WAS MARCO POLO A GREAT EXPLORER OR A LIAR?

When Marco Polo returned to Venice after 24 years' absence in the East, few believed the tales he told of his travels. But over the years, they became generally accepted as a true record. Now, the controversy has resurfaced and many modern scholars are certain that Polo never visited China at all. What's the true story?

According to a story circulated by the Dominican friar Jacopo d'Acquic some years after Marco Polo's death in 1324, the famous Venetian merchant and traveler to China was asked on his deathbed to repudiate the "many great and strange things in his book, which are reckoned past all credence." His Il Milione ('Description of the World) is the most famous travel book ever written, yet even in Marco's own time there were people who doubted its authenticity.

Marco's alleged answer to the scoffers was that he had not told one half of what he had actually seen. That is precisely what has bothered some historians since—the things that are not in the book. Although it describes his apparent visit to China, there is no marveling at the Great Wall, no excitement at eating with chopsticks or drinking tea (which did not make it to Europe until the 17th century), no curiosity about the ritual binding of the feet of young girls.

Did Marco actually get to China and, if so, was his book a truthful account of his travels and his stay there? What sort of book was it? Was it a travel adventure, a merchant's handbook, or a guide for Christian missionaries? And was the story it told so groundbreaking, its impact on the age so powerful, as to justify its reputation as one of the great influences on European minds on the eve of the Age of Exploration?

Skepticism about Marco Polo has continued from the Middle Ages down to our own day. One of the reasons is that apart from the scant
biographical information given in his book, almost nothing else is known about him. From his book, we know he was born in 1254. His father was a Venetian merchant at a time when the commerce and trade of the maritime city states of Venice and Genoa was growing rapidly. The Venetian gold ducat, first minted in the 13th century, was on the way to becoming the standard European currency of the Middle Ages. And thanks to the Crusader conquest of Byzantium in the Crusade of 1204, Venice had gained possession of the port of Constantinople, at the crossroads between Europe and Asia.

By the mid-13th century many Venetian merchants had established themselves on the Black Sea, especially in the Crimean port of Soldaia. According to Marco’s book it was from Soldaia that his father Niccolò and uncle Maffeo set out in around 1260 to trade in jewels, traveling eastward along the Silk Route through Central Asia. Things there had changed. Over the previous half-century the Mongols had conquered almost the whole of Asia. The Polo brothers were the first westerners to meet the great Kublai Khan, the new Mongol ruler of China. In 1269 they returned to Europe as ambassadors, carrying letters from Kublai to the pope.
“Many great and strange things in his book, which are reckoned past all credence.”

MARCO POLO’S BIOGRAPHER, JACOPO D’ACQUI, 1470

Left: This manuscript illustration shows the vital Silk Route across Asia, linking Byzantium (modern Turkey) with China. It had been in operation for centuries before the Polos’ time. Among other things, the Chinese traded their silk for medicines, perfumes, precious stones, ivory, and slaves from the West. Eventually, increased banditry led to a switch to seaborne trade and the route’s consequent decline.

Two years later the brothers set out for China again, this time from Venice and accompanied by the young Marco, now aged 17. According to Marco’s account, the journey to Kublai’s court at his summer palace of Xanadu took three and a half years. The Polos spent the next 17 years in China, arriving back in Venice, after another three-year journey, in 1295. Imprisoned for a year or two in Genoa (for what offense remains unknown), Marco wrote his book with the help of a fellow inmate, a writer by the name of Rustichello da Pisa, who relied on Marco’s memory, and notes and documents brought back from the East. In other words, he was a kind of ghostwriter. The book was finished in 1298.

Some modern historians have cast doubt on the story of the imprisonment and the way the book was supposed to have been written.
But whatever the story of its composition, the book gives a glowing picture of Marco. He is welcomed into Kublai’s high counsels; he learns four languages (he does not say which); he is sent on important missions, one as far away as India. Yet, in all the official Chinese records of the time, no mention of these activities—or of his father and uncle—has ever been found.

