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# Marco Polo and the Silk Road



Written by David L. Dreier

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## A Tale Told in Prison

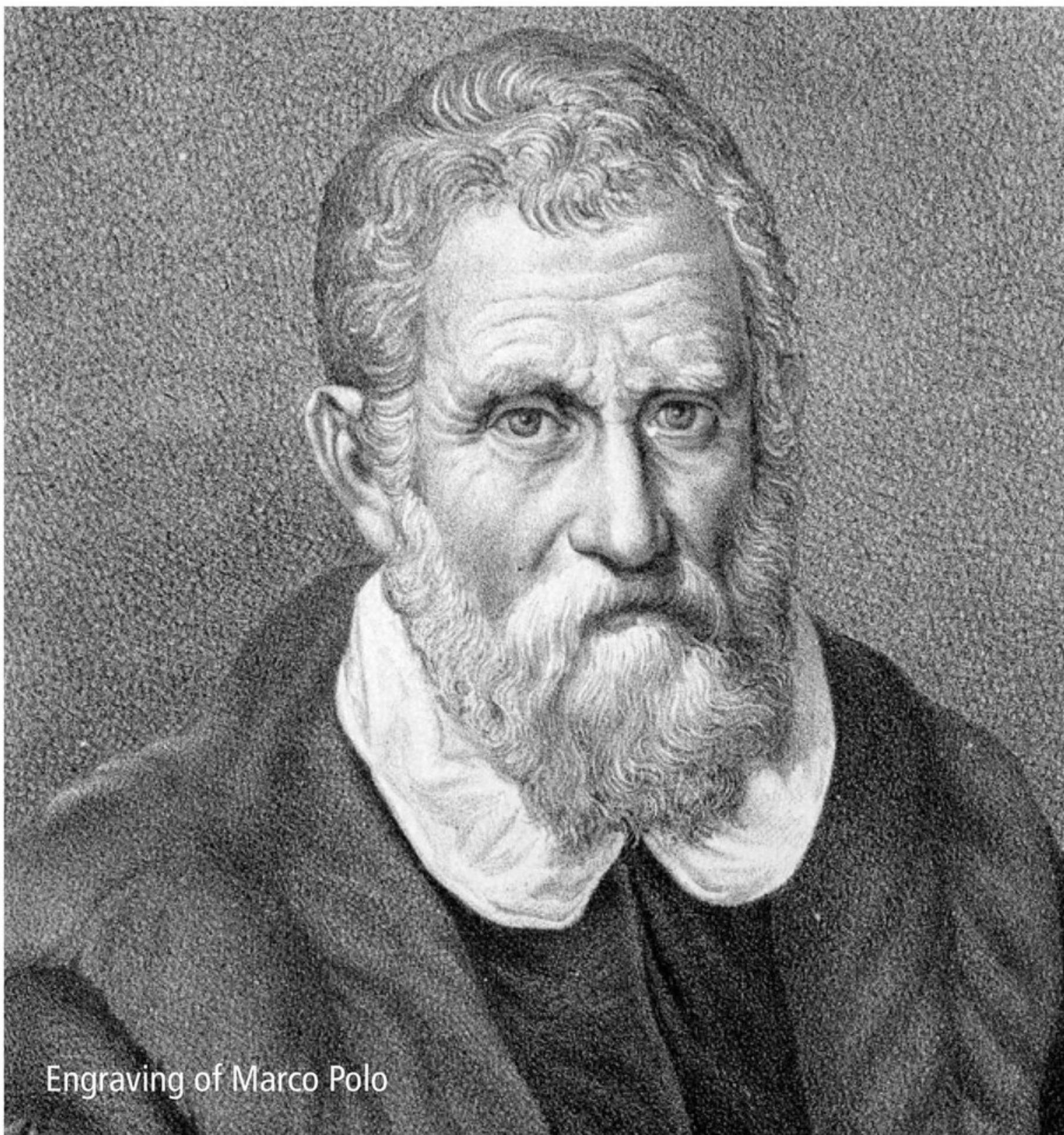
In the year 1298, a man named Marco Polo sat in a prison cell in Genoa, Italy. He thought about the remarkable life he had led. During his youth, Marco had traveled from his native Italy to distant lands. For more than 20 years, he had experienced many great adventures. But after his return, he was a hostage in a war between two Italian cities—Genoa, and his home city, Venice (VEN-is).

A fellow prisoner, a writer named Rustichello (rus-ti-KAY-loh), formed a friendship with Marco. “I’ve heard that you have been to Cathay and have seen many amazing things,” he said. Cathay (ka-THAY) was what people in Italy and other parts of Europe called China. China was a **mysterious** land most people knew very little about.

“Yes,” said Marco, “I have been to Cathay. Would you like to hear about it?”

Rustichello nodded. “I would indeed.”

Marco then sat back and started to tell Rustichello about his fantastic journey. For months, he told one story after another while the writer took pen in hand to write down every word. “This will make a wonderful book,” he said.



Engraving of Marco Polo

## Mysterious Cathay and the Silk Road

Marco Polo was not the first person from Europe to see Cathay. There had been a few before him. However, those travelers did not publish popular books about their journeys. Thus, most people knew very little about the Asian country. Yet traders from distant lands had been bringing Chinese goods to Europe and other parts of the world for hundreds of years.

People in Europe had long desired things from China, such as beautiful pottery, carved jade, and silk. Silk is a beautiful, shimmering cloth made from the