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XANADU

Marco Polo and Europe's discovery of the East

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INTRODUCTION: OF TRUTH, TOLD AND HIDDEN

MARCO POLO IS PERHAPS THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS traveller, and his account of his journey from Venice to the court of Kublai Khan, ruler of the world's greatest land empire, is the most famous travel book ever written. His *Description of the World*, or the *Travels* as it is usually entitled in English editions, is famous for three good reasons: because it was the first to open Central Asia and China to the West; because of its scale; and because of its essential truth.

But there's another, hidden reason for its fame. It is a real-life fairy story. An ordinary boy is plucked from home by his father and taken to an unknown region, where he is presented to the richest and most powerful man in the world, who, marvellous to relate, becomes his mentor, and as a result he acquires wealth and stature and finally, by turning his story into a book, a sort of immortality.

Put like that, it sounds incredible. Indeed, since there were no other sources to corroborate what Marco said,

many at the time assumed he exaggerated or had made it all up. As his first biographer, Giovanni Battista (usually shortened to Giambattista) Ramusio, explains:

> Young men came daily to visit and converse with the ever polite and gracious Marco, and to ask him questions . . . all of which he answered with such kindly courtesy that every man felt himself in a manner his debtor. And as it happened that in the story, which he was constantly called upon to repeat . . . he would speak of his revenues as amounting to ten or fifteen millions of gold; and in like manner, when recounting other instances of wealth in those parts, would always make use of the term millions.
>
> So it came about that they nicknamed him 'Milione' – Marco 'the Millions' Polo – and it stuck[1]. Italians still call his book *Il Milione*, and the courtyard where his house once stood in the heart of Venice is the Corte del Milion. It's a fair comment. His memory was vague, and he made mistakes, and pretended, and exaggerated. But at heart there was honesty. Kublai Khan's China really was a land of millions.

Not that most Europeans would have known one way or another. In the thirteenth century they knew virtually nothing about the world beyond their homelands. Maps

[1] Some scholars believe this is a mistake, that 'Milione' was the nickname of another family line, which also included a Maffeo, Niccolò and Marco. The arguments are summarized in de Rachewiltz, *Marco Polo Went to China*.

represented beliefs more than information: the Last Judgement and the Garden of Eden were as prominent as land masses and oceans, and the ill-formed shapes of imagined distant lands were populated by monsters – men who fed on the smell of apples, and the Sciopod, whose single giant foot shaded him from the sun. The three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa appeared either as neat segments of a circle or unshaped blobs. No sign, anywhere, of China, let alone Mongolia.

So, for Europeans, Genghis Khan's Mongols sprang out of the dark. Initial hopes that the approaching hordes were Christians coming to help crusaders fight the Muslims were quickly, and cruelly, dashed with Genghis's devastating descent through Central Asia and into Persia between 1219 and 1223. Terrified Europeans seized on the name of one group of Mongol subjects, the Tatars, and called them Tartars, people who had escaped from Tartarus, one of the regions of hell, where the worst of souls – such as disobedient children, traitors, adulterers and faithless ministers – were penned inside a wall of brass, hidden by a cloud of darkness 'three times more gloomy than the obscurest night'.[2] In 1241, Russia, Poland and Hungary fell. European leaders dropped their customary rivalries to exchange pleas for help and offers of cooperation in resisting the onslaught – and then suddenly the Mongols were gone, drawn back home by the death of the khan, Genghis's son Ogedei.

[2] Lampriere's *Classical Dictionary*, 1797.

Now Europe knew they were there, and needed to know more about them. The news was not encouraging: two papal envoys to the Mongol capital, Karakorum, in 1246 and 1253–5, brought back uncompromising demands from the Mongol khans. Other envoys went to meet the Mongols in the Middle East, and as a result the West began to accumulate detailed, realistic information about the Mongols in Mongolia and in their new mini-empires in southern Russia and Persia.

Meanwhile, in the Far East, a new world was emerging – Kublai's empire – of which the West knew nothing. Information should have come with the exchange of goods, for Mongol rule had opened several trade routes between Asia and Europe. But traders were mainly interested in trade, not travel and social comment – and certainly not in making the long trip eastward themselves. There were plenty of middlemen from whom goods could be bought; so why waste months and risk life and limb going to fetch them yourself? The journey overland meant eight months of toiling across mountain and desert; and the sea route was even worse. It would be another two hundred years before anyone sailed round southern Africa, so the voyage to the East could take up to two years, in constant danger from pirates, storms, and the collapse of hulls bound by ropes (a hazard mentioned by Marco Polo). No one wrote up the experience.

So the first western visitors of note to Kublai's realm were the Polos: the brothers Niccolò and Maffeo, and young Marco. It was only after his death that Kublai

became famous in Europe, and that was almost all thanks to Marco and his book.

