

Traveling the Silk Road



102 ▼ Marco Polo, DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD

No chapter on trans-Eurasian travel in the Mongol Age would be complete without a selection from Marco Polo (ca. 1253–1324), a Venetian who spent twenty years in East Asia. A few scholars have questioned whether Marco Polo ever went to China, and some have even wondered whether he ever existed. Their conclusions, largely built on arguments from silence, in which they point to what Polo's account does not mention and to the absence of his name in all known Chinese records (despite his claim to have been in the service of Khubilai Khan), have failed to win support within the academic community. As the issue currently stands, there is no good reason to doubt the basic historicity of Marco Polo's account of his years in China, even though the story, as we have received it, contains undoubted exaggeration and human error — error that was compounded by the manner in which Polo's story was transmitted to posterity.

Around 1260 Marco's father and uncle, Niccolò and Maffeo, both merchants from Venice, set sail for the Black Sea and from there made an overland trek to the court of Khubilai. When they were preparing to return home, the Great Khan requested that they visit the pope and ask him to send 100 missionary-scholars to Cathay (northern China). The Polos arrived at the crusader port of Acre (in modern Israel) in 1269 and in 1271 received a commission from Pope Gregory X (r. 1271–1276) to return to China with two Dominican friars. The two friars quickly abandoned the expedition, afraid of the dangers that awaited them, but Niccolò's seventeen-year-old son, Marco, was made of sterner stuff. The brothers Polo, now accompanied by young Marco, began the long trek back to northern China and the court of Khubilai, arriving there in 1274 or 1275. Here apparently Marco entered the service of the Great Khan, but it is impossible to say with certainty what offices he held. Whatever the truth about Polo's position, it is clear that for close to two decades he traveled extensively over much of Khubilai's empire, and he probably functioned, at least occasionally, as one of the many foreign officials serving the Mongol, or *Yuan*, Dynasty (1264–1368).

In 1290 or 1292 the three men set sail for the West by way of the Indian Ocean and arrived home in Venice in 1295. In 1298 Marco was captured in a war with Genoa and, while in prison, related his adventures to a writer of romances known as Rustichello of Pisa. Together they produced a rambling, often disjointed account of the sites, peoples, personalities, and events Marco had encountered in Asia.

Despite its literary flaws and a self-puffery that was obvious even to fourteenth-century contemporaries, the book was widely translated and distributed throughout late medieval Europe. Its popularity was due in part to Marco's eye for detail, as the book abounds with stories and descriptions of phenomena that Westerners found fascinatingly different.

In the following selection Polo describes his journey to Cathay along the portion of the Silk Road that skirts the southern fringes of the forbidding *Taklamakan Desert*. The term *Silk Road* conjures up every sort of romantic notion in modern readers, but for the men and women who journeyed along its many routes it was

anything but romantic, even though towns along the way offered pleasures and even exotic experiences. The fact that it took the Polos about three and one-half years to travel from Acre to Shangdu, the summer palace of the Great Khan, suggests how difficult and dangerous the journey was.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What were the dangers for travelers along this portion of the Silk Road?
2. Despite the dangers, what made the journey possible and even bearable?
3. Why did people inhabit towns and cities along this route?
4. What dangers did these urban people encounter?
5. What impact did the Mongols have on this part of the Silk Road?

Let us turn next to the province of Yarkand,¹ five days' journey in extent. The inhabitants follow the law of Mahomet,² and there are also some Nestorian Christians.³ They are subject to the Great Khan's nephew,⁴ of whom I have already spoken. It is amply stocked with the means of life, especially cotton. But, since there is nothing here worth mentioning in our book, we shall pass on to Khotan,⁵ which lies towards the east-north-east.

Khotan is a province eight days' journey in extent, which is subject to the Great Khan. The inhabitants all worship Mahomet.⁶ It has cities and towns in plenty, of which the most splendid, and the capital of the kingdom, bears the same name as the province, Khotan. It is amply stocked with the means of life. Cotton grows here in plenty. It has vineyards, estates, and orchards in plenty. The people live by trade and industry; they are not at all warlike.

