

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will

Travels 1300

Marco Polo. (1254-1324). ‘=

Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant, believed to have travelled widely through Central Asia and China, when the Mongol Empire was at its peak. Thus he breaks out of the portrait gallery, of the present trip through the Middle Ages, and gives actual expression to that curiosity of the world which had in antiquity begun to express itself with the Romans' movement east, trampling the Hellenistic states of the Eastern Mediterranean, and in the first centuries after Christ venturing through the mountains to India and beyond, often on camel, or shipping out from Aqaba on the Red Sea, on voyages eventually planting them on the Chinese mainland.

Marco Polo first set out traveling with his father and uncle, when he himself was seventeen. Their route crossed the overland passage later dubbed the *Silk Road*, for the regular use later made of the passageways for traffic in Asian cloths, jewels, spices. Marco Polo was to be away from home from 1271 to 1295, twenty four years primarily in China, from where, after years of making his mark as a respectable merchant and man of the world, he was to become a valued diplomat for the Emperor, carrying out trusted missions which took him as far as Burma, India, and Tibet. His record of these travels, which took him to places unimagined in the West, were not to be shared with the world until much later in his life. The influence of his life and travels had by that time spread. Christopher Columbus, we will learn, carried with him to the Americas a copy of Marco Polo's *Travels*.

The entanglement of Marco Polo with the Mongol power structure can of course not have been as simple or direct as this account, of his first trip to China implies. Traveling with his uncle and father, as he was, he presented a promising spectacle to the Mongol ruler of the time, who was ensconced in his winter palace in Xanadu. As a young man in his early twenties, with untold practical experience as a trader, and with a gift for learning languages and culture, Marco Polo rapidly recommended himself to the royal court.

Two years after returning home from China, Marco set out again, with his father and uncle, to accept the invitation of the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. The invitation was not simple. The Khan had formed a fascination for Christianity, and had demanded, from Marco and his family, upon their return to China, holy oil from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and a convoy of one hundred priests. As it turned out, the number of accompanying priests was reduced to two, the pair of whom tired quickly of the mission and left the company. Taking off from Jerusalem, in the present instance, the Polo family continued onward, probably by camel, to the Persian port of Hormuz.

From there, finding no ocean transportation that was suitable for them, they switched onto well worn overland roads—what by the nineteenth century would be called The Silk Roads—then for three years, whether on camel or foot, they made their ways toward China, over mountain passes and through steep valleys, meeting along the way, as would be expected, people, tribes, and languages of which few western travelers had knowledge. Finally, around 1275, they arrived at the border of China, from which they went directly to Kublai Khan's palace at Xanadu (Shangdu), two hundred miles northwest of the Emperor's winter quarters in Beijing.

The Mongol Emperor., as it happened, was accustomed to using foreigners in his administration, and it was in this setting that he took Marco Polo into his court, possibly as a tax collector. Marco was kept busy doing the work of the Emperor. He was sent on a lengthy official assignment to the city of Hangzhou, which was built on a series of canals, like Venice! He was assigned to work on the borders of the Empire, in what was then Burma.

The final return home, for Marco, was characteristically arduous, complex, and unpredictable. The Polos long awaited a release from service to the Emperor, and eventually were granted it, under arduous circumstances. Marco was charged with escorting a young princess to her husband to be, the Mongol ruler of Persia. In 1292 the Polos joined a flotilla of fourteen ships departing from Guangzhou, China. The flotilla arrived in Persia after fourteen months, only to find that the Princess' intended husband was dead; she was obliged to marry the son of the deceased. The Polos remained in Persia, with Arghun's brother, until leaving for Italy. They arrived home in 1295, the year after the death of Kublai Khan which sent the Mongol Empire into a fatal decline.

Just over forty when he returned home, Marco Polo's life was not over. He joined the navy of Venice, and was taken prisoner in a naval battle against Venice's chief rival, Genoa. While in prison he was incarcerated with a fellow prisoner of considerably literacy, who worked with Marco to write out a text of Marco's travels. This was to become the book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which was one of the most read texts of the Middle Ages. Upon release from prison, Marco not only prepared this text for the world, but married and fathered three children, supporting himself, as before, with trade and commerce.

Marco Polo's perceptual world

Marco Polo's extraordinary travel account opens with astounding visions onto the historical and cultural world in which he was living. (Much astonished him, for example the use of paper for currency.) Beyond his accounts of places he travelled through, however, he remains something of a personal enigma. That he had stamina and determination goes without saying, for as we see in his *Travels*, he endured walking across the Silk Road from Persia to China, and bravely survived such temporary trials as the three year ocean passage that eventually brought him back to Italy—after having deposited the Mongol Princess in Persia, and spent serious time there with the brother of the lady's once intended. Not only stamina, of course, for Marco Polo was also an exceptionally astute observer of the world he took on. Among the many passages which display his natural perception, one might think of the description of a banquet at the court of the Mongol Emperor, The internal geometry, and social insight of the passage are signs of a mind able to see shrewdly and to express forcefully.

It is as though we had a transparent narrator through whom we are the seeing of a long hall—the Emperor's central palace dining hall. We are in the mind of this awareness of the level of dignity we can occupy, as ocular center of the word portrait. We, as the Emperor and wife number one, sit on an elevated dais, with a geometrical sequence of inferiors—knights and barons and their wives—aligned before us on descending levels, so that rank is reinforced both by greater elevation and by proximity to the transparent ruler of all.

Study guide

These mediaeval study guides have to this point dealt with essentially 'literary' or at the most 'religious' issues. Marco Polo is the first merchant-traveler we have met, and even he, it must be said, was a literary figure as well as a traveler. Literary? It is not precisely that Marco Polo imagines daringly or shapes fictional plots, for in fact he comes across as what the American poet, Marianne Moore, called the 'imagination of the literal.' We observe that capacity in the characteristic way in which Marco Polo depicts a banquet at the palace of the Mongol Emperor. He is a literalist in description, but with that precision occasionally granted to literalists—think of a Durer engraving—who drive through detail out onto the other side, art.

Does it seem to you to require exceptional explanation, to understand what drove Polo to his daring life of travel? Surely it was not just business? He makes very little, in his travel accounts, of the value of striking powerful deals, of making big money. On the other hand, though, does Marco Polo seem anything like an adventurer for adventure's sake? Is there room in our world, today, for the wide traveling adventurer—the polar explorer like Shackleton, the humanist explorer like D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller, or for work like

Heinrich Boell's *Irish Diary* or Frederic Will's *A Year in Greece*? Does the mystery of curiosity explain the pressure to travel as an act in itself?