But both man and book are like will-o'-the-wisps – and the closer you look, the wispier they get. Marco tells us hardly anything about himself or his experiences en route. There are none of the agonies and fears felt by the two explorer-priests who went overland to Mongolia before him, who starved, froze and feared death many times. What did Marco feel? How did he escape this or that robber band, suffer and recover from such-and-such unnamed diseases? Was he on foot, on horse, or in a wagon? He doesn't say. He does not even seem to have a very clear purpose. This is many books in one: part geographical description, part guidebook, part merchants' handbook, without enough detail to serve well as any of them but with plenty of incidental detail on social behaviour and history and legends and military matters and places that Marco heard about but never saw. Some claim him as a closet missionary, in his dismissal of all non-Christians as idolaters and his admiration of Kublai for his nominally Christian virtues. But that doesn't work either, for he has nothing positive to say about Christianity and praises Kublai for his tolerance of *all* religions. And the book, ghost-written with a writer of romances long after the event, should really be called the *books*, plural, because the original vanished, leaving about 120 manuscripts in many different languages, none the same as any other.

So much is omitted. According to a note by a contemporary, a friar named Jacopo d'Acqui (i.e. Jacob,

from present-day Acqui Terme, in northern Italy), Marco was 'asked by friends on his death bed to correct the Book by removing everything that went beyond the facts. To which his reply was that he had not told one-half of what he had really seen.'

Of all the omissions, one in particular may have been of deeply personal significance. As we shall see, he gives more than the odd hint that he appreciates beautiful women. Yet at an age when he would normally have been married, he was made to endure years of travel, which turned into years in the service of the khan. Are we to assume that he remained celibate? Surely not. As anyone, man or woman, but especially man, travelling in Mongolia today knows, Mongolian women are very different from their Chinese counterparts. In looks, they seem to span all Asia, with hints of Russian, even European features. This range seems to include more than its fair share of startling beauty, which combines with equally startling self-assurance and lack of inhibition. And Marco saw women of all sorts. When he arrived at Kublai's court, he must have seemed like a gift from the Blue Heaven: 21, well travelled, exotic, well off, perhaps already speaking reasonable Mongol, and basking in imperial favour. How could the young women at court, chosen for their beauty by the hundred for the pleasure of a sovereign, fail to be fascinated? And it would have been quite in order for Kublai to approve a match. This, I suggest, was in part what he meant by not telling the half of it.

And what of the bits he did record? The book is so

riddled with inconsistencies and distortions that some scholars have suggested, as many of Marco's contemporaries did, that the whole thing was a fabrication, in the style of a medieval romance or collection of fictitious 'travellers' tales'. But there are few total fictions; the more we learn, the truer it gets. No one could possibly have made up the details that Marco reports, or gleaned them from the experience of others, because there were no others. As an expert in Chinese history, topography and natural history, Stephen Haw, points out, almost all of the places, plants and animals have now been identified (mostly by Haw himself, who has travelled extensively in China and works mainly with Chinese sources).

One example among many: Marco says that Kublai chose concubines from a group he names as 'Ungrat, who are very handsome'.

> Now every year an hundred of the most beautiful maidens of this tribe are sent to the Great Kaan, who commits them to the charge of certain elderly ladies dwelling in his palace. And these old ladies make the girls sleep with them, in order to ascertain if they have sweet breath, and are sound in all their limbs. Then such of them as are of approved beauty, and are sound in all respects, are appointed to attend the emperor by turns.

The clan concerned, traditional marriage partners of Genghis Khan's clan, is now transcribed as Qonggirad

(the Q being a *kh* or *ch* sound, as in Scottish 'loch'), or Ongirat. Given that Marco's book was written in Franco-Italian, 'Ungrat' is not a bad attempt at the Mongol. Only someone familiar with Mongol traditions and with the language could have known this. His portrait of Kublai Khan, therefore, is rightly seen as a prime historical source.

At every turn, it is worth looking for the truth lying behind Marco's obscurities, omissions and errors. It was for this reason that I followed his footsteps across north China, to the site of Kublai's first capital and then his summer base – Xanadu, as it is best known in English, after Coleridge's famous poem:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree.

Since that image came to Coleridge in a dream, many people are still surprised to learn that Xanadu is real. Shangdu ('Upper Capital'), as it is in Chinese, is indeed a wonderful place, but not in the way Coleridge dreamed. The site is a six-hour drive from Beijing, up on to the grassland plateau that was once part of Mongolia.[3] Lying in a huge space of gentle hills and far horizons, it was never a place of towers; its low buildings were set in grassy parkland, nested within three sets of walls. Today mounds of earth, some still faced with

[3] Check it out on Google Earth by going to 42.21.30 N and 116.10.45 E.

bricks, emerge like veins from grasslands that are ice-bound in winter and glorious with wild flowers in early summer. There is a small river, but none of the measureless caverns, forests, romantic chasms, torrents or caves of ice mentioned by Coleridge. That opium-tinged vision owes more to the landscape of north Somerset, where Coleridge was staying, than north China.

