

# **The Travels of Marco Polo Study Guide**

## **The Travels of Marco Polo by Marco Polo**

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## Plot Summary

"The Travels of Marco Polo" presents a broad and wide-ranging panorama of Kubilai Khan's thirteenth century empire. Marco Polo is the Great Khan's emissary who is commissioned to travel throughout his empire. Marco Polo is sent to investigate and report back his findings about people, customs, culture, climate, flora and fauna, game, birds and habitation. The Great Khan's empire ranges from the Mideast and the Levant east through all the lands and kingdom to the China Sea and islands in it, north to Russia and the polar region and south to the Indian Ocean islands. Marco Polo is believed to travel farther and more widely than anyone else in the world of his day.

Marco Polo is born into a family of Venetian merchants. He spends twenty years in the service of travel through the Great Khan's empire. He starts his first mission as a young lad of seventeen after arriving at the court with his father Niccolo and uncle Maffeo. The Great Khan is pleased with his first report of the business and remarkable things he sees. He honors him by proclaiming he is Messer Marco Polo. The narrator of these tales is Rustichello of Pisa who claims this book describes the "great wonders and curiosities" of many territories including Armenia, Persia, Tartars, India and other land that Marco Polo sees with his own eyes. Marco Polo is believed to be a wise, noble Venetian citizen who tells the truth in this written record for others to learn from it. Rustichello of Pisa records these tales in 1298 to occupy his time while they are prisoners of war in a Genoa prison.

Rustichello's experience as a romance writer makes "Travels" a best-seller of its day according to Ronald Latham who writes the Introduction and translates this version of Marco Polo's tales. Latham bases the "Travels" on Professor Benedetto's work, which is a "straightforward and readable version" for the common man to enjoy. "The Travels of Marco Polo" is a 380-page non-fiction tale of travel and exploration through thirteenth century territories of the Great Kubilai Khan of the Mongol Empire. Marco Polo travels on assignment from the Great Khan between 1271 and 1292.

The book has nine numbered chapters plus an Introduction, Prologue, Epilogue and back matter. A Genealogical Table of the Imperial Mongol House and Maps with inset pages of Marco Polo's travels provides illustrations to guide the armchair traveler. The Index offers quick access to unfamiliar names, subjects and locations discussed in the book. Chapter titles are named for a travel route or region with the exception of a chapter about the lifestyle and fortunes of the Great Kubilai Khan. "The Travels of Marco Polo" is a colorful, fast-paced and fascinating book about the tales and travels of Marco Polo on his exploration of the Great Khan's thirteenth century lifestyle, times and empire.



# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

"The Travels of Marco Polo" presents a broad and wide-ranging panorama of Kubilai Khan's thirteenth century empire. Marco Polo is the Great Khan's emissary who is commissioned to travel throughout his empire. Marco Polo is sent to investigate and report back his findings about people, customs, culture, climate, flora and fauna, game, birds and habitation.

"The Travels of Marco Polo" is first introduced to the reading public in the thirteenth century as "A Description of the World." Marco Polo is then believed to travel farther and more widely than anyone else in the world. His travels take him from Java to the Polar Sea, from Japan to Zanzibar. Many tales he tells are enjoyable as fact or fiction. Eastern merchants like "the India voyager" Cosmas follow trade routes, Theophylactus Simocatta writes about China and Rabbi Benjamin's travels to Baghdad in the twelfth century all connect East and West. The Crusades enable Venetian merchants to extend their commercial empires. From the East in 1206, Mongol tribes elect Chinghiz as khan to rule northern China, named Cathay and then ". . . to conquer the whole world." The Great Khan succeeds Chinghiz to rule the eastern part of the empire, unequalled in size before or since. Three regions are assigned to lesser family khans to rule European Russia, Levant from eastern Persia to the Mediterranean and Central Asia's Turkestan.

Their experiences between leaving in 1271 and returning in 1292 with a bride for Arghun, khan of the Levant is described by Marco through his chroniclers Ramusio and Rustichello. Some tales are common tradition like the Magi and other Middle East legends. Rustichello's writing makes "Travels" a best-seller according to the translator Latham. Some characteristics are known by facts of Marco Polo's venture. Survival requires a practical traveler and merchant to take advantage of food, water and transport along the route with natural and man-made obstacles. Trade-routes are costly to follow so high value commodities like precious gems, fabrics, spices and gold are needed to make a profit on the way. "Civilization" is an unknown term in medieval language but "good" and "bad" are known. Marco classifies by religion like Christian, Jew, idolater and Saracen without nuance. Moslems are "worshippers of Mahomet." "Idolaters" include Hindus and Buddhists that he tolerates and admires. Marco is curious and adept seeing and describing natural history of birds, plants, beasts and herbs. Human history is limited and inaccurate. Polo is not a speculator or a geographer and pays little attention to the layout and extent of countries, towns and natural features. His "day's journey" is inexact but adequate for a traveling caravan. He is an observant traveler who faithfully describes features and characteristics of Persians, Turks, Chinese, Tibetans and others.

Rustichello writes "The Travels" in French but versions exist in Latin, Venetian dialects, and Italian, denoted by Latham as F, L, V, R, and Z. Distinctions among them may be of interest to the scholar of Marco Polo and are cited in several references listed.

Translator Latham bases this text on the work of Professor Benedetto which he claims to provide a "straightforward and readable version" but no claim to satisfy the needs of a specialist.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary and Analysis

Narrator of Marco Polo's travels proclaims this book will describe all the "great wonders and curiosities" of many territories including Armenia, Persia, Tartars, India and other lands. Tales are described to him by Marco Polo who claims to see these things with his own eyes. The narrator affirms Marco Polo is a wise, noble Venetian citizen who tells the truth. Marco wants a written record so others learn from it. Narrator Rustichello of Pisa records these tales in 1298 to occupy his time while they are both in a Genoa prison.

Marco's father Niccolo and Maffeo his uncle are Venetian merchants in Constantinople when they start a venture sailing to Sudak to sell jewels in 1260. Later they travel to the court of Barka Khan, lord of Tartary. Barka Khan and Hulaga, Khan of Levant Tartars begin a war that Hulaga wins. The Polos cannot return to Constantinople for fear of arrest so they travel east to Bukhara in Persia for three years of Barak's rule. An envoy of Hulaga invites them to join his trip to the Great Khan of the Tartars, Kubilai. Niccolo and Maffeo meet Kubilai Khan. Great Khan sends the Polos with a baron to the Pope for a hundred men to teach Christianity and get oil from a lamp at the sepulcher in Jerusalem. Great Khan issues a tablet of gold to assure lodging and needs. The baron gets sick but the Polos survive snow and swollen rivers for three years till 1269 when Pope Clement dies. Tedaldo of Piacenza asks them to wait for a new pope. Messers Niccolo, Maffeo and seventeen year-old Marco ask Tedaldo for oil from Jerusalem before a new Pope is elected. Ironically, Tedaldo is elected Pope Gregory when they reach Ayas. The new Pope sends them two Dominican Friars with letters of authority and gifts for the Khan.

In Ayas a battle begins with the sultan of Egypt. The frightened friars turn over their papers and authority to the Polos to join the Grand Master of the Templars. The Polo expedition travels for three and one-half years in snow, rain and flooded rivers. Forty days into their journey the Polos meet couriers from the Great Khan. The Great Khan asks them all to stay. Marco learns Tartar customs and four languages with writing styles. The Great Khan sends him to a country that takes six months to reach. Marco gives him a full report of the business and remarkable things he sees. The Khan is so impressed that he names him Messer Marco Polo. He stays at court seventeen years to do many missions. The Polos want to go home but the Great Khan wants them to stay.

Queen Bulagan, wife of Arghun, lord of the Levant dies. Her will requires someone of her lineage replace her. Three of Arghun's lords are at the Great Khan's court to escort Kokachin back to Arghun. She is seventeen, beautiful, charming and in the Queen's lineage. They are barred from land travel. They ask Great Khan's permission to travel with Messers Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco by sea to King Arghun. The Khan agrees to let them travel to the Levant. The Great Khan gives gifts, messages and a fleet with crews for fourteen ships and provisions for two years. In total 600 souls plus seamen leave on



the journey, but only 18 survive. Arghun dies so his brother Kaikhatu rules and gives Lady Kokachin to Arghun's son Ghazan. The Polos return to Kaikhatu for nine months. Kaikhatu gives them gold, horses, provisions, escorts and good passage from Trebizond to Constantinople and home to Venice in 1295.



