

Marco Polo

THE BOOK OF WONDER

Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant who traveled for twenty-four years to East Asia. Of particular importance were his experiences in the Mongol Empire, when he met Kublai Khan and spent significant time in Khan-balik (the city that would later become Beijing). Consider these excerpts from his travelogue, *The Book of Wonder*, with that from WTWA 425-426, and consider what he emphasizes about himself and his own perspective that he brings to his travels. What does Polo describe in greatest detail, and why might that be? How does Polo describe various kinds of authority in this text (the Khan, the Pope, and others)? How is wealth created and understood in the Empire? What do you think is Polo's main characterization of the Mongols?

[The journey of Nicolo and Maffeo Polo]

CHAPTER 1

[The brothers Polo travel along the land Silk Road]

1. It should be known to the reader that, ... in the year of our Lord 1250, Nicolo Polo, the father of the said Marco, and Maffeo, the brother of Nicolo, respectable and well-informed men, embarked in a ship of their own, with a rich and varied cargo of merchandise, and reached Constantinople in safety. After mature deliberation on the subject of their proceedings, it was determined... that they should continue their voyage into the [Black Sea]. With this view they made purchases of many fine and costly jewels, and taking their departure from Constantinople, navigated the [Black Sea] ... from whence they travelled on horseback many days until they reached the court of a powerful chief of the Western [Mongols]... He expressed much satisfaction at the arrival of these travellers, and received them with marks of distinction. ...

The brothers having resided a year in the dominions of this prince, became desirous of revisiting their native country, but were impeded by the sudden breaking out of a war ... in consequence of which, the roads being rendered unsafe for travellers, the brothers could not attempt to return the way they came. It was recommended to them, as the only practicable mode of reaching Constantinople, to proceed in an easterly direction... Accordingly they made their way to a town... situated on the confines of the kingdom of the Western [Mongols]. Leaving that place, and advancing still further, they crossed the Tigris [in Iraq], and came to a desert, the extent of which was a seventeen-day journey, wherein they found neither town, castle, nor any substantial building, but only [Mongols] with their herds, dwelling in tents on the plain. Having

passed this tract they arrived at a well-built city called Bokhara, in a province of that name, belonging to the dominions of Persia... Here... they remained three years.

It happened while these brothers were in Bokhara, that ... an ambassador [was] sent ... to the Grand Khan, supreme chief of all the [Mongols], named Kublai, whose residence was at the extremity of the continent... he proposed that [the brothers] should accompany him to the presence of the Great Khan, who would be pleased by their appearance at his court, which had not hitherto been visited by any person from their country... They agreed to this proposal, and recommending themselves to the protection of the Almighty, they set out on their journey in the suite of the ambassador, attended by several Christian servants whom they had brought with them from Venice. ...

[The brothers meet Kublai Khan]

2. Being introduced to the presence of the Grand Khan, Kublai, the travellers were received with the condescension and affability that belonged to his character, and as they were the first Latins to make an appearance in that country, they were entertained with feasts and honored with other marks of distinction. Entering graciously into conversation with them, he made earnest inquiries on the subject of the western parts of the world, of the Emperor of the Romans, and of other Christian kings and princes. He wished to be informed of their relative consequence, the extent of their possessions, the manner in which justice was administered in their several kingdoms and principalities, how they conducted themselves in warfare, and above all he questioned them particularly respecting the Pope, the affairs of the Church, and the religious worship and doctrine of the Christians. ... they gave appropriate answers upon all these points, and as they were perfectly acquainted with the [Mongol] language, they expressed themselves always in becoming terms; insomuch that the Grand Khan, holding them in high estimation, frequently commanded their attendance.

When he had obtained all the information that the two brothers communicated with so much good sense, he expressed himself well satisfied, and having formed in his mind the design of employing them as his ambassadors to the Pope, after consulting with his ministers on the subject, he proposed to them, with many kind entreaties, that they should accompany one of his officers... on a mission to the See of Rome. ...

He gave orders that they should be furnished with a golden tablet displaying the imperial cipher, according to the usage established by His Majesty; in virtue of which the person bearing it, together with his whole suite, are safely conveyed and escorted from station to station by the governors of all places within the imperial dominions, and are entitled, during the time of their residing in any city, castle, town, or village, to a supply of provisions and everything necessary for their accommodation.

... Their expenses were defrayed, and escorts were furnished. But notwithstanding these advantages, so great were the natural difficulties they had to encounter, from the extreme cold, the snow, the ice, and the flooding of the rivers, that their progress was unavoidably tedious, and

three years elapsed before they were enabled to reach a sea-port town in the Lesser Armenia, named Laiassus.

Departing from thence by sea, they arrived at Acre in the month of April, 1269. ... They embarked at Acre on a ship bound to Negropont, and from thence went on to Venice, where Nicolo Polo found that his wife, whom he had left with child at his departure, was dead, after having been delivered of a son, who received the name of Marco, and was now of the age of fifteen years. This is the Marco by whom the present work is composed, and who will give therein a relation of all those matters of which he has been an eyewitness.

3. [they are received by the new Pope Gregory]

Upon their arrival, His Holiness received them in a distinguished manner, and immediately dispatched them with papal letters... He also charged them with valuable presents, and among these, several handsome vases of crystal, to be delivered to the Grand Khan in his name, along with his benediction.