So forget Coleridge: the reality has quite enough of beauty and truth to repay many visits. My consultant, Wei Jian, Professor of Archaeology at Beijing's Renmin University, worked there for fifteen years. Once, in Mao's China, visits were discouraged, partly because of official xenophobia, partly because Kublai's Mongol dynasty, the Yuan, was a foreign one, and not in favour. Now everything has changed. The Yuan are increasingly seen as a vital part of Chinese history, and China is wide open. Anyone now can go to Xanadu and see the base of the palace where Marco, a callow 21-year-old from Venice, with no assets but his curiosity and charm, first met Kublai, 61, emperor of China, Mongolia, Tibet and the Western Regions, with the rest of the world (as he believed) about to fall into his embrace.

1

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

ONCE UPON A TIME, I WORKED WITH THE GREAT HISTORIAN A. J. P. Taylor. Part of his skill lay in selecting the telling details that explained events and brought them alive. He also liked quirky footnotes. I was surprised by one stating that a certain king – Edward VII or VIII, I think – liked to have his trousers creased horizontally, naval fashion, rather than vertically. When I asked Taylor why he had included this odd and inconsequential detail, he said, 'You never know.' I was young, he was eminent, I dared not ask him what on earth he meant; but it made me wonder at the role of chance in history. What if Cleopatra's nose had been a little smaller, or if the shrapnel that wounded Hitler on the Somme in 1916 had struck him in the head and not the thigh? The stuff of history is made by powerful forces and astonishing characters, but also by pure luck, without which no one

would ever have heard of Marco Polo, and countless writers would be short of a subject.

In 1253 two ambitious young Venetians, Niccolò Polo and his brother Maffeo, set off to make their fortunes.[1] Niccolò left his wife pregnant with Marco, her first and only child. Marco, whose book is the only record of these events, does not even give us her name – an omission typical of a narrator interested in travel, but not in personal details. We must be prepared to tolerate such gaps, or fill them in ourselves. So let us imagine the young Signora Polo, in the summer of 1253, still unaware of her condition, consoling herself with her mansion (on the corner of two small canals, two minutes' walk from the Rialto Bridge), her servants and Niccolò's reassurance that he would be away only a few years and would surely return with riches enough to repay the family's investment many times over.

The Polo brothers' idea was to base themselves in Constantinople, seat of Catholic Rome's rival sect, eastern Orthodoxy, and for a thousand years capital of what had been the eastern section of the Roman empire, now known as Byzantium. Their wealth was not in golden ducats, but in 'merchants' wares', which they proposed to trade for jewels. Perhaps, the following year, a letter arrived from the family in Venice telling of

[1] Some editions say 1252. There is no telling which is correct. Marco was notoriously inexact, which has led to endless controversies among scholars as they struggle to match events in the book to known historical events. The date that makes most sense is 1253.

Marco's birth. It's possible, because they had with them Venetian servants who could have acted as messengers. But the news, if it came, must have been good: mother and child doing well, nothing to draw Niccolò home. He focused on business, to the exclusion of domestic matters.

Why Constantinople? Because Venice, once a village in a bog, was now a place of canals and palaces and 150,000 people, with an empire, and Constantinople was virtually a Venetian colony. Fifty years previously, Venice's doge, the fanatical Enrico Dandolo – astonishingly energetic despite being in his eighties and blind – had led his city-state into the Fourth Crusade, and into an adventure of duplicity and pillage directed almost exclusively against his own allies and fellow Christians. For Rome, the aim was inspirational: to create a Christian version of the Roman empire, first by seizing Constantinople, thus unifying divided Christendom, and then – of course – by retaking the so-called Holy Land from its Muslim rulers. Venice would supply a navy – at a price. But Dandolo had a secret agenda of his own: to cut the ground from under rival city-states, in particular Genoa and Pisa, and extend Venice's own reach in the eastern Mediterranean – all funded by loot from Christendom's richest city. So much for Christian unity. On 17 July 1204 the old, blind Dandolo somehow led the assault, leaping from his beached galley to plant the banner of St Mark on the sand. The city fell, the emperor fled and, after a nine-month interregnum, hell broke loose. In the words of Venice's eminent

historian John Julius Norwich: 'Never in history had so much beauty, so much superb craftsmanship, been wantonly destroyed in so short a space of time.' French and Flemings broke into the cathedral of St Sophia and used horses to carry off bits of the altar, throne, pulpit and doors. Venetians, more discerning, sent home works of art by the hundred. Among them were four great bronze horses which Constantine, the city's founder, had placed on the starting gate of the Hippodrome almost nine hundred years before; for centuries they would stand on the loggia above the main door of St Mark's Cathedral as a symbol of Venetian power (those you see today are replicas; the real ones are in a museum inside). From the spoils, Dandolo repaid himself the 50,000 silver marks still outstanding for supplying the navy in the first place. He also won for Venice three-eighths of the whole of Byzantium and the same fraction of Constantinople, the right to trade in imperial dominions, and the total exclusion in the Mediterranean of Venice's great rivals, Genoa and Pisa. This was an empire within an empire – ports and islands by the dozen down the Adriatic coast and around Greece, all of Crete, and access at last to the Black Sea and its northern peninsula, Crimea, the gateway to the great trans-Russian rivers of the Don and Volga.