# The Middle East

## The Middle East Summary and Analysis

Armenia is south of Turkey in the map on page 350. Lesser Armenia is southeast of the Mediterranean. Greater Armenia is farther southeast. Lesser Armenia's climate makes its nobility craven, mean-spirited and drink a lot. The king rules many villages and towns with Tartar supervision. The country has wild game and a market in Ayas where spices and cloths are sold to merchants from Venice and Genoa for their trips. Turkey is ruled by Tartars on the north where Turcomans, Armenians and Greeks live. Turcomans tend their flocks while Greeks and Armenians live on crafts, commerce and farming. Greater Armenia is a large province where buckram for bookbinding and other crafts are made in Erzincan. Tartar armies of the Levant summer in the province to graze their animals but leave in the winter from cold weather. Greater Armenia borders Mosul and Georgia.

Georgians are strong warriors, good archers and Christians of the Greek Church. The country is bounded by the sea and mountains on opposite sides that make it impossible to cross. Georgian villages and towns weave fine silk fabric and cloth. Georgia overlooks the Black Sea on the north and Sea of Baku on the east. Baku is 2,800 miles around and has many islands with cities built by refugees fleeing Persia from the Great Tartar. Tiflis is a large city of Christians from Armenia, Georgia, some Saracens and Jews. South of Armenia is Mosul, which is a kingdom of Arabs that worships Mahomet, Nestorian and Jacobite Christians. Mosul makes cloth called "mosulin" and merchants are also called "Mosulin." Kurds live in the mountains with lawless, lusty fighters that rob merchants.

Baghdad is home of the Saracen Caliph. Baghdad to Kais is eighteen days by river and Basra's groves grow the best dates in the world. Baghdad pierces pearls from India and weaves fabrics of cloth, gold and silk. It is a center of study for Mahomet, necromancy, natural science, astronomy and other subjects. The Caliph in 1258 hoards more treasure than any other man. Hulagu, Khan of the Tartars poses a small army and hides 100,000 for ambush. Caliph follows the small army into the ambush. Hulagu jails him in his own tower with the treasure he loves but no food or drink. The Caliph dies in four days

Persia is weak since ravaged by the Tartars. This is a large country with eight kingdoms including Kasvin, Kurdistan, Isfahan and Shiraz. The people are brutal, bloodthirsty and rob merchants despite the Tartar government. Persians live by trade and industry making cloths of gold and silk, growing cotton, other grains, fruit and wine. Seven days through date-palms with wild game, partridge and quail is a kingdom that borders Persia. Kerman inhabitants make war equipment, armor and women embroider silk, curtains and pillows. Kermans are meek and peaceful unlike Persians. The king asks why they are so different and sages blame it on the soil. The king spreads seven ships of Persian soil under carpets for a banquet where the Kerman guests begin to argue and hit each other.





Hormuz is two days through date-palms and rivers to reach the center of commerce. The people spend days in gardens to avoid hot overpowering wind that kills many exposed to it. Mulehet means "heretic" and is the country where Sheik of the Mountain lives. The sheik makes a garden from Mahomet's Paradise with ladies to sing, dance and service the youth he wants to be Assassins. He promises their return to Paradise for killing someone.



# The Road to Cathay

## The Road to Cathay Summary and Analysis

Six days travel east leads through hillsides with herbs, pastures, fruit and abundance of everything including villages and town where inhabitants worship Mahomet. Shibarghan is a city where the best melons in the world are found and when dried become sweeter. Balkh is the last city at the frontier of Persia and the limit of the Tartar lordship of the Levant. Twelve days travel east without dwellings requires the traveler bring his own supplies since all the people relocated to the mountains. Talikhan has a corn-market and mountains nearby with salt, almonds and pistachios. Three days east-northeast are unpleasant murderous people addicted to drinking boiled wine and hunting. Inhabitants tend their herds and live in the mountains in earthen caves.

Badakhshan is a country that runs twelve days journey in length governed by kings from the lineage of King Alexander and daughter of Darius, King of Persia. Precious stones named balass rubles are mined in a mountain called Sighinan when the king orders them and another is mined for lapis lazuli. Balashan is cold and breeds good running horses. Falcons and wild sheep thrive in the mountains and fish abound in streams. A few days on the mountaintop cures any malady. Ten days-journeys south is Pashai inhabited by idolaters who speak their own language and eat flesh and rice. Seven days south-east is Kashmir with idolaters who say their idols speak. Climate is temperate with no extremes. Kashmir has independent rule and hermits who live holy lives of abstinence. Some live an austere life in monasteries. Kashmir has a route to the Indian Sea but no other outlet.

Backtracking to Badakhshan takes twelve days east-northeast up a valley to Wakhan. Three days through highest mountains in the world is Pamir plain with no food or shelter from the cold altitude. Forty days travel through mountains and gorges with no supplies available is Belor where the people are savages, idolaters, hunters and evil. Kashgar is east-northeast with cities, towns and residents who grow orchards, vineyards and estates. Samarkand is a large city of Christians and Saracens ruled by a nephew of the Great Khan who also rules the province of Yarkand. Turkestan is sandy land with springs of bad, bitter water. Lop borders the Great Desert where traders load a month's supplies to cross the desert. Desert of Lop shows on page 349 in Tangut province with more detail on page 351 from Tangut to the China Sea including Cathay.

Marco Polo stops for supplies at Etzina for travel to Karakorum where the Tartars unite. Ung Khan, or Great Lord is the ruler called Prester John in the empire. As the Tartars grow Prester John plans to divide them. Tartars get anxious and escape to a desert where they withhold tribute. In 1187 they chose a king, Chinghiz Khan and encourage him to begin empire-building. He conquers towns and provinces for six years. Four rulers later Kubilai Khan becomes fifth Great Khan. East from Kan-chau leads to Erguiul and Sinju in Cathay. Farther east is Ergrigaia, Kalachan and Tenduc, former dominion of Prester John. Area is called Ung and Mungul by natives but Gog and Magog by Marco

Polo. Three days north-northeast is Shang-tu, which is a city and palace built by Kubilai Khan.



# Kubilai Khan

## Kubilai Khan Summary and Analysis

Kubilai Khan is the mightiest man in the world with more subjects, territory and treasure than anyone else. He is a direct descendant of Chinghiz Khan when he rules in 1256 as fifth in succession. The Great Khan is a mighty warrior shown by conquest of Nayan's forces in the hazardous battle they wage from dawn to noon. He honors the feasts of Christians, Saracens, Jews and idolaters and reveres their God and prophets. The Polos ask why he does not become a Christian if he believes it is the best so he sends them to the Pope to get one hundred teachers to convert his empire. The Great Khan is of moderate height and well-proportioned with a fair and ruddy complexion. Kubilai Khan has four wives, called empresses and many concubines recruited from Kungurat with a beauty contest every two years. Every candidate above a certain score must pass other tests to be approved for three days and nights in groups of six to serve the Khan's every desire. He has twenty-two sons by four wives to succeed him. His son Temur is the next Great Khan and seven other sons are kings of other kingdoms. Mistresses produce twenty-five sons who are all barons.

For three months of the year, the Great Khan lives in his palace in Cathay's capital, called Khan-balik. The palace is surrounded by four walls each a mile-long. The Khan's palace is the largest ever seen and lavishly decorated with silver, gold and pictures. Rear of the palace has extensive private apartments of the Khan to keep his possessions, ladies, treasures, and concubines where no outsiders are allowed. Astrologers of the Great Khan predict the rebellion of Khan-balik, so he builds Taidu next to it for his faithful followers. Over 1,000 cart-loads full of silk enter Khan-balik daily and 1,000 men guard every gate to respect and protect the Great Khan. The Great Khan spends December, January and February in Khan-balik where everyone within sixty days journey must hunt and hawk game. The Khan hunts with Bayan and Mingan who take 5,000 hounds and 10,000 subordinates on either side so no game escapes. They provide one thousand head of game daily to the court from October to March. The Great Khan travels to the ocean with falconers, falcons and hawks that he sends along the riverside to go hawking and fowling. The Great Khan travels in a shelter on the back of two or four elephants to pavilions at Cachar Modun. They are lavishly prepared for his hunting party of 10,000 with mistresses, barons and knights, physicians and astrologers to stay until Easter.

When the Great Khan returns to Khan-balik his mint makes money from the bark of mulberry trees, cotton and silver or gold with his seal. His currency is acceptable to buy gold or silver from the mint. The Great Kahn has more wealth than the total riches of all other potentates throughout the world. The Great Kahn rules through twelve barons that supervise armies and troop movement throughout the world called "Thai." Twelve other barons supervise thirty-four provinces with a judge and staff of clerks called "Shieng." The Khan has a system of messengers by which he can send and receive messages from the kingdom. He is kind to his subjects by helping if their crops fail or other

casualties. Families having a difficult time can ask officials for help from the Great Kubilai Khan.