Marco says that they delivered a letter from the pope and a phial of holy oil from the Lamp of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to the Great Khan. Of that, too, there is no record. The book says that Marco was the governor of the great city of Yangzhou, on the Yangtze River, for three years. But local lists of every office-holder do not include his name. And there is a more blatant untruth. Marco and the two elder Polos are said to have risen in the Great Khan’s estimation by overseeing the building of three siege-machines, capable of catapulting stones 300 pounds (336 kilograms) in weight, for an attack on the last outpost of the Sungs at San-fan-yu (Xiangyang). But that siege took place in 1273, a year before the Polos had reached China, and the construction of the machines is known to have been carried out by Muslim engineers.

But there is at least one mention of Marco in Chinese sources, in connection with the murder of a Saracen named Achmath. Renowned for his cruel tyranny, Achmath was beheaded with a sword by one Chenchu, or Wangchu. Marco tells the tale of this murder and his statement that “when all this happened Messer Marco was on the spot” is corroborated by a passage in Chinese annals. This reads, “The Emperor having returned from Chaghan-Nor to Shangru, desired Polo, Assessor of the Privy Council, to explain the reasons which had led Wangchu to commit this murder. Polo spoke with boldness of the crimes and oppressions of Achmath, which had rendered him an object of detestation throughout the Empire. The Emperor’s eyes were opened, and he praised the courage of Wangchu.”

For many of the more surprising omissions in Marco’s account, reasonable explanations can be put forward. By the late 13th century, for instance, much of the Great Wall of China had crumbled. Most of what
Below: Kublai Khan presents Marco’s father and uncle with the golden tablet that served as their passport through the Mongol Empire. The letter they apparently carried from the khan to the pope asked for scholars to be sent to China to teach him about Christianity.

is visible today was built in the 15th and 16th centuries. Accounts of travels to China in the century after Marco’s death in 1324 also fail to mention the Great Wall. In Marco’s time the custom of drinking tea had established itself in south China, but in central and north China, where Marco spent most of his time, the habit was not yet widespread. Silences in Il Milione may raise suspicions, but they do not carry sufficient weight to demonstrate that the book was a hoax or intended as a deliberate fraud. As for what are clearly falsehoods, it may simply be that Marco wished to exaggerate the status that he achieved in China. And those falsehoods, as one historian has recently argued, “are of the sort which only someone who knew what he was talking about could have told.”

Let us suppose that the book was a fraud written by someone, either Marco or another, who had never been to China. How then can the wealth of detail about China and the Mongol Empire—material which historical research has now shown to be accurate—be explained? Some believe that the information was gathered from conversations with traders in the western reaches of the Mongol Empire—the land north and east of the Black Sea known as Tartary or the Khanate of the Golden Horde—or from contacts in Persia. As historians have pointed out, forms of language and place-names derived from Persian abound in the book, where one might expect words from the Mongol language.

To that specific objection it may be countered that Persian was the lingua franca (international language) used across the whole region and at the court of Kublai Khan at that time. It is possible to imagine the Polos wandering about western or central Asia for more than two decades, talking to travelers, listening to bazaar gossip, and amassing a vast amount of learning about the geography and customs of places that they had never visited. But is such a version of events really
likely? Other modern historians have pointed out what an unusual thing this would have been for them to do, without any visits by any of them back to Venice (to receive the Christian sacraments, for example) and also without their having been seen or recognized in any of these places by other western merchants, of whom there were increasing numbers by this time.

Historical controversy also surrounds the gold tablet, or paiza, which Marco says the Great Khan, Kublai, gave to his father and uncle and which passed into his possession. The tablet, an oblong sheet of gold with rounded corners, of about 12 by 3 inches (305 millimeters by 76 millimeters) in size, was worn around the neck. It was shown by the Polos on their journey back to Venice and on their return travels to China to guarantee them safe passage through the various provinces of the Mongol Empire. Some have suggested that a minor khan somewhere in the Mongol provinces gave the elder Polos the tablet. Maffeo, of course, may have been lying, but he said that the tablet came from "the magnificent Khan of the Tartars." Other historians believe such a grand phrase can only refer to the Great Khan Kublai.