Crimea: that was where the two Polo brothers turned their gaze next. Six years of profitable trade in Constantinople had turned their wares into jewels, which they now planned to use to purchase trade goods in the Venetian base across the Black Sea, where they

would have contact with another empire that had apparently sprung from nowhere, out of the unknown depths of Central Asia. This imperium, and the explosion of mounted warriors on which it was based, had nothing to do with luck, for it had been created by one of the most astonishing and influential characters of all time: Genghis Khan. For the previous 50 years, ever since Genghis's rise to power in 1206, the peoples around the edge of his expanding empire – Chinese, Muslims, Indians, Europeans – had watched and suffered aghast. It was as if, in the late nineteenth century, Geronimo at the head of his Apaches had united the many Indian tribes, seized Washington, made an empire of all North America and claimed the world. A Mongol in the heart of Beijing, which fell in 1215, or at the gates of Vienna (1241) was as unlikely as an Apache in the White House in 1880.

By 1260 Genghis had been in his secret grave for over 30 years, but his heirs ruled from China to southern Russia, and were still intent on expansion, in accordance, as they believed, with the will of Heaven. Four grandsons ruled their own mini-empires, in Russia, Persia, Central Asia and north China, though the boundaries were vague and other grandsons were trying to stake out their own estates in shadowy border lands. It is one of history's more remarkable facts that in the second half of the thirteenth century a traveller could ride from the mouth of the Danube to the Yellow River on Mongol territory, a distance of 6,000 kilometres, and with the right connections pass from camp

to camp all the way, with the certainty that every host would owe allegiance to the golden clan of Genghis, by direct descent or appointment. It was not an easy journey, across oceanic steppes and deserts and through mountain passes with thin air and icy winds, but it was said that a virgin carrying gold would be helped on her way in safety, if she had imperial blessing.

Crimea, to which the Polos now turned, had been taken by the Mongols in 1238. Ever practical, Genghis's successors had seen the advantages of preserving the two trading bases, Soldaia (today's Sudak) and Caffa (Feodosiya), dominated by Venetians since the disgraceful sack of Constantinople in 1204, and left the Venetians to get on with trading, as long as they paid their dues to their Mongol overlords. Here, the brothers planned to exchange their jewels for raw produce much in demand further west – wheat, wax, salted fish, Baltic amber, Siberian furs, slaves. But it was not as easy as they hoped. Many other merchants were in the same line of business; and the Genoese, though much reduced, still competed for trade. Practice was sharp, competition cut-throat, brawling frequent. Seeking some easier way to turn a profit, the Polo brothers looked east, 1,000 kilometres away across the gently rolling grasslands of southern Russia, to the new Mongol capital of Sarai.

After a brief stay in Soldaia, they set off for Sarai with all the confidence of youth, travelling in style and safety, with their Venetian servants to guard their store of jewels, and unaware of the maelstrom of trouble ahead.

Sarai, a steppe city of tents and wagons and horses, was on a tributary of the lower Volga, 50 kilometres from where the great river breaks up into the delta that feeds into the Caspian. Old Sarai, as it is known, was where Genghis's grandson Berke ruled his inheritance, which stretched from north of the Black Sea across present-day Kazakhstan – an area about the size of the USA, almost 10 million square kilometres. Later the Mongol rulers here would be known as the Golden Horde – 'golden' because Genghis's 'golden clan' hung gold on their royal 'palace-tents', called in Mongolian the *orda* (from which English speakers get 'horde', meaning an unruly mass of marauders, as in 'the Mongol hordes'). The Horde would dominate Russia for 200 years, a time that Russians still call 'The Tartar Yoke'. But at the time, Berke's future was not certain. Having turned Muslim, the better to manage the local population, he had fallen out with his cousin Hulegu, conqueror of present-day Iraq, because in 1258 Hulegu had devastated Baghdad and executed the caliph, supreme head of Islam. Civil war was looming, even as the Polo brothers arrived in Sarai, hoping to start up business with a powerful monarch who had links across all Eurasia.

It worked. In a deal of which we have no details, they were welcomed, and a year later the jewels had been turned into goods that doubled their value. It was time to return, via Constantinople. Back home in Venice, Marco would have been seven.

At this moment chance intervened, twice.

First, the Greeks and Genoese together retook Constantinople from the Venetians, killing some, mutilating others, and barring the Greek islands and the Bosphorus to all Venetians. Unable to use the sea route back to Venice, the Polos were stranded. There was another way: overland, through the Caucasus and western Persia. But just when the first door closed, so did the second one. Berke used his new Muslim faith as an excuse to turn his army loose on his non-Muslim cousin. For the Venetians in Sarai, there was only one escape route left: an even longer way round, eastward, through the heart of Central Asia.