[The brothers, accompanied by the young Marco Polo, go on their new voyage]

Nicolo, Maffeo, and Marco ... undismayed by perils or difficulties ... continued their journey... [Finally] through the blessing of God, they were conveyed in safety to the royal court.

4. Upon their arrival they were honorably and graciously received by the Grand Khan, in a full assembly of his principal officers. ... He immediately commanded them ... to relate to him the circumstances of their travels, with all that had taken place in their negotiation with His Holiness the Pope. To their narrative, ... he listened with attentive silence. The letters and the presents from Pope Gregory were then laid before him. ... Upon his observing Marco Polo, and inquiring who he was, Nicolo made answer, "This is your servant, and my son"; upon which the Grand Khan replied, "He is welcome, and it pleases me much", and he caused him to be enrolled amongst his attendants of honor. And on account of their return he made a great feast and rejoicing and as long as the said brothers and Marco remained in the court of the Grand Khan, they were honored even above his own courtiers. Marco was held in high estimation and respect by all belonging to the court. He learnt in a short time and adopted the manners of the [Mongols], and acquired a proficiency in four different languages, which he became qualified to read and write.

... In short, during seventeen years that he continued in the Grand Khan's service, he rendered himself so useful that he was employed on confidential missions to every part of the empire and its dependencies; sometimes also he travelled on his own private account, but always with the consent, and sanctioned by the authority, of the Grand Khan. ... Marco Polo [thus] had the opportunity of acquiring a knowledge, either by his own observation, or what he collected from

others, of so many things, until his time unknown, respecting the Eastern parts of the world, and which he diligently and regularly committed to writing, as in the sequel will appear.

[The magnificent court of Kublai Khan]

CHAPTER 35

When His Majesty holds a grand and public court, those who attend it are seated in the following order. The table of the sovereign is placed before his elevated throne, and he takes his seat on the northern side, with his face turned towards the south, and next to him, on his left hand, sits the Empress. On his right hand, upon seats somewhat lower, are placed his sons, grandsons, and other persons connected with him by blood, that is to say, who are descended from the imperial stock. ... The tables are arranged in such a manner that the Grand Khan, sitting on his elevated throne, can overlook the whole. ... The greater part of the officers, and even of the nobles ... , eat, sitting upon carpets, in the hall; on the outside stand a great multitude of persons who come from different countries, and bring with them many rare and curious articles. ...

In the middle of the hall, where the Grand Khan sits at table, there is a magnificent piece of furniture... Within this buffet are also the cups or flagons belonging to His Majesty, for serving the liquors. Some of them are of beautiful gilt plate. Their size is such that, when filled with wine or other liquor, the quantity would be sufficient for eight or ten men. Before every two persons who have seats at the tables, one of these flagons is placed, together with a kind of ladle, in the form of a cup with a handle, also of plate, to be used not only for taking the wine out of the flagon, but for lifting it to the head. This is observed as well with respect to the women as the men. The quantity and richness of the plate belonging to His Majesty is quite incredible. ”

[Paper money in Yuan China]

CHAPTER 38

In this city of Kanbalu is the mint of the Grand Khan, who 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 the bark to be stripped from those mulberry trees, the leaves of which are used for feeding silkworms, and takes from it that thin inner rind which lies between the coarser bark and the wood of the tree. This being steeped, and afterwards pounded in a mortar, until reduced to a pulp, is made into paper, resembling (in substance) that which is manufactured from cotton, but quite black.

When ready for use, he has it cut into pieces of money of different sizes, nearly square, but somewhat longer than they are wide. ... The coinage of this paper money is authenticated with as much form and ceremony as if it were actually of pure gold or silver, for to each note a number of officers, specially appointed, not only subscribe their names, but affix their signets also; when this has been regularly done by the whole of them, the principal officer, deputed by His Majesty, having dipped into vermilion the royal seal committed to his custody, stamps with it the piece of paper, so that the form of the seal tinged with the vermilion remains impressed upon it, by which it receives full authenticity as current money, and the act of counterfeiting it is punished as a

capital offence. When thus coined in large quantities, this paper currency is circulated in every part of the Grand Khan's dominions... All his subjects receive it without hesitation, because, wherever their business may call them, they can dispose of it again in the purchase of merchandise they may have occasion for, such as pearls, jewels, gold, or silver. With it, in short, every article may be procured.

... All His Majesty's armies are paid with this currency, which is to them of the same value as if it were gold or silver. Upon these grounds, it may certainly be affirmed that the Grand Khan has a more extensive command of treasure than any other sovereign in the universe.

[The benevolent rule of the Khan]

CHAPTER 39

The Grand Khan sends every year his commissioners to ascertain whether any of his subjects have suffered in their crops of corn from unfavorable weather, from storms of wind or violent rains, or by locusts, worms, or any other plague; in such cases he not only refrains from exacting the usual tribute of that year, but furnishes them from his granaries with so much corn as is necessary for their subsistence, as well as for sowing their land. With this view, in times of great plenty, he causes large purchases to be made of such kinds of grain as are most serviceable to them, which is stored in granaries provided for the purpose in the several provinces, and managed with such care as to ensure its keeping for three or four years without damage. ... All his thoughts, indeed, are directed to the important object of assisting the people whom he governs, that they may be enabled to live by their labor and improve their substance.