The wealth of detail in Marco’s book argues for its truthfulness. There is, for one thing, a long section containing descriptions of the physical characteristics of city after city in China—more than three dozen in total—and of the customs of their inhabitants. More tellingly, there is a section, though it is short and not very informative, on Japan (Marco calls it Zipangu) and on the Great Khan’s abortive invasion of the island. Japan was otherwise unknown in central and western Asia or Europe until the 16th century. In other words, to have heard of Japan, Marco would have to have made it to China.
Il Milione portrays China as a society that is structured with a degree of order and efficiency unknown in the West. The cities are laid out in square grids with mathematical precision. The Great Khan is benevolent with his people, providing them with food in times of famine and hardship. In return, the people hold him in awe and, within miles of approaching his winter palace in Khanbahl, fall silent as a mark of reverence. Rebellion is kept in check by armies stationed outside every city, armies whose personnel is changed every two years in order to stifle sedition in the ranks.

An elaborate postal system stretches out along the roads from the capital to the provinces, with large posting-houses. Each posting-house has 400 horses to carry the royal messengers, and over the empire as a whole there are 200,000 such horses. Paper currency, printed at the mint in Khanbahl, is used in the capital and in many other cities—"nor dares any person, at the peril of his life, refuse to accept it in payment." Then there is "a sort of black stone" that is dug out of the mountains, "where it runs in veins;" when lit, it "burns like charcoal and retains the fire much better than wood." Thanks to coal (Marco does not use the word), every man of rank or wealth could enjoy a warm bath two or three times a week.

The dominant impression left by Marco's account, which has almost nothing to say of the poverty of the Chinese peasantry, is of a land teeming with wealth far surpassing anything known in the West. The forecourt alone of the Great Khan's winter palace at Khanbahl, "the most extensive that has ever yet been known," is a square measuring 8 miles (13 km) along each side. For bodyguards, the emperor has 12,000 horsemen. For his birthday celebrations, he clothes 20,000 nobles and military officers in gold silk. They bring presents to him and according to the custom "furnish nine times nine of the article of which the present consists." So, if a province sends a present of horses, it sends 81. For his birthday the Great Khan receives no fewer than 100,000 horses.

Accompanying him on his hunting trip to the north, after wintering in Khanbahl, are leopards and lynxes to chase deer; lions larger than Babylonian lions to seize boars, oxen, deer, and other beasts; and eagles to catch wolves. There are also 10,000 falconers. This hunt, which lasts for the months of March, April, and May, "is unrivaled by any other

Above: An older, wiser, and bearded Marco Polo is depicted on this commemorative medallion. Fame was slow in coming for Marco—his Venetian contemporaries "stiffened him the "man of a million lies" when they read of his adventures.
amusement in the world.” Perhaps the Great Khan saw things a bit differently—he had four wives and hundreds of concubines.

Il Milione is not an adventure book, nor what is nowadays thought of as a travel book. It does not recount dangers and hazards overcome, nor record conversations with strangers along the way. Nor is it a handbook for merchants. Although it provided the first comprehensive catalog of spices and where they were to be found, it did not offer Venetian readers much insight into how to do business in the East. Its real points of focus are geography and Mongol culture.

Marco’s prose is humdrum. The long list of cities may be tedious. But his book gave medieval readers their first glimpse of a new world, a populous world filled with large cities, a world of great prosperity and bustling commerce—a world, in short, far richer than anything in Europe, and richer than anything previously imagined by Europeans. Christopher Columbus himself read it carefully, making special note of the rare and precious gemstones mentioned in it. Whether Marco Polo did or did not reach China, it was his book that played a major part in inspiring the urge to find a sea route to the lands that he described.