So in the summer of 1262, well able to afford a caravan of horses, camels and wagons, off they went across steppe and desert for two months and another 1,000 kilometres, until at last they reached Bukhara, the great entrepôt on what would later be called the Silk Road. From here they planned to swing south and finally west, skirting Afghanistan, travelling through Persia and Syria, until, perhaps, with luck, they would reach the Mediterranean. It would have been a stupendous, 2,500-kilometre journey, and might well have been the end of them. As it happened, war between Mongol cousins prevented them going anywhere, and they were trapped in Bukhara for the next three years.

Doing what exactly? We have no idea. For sure they would have become familiar with its recent history – a Muslim boom, followed by a Mongol bust, and now another boom thanks to Muslims and Mongols together. Four decades earlier, this city of 300,000

people had had many glories, notable among them a royal library of 45,000 volumes and the 50-metre Kalyan Minaret, built on earthquake-proof foundations in the shape of an inverted pyramid. Its sages and scholars made it 'the dome of Islam in the east'. Then the Mongols had come, with catapults and flaming naphtha bombs. The city had experienced many assaults – by armies, fire and the restless earth – and many reconstructions, and it survived again. The Kalyan Minaret stood firm, as it does today. Under a surprisingly humane governor, Bukhara recovered – 'nay,' wrote the Persian historian Juvaini, in his flowery style, 'it reached its highest pitch and . . . today no town in the countries of Islam will bear comparison with Bukhara in the thronging of its creatures, the multitude of moveable and immoveable wealth, the concourse of savants, and the establishment of pious endowments.' The canals bringing water from the Oxus (today's Amudarya), the restored palaces, the bazaars, the eleven gates, the stone-paved streets – all these the Polo brothers would have known. After three years, making the most of the city's revived fortunes, they had turned yet another profit.

Now what? The quarrels between Genghis's heirs showed no signs of ending. Travel in any direction seemed risky. At this point, 1265, luck once again directed them.

Five years before, Kublai, another of Genghis's grandsons, had established himself as Khagan – khan of khans – in his capital, Xanadu. But his position too was

the demands of Nestorians, Buddhists and Daoists.

So Kublai charged his visitors with two requests for the Pope: first, 100 priests, educated men well able to argue the truth of their religion and 'rebuke the Idolaters'. Then – so Ramusio's edition of the book claims – he, Kublai, and his followers would all convert to Christianity, 'and their followers shall do the like, and thus in the end there will be more Christians here than exist in your part of the world'. (What a crazy, impractical idea. But from a Christian perspective: what a noble challenge! What a world-changing prospect!) Second, Kublai asked for some holy oil from the sepulchre of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Why? Perhaps to confer the power to quell unruly subjects. A contingent of 100 priests coming all the way from Europe bringing their most powerful and revered potion would be no end of a boost to his reputation.

The two brothers, having been blown eastward by chance, headed for home overland with promises to fulfil. With them was a Mongol guardian, who fell ill and let them continue without him – not that it mattered, because they had an official safe-conduct pass made of gold allowing them to use the post-roads and horses which carried people and messages across the empire.[2] Nevertheless, according to Marco, it took them

[2] The passport was known as a *paiza*, or *páizi* (牌子) as it is today: a tablet (of authority), nowadays also a trademark. In a system inherited from the preceding Jin dynasty, there were seven ranks of *paizi*, which could be issued by high officials, army commanders and members of the royal family. Recipients could transfer them at will, so the system bred huge resentment among civilians who had to fulfil the requests.

three years to get to the Mediterranean, which he says was because of bad weather. More delay occurred in Acre, the crusader stronghold that is now Akko in northern Israel, where the travellers discovered that the pope had died and, the church being engaged in a long wrangle over the succession, a new one had not been appointed, leaving no one to receive Kublai's requests. The papal ambassador in Acre, an eminent churchman named Teobaldo Visconti, at once saw the significance of the brothers' mission and persuaded them to wait, just in case the cardinals in Italy could come to a conclusion. After a few weeks they gave up, and in 1269, after an absence of sixteen years, they arrived back in Venice.

What a homecoming it must have been, though Marco records no meetings, celebrations, questions or recriminations, only this: Niccolò's wife, Marco's unnamed mother, was dead. When did that happen? The previous year, or years back, soon after he was born? At a guess, her death came some time after her husband fell off the edge of the known world in 1262, when Marco was eight.[3] Marco, we must suppose, had been seen through his teenage years as a virtual orphan by tutors and relatives. They must have done a good

[3] That Niccolò left when his wife was a month or two pregnant is mentioned only in some versions of the text. But it seems a fair comment, given that his father was away for 16 years and Marco was 15 on his return. This does not fit with an insubstantial claim made across the Adriatic that Marco was actually born on the Dalmatian island of Korčula, which holds an annual festival in Marco's honour.

job, because two years later, in the summer of 1271, when the two brothers decided to set off again for Xanadu, via Jerusalem to pick up the oil, they had Marco, an unworldly 17-year-old, in tow.