Passing on from here we come to the province of Pem, five days' journey in extent, towards the

east-north-east. Here too the inhabitants worship Mahomet and are subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns in plenty. The most splendid city and the capital of the province is called Pem. There are rivers here in which are found stones called jasper and chalcedony⁷ in plenty. There is no lack of the means of life. Cotton is plentiful. The inhabitants live by trade and industry.

The following custom is prevalent among them. When a woman's husband leaves her to go on a journey of more than twenty days, then, as soon as he has left, she takes another husband, and this she is fully entitled to do by local usage. And the men, wherever they go, take wives in the same way.

You should know that all the provinces I have described, from Kashgar⁸ to Pem and some way beyond, are provinces of Turkestan.⁹

I will tell you next of another province of Turkestan, lying east-north-east, which is called Charchan. It used to be a splendid and fruitful

¹Yarkand is on the southwestern border of the *Taklamakan Desert*, which is located in the *Tarim Basin*. The Taklamakan, whose name means "those who enter never return," cannot support human life. Travelers must decide whether to take the fork that skirts the northern edge of this 600-mile-long wilderness of sand (the Northern Tarim Route) or the southern fork (the Southern Tarim Route). Yarkand is the first major city on the Southern Tarim Route for those traveling from the west.

²Muhammad.

³Various Turkish and Mongolian tribes had adopted this form of Christianity.

⁴Kaidu.

⁵The next major city along this route.

⁶Many Western Christians thought *Mahomet* was a god whom Muslims worshiped.

⁷Two highly valued quartz crystals.

⁸Kashgar, on the extreme western end of the Taklamakan, is where the northern and southern forks branch, for those traveling from the west.

⁹The region of Central Asia inhabited by Turkic peoples.

country, but it has been much devastated by the Tartars.¹⁰ The inhabitants worship Mahomet. There are villages and towns in plenty, and the chief city of the kingdom is Charchan.¹¹ There are rivers producing jasper and chalcedony, which are exported for sale in Cathay and bring in a good profit; for they are plentiful and of good quality.

All this province is a tract of sand; and so is the country from Khotan to Pem and from Pem to here. There are many springs of bad and bitter water, though in some places the water is good and sweet. When it happens that an army passes through the country, if it is a hostile one, the people take flight with their wives and children and their beasts two or three days' journey into the sandy wastes to places where they know that there is water and they can live with their beasts. And I assure you that no one can tell which way they have gone, because the wind covers their tracks with sand, so that there is nothing to show where they have been, but the country looks as if it had never been traversed by man or beast. That is how they escape from their enemies. But, if it happens that a friendly army passes that way, they merely drive off their beasts, because they do not want to have them seized and eaten; for the armies never pay for what they take. And you should know that, when they harvest their grain, they store it far from any habitation, in certain caves among these wastes, for fear of the armies; and from these stores they bring home what they need month by month.

After leaving Charchan, the road runs for fully five days through sandy wastes, where the water is bad and bitter, except in a few places where it is good and sweet; and there is nothing worth noting in our book. At the end of the five days' journey towards the east-north-east, is a city which stands on the verge of the Great Desert. It is here that men take in provisions for crossing

the desert. Let us move on accordingly and proceed with our narrative.

The city I have mentioned, which stands at the point where the traveler enters the Great Desert, is a big city called Lop, and the desert is called the Desert of Lop.¹² The city is subject to the Great Khan, and the inhabitants worship Mahomet. I can tell you that travelers who intend to cross the desert rest in this town for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts. At the end of the week they stock up with a month's provisions for themselves and their beasts. Then they leave the town and enter the desert.

This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end; and at the narrowest point it takes a month to cross it. It consists entirely of mountains and sand and valleys. There is nothing at all to eat. But I can tell you that after traveling a day and a night you find drinking water¹³ — not enough water to supply a large company, but enough for fifty or a hundred men with their beasts. And all the way through the desert you must go for a day and a night before you find water. And I can tell you that in three or four places you find the water bitter and brackish; but at all the other watering-places, that is, twenty-eight in all, the water is good. Beasts and birds there are none, because they find nothing to eat. But I assure you that one thing is found here, and that a very strange one, which I will relate to you.