# From Peking to Bengal

## From Peking to Bengal Summary and Analysis

Great Khan sends Marco Polo on a four month trip from Khan-balik, or Peking, west in Cathay on his way to Bengal. Ten miles brings him to river Pulisanghin which is crossed by a large bridge of marble decorated with marble lion statues. Thirty miles across is the commercial silk-producing city of Cho-caun at a fork in the road. The west branch takes five days through a thriving area to Ak-balik, which is the outer limit of the Great Khan's hunting grounds. Five days farther to Tai-yuan-fu is a kingdom and capital with the same name where equipment for the Great Khan's armies, wine and silk is made. An industrial city called P'ing-yang-fu is seven days through pleasant, thriving land and two days more is castle Caichu. The Golden King builds Caichu where he is personally attended only by a great number of fair young ladies to care for his every need. He obeys Prester John till he becomes prideful and arrogantly rebels against him. Prester John sends seven men to kidnap the Golden King. He accepts them into his service for two years until they can take him alive. Prester John makes the Golden King tend animals to break his pride. The king learns his lesson and John releases him with rewards for his promise of loyalty.

Twenty miles from Caichu is a river too wide and deep for a bridge with much industrial growth on its banks. Two days west is Ho-chung-fu a thriving area of trade and industry and farther on is Si-ngan-fu, whose ruler is Mangalai who gets the thriving kingdom from his father the Great Khan. Twenty-three days farther through mountains and valleys of thriving cities and towns, game and places to stay brings the traveler to Ak-balik Manzi, a capital city that borders Manzi. Inhabitants are idolaters who live on the earth and wild game. Farther on twenty days is Ch'eng-tu-fu and five days more leads to the province of Tibet.

Tibet is devastated by the ravages of Mongu Khan. Tibet takes twenty days to cross with no provisions for every three or four days. Natives use salt as money rather than the Khan's currency. Tibet has eight kingdoms bordering many provinces. The next province west is Kaindu where gold is valued by weight but trades for blocks of salt. Traders visit Kaindu and Tibet to buy gold cheap for salt. Across the river Brius is the province of Kara-jang with seven kingdoms subject to the Great Khan ruled by his son Essen-Temur, a rich, powerful, wise and upright man. Five days travel in the province leads to the capital city Yachi where many different people live. They eat rice and drink rice wine with other spices. They use seashells for money and salt as food. Ten days west is a kingdom called Kara-jang ruled by the Great Khan's son Hukaji. Gold dust and nuggets are in the rivers, lakes and mountains but seashells are used as money. Snakes and serpents are killed at night for the gall to sell as medicine. Five days west is Zar-dandan where all the men's teeth are covered in gold. Fifteen days from Zar-dandan is Mien and the next province south bordering India is Bengal. The return journey is more than eighty days travel back to Cho-chau near Peking.



# From Peking to Amoy

## From Peking to Amoy Summary and Analysis

Traveling from Cho-chau south four days leads to the city of Ho-kien-fu. The people are idolaters, burn their dead and live by trade and industry. They produce gold, silk and cloth to ship by river to Khan-balik. Changlu is three days farther south where they process pure, white fine salt for export to surrounding countries. Changli is next after five days travel where much merchandise is shipped on the river flowing through the city. South for six days leads to Tandinfu where a disloyal baron rebels against the Great Khan but is put down by his men who kill all the traitors.

Young women in Cathay are polite, prudent and proper in all things. When betrothed or asked for her hand in marriage the father pledges his daughter is a virgin. The father and future son-in-law draw up a contract specifying this. The mother and female relatives attend the bride-to-be in her bath to affirm her virginity. If the young woman is found to be a virgin, the marriage goes forward. If she is not, the father pays the penalty specified. Young women walk very carefully and daintily to avoid bruising their female integrity. Natives of Cathay and Manzi observe this custom but the Tartars are not sensitive to this since their women ride horses often.

Three days south of Tandinfu in Sinju Matu a river flows south to the town and splits in two flowing through Cathay and flowing to Manzi to carry a huge amount of ship traffic. Eight days south is Linju where inhabitants are skilled in arms, commerce and industry. Piju is three days farther south where much silk is produced for Manzi. Traveling south two days is Siju and three days more to the river Kara-moran is where crossing the river brings the traveler into Manzi. The ruler of Manzi is Facfur who is second only to the Great Khan in wealth and power although he is not a soldier. The Great Khan sends Baron Bayan Chincsan whose name means "hundred-eyes" to take Manzi city by city till the king surrenders. Bayan takes twelve cities before Kinsai where Facfur escapes to islands in the Ocean and leaves the queen to defend the city. She recalls a prediction the empire is robbed by a man of one hundred eyes and surrenders at learning Bayan's name.

Kinsai means "City of Heaven." The queen describes the city to ask the Great Khan to not destroy it. Kinsai is 100 miles around with wide and spacious streets, watercourses and marketplaces. There are 12,000 stone bridges and a forty-mile-long moat to defend against floodwater and attack. A market square every four miles can accommodate fifty-thousand people with many goods, game, fish, vegetables, fruit and wine. Commerce is measured in pepper using 43 carts daily of 223 pounds each. Twelve guilds of 12,000 workshops each with ten- to forty-men supply provinces. People of Kinsai are peaceful, diligent, honest and kind to foreigners. The Great Khan divides Manzi in nine kingdoms with their own governing king that renders an accounting to the Khan's agent every year. There are 1,200 cities throughout the province, each with a garrison of at least 1,000 men and some up to 30,000. Port city of Zaiton receives ships and merchants

from India and Manzi. Zaiton is one of two biggest ports in the world where revenue paid to the Great Khan is colossal. Marco Polo travels personally through three of the nine kingdoms of Manzi, including Yang-chau, Kinsai and Fu-chau.





# From China to India

## From China to India Summary and Analysis

India is in the center, lower half of the map on pages 348 and 349. The "Indian Ocean" borders south India on both pages. Merchants who trade with India travel in wooden ships made of spruce and fir with four masts and a deck of sixty or more cabins. Hulls are double-planked, caulked and fastened with iron nails. Big ships have watertight hull sections that close off to protect cargo if the hull is damaged. Lime and hemp is used with oil as pitch to daub on the ship. Ships crews are between 150 and 300 men to carry 6,000 baskets of pepper. Two or three smaller craft manned by up to 100 seamen tend to the larger craft and tow them when needed. Ships are repaired with a layer of wood and fresh caulk every year for six years before it is no longer seaworthy. Seamen predict successful voyages before departing by lashing a fool or drunk to a hurdle or framework they send up like a kite in a gale. If the wind takes the kite aloft, more line is let to carry it up as high as it can go which predicts a successful voyage. If the kite does not go aloft the ship stays in port that year.

Voyage to India starts in the China Sea 1,500 miles east of the mainland at the island named Japan. The people of Japan are idolaters, well-mannered, of fair complexion and have an abundance of gold they do not export, pearls both red and white and many other precious stones that makes the island very rich. Riches make the Kubilai Khan decide to conquer Japan by sending two barons with ships and men. The fleet is caught in a gale that sinks many ships. The crews take refuge on an uninhabited island. The barons return to the mainland with some officers but leave 30,000 seamen marooned on the smaller island. Rulers of the main island sail to the smaller island to capture them but leave no one on board to guard their ships. The seamen evade capture by taking their boats instead which they sail back to the main island to invade the capital which now falls to the Great Khan's marooned seamen. The rulers return by other ships to besiege their captured capital for seven months until the seamen surrender but are allowed to stay there for life in 1268. When the Great Khan finds out what the barons did he beheads one and exiles the other to an island where he is left to die a painful death.

China Sea contains 7,448 mostly uninhabited islands with spices, fragrant wood trees, white and black pepper and gold in abundance. The Great Khan has no authority over these islands and does not collect revenue from them. Sailing south-west from Zaiton in the China Sea for 1,500 miles is the country Chamba which has a king that pays tribute to the Great Khan in elephants and wood. South-southeast from Chamba is Java which is 3,000 miles around and the biggest island in the world. Java is rich and independent. The Great Khan cannot conquer it since the voyage there is hazardous. Many independent islands are on the China Sea like Sondur, Condur and Lokak. Lesser Java is 2,000 miles around with eight kingdoms, separate kings and their own languages including Sumatra, Dagroian and Lambri. They are hazardous to reach and independent from the Khan. Most goods are exported to Manzi and Cathay. North of Lesser Java is

Nicobar and Andaman islands. Ceylon is 1,000 miles southwest and 2,400 miles around. Sendernam rules and refuses to sell a ruby to the Great Khan at any price.