2

ACROSS THE HEART OF ASIA

MARCO WAS NOW THE JUNIOR MEMBER OF A HIGH-LEVEL mission. With their *paizi* in hand, his father and uncle were assured of a safe run across Asia. But they also had support from Teobaldo Visconti in Acre, and a connection through him to the new pope, once elected. So Acre was their first stop. After a quick trip to Jerusalem for some holy oil, the three Polos set off for China. This was around the beginning of September 1271. That's certain, because on 1 September, by an astonishing stroke of luck, Visconti himself was appointed pope under the name Gregory X. No sooner had a messenger arrived in Acre with the news than another galloped off to bring the Polos back. The new pope, anticipating all Asia being opened to Christianity, quickly wrote them a letter to Kublai, and also gave them two priests – rather fewer than the 100 requested;

anyway, as it happened, both of them backed out not long into the journey when they heard of vague dangers ahead. Still, the Polos now had credentials from both Asia's ruler and Europe's spiritual head, and so armed, they finally left for Xanadu.

Or perhaps not. Marco says the journey took three and a half years, an average of under 5 kilometres a day. That can't be so. His father and uncle had spent several years en route first time around, but most of that was in Sarai and Bukhara; the actual travelling time was around a year, which seems about right, considering that relay stations were typically about 40 kilometres apart. The two other travellers who had already gone from Russia to Mongolia did so in six or seven months.[1] What took the Polos so long? Marco says 'bad weather and severe cold', which sounds pretty lame, considering they could have covered the distance easily in a year if, as he says in virtually the same breath, they travelled 'by winter and by summer', i.e. non-stop.

Probably they were delayed right at the start by war and rumours of war. The Mongols were now fighting each other with disturbing regularity. And the Egyptian sultan, Baybars, spent his reign fighting both the crusaders and the Mongols, rushing up and down the coast of Palestine to do so. In a note on Baybars, Marco's great Victorian editor and commentator Henry Yule remarks, 'More than once he played tennis at

[1] Giovanni di Pian di Carpini in 1245–6 and William of Rubrouck in 1253.

warriors raided into India, capturing huge numbers of prisoners; most of the men were sold as slaves, many of the women kept as wives. From them sprang a new generation of frontier troops known as Qaragunas,[2] from the old Mongol for 'dark' or 'black'. They evolved into freebooters, medieval equivalents of Cossacks, feared by the populace for their extreme violence and for that same reason occasionally employed by Mongol leaders, when they could control them. In Marco's time three contingents, nominally of 10,000 each, were loose in Persia, each swinging unpredictably between loyalty, rebellion and pillage. Top dog among the Qaraguna warlords had indeed been a certain Negüder, whose name, after his death in about 1262, remained attached to his group. The Negüderis and other Qaragunas remained a potent force for another century, their descendants forming today's Hazara and Mogholi minorities in Afghanistan. Those who know Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, both the book and the film, will recall the narrator's best friend, the much-abused Hassan, who is insulted by everyone for his Mongoloid features: 'People called the Hazaras *mice-eating*, *flat-nosed*, *load-carrying donkeys*.' It may frustrate modern readers that Marco evades, exaggerates and fails to detail a hair's-breadth escape, but there's no doubting that parts of his book tell truths that echo down the corridors of time. The problem is sorting out the true bits.

[2] Later, the *g* weakened to a sort of glottal stop, forming Qara'una, thus Marco's Carau(o)na.

From western Iran, Marco and his party wove over mountains and across searing hot plains to Hormuz. This being high summer (1272), the heat was appalling, especially when a vile desert wind blew. To escape it, he says, people would immerse themselves in water. Those exposed to it risked death, and Marco records hearing of corpses being cooked as if in an oven, so that when others came to retrieve them 'the arms parted from the trunks'. Others have noted the effects of the *simoom* (from the Arabic for 'to poison'), a sand-filled wind that takes temperature up to the mid-fifties Celsius, and causes death by heat-stroke. It sounds so grim you wonder why anyone lived in Hormuz. Yet it was a major port, one of a dozen around the coasts of the Middle East and north-east Africa, where spices, precious stones, silk and gold arrived from India and from which perfumes, ivory, iron, glass and pepper (among many other items) were exported. The people ate a good diet which included dates, tuna and onions. The fact is that Marco liked to focus on extremes. Hormuz/Bandar-e Abbas is not *that* appalling: the summer temperature averages a mere 37°C, with only fourteen rainy days a year, which is why today it is still a major port, with some 350,000 people, despite the occasional *simoom*.

What were the Polos doing there? Presumably hoping for a boat to India, until something put them off. The sight of the open sea, perhaps. Or the ships: 'wretched affairs . . . for they have no iron fastenings, and are only stitched together with twine made from the husk of the

Indian nut,' by which he means coconuts. They were sealed with whale-oil. Naturally, for the little Arab ships, the 1,500-kilometre voyage to Gujarat was a 'perilous business . . . and many of them are lost'. Or perhaps it was fears for their health that stopped them. It is possible they were there for some time, perhaps over winter (1272–3), because Marco refers to sowing grain in November and harvesting in March. He becomes very concerned about the state of his stomach. Hormuz's date-and-spice wine caused 'repeated and violent purging' until you got used to it. Loose bowels, seasickness, storms and a ship held together with bits of string: there's enough there, I think, to make them change their minds.

