ITALIAN TRADER AT THE COURT OF KUBLAI KHAN

MARCO POLO

Born
1254
Venice, Italy

Died
January 8, 1324
Venice, Italy
Marco Polo served Emperor Kublai Khan in China at the height of the Mongol Empire. When Polo returned to Venice, writings about his experiences gave Europeans some of their earliest information about China.
In the thirteenth 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. The city-state located on the east coast of Italy. Trade with Asia was increasing during this time. 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 deserts of Central Asia.

When Marco Polo was born, his father, Niccolo, and two uncles were away trading. They had gone to cities on the Black Sea. But their adventures actually had taken them all the way to China. 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 they returned, Niccolo found that his wife had died. He also discovered that he had a 15-year-old son named Marco. He hadn't even known Marco existed.

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. They would reach the palace of Kublai Khan by following the Silk Road routes. Even then, they took three and a half years to travel there. The Mongols protected them along the way.

Two years later, in 1273, Niccolo Polo and his brother, Maffeo, set off again. They took 19-year-old Marco with them. This time they traveled to Kublai Khan's capital, Khanbaliq (the city of the Khan). There they met the most powerful ruler of the world, Kublai Khan. The day Kublai Khan welcomed the Polos, Niccolo Polo and his brother, Maffeo, 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. They would exchange them for silk, spices, and other goods. 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 didn't want the Mongols. Two years before, Marco had visited Kublai Khan in his capital. The Polos had brought 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. They would reach the palace of Kublai Khan by following the Silk Road routes. Even then, they took three and a half years to travel there. The Mongols protected them along the way. The Polos arrived safely in Khanbaliq. Kublai Khan welcomed them. He had heard of their travels. He placed them in charge of his treasury. He gave them a gold passport. It allowed them to use lodgings and horses posted by the Mongols. They would reach the palace of Kublai Khan by following the Silk Road routes. Even then, they took three and a half years to travel there. The Mongols protected them along the way.

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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 naval battle and ended up in

close to 100 Byzantine coins to local rulers on the Black Sea. The payment was a large portion of their fortune.

So many Polos went to war with Genoa. It was a naval battle and ended up in

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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.

Marco Polo's book

The account of the Mongol dynasty

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Marco Polo's book
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO
1271 TO 1295

AFRICA
EUROPE
ASIA
INDIAN OCEAN
ARCTIC CIRCLE
EQUATOR
TROPIC OF CAPRICORN
VENICE
EUROPE
ASIA
AFRICA
AUSTRALIA
INDIAN OCEAN
ARCTIC CIRCLE
EQUATOR
TROPIC OF CAPRICORN
VENICE
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 wasn’t in Europe then. It wasn’t invented there until 1440, by Johannes Gutenberg, a German printer.

When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492, he hoped to reach China. He brought a copy of The Travels of Marco Polo. He expected it would be useful. Columbus never made it to China. He discovered the Americas instead. The book remained Europe’s primary source of information about China until the nineteenth 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], the mint of the Grand Khan is. 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 this comes in large quantsities, this paper currency is circulated around him in this city of Cambalu. (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. This beverage is so good and well flavoured that they do not wish for better. It is clear, bright, and pleasant to the taste. And being made very hot, when ready for use, the host dilutes it into pieces of money of different sizes, nearly square, but somewhat longer than they are wide...
During the time of Marco Polo's life:

- **1254**: Born in Venice
- **1269**: Father Niccolo Polo returns from China
- **1294**: Kublai Khan dies on February 18
- **1271**: Sets off for China with father and uncle
- **1275**: Begins service at the court of Kublai Khan
- **1295**: The Polos return to Venice
- **1297**: Venice and Genoa at war; Polo captured
- **1299**: Released from imprisonment
- **Early 1300s**: Marries Donata Badoer
- **1298**: Eyeglasses are invented in Italy
- **1262**: Norway annexes Iceland and Greenland
- **1270**: Louis IX of France dies on the Eighth Crusade to the Middle East
- **1273**: The Hapsburg Dynasty is established in Austria
- **1286**: The Chinese develop the cannon for use in battle
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1310

1320

1330

1314–1317
Europe
Famine strikes
1321
Dante Alighieri, author of The Divine Comedy, dies in Italy
1326
The Ottoman Empire is founded
1310

1320

1330

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 is used in furnaces and in the manufacture of iron. Its quality is
considerable, but its use is limited to this. When first lighted, it
gives off a large flame and burns with a steady, steady light. Unlike
charcoal, it does not produce a lot of smoke or odor. When quenched,
it goes out slowly, allowing for easy rekindling.

The stone is used for heating in homes and public baths, which are
common in these regions. The demand for heat is so high that the
supply of wood is not sufficient. The stone, on the other hand, is
abundant and provides a more reliable source of heat. The practition-
ers of this craft rely on the stone for its durability and efficiency.

It is worth noting that the use of this stone is not limited to this
province. Its popularity has spread throughout Europe, where it is
valued for its unique properties. The demand for this stone has
led to its widespread use, making it an essential commodity in
these regions. Its significance is reflected in its role in shaping
the daily lives of the people who rely on it for their heating needs.
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Sources


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A miniature painting of Marco Polo before Kublai Khan

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A 13th-century illustration of the Polo family leaving from Venice

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A drawing of Marco Polo

Credit