The truth is this. When a man is riding by night through this desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he

¹⁰Mongols not Tartars. See source 101, note 1.

¹¹Known to the Chinese as Shanshan, it was the next significant city along the Southern Tarim Route.

¹²On the eastern edge of the Taklamakan Desert is a salt-

encrusted plain of hard-baked clay known as the Lop Nor (the Salt Sea) — the dried bed of an ancient sea.

¹³Streams from distant mountains, which long ago made this a great inland salt sea, create oases.

never finds it again. And in this way many travelers have been lost and have perished. And sometimes in the night they are conscious of a noise like the clatter of a great cavalcade of riders away from the road; and, believing that these are some of their own company, they go where they hear the noise and, when day breaks, find they are victims of an illusion and in an awkward plight. And there are some who, in crossing this desert, have seen a host of men coming towards them and, suspecting that they were robbers, have taken flight; so, having left the beaten track and not knowing how to return to it, they have gone hopelessly astray. Yes, and even by daylight men hear these spirit voices, and often you fancy you are listening to the strains of many instruments, especially drums, and the clash of arms. For this reason bands of travelers make a point of keeping very close together. Before they go to sleep they set up a sign pointing in the direction in which they have to travel. And round the necks of all their beasts they fasten little bells, so that by listening to the sound they may prevent them from straying off the path.

That is how they cross the desert, with all the discomfort of which you have heard. . . .

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Now I will tell you of some other cities, which lie towards the north-west near the edge of this desert.¹⁴

The province of Kamul, which used to be a kingdom, contains towns and villages in plenty, the chief town being also called Kamul.¹⁵ The province lies between two deserts, the Great Desert and a small one three days' journey in extent.¹⁶ The inhabitants are all idolaters¹⁷ and speak a language of their own. They live on the produce of the soil; for they have a superfluity of foodstuffs and beverages, which they sell to trav-

elers who pass that way. They are a very gay folk, who give no thought to anything but making music, singing and dancing, and reading and writing according to their own usage, and taking great delight in the pleasures of the body. I give you my word that if a stranger comes to a house here to seek hospitality he receives a very warm welcome. The host bids his wife do everything that the guest wishes. Then he leaves the house and goes about his own business and stays away two or three days. Meanwhile the guest stays with his wife in the house and does what he will with her, lying with her in one bed just as if she were his own wife; and they lead a gay life together. All the men of this city and province are thus cuckolded by their wives; but they are not the least ashamed of it. And the women are beautiful and vivacious and always ready to oblige.

Now it happened during the reign of Mongu Khan,¹⁸ lord of the Tartars, that he was informed of this custom that prevailed among the men of Kamul of giving their wives in adultery to outsiders. Mongu thereupon commanded them under heavy penalties to desist from this form of hospitality. When they received this command, they were greatly distressed; but for three years they reluctantly obeyed. Then they held a council and talked the matter over, and this is what they did. They took a rich gift and sent it to Mongu and entreated him to let them use their wives according to the traditions of their ancestors; for their ancestors had declared that by the pleasure they gave to guests with their wives and goods they won the favor of their idols and multiplied the yield of their crops and their tillage. When Mongu Khan heard this he said: 'Since you desire your own shame, you may have it.' So he let them have their way. And I can assure you that since then they have always upheld this tradition and uphold it still.

¹⁴Polo now shifts to the Northern Tarim Route. He does not claim that Kamul and the other cities that he describes in this aside were on his route eastward. Indeed, the whole tone of this section suggests he heard about these sites during his stay in China.

¹⁵The modern city of Hami.

¹⁶This smaller desert has to be the edge of the Gobi Desert, which is not a small desert and is not crossed in three days.

¹⁷Buddhists.

¹⁸Khubilai's older brother and Great Khan from 1251 to 1259.