Returning to Kerman – 350 kilometres, another month – and heading north then east, Marco picked up the story of the Assassins, the extremist Muslim sect whose policy of murdering enemies, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, had included a plan to assassinate the Mongol emperor Mönkhe. It was this plot, or rumours of it, that drew in the vast army which had wiped out first the Assassins, then Baghdad and finally a good deal of Islam itself.

The Assassins, a sect of Nizari Shias, were based in Alamut, a fortress high in the Elburz mountains south of the Caspian. Tradition claims that its name derives from a local phrase meaning 'eagle's nest', because it stood on a peak towering above a single approach path, which itself could be entered only from either end of a narrow ravine. But Alamut, the ruins of which are still

there, was 700 kilometres off Marco's route, and reality was already drifting into legend. In Marco's version, Alamut's stark valley has become a beautiful garden, filled with gilded pavilions and painted palaces, where honey, wine, milk and water flow in conduits. Damsels play and sing. Its imam (the Old Man of the Mountain, as Marco calls him; in fact his name was Hasan) keeps a group of lusty teenagers, who are drugged (with opium, in one version), carried into the garden, and when they awake pampered in every way. All is play, love and pleasure. 'The damsels were around each one always, and all the day were singing and playing and making all the caresses and dalliance which they could imagine . . . so that these youths had all that they wished.' Another draught of the sleep-inducing drug, and the young men find themselves back in the real world, bereft, and willing to do anything to regain the joys of Paradise. Marco uses the term assassins – 'Ashishin', hashish-users – helping to spread the belief already widespread among the crusaders that the Assassins used the drug to prepare themselves for murder. But hashish was widely used, not a Nizari secret. No Nizari source mentions it. More likely, the term was an insult applied to this despised and feared group, simply as a put-down for behaviour that struck outsiders as both appalling and irrational.

Two weeks out of Kerman, approaching the Afghan border, the travellers found themselves in a gentle region of well-stocked towns and villages. Marco's spirits rose. The inhabitants, he noted, were very handsome,

From north-eastern Afghanistan a 200-kilometre corridor reaches up between the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush, the Pamir and the Karakorum ranges. North lies Tajikistan, which used to be part of the Soviet Union, and before that Russia. South lies wildest Pakistan. The corridor, which follows the Wakhan river, is like a knife hacking through a tangle of mountains, habitats, and rival nations towards China. Only 16 kilometres across at its narrowest, this strange peninsula of Afghan territory came into existence as the result of the Great Game of diplomacy, espionage and proxy wars between the Russian and British empires in the late-nineteenth-century heyday of imperialism. At the time, in the 1890s, Britain had the upper hand in Afghanistan, while Russia wanted most of the rest of Central Asia. A deal was done, along a frontier defined by the upper reaches of the famous river known to the ancient world as the Oxus and today as the Amudarya. Russia got the north, which meant two of today's 'stans' (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan). The British got the south, most of it, or rather their protégés the Afghans did. That left an unclaimed remainder, the thin no man's land through which ran the Wakhan. It should really have been taken into British-ruled India. But that would mean a frontier shared with Russia, and the British had visions of Cossacks charging through the only accessible pass, the Chitral, so the idea of a British–Russian border was out. The solution was to give it to the Afghans, or rather force it down their unwilling throats. This also made geopolitical sense, because access up the Wakhan

corridor had always been from Afghanistan, along a trail that had been in existence long before Marco came this way.

This is, and always was, one of the world's toughest and most awe-inspiring places, where time moves slowly, outsiders are rare, and reports rarer still. Indeed, Marco seems to have been the first westerner to describe it, and also the last until the nineteenth century. Even then, visitors were few and far between. They still are. 'To the best of our knowledge,' wrote two American explorer–writers, John Mock and Kimberley O'Neil, in 2002, 'no Westerner has visited the upper Wakhan and the source of the Oxus since H. W. Tilman in 1947' – until they went themselves, several times in 2004 and 2007.[3] Here, a 6,000-metre peak is hardly worth a mention. Glaciers grind down from icy summits, and melt-waters carve steep valleys where snow leopards and wolves hunt ibex. Marco's account matches the experiences of other travellers before and since, for in 1,500 years little changed. Persians call the region Bam-i-dunya, the Roof of the World. Chinese travellers who came this way in the sixth century said the place was midway between Heaven and Earth, while Marco remarks, ''Tis said to be the highest place in the world.' It can get so cold, people say, that once a caravan of camels, mules, horses and their riders died still standing, frozen into ice-statues. This is not one of Marco's stories; I heard it in China. We should not take

[3] www.mockandoneil.com.