# India

## India Summary and Analysis

Sailing sixty miles west from Ceylon brings one to the province of Maabar in Greater India. This is the richest province in the world and is ruled by five kings who are all brothers of each other. Sender Bandi Devar rules a kingdom where pearls of great size and beauty are gathered from the gulf between the island and the mainland. Pearls are collected from oysters offshore from Bettala by divers at the bottom of the sea. They are collected every year in April and early May for export throughout the world. The king and all his subjects "go stark naked all the year around" except for a scrap of cloth on their private parts. The king also wears a necklace of prayer beads in honor of the idols. The king redeems pearls or gems over a certain weight for twice their value to keep his precious stones in the kingdom. The king has 500 concubines and henchmen to protect him that also accompany him at death into the next world as well as many other customs.

Motupalli is a kingdom between 500 and 1,000 miles north from Maabar ruled by a queen for the forty years since her husband's death. The people are idolaters who pay no tribute and live on rice, flesh, fish, milk and fruit. This kingdom gathers diamonds that roll down the mountains when it rains and collect in gorges and caverns. The mountains have serpents that make it too dangerous for the men to collect them. They throw hunks of flesh into the valleys that pick up diamonds as they roll down the hills for the men to pick diamonds out of the flesh. This kingdom makes finest texture and highest value buckram in the world.

Lar is situated to the west of St. Thomas burial place in Maabar. This province is the source of all Brahmans, who are the best and most reliable traders in the world. They wear an emblem on their shoulder that identifies them where ever they go. The king agrees to buy all the pearls the Brahmans can get from Maabar's province Chola for twice the price they pay. They are superstitious when deal-making depending on the length or time of day and shadow and if or where a tarantula spider or swallow bird appears. Some Brahmans are Yogis who live an ascetic life of fasting and abstinence.

The oldest brother is Asha who rules the port city of Kayal for all ships trading with Hormuz, Aden and Arabia. This king is very rich and governs his country well. He has 300 wives which is a mark of esteem in support of so many. Whenever brothers argue among themselves, their mother threatens to stop their arguing by saying "I will cut off the breasts from my bosom with which I gave you milk." The brothers then make peace. Indians chew a leaf called tambur that they believe is healthy but they also use to insult others by spitting in their face to cause a fight among clans or a duel between men. The next kingdom 500 miles southwest of Maabar is Quilon where inhabitants grow ginger, pepper, and indigo to sell to merchants from Manzi, the Levant and Arabia. They are black-skinned and go about naked except for loin-cloths. Comorin is a savage area but Ely is to the west where customs are familiar. Malabar and Gujarat have pepper, ginger,

indigo, cotton and leather goods. Thana, Cambay and farther west is Kech-Makran and Somnath where the people live by trade and industry along the Greater India sea-coast.



# The Arabian Sea

## The Arabian Sea Summary and Analysis

Two islands are 500 miles south of Kech-Makran in the sea. Inhabitants of Male Island are Christians who follow Old Testament conjugal rules. However, their women live on Female Island. The men go to Female Island thirty miles away in the months of March, April and May where they live with their wives, sow corn and then return to Male Island for the rest of the year to work. They live on rice, milk and meat, catch fish which they dry to eat year round or sell. Their sons stay on Female Island till fourteen when they join the men on Male Island. The women harvest corn, gather fruit and raise children.

Socotra is an island 500 miles south where they catch whales with pickled tunny fish that intoxicates the whale. The men jump from the boat to the whale's back to sink a harpoon deep in his back attached to casks that stop the whale from diving deep but exhausts him by trying until he dies. The whalers haul the dead whale to shore where they sell it. The archbishop of Socotra reports to the archbishop of Baghdad rather than the pope in Rome. Christians on this island buy goods from pirates because they steal from idolaters and Saracens but not other Christians. The next island, 1,000 miles away, is Madagascar inhabited by Saracens with four sheikhs who rule them. More elephants are bred and tusks sold here and on Zanzibar than anywhere else in the world. Natives eat mainly camel-flesh on this island year around. They catch many whales for ambergris. Animals on this island are huge like the boar's tusk weighing 14 pounds brought by the Great Khan's emissary. Zanzibar is 2,000 miles around whose inhabitants are idolaters, have a language and king of their own, pay no tribute and look like giants, strong as four men. Their animals are different from the rest of the world. The men are good fighters on camel and elephant back. The Indian Ocean has 12,700 inhabited and uninhabited islands with many kingdoms. Greater India has thirteen major kingdoms and Lesser India has eight major kingdoms in addition to these many island kingdoms.

The king of Middle India is a Christian and six other kings, three Christian and three Saracen report to him. The province is Abyssinia where the Christians are baptized by branding with a hot iron. Abyssinian men are strong warriors at war with the Sultan of Aden and Nubians. In 1288, the king is told by his bishop that the sultan of Aden abused him and he vows to avenge him. The king spends a month wreaking havoc in the kingdom of Aden to restore his honor before returning to Abyssinia. The province has imported elephants but native giraffes, lions, leopards, lynxes and other species. Abyssinia has many cities, towns and merchants that live by trade.

The people of Aden are Saracens who hate Christians. Aden is a great port and resort where ships from India transfer their merchandise. The sultan of Aden receives much revenue from the port duties and is one of the richest in the world. Shihar is 400 miles northwest of Aden where the people are Saracens and many merchant ships arrive with goods coming from and going to India. The province produces white incense and dates

and catches many fish. The domestic animals here eat fresh or dried fish because there is no grass to eat. Dhofar is 500 miles northwest of Shihar and Kalhat is 600 miles farther on at the mouth of the gulf. Hormuz is 300 miles north northwest of Kalhat and very hot.



# Northern Regions and Tartar Wars

## Northern Regions and Tartar Wars Summary and Analysis

Although a king of Turkestan, Kaidu is the nephew of the Great Khan and is always at war with him. Turkestan is northwest of Hormuz and extends to the north as far as the Great Khan's territory. Kaidu wants more land from the Great Khan but refuses to visit him for fear of his life. They quarrel and fight many battles about his territory. Despite many attacks and border invasions by Kaidu, the Great Khan does not retaliate against his nephew. Kaidu's daughter is named Aiyaruk. She will not marry a man she can wrestle to the ground. If she wins he must add 100 or 1,000 horses to her stable of 10,000. She remains undefeated and unmarried. Kaidu relies on her to capture enemy knights in many battles. Another nephew named Arghun prepares to battle with his uncle Ahmad Sultan to take back the land inherited from his dead father Abaka. Arghun asks for all the land but Ahmad refuses. They battle and Ahmad holds Arghun prisoner until he is released by rebellious barons who capture and kill the lecherous Ahmad instead. When Arghun dies, Ghazan continues the lineage from Hulagu of Baghdad, brother of the Great Kubilai Khan, and father of Abaka who fathers Arghun who fathers Ghazan.

Kaunchi is a Tartar king of the imperial line from Chinghiz Khan and kin of the Great Khan. He rules people in the provinces towards the north where they live in vast plains and mountains on the meat and milk of their herds of camels, horses, cattle, sheep and other animals. They live among white bears, black foxes, asses, sables and other wild game that they trap and sell. There are ice-covered lakes and marshes where dogs haul messengers and goods by sledge. Farther north is the Land of Darkness where the people are trappers of pale complexion, tall and well-formed. This land borders Russia. The Russian people are Christians of the Greek rite with many kings who pay tribute to no one and speak their own language. Furs and silver are produced, which are the world's best and most beautiful. The cold in Russia is very intense and barely survivable. Public stove houses to keep people warm are available every sixty paces. They have drinking bouts of mead that they call "stravitza." Russia extends to the Ocean where there are islands that breed falcons and are near Norway.

There are several Tartar lords of the West including Sain, Btu, Toktai and others. In 1261, Barka of the West and Hulagu of the Levant battle over the borders of a province they each claim. They gather 300,000 horsemen each to battle on a great plain between the Caucasus and the Caspian that is best-suited to the largest number of cavalry ever assembled. Both Hulagu and Barka are of the Chinghiz Khan imperial lineage and near relatives. Hulagu wins the battle but suffers heavy losses and returns to his own country. Other battles are fought by Toktai and Noghai to avenge the death of Tulabugha.

In the Epilogue, the author claims no other man explores so much of the world as Messer Marco Polo from Venice.



