

Marco Polo



Figure 1: Marco Polo in Tatar attire.

(1254?–1324). The Venetian merchant and adventurer Marco Polo wrote a fascinating book about his travels in China and other parts of Asia in the late 13th century. The book was an instant success and was translated into many languages. Fellow Europeans read his accounts of the riches of Asia and became eager to find sea routes to China, Japan, and the East Indies. Even Christopher Columbus, nearly 200 years later, often consulted his copy of Marco's book, *Il milione* (The Million). In English, the book is known as the *Travels of Marco Polo*.

In Marco's time, very little was known about Asia in Europe. When his book was published, many people thought that it was a fable or a gross exaggeration. Over the years, some people have argued that Marco never even reached China. Others have taken his book to be a true and accurate account. Today, scholars generally believe that Marco faithfully recorded what he saw and heard on his travels but that much of what he heard secondhand was distorted or fictitious.

Marco Polo was born in the city-republic of Venice in about 1254. His father and uncles were merchants who traveled to distant lands to trade. On a long trading expedition Marco's father, Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo traveled overland as far as Cathay (now northern China). There they met Kublai Khan, the great Mongol emperor of China. Kublai wanted to learn more about the Western world, and he asked Niccolò and Maffeo to act as his ambassadors and carry letters to the pope. The Polos returned to Venice in 1269. They set out for China again in 1271, and this time they took Marco.



Figure 2: Marco Polo sets sail from Venice in 1271, in a painting from an illuminated manuscript from about the 15th century.

From Venice the Polos sailed to Acre (now 'Akko, Israel), where they received letters for Kublai from a representative of the pope. The Polos crossed the deserts of Persia (Iran) and Afghanistan. They mounted the heights of the Pamir Mountains, descending to the trading city of Kashgar (Kashi), which is now in Xinjiang, China. By then, they were traveling on the main part of the trade route known as the Silk Road. They continued eastward, crossing the dry stretches of the

Gobi. Sometime in 1274 or 1275 they arrived at Kublai Khan's court at his summer capital, Shangdu (now Duolun, Inner Mongolia). At that time Marco was about 20 years old.

The Marco quickly became a favorite of Kublai Khan. He may have moved with the court to the emperor's winter residence at Dadu (now Beijing). Kublai sent Marco on many fact-finding missions to far places in the empire, including Hangzhou in the southeast, Yunnan in the southwest, and perhaps also what is now Myanmar (Burma). From these lands Marco brought back stories of the people and their lives. He may also have had other official responsibilities, such as inspecting taxes collected from the trade in salt and other commodities.

The Polos became wealthy in China, where they lived for many years. But they began to fear that jealous men in the court would destroy them when the elderly emperor died. In about 1290 or 1292, Kublai was preparing to send a Mongol princess to Persia to become a consort of the ruler there. The Polos asked to accompany her on the voyage and, from Persia, to return to Venice. Kublai at first refused but then reluctantly agreed.

Since there was danger from robbers and enemies of the emperor along the overland trade routes, they went by sea. They sailed in a fleet of 14 ships, which carried the Polos, the princess, and 600 courtiers and sailors. The fleet traveled southward along the coast of what is now Vietnam and the Malay Peninsula to Sumatra, where the voyage was delayed for several months. The ships then turned westward and visited Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and India before reaching their destination in Persia. The Polos set off by land for Venice, but along the way they were robbed of most of their earnings from China. When they arrived in Venice in 1295, they had been gone 24 years.

Soon after his return, Marco was sailing aboard a ship that was captured by forces of the trading city of Genoa, a rival of Venice, during a skirmish in the Mediterranean. Marco was thrown into a Genoese prison. There he wrote his book with help from another prisoner, Rustichello, who was a writer of romances. Marco was soon released from prison. He returned to Venice and engaged in trade. His name appears in the court records of his time in many lawsuits over property and money. He died in Venice on Jan. 8, 1324.

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