These were so common, and such easy prey for both hunters and wolves, that locals piled their immense horns so that they stuck out of the snow to mark the way. He describes the high plain, with its superb summer grazing, though he fails to mention the low stands of willow, birch and buckthorn, with its orange-yellow berries. He records the great lake described by Xuanzang and the river running from it (the Pamir, which becomes the Amudarya). At that altitude, he noted, fire was less effective, not as he thought because of the cold but because of the lack of oxygen, which he did not notice because his slow climb allowed him to adapt. In fact, he quite liked these austere heights, because 'the air in those regions is so pure and residence there so healthful' that the sick climb up to be healed.

At this point he slips in a startling piece of information: that he knew from personal experience how good the Pamirs were for health, because he had become well again himself, having been sick 'for about a year'. Does he mean that the whole party was delayed for a year? It's impossible to tell, because the Polos have fallen out of time. At a guess this is the summer of 1274, because travelling through the high Pamirs in winter would be courting death. More likely he had been suffering some sort of chronic complaint, like a permanently upset stomach, that was cured by the mountains' thin air and pure water.

The few inhabitants of this wilderness lived (as their successors still do) as herders in a score of scattered villages or in round felt tents; here Marco's party would

in the knot of mountains that Marco crossed its course was a mystery. The Great Game changed all that. In the 1880s, when Russia and Britain established their frontiers, it was thought that the Oxus – still known by its classical name – rose in Lake Sarikol.[5] In fact, it was further east, somewhere in the glaciers and snowfields dividing the Great from the Little Pamirs. These are not distinctions that need concern us now, but they were of great concern then. (The 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, still at that time being produced in London, devotes 6,000 words to the Oxus; now it has about 1,000, referring to the river as the Amudarya, with the Oxus as a mere cross-reference.) The source of the Oxus, like the source of the Nile, set imperial pulses racing, and for the same reason: the source fed the river, the river defined areas of political interest.

It was the future viceroy of India, George Nathaniel Curzon, who found the answer in 1894, just in time for Russia and Britain to sort out their borders.[6] He came over the top on horseback from what is now China:

> From the top of the Wakh-jir Pass the descent is rather steep and stony towards the Oxus valley, which is visible far down below, a blue line of shingle bed winding away between lofty ridges . . . Descending to the shingle bed, which varies from 100 to 350 yards in

[5] See Wood, *Journey to the Source of the River Oxus*.
[6] Curzon, 'The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus'.

width, the channel being divided into several branches of from 6 to 18 inches deep, I rode up it to the source. There the river issues from two ice-caverns in a rushing stream. The cavern on the right has a low overhanging roof, from which the water gushes tumultuously out. The cavern to the left was sufficiently high to admit of my looking into the interior, and within for some distance I could follow the river, which was blocked with great slabs of ice, while there was a ceaseless noise of grinding, crunching and falling in. Above the ice-caves is the precipitous front wall or broken snout of the glacier, from 60 to 80 feet in height, composed of moraine ice, covered with stones and black dust.

Is the cave still there, and still the river's source? On 3 August 2004 John Mock and Kimberley O'Neil set off to find out.

> From our campsite at the base of the Wakhjir Pass, we headed farther east-southeast up the valley towards the snowy glacier filling the valley's head. The rocky river-bank was dotted with more Marco Polo sheep horns, further evidence of the animal's abundance here and its unlucky fate from rockfall or hunting by hungry Kyrgyz during winter. Within an hour, we caught our first glimpse of a black cave in the glacier's mouth . . . Forty-five minutes farther we were at the cave (37°02′27.2″N, 74°29′28.8″E), a dark gaping hole at the glacier's terminus whence flowed icy waters, the source of the Oxus River. We made it! To the best of our knowledge,

no Westerner had been to the source of the Oxus since Curzon in 1894.

Marco had seen Lake Sarikol and the upper reaches of the Oxus, and could not have known the significance of either. Now, unaware of what else he might have discovered, he started the descent that would take him down into China's western regions, and to the point where I was able to cross his path.

wrote his contemporary and rival Sven Hedin, 'but Asia remained my bride.' Stein's too. He will be reappearing many times in the coming pages, haunting Marco, a ghost behind a ghost.

The way led past a small lake and gently downhill, following a stream that wove over aprons of rock and gravel washed from the snow-clad peaks on either side. This being high summer, for no traveller would attempt a winter crossing, patches of snow alternated with soil made boggy by melt-water. Scattered tussocks gave way to thick, coarse grass.

You may wonder if the route would have been the same in Marco's time. In detail, almost certainly not, for earthquakes constantly remould the surface features of these young mountains.[2] Lakes vanish, rivers change their courses, cliffs fall, small valleys reform. But large features – 6,000-metre mountains, the valleys that divide them, ridges many kilometres across – seldom change on historical timescales. There are no active volcanoes here to remake landscapes.

You may also wonder if he took this route at all, since he does not mention any landmark between the high Pamirs and Kashgar. True, there are other routes, but they are few, and harder, and with even less chance of finding food and shelter and spare animals. Why would his guides – for guides there must have been – have not taken the easiest route? I can imagine possible reasons – to avoid bandits, or an unreliable local chieftain, or a

[2] My thanks to Stephen Haw for pointing this out.