# Characters

## Marco Polo

Marco Polo is the name of a thirteenth century merchant who is believed to travel farther and more widely than anyone else in the world. He travels throughout the Mideast and Asia including Java, the Polar Sea, Japan and Zanzibar. Survival in his travels during that period requires him to be enterprising and resourceful with great endurance. He has a practical mind and skills that enable him to find food, water, shelter and transport through desert, plain, mountain, sea, village, city and palace. He travels among friendly and hostile people, unknown customs and both natural and man-made obstacles. Marco Polo is a successful trader and merchant who transacts profitable business along trade-routes with high value commodities like precious gems, fabrics, spices and gold to make a profit enroute.

Marco Polo uses simple terms to denote Christians, Jews, idolaters and Saracens. He is hostile to Moslems as "worshippers of Mahomet" but respects "idolaters" including Hindus and Buddhists. Marco provides detailed descriptions of natural history like birds, plants, beasts and herbs. Marco Polo is observant and details physical features and traits that distinguish Persians, Turks, Chinese, Tibetans and others. Marco is assumed to be fluent in the related languages of Mongol and Turkish, Persian and a fourth unknown language. Marco Polo is born in 1254, sired by a Venetian merchant with whom he travels as a lad of seventeen. While in Genoa as a prisoner of war in 1298, he meets Rustichello who is his co-writer of the "Travels." He dies in 1324, leaving three daughters behind.

## Kubilai Khan

Kubilai Khan is the name of the fifth Great Khan in succession from Chinghiz Khan. He is the emperor and ruler of all the Tartars and rules from 1257 through his death in 1294. His main palace is in Peking, which is also called Khan-balik. Kubilai is less savage and more cosmopolitan than his ancestors. For example, he absorbs parts of the Chinese culture like Buddhism's humanitarian spirit and the nomad's simplicity by sowing prairie grass in his palace courtyard to remember his origin's freer world. Great Kubilai Khan is born on September twenty-eighth, an occasion for the greatest feast of each year. He celebrates by wearing a robe of gold with 12,000 party goers and receives gifts from all over the world.

Kubilai Khan is the mightiest man in the world by number of subjects, territory and treasure. His twenty-two sons from four wives are in line of succession. His eldest son dies. Temur is next in line to be Great Khan while seven of the other sons rule kingdoms. His mistresses produce twenty-five sons who are all barons. He rules by twelve barons supervising his armies and troop movement throughout the world. Twelve other barons supervise his thirty-four provinces with a judge and staff of clerks. Only the





Great Khan himself has greater authority than these councils. The Great Khan communicates by a system of messengers with 10,000 horse posts twenty-five or thirty miles apart and 200,000 horses. Other stations are three miles apart for messengers that run from one station to the next relay station. The system effectively notifies the Great Khan of events in his empire. For example, the Polo expedition is traveling for three and one-half years in snow, rain and flooded rivers. Forty days-journey from court the Great Khan knows they are arriving soon so he sends couriers to assure them safe passage.

When they arrive, the Great Khan graciously welcomes them and asks them all to stay. The Great Khan is kind to his subjects. He helps them survive and increase their wealth through concessions if their crops fail or they have other casualties. He is a reverent man who respects the feasts of Christians, Saracens, Jews and idolaters. He reveres their God and prophets including Jesus Christ, Mahomet and Moses. When the Polos leave twenty years later, Kubilai Khan gives them gifts, messages and a fleet with crews for fourteen ships and provisions for two years on their voyage back to the Levant.

## **Rustichello of Pisa**

Rustichello of Pisa is the name of a romance-writer Marco Polo meets in prison. They co-write these tales in 1298 to occupy their time while they are both in a Genoa prison. Writing exhibits similarities between Rustichello's tale of Tristan at King Arthur's Camelot and Marco Polo's tales at Kubilai Khan's court. Some other elements are from common tales like the Magi and Middle East legends. Rustichello's narrative makes "Travels" a best-seller in the translator's opinion

## **Ronald Latham**

Ronald Latham is the name of the translator who also writes the Introduction. Rustichello writes "The Travels" in French but versions exist in Latin, Venetian dialects, and Italian, denoted by Latham as F, L, V, R, and Z. Distinctions among them may be interesting to scholars of Marco Polo and cited in several references. Latham relies on Professor Benedetto's work that he claims is a "straightforward and readable version" but he makes no claim to satisfy the needs of a specialist.

## **Barka, Hulagu and Barak**

Barka, Hulagu and Barak are the names of the khans or rulers of three regions assigned to lesser family members. They rule European Russia, the Levant from eastern Persia to the Mediterranean and Central Asia's Turkestan. The imperial lineage is illustrated in chart form with these family members and others to depict the descendants and ancestors of the Mongol house with their dates of death and chronological order in which they rule the region on page 347.



## Niccolo and Maffeo Polo

Niccolo and Maffeo Polo are the names of Marco Polo's father and uncle who are his fellow travelers. Niccolo and Maffeo meet the Great Khan when they depart the Levant with an envoy of Hulaga. The Great Khan sends them to the Pope for 100 Christian teachers and oil from the sepulcher lamp in Jerusalem. Years later they return with Marco and oil but no teachers. The Great Khan likes Marco and sends them on many trips for the next twenty years. Messers Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco become homesick and escort Lady Kokachin to the Levant and eventually return themselves to Genoa their home.

## Tartar

Tartar is the name given to a tribe of Mongols known originally as "Tatars." The name is taken from the classic mythological name of hell called "Tartarus." The name Tartars is later extended to "the whole diabolical brood." Since Tartars are uncivilized with no organized priesthood, some Christian bishops consider them an ally, ripe for conversion and a free-trade opportunity for merchants.

## Saracens

Saracens is the name of the people that "worship the prophet Mahomet" and rule the Promised Land south of Lesser Armenia. They live throughout the areas that Marco Polo travels among other people there such as idolaters and Christians.

## Cathayans

Cathayans is the name that refers to the inhabitants of Cathay, which is a province in northern China. The Cathayans have different customs and practices than other races throughout the territories visited.

## Caliph of Baghdad

Caliph of Baghdad is the name of the Saracen ruler comparable to the Pope of Rome to the Christians. In 1258 the Caliph owns more treasure than anyone else and loves his treasure more than anything else. Khan Hulagu conquers the Caliph by tricking him with a small army. The Caliph is ambushed by the large army of Hulagu that waits in hiding. Hulagu imprisons the Caliph in a tower with all the treasure he loves but no food or drink. The Caliph dies in four days.



## Prester John

Prester John is the name of a ruler and legendary conqueror that does battle with Chinghiz Khan. Before Chinghiz Khan is elected in 1187, Ung Khan, meaning Great Lord, is Prester John's name throughout the empire. The Tartars grow in numbers and power so Prester John tries to divide them. They migrate and refuse to pay tribute to him. Prester John insults Chinghiz Khan when he asks to wed his daughter. Chinghiz Khan kills Prester John in battle and takes his land.

## Golden King

Golden King is the name of a king who builds the castle Caichu on the way from Peking to Bengal. The arrogant Golden King is attended by many young ladies that attend to his every need. Prester John sends seven men to capture him that he accepts into his service unknowingly. They take him to Prester John who makes him a herdsman for two years to make him humble before releasing him back to his land for his promise of loyalty.

## King Facfur

King Facfur is the name of the ruler of Manzi. He is second only to the Great Khan in wealth and power. However, he has no experience as a soldier and no military support in the province. When the Great Khan sends his baron Bayan Chincsan to conquer Manzi's capital city Kinsai, King Facfur escapes leaving his queen to defend herself and the city. Previously they receive a prediction that the empire is robbed by a man with one hundred eyes. The prediction makes sense when Bayan's last name Chincsan is discovered to mean "hundred-eyes." The queen sends a letter to the Great Khan asking him to spare the "City of Heaven."

## Kaidu

Kaidu is the name of a nephew of the Great Khan who wars with him about getting more land. Great Khan shows him mercy because of their relationship.

## Aiyaruk

Aiyaruk is the name of a daughter of Kaidu. She is a great warrior for her father and will not marry any man that cannot wrestle her to the ground. As a penalty she demands horses in lots of 100 for her stable of 10,000 from suitors she beats.



## Arghun

Arghun is the name of another nephew who battles with his uncle Ahmad Sultan to take back the land he inherits from his dead father Abaka. Arghun and Queen Bulagan marry. When the Queen dies she must be replaced by a wife of her royal lineage. Lady Kokachin qualifies and is escorted to Arghun who dies before she arrives. She is given to Arghun's son Ghazan who later becomes king.

## Kokachin

Kokachin is the name of a seventeen year old lady of the lineage of Queen Bulagan sent to marry Arghun when the Queen dies. She marries Ghazan, his son, because Arghun dies by the time she arrives. Kokachin's trip is escorted by the Polos and is the reason they depart Peking to return home after twenty years.



