no references in the extensive Chinese archives to people or activities that could possibly relate to the Polos. There are two mentions of them on their return journey with the Princess they were accompanying to Iran, one in Chinese the other in Persian.

Unfortunately, because Marco's book *Il milione* is only incidentally a biography and autobiography, it is exceedingly difficult to ascertain where the Polos went and what they did during these years. Nevertheless, it is well known that many foreigners were in the employ of the state, since the Mongol rulers did not trust their Chinese subjects; so it would have been natural for the Polos to fit in most honourably and successfully with this motley society.

Marco Polo's description of the Far East and its riches inspired Christopher Columbus's decision to try to reach Asia by sea, in a westward route. A heavily annotated copy of Polo's book was among the belongings of Columbus.

The Moroccan merchant Ibn Battuta travelled through the Golden Horde and China subsequently in the early-to-mid-14th century.

Archaeologist Aurel Stein quotes Marco's book in his writings
Lord Macarney, ambassador to Chinese court used it as background reading

Sources

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