# Objects/Places

## China

China is the name that refers to northern and southern provinces of China called Cathay and Manzi. Both major provinces of China are ruled by the Great Khan as successor to Chinghiz. His palace is in Khan-balik which is Peking

## Russia

Russia is the name that refers to one of the three lesser regions parceled out by the Great Khan to minor family khans

## Levant

Levant is a name that refers to the region from eastern Persia to the Mediterranean which is also one of three lesser regions parceled out by the Great Khan to minor family khans

## Turkestan

Turkestan is the name that refers to one of Central Asia's three lesser regions parceled out by the Great Khan to minor family khans.

## Acre

Acre is the name of the easternmost outpost of Latin Christendom where Polos meet with Tedaldo Visconti who becomes Pope Gregory X in 1271. Acre is at the southern tip of the Mediterranean Sea, north of Jerusalem on the map page 348.

## Armenia, Lesser and Greater

Armenia, Lesser and Greater is the name of two sections south of Turkey in the map on page 350. Lesser Armenia is at the southeast shore of the Mediterranean Sea and Greater Armenia is farther southeast.

## Georgia

Georgia is the name of the country that borders Greater Armenia on the north. The country is bounded by sea and mountains on opposite sides.



## Baghdad

Baghdad is the name of the home of the Saracens' Caliph. Baghdad pierces most of the pearls imported from India, weaves richly decorated fabrics of cloth, gold and silk and is a center to study law of Mahomet, necromancy, natural science, astronomy and other subjects.

## Tabriz

Tabriz is the name of a large city in Iraq. The inhabitants practice trade and industry by weaving gold and silk cloth. The city is situated as a market for goods and precious gems from India, Baghdad, Mosul, Hormuz and other places

## Persia

Persia is the name that refers to a large country that has eight kingdoms. Some of the names are Kasvin, Kurdistan, Isfahan and Shiraz. The kingdoms have many steeds and asses they export to India to sell. The people are brutal, bloodthirsty and would bother merchants but for fear of the Tartar government of the Levant.

## Saveh, Hawah, Kashan

Saveh, Hawah, Kashan are the names of cities that are the hometowns of the Magi where fire from the Baby Jesus continues to burn. Each Magi keeps a fire in his home city where the people of the country are called fire-worshippers.

## Hormuz

Hormuz is the name of a city that is a great center of commerce. The people are black and spend days in their gardens where it is cooler. A regular hot wind occurs that is overpowering and causes the death of many exposed to it.

## Mulehet

Mulehet is the name of a country in the Mideast that means "heretic." Sheik of the Mountain lives there and makes the biggest and most beautiful garden that he imagines from the Prophet Mahomet's ideas about Paradise. The garden is full of young ladies who are there to sing, dance and service all needs of the young men the Sheik wants to become Assassins with the promise of returning to Paradise.



## Khan-balik

Khan-balik is the name that refers to the city in Cathay also called Peking where the Great Khan's palace is located. The palace is surrounded by four walls each a mile-long. The palace is the largest ever seen and is lavishly decorated with silver and gold and pictures. Astrologers of the Great Khan predict the rebellion of Khan-balik, so he builds Taidu next to it for his faithful followers. Several other palaces are built by the Great Khan like his own for his successor and others in the city of Taidu. Taidu is twenty-four miles around with four sides of equal length enclosed by twenty foot high, ten foot thick base sloping up to three

## Tibet

Tibet is the name of a province with many towns and villages ruined from the ravages of Mongu Khan. Huge canes grow that are used as fuel because they pop and bang when burned at night to keep wild animals away by the terrifying noise. Tibet is very large and has eight kingdoms bordering on many other provinces.

## Yang-chau

Yang-chau is the name of a city that Marco Polo governs for three years. This city is near the city of Siang-yang-fu that the Polos help the Great Khan conquer with a weapon that throws 300 pound stones on houses till residents surrender.

## Kinsai

Kinsai is the name of the capital city of Manzi that means "City of Heaven." The queen is abandoned by her husband the king while being threatened by Bayan. She writes a letter to the Great Khan asking him to not destroy the city. Kinsai is 100 miles around with wide spacious streets, watercourses, marketplaces and stone bridges with a forty mile long moat to defend against floodwater and attack. Ten men each guard 12,000 bridges to protect the city from evil and ring the time hourly. Much commerce occurs that is measured in pepper use. For example, Marco Polo determines 43 carts carrying 223 pounds of pepper each is used daily in the city. Twelve guilds of 12,000 workshops with ten to forty men working to supply the needs of the provinces. People of the city of Heaven are peace-loving, diligent, honest and kind to foreigners. Streets are paved and well-drained. King Facfur's palace keeps 1,000 damsels for his pleasure that become his undoing.

## Kiang

Kiang is the name that refers to a river that is the biggest river in the world. It is six to ten miles wide and the length of 100 days journey in Manzi. Kiang flows through sixteen



provinces with over 200 cities on its banks. Salt is the major commodity carried on the river.

## **Manzi**

Manzi is the name of the southern province of China that the Great Khan divides into nine kingdoms. Each governing king renders an annual accounting to the Khan's agent. There are 1,200 cities in the province. Each city has a garrison of at least 1,000 men and some have up to 30,000 men stationed.

## **Fu-chu**

Fu-chu is a kingdom with trade and industry whose natives eat human flesh of those who die of a wound, but not of a natural death. The natives are the most blood-thirsty in the world that kills men to drink their blood and eat their flesh.

## **Zaiton**

Zaiton is the name of a port city serving ships from India and merchants from Manzi. Zaiton is one of the two biggest ports in the world and pays a colossal revenue amount to the Great Khan.

## **China Sea**

China Sea is the name that refers to the part of the Ocean to the east and south of China. The China Sea contains 7,448 mostly uninhabited islands with spices, fragrant wood trees, white and black pepper and gold in abundance. The Great Khan has no authority over these islands and does not collect revenue from them

## **Java**

Java is the name that refers to the biggest island in the world which is 3,000 miles around. Java is rich and independent. The Great Khan cannot conquer it because the voyage there is too hazardous. Lesser Java is an island 2,000 miles around with eight kingdoms, ruling kings and their own languages.

## **Ceylon**

Ceylon refers to the name of an island that is 1,000 miles southwest and 2,400 miles around. Sendernam is the name of Ceylon's ruler who refuses to sell a prized ruby to the Great Khan at any price.





## Maabar

Maabar is the name of a province in Greater India that is sixty miles west from Ceylon by sail. This is the richest province in the world and is ruled by five kings who are all brothers of each other.

## Male and Female Island

Male and Female Island are names that refer to two islands thirty miles apart. Inhabitants of Male Island are Christians who follow Old Testament conjugal rules and their wives live on Female Island where they spend three months of the year together.

## Socotra

Socotra is the name of an island 500 miles south where they catch whales with pickled tunny fish that intoxicates the whale. The men jump from the boat to the whale's back to sink a harpoon attached to casks that stop the whale from diving deep but exhausts him by trying until he dies.

## Indian Ocean

Indian Ocean is the name that refers to the Ocean that is to the south of India. The Indian Ocean has 12,700 inhabited and uninhabited islands with many kingdoms. Greater India has thirteen major kingdoms and Lesser India has eight major kingdoms in addition to these many island kingdoms

## Aden

Aden is the name that refers to a great port and resort where ships from India transfer their goods. People of Aden are Saracens who hate Christians. The sultan of Aden gets paid port duties and is one of the richest in the world.

## Land of Darkness

Land of Darkness is territory farthest north where the people are trappers of pale complexion, tall and well-formed. This land borders Russia where the people are Christians of the Greek rite with many kings who pay tribute to no one.



# Themes

## SUPERSTITIONS

Throughout the empire that Marco Polo travels and explores on behalf of the Great Khan he finds superstitious habits, customs and beliefs practiced by the inhabitants. Many of the beliefs originate in apparent miraculous events that cannot be readily explained by any tenets of natural science that are evident in the thirteenth century. For example, the country of Georgia has a monastery named St. Leonard that claims to have a miraculous lake on its grounds. Fish appear in the lake at the beginning of Lent and remain present during all of Lent until Easter when they disappear. The residents claim this is a miracle, presumably because it coincides with the Church rules of abstinence from eating meat by substituting fish during Lent that become miraculously available.

Another incidence of natural objects given supernatural significance is the superstition that Persian soil makes Persian people brutal and bloodthirsty compared to the meek, peaceful people of Kerman in the adjoining kingdom. The king tests the soil by spreading seven ships full of soil under carpet in rooms where he begins to notice Kerman guests argue and hit each other. When the Magi's stone is thrown in a well fire descends from heaven that they keep burning and become known as fire-worshipers. These superstitious beliefs answer why fish, soil and fire appear to have some supernatural, or unexplained, cause whereas other superstitions require action to make something supernatural happen.

To please the idols and be assured of improved crops the husbands of Kamul entertain their guests by leaving town after telling their wives to do what the guest wants which the women are happy to do and causes the host no shame. To determine whether a voyage will be successful before departing, seamen lash a fool or drunk to a hurdle or framework they send up like a kite in a gale. If the wind takes the kite aloft a successful voyage is predicted. If the kite does not go aloft the ship stays in port that year. Even the Great Khan takes action to be assured of a safe voyage into the afterlife. On funeral procession to each Khan's burial on the mountain Altai, bystanders along the way are put to death so they can accompany the ruler in the next world. Other superstitions are developed by astrologers and other soothsayers to give guidance to rulers and other mere mortals.

Bystanders to the funeral celebration of an inhabitant of Tangut do not suffer the same permanent fate of the Khan's funeral procession. They must simply endure a dead body in their house until the day the astrologer appoints for the corpse to be cremated. Like a successful voyage, astrologers predict the details of successful conquest. Either by fate, chance, choice or astrological conspiracy the Great Khan sends Baron Bayan Chincsan to conquer Manzi. His last name means "hundred-eyes." The abandoned queen of Manzi surrenders when she recalls an astrological prediction that her empire is robbed by a man with one hundred eyes and learns Bayan's name. The Great Khan relies on



superstitious predictions of astrologers for battle success as well as going to great lengths to assure that nothing bad happens either. When astrologers predict rebellion of Khan-balik the Great Khan builds a second palatial city Taidu next to it for himself and his faithful followers.

## HEAVEN AND PARADISE

In a primitive society like countries, cities and villages of the thirteenth century eastern empire, afterlife is a tangible idea. Two characters use "heaven" and "paradise" for effect. The fated queen of Kinsai describes her besieged city as heaven to beg the Great Khan's mercy. A sheik calls his garden paradise to motivate young men to become assassins. Paradise is designed by the sheik following prophet Mahomet's description. The sheik's garden offers the dream of every adolescent young man replete with lovely young ladies to sing, dance and service his every desire. Heaven for the queen is a clean, peaceful, well-run city that satisfies her citizens every need. Other figures in the empire act like heaven and paradise is all the treasure in the world or doing without risk of sin.

The Sheik of the Mountain makes the biggest and most beautiful garden from Mahomet's ideas about Paradise. Young men are drugged before being brought there. From that foggy state they gradually wake up in paradise. Fair young ladies and damsels are there to sing, dance and satisfy the youth's fondest desire and fantasies imaginable. The young man believes he is in Paradise just like the Prophet describes. If the sheik has a mission he delivers a drugged youth to court where he tells about Paradise and how wonderful it is. If the Sheikh wants an unbeliever killed he promises the youth a reward of Paradise.

The Saracen Caliph of Baghdad accumulates more gold and treasure in 1258 than any other man in the world at that time. This treasure is his paradise that he hoards without reservation. When attacked by Hulagu the Caliph does not use any treasure to defend himself and his own army. The Caliph is ambushed by Hulagu and imprisoned in his own tower filled with the gold and treasure he loves so much, but no food or drink. The Caliph dies in four days, ironically starving as the richest man in the world.

Some inhabitants of the empire demonstrate belief in heaven and paradise by avoiding damnation and the ravages of sin while still pursuing their own goals like the Sheik and Caliph. For example, Tabriz residents also follow the prophet Mahomet's laws to harm non-believers, which they believe gives them the duty to take the goods of unbelievers without sin and perhaps with the reward of paradise. Some idolaters live under religious rules to lead a virtuous life by avoiding sexual activity. However, if they are tempted by a woman who makes the first advance, they may enjoy sex without sin.

The name Kinsai means "City of Heaven." The queen is abandoned by King Facfur who escapes to an island with some of the 1,000 damsels he keeps for his pleasure. She writes to the Great Khan describing "heaven" to beg him to save it. Kinsai is 100 miles around with wide and spacious streets, watercourses and marketplaces. There is a



marketplace every four miles to accommodate fifty thousand people plus many local market squares, all with abundant goods, game, fish, vegetables, fruits and wines. In other areas women of the town offer endearments and caresses to foreigners that make them want Heaven. City of Heaven people are peace-loving, diligent, honest and kind to foreigners. All streets are paved and well-drained.

## **MEN AND WOMEN IN THE EMPIRE**

One of the most revealing cultural themes about a society is demonstrated in the roles and customary behavior between men and women. Marco Polo's travels through the Mideast and Far East expose a variety of habits and attitudes men and women show towards each other. Those expressions reveal deeper cultural values about authority, wealth, pleasure, duty and afterlife. Cultural groups follow a larger dynastic structure of an emperor-based society. Succession to rule an empire is the driving force. Relatives are everywhere in the empire of the Great Kubilai Khan with royal lineage to the original Chinghiz Khan.

The mechanism to develop and maintain a ready flow of related rulers is the superior male propensity to inseminate female subjects at every opportunity. The Great Khan is the model who institutionalizes the custom in a biennial beauty contest. Trusted agents recruit a fresh stock of young ladies that pass a certain rating to replenish his harem of concubines. If they pass the first level they are taken to the palace where they must pass other tests. If they are approved they spend three days and nights in groups of six to serve the Khan's every desire. These fresh recruits are in addition to his four wives and the other concubines he has. King Facfur of Kinsai has a palace where 1,000 damsels attend to his pleasure and the Golden King outfits his castle Caichu exclusively with a great number of fair young ladies that care for his every need.

Since a place in royal lineage is available only to the lucky few, common males in the empire practice rules and roles to assure a ready flow of female pleasure. For example, a man can marry up to thirty wives as long as he can afford them. Even some idolaters that live under a religious rule leading virtuous lives can enjoy ladies if they avoid sexual activity until a woman makes the first advance, which they then may enjoy without sin. In Yachi men allow others to touch their wife if she consents and guests in Kamul are offered their wives. When guests visit the host tells his wife to do what the guest wants. The women are beautiful, happy to oblige and the host feels no shame. In other areas the men and women live separately. For example, Male Island has only men inhabitants and the women live on Female Island where the men visit them in March, April and May.

Young, ambitious youths can train as an assassin for the Sheik of the Mountain in his garden full of fair ladies and damsels to sing, dance and service their needs and desires. They are rewarded with ladies when they do the deed. Some young ladies enjoy similar opportunities as their male counterparts. These young girls are offered to travelers who pick the ones they want to take pleasure with. Male experience in that custom makes a virgin girl worthy and fit to marry. She proudly wears tokens around her neck that prove her male experiences and worthiness. When young women in Cathay



are asked for their hand in marriage, the father pledges his daughter is a virgin. The mothers and female relatives examine her. If she is not a virgin the father pays a penalty. Kaidu's daughter Aiyaruk makes her suitors wrestle her to become a bride or give her horses if he loses. When Chinghiz Khan asks for his daughter, Prester John insults him, which makes him lose his kingdom and life to Chinghiz Khan in revenge.

# Style

## Perspective

Marco Polo is a thirteenth century Venetian merchant commissioned by the Great Kubilai Khan to conduct trade missions throughout his empire and report back to him the results of his travel. The Great Khan's empire ranges from the Mideast and Levant east through all the lands and kingdom to the China Sea and islands in it, north to Russia and the polar region and south to the Indian Ocean and islands in it. Marco Polo spends twenty years traveling the empire. Rustichello is the narrator of Marco Polo's travels who proclaims this book will describe the "great wonders and curiosities" of many territories including Armenia, Persia, Tartars, India and other lands. Marco Polo describes these travels and tales to Rustichello that he claims to see with his own eyes. The narrator affirms Marco Polo is a wise, noble Venetian citizen who tells the truth. Marco wants a written record so others learn from it. Rustichello of Pisa records these tales in 1298 to occupy his time while they are both in a Genoa prison.

Rustichello is a romance writer and fellow prisoner of war with Marco Polo in a Genoa prison during this period while they co-write the "Travels." Rustichello writes in French and some similarities between the narrator's tale of Tristan at King Arthur's Camelot and Marco Polo's tales at Kubilai's court are curious. Some other tales are common tradition like the three Magi and other Middle East legends. Rustichello's experience in romance writing makes "Travels" a best-seller according to the translator Latham. Ronald Latham wrote, edited and translated many works as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries before his death in 1992. Latham bases the "Travels" on Professor Benedetto who provides a "straightforward and readable version" but makes no claim to satisfy needs of specialists.

## Tone

Rustichello uses the personal pronoun "I" in narrating tales told to him by his cellmate Marco Polo. The narrator confirms that Marco Polo tells the truth and sees these things he tells Rustichello with his own eyes. This is a subjective account of an Italian romance writer from Pisa who records these tales "to occupy his time" while they are in jail. The travels are told by Marco Polo thirty years after he begins them as a seventeen year-old youth. Initial audience for these experiences is his client the Great Khan to whom he reports. Rustichello is an omniscient first person narrator of Marco Polo's travel events. Rustichello of Pisa is also a romantic writer co-writing a thirteenth century "best-seller."

The narrator writes with extensive use of hyperbole by which Marco Polo comes across the biggest, richest, finest and best or greatest in the land or world. Provinces and cities are "a very great province" or "very splendid and powerful." Other standard phrases are used to depict inhabitants that "live by trade and industry" or that "worship Mahomet." Descriptions include "The people are idolaters who pay no tribute and live on rice, flesh,



fish, milk and fruit" or alternatively "The people are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan." Colorful tales like the Sheik's Paradise garden or a starving Caliph's gold-filled tower provide points of interest and balance to this thirteenth century travel guide through the Great Kubilai Khan's empire.

## Structure

"The Travels of Marco Polo" is a 380 page non-fiction, quasi-historical tale of travel and exploration throughout the thirteenth century territories of the Great Kubilai Khan of the Mongol Empire. Marco Polo describes his firsthand experiences between 1271 and 1292 to the narrator Rustichello in 1298 and 1299. The text is structured with nine numbered chapters plus an Introduction, Prologue, Epilogue and back matter with a Genealogical Table, Maps and Index. Chapters range in size from 13 to 50 pages. Chapter titles name the subject discussed and usually indicate a region of travel. Back matter is particularly useful to identify and maintain regional orientation. One genealogical page and four map pages including inset details illustrate relative ranks and locations of persons and states discussed in the text. Within chapters are untitled subsection breaks that describe further detail in a related or nearby section. Alternatively a section break may be a comment on one or another topic unrelated to the apparent subject. Generally within a few pages the topic, whether an area or person, is noted again after the section break commentary. Footnotes are used throughout to reference or clarify differences among versions.

Introduction and Prologue chapters are critical for the reader to develop an overall view and orientation to the subject matter and strange names used throughout. Chapter titles are clear and follow a logical order, i.e., "The Middle East" and "The Road to Cathay." The Genealogical Table, Maps and Index are essential reference to use while reading because they identify names, locations and travel routes. For example, the Genealogical Table is an organization chart format that keeps uncommon names listed in order. The Map with insets is difficult to read and find regions but is a reliable guide nonetheless. Use of "asides" in the text is distracting. For example, some sections are repetitive about areas like Maabar and Ceylon. There are some discrepancies with versions in text, maps and genealogy. For example, Kubilai is listed fifth khan on the chart and sixth in the text on page 113. This Benedetto translation of thirteenth century tales from a world traveler to a romantic writer in jail thirty years later suggests a little confusion can be expected.



## Quotes

"His travels are proof in themselves of enterprise, resource, and dogged endurance, and there can be no doubt that he travelled with his wits about him and his eyes open. Primarily they were the eyes of a practical traveler and a merchant, quick to notice the available sources of food and water along the route, the means of transport, and the obstacles interposed by nature or by man, and no less quick to observe the marketable products of every district, whether natural or manufactured, and the channels through which flowed the interlacing streams of export and import." Introduction, pg. 19

"The present translation is intended to provide a straightforward and readable version, related as closely as possible to modern knowledge but making no claim to meet the requirements of the specialist." Introduction, pg. 27

"When the Great Khan saw that Messer Niccolo and Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco were on the point of departure, he ordered all three to be brought into his presence and gave them two tablets proclaiming that they might travel freely throughout his dominions and that wherever they went they should receive provisions for themselves and their attendants." Prologue, pg. 43

"Among the people of these kingdoms there are many who are brutal and bloodthirsty. They are for ever slaughtering one another; and, were it not for fear of the government, that is, the Tartar lordship of the Levant, they would do great mischief to traveling merchants." Chapter 1, The Middle East, pg. 61.

"All that I have told you concerns the usages and customs of the genuine Tartars. But nowadays their stock has degenerated. Those who live in Cathay have adopted the manners and customs of the idolators and abandoned their own faith, while those who live in the Levant have adopted the manners of the Saracens." Chapter 2, The Road to Cathay, pg. 101

"Let me now tell you how on one occasion the Cathayans in the city actually did plan to revolt. It is an established practice, as will be explained below, that twelve men are appointed with full powers of disposal over territories and public offices at their own discretion. Among these was a Saracen called Ahmad, a man of great energy and ability, who surpassed all the rest in his authority and influence over the Great Khan." Chapter 3, Kublai Khan, pg. 131

"I have now told you how it comes about that the Great Khan must have, as indeed he has, more treasure than anyone else in the world. I may go further and affirm that all the world's great potentates put together have not such riches as belong to the Great Khan alone." Chapter 3, Kubilai Khan, pg. 149

"Now let me tell you something of the bounties that the Great Khan confers upon his subjects. For all his thoughts are directed towards helping the people who are subject to





him, so that they may live and labour and increase their wealth." Chapter 3, Kubilai Khan, pg. 155

"You must understand that Messer Marco himself was sent by the Great Khan as an emissary towards the west, on a journey of fully four months from Khan-balik. So we will tell you what he saw on the way, going and coming." Chapter 4, From Peking to Bengal, pg. 163

"Their commander was well content with these terms. He accepted their submission and the citizens surrendered. And the credit for this achievement was due to the good offices of Messer Niccolo and Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco. And it was no small achievement. For you must know that this city and the dependent province is one of the very best in the dominions of the Great Khan and makes a great contribution to his revenues. So much, then, for this episode." Chapter 5, From Peking to Amoy, pg. 208

"It chanced that Messer Marco found himself in this city of Kinsai when account was being rendered to the Great Khan's agents of its total revenue and population. Thus he learnt that it contained 160 'tomauns' of hearths, that is, of houses. I should explain that a 'tomaun' is 10,000. So you may take it that the city contains 1,600,000 houses, including a large number of palatial mansions. There is just one church of Nestorian Christians." Chapter 5, From Peking to Amoy, pg. 227

"The inhabitants of Ceylon are not fighting men, but paltry and mean-spirited creatures. If they have need of the services of soldiers, they hire them from abroad, especially Saracens. Since there is nothing else here worth mentioning, we shall now pass on to India." Chapter 6, From China to India, pg. 259

"Then, when the king dies and his body is burning on a huge pyre, all these barons who were his henchmen, as I have told you, fling themselves into the fire and burn with the king in order to bear him company in the next world." Chapter 7, India, pg. 263

"Here is yet another of their customs. The king and his barons and everyone else all sit on the earth. If you ask them why they do not seat themselves more honourably, they reply that to sit on the earth is honourable enough, because we were made from the earth and to the earth we must return, so that no one could honour the earth too highly and no one should slight it." Chapter 7, India, pg. 265

"Now you must know that in this country Christians are bitterly hated; the natives will not tolerate one of them, but look upon them as their mortal foes. Chapter 8, The Arabian Sea, pg. 305

"The Great Khan was bitterly angry with Kaidu for the continual damage he did to his people and his land. He thought to himself that, if he were not his nephew, he would never escape the ill death he had earned. But the ties of blood restrained him from robbing his kinsman of life or lands. And so Kaidu escaped death at the hands of the Great Khan." Chapter 9, Northern Regions and Tartar Wars, pg. 317



## Topics for Discussion

Identify, compare and contrast at least one characteristic that differentiates Christians, Jews, idolaters and Saracens from each other.

Explain and discuss the significance of the experience that changed Marco Polo from being called "the seventeen year-old Marco" to Messer Marco Polo.

Identify, list and comment on the four languages that Marco Polo learns while at the court of the Great Khan.

Identify, list and describe the characteristics of five peoples that inhabit Lesser and Greater Armenia.

Identify and describe the test and results that the sage recommends the king use to determine the difference between the people of Kerman and Persia.

Describe and discuss the story of the Sheik of the Mountain and its significance to modern day worshipers of Mahomet.

Describe and discuss the place of young women as wives and concubines in the social structure of the Great Khan and Cathay.

Identify, list and describe at least five practices in the treatment of men or women in Marco Polo's social structure that would not be considered politically correct in the modern American society.

Compare and contrast elements of a modern day beauty contest or "reality show" and the Great Khan's process of recruiting female attendants.

Describe, compare and contrast the empire of Kubilai Khan to those of his brothers and other relatives with respect to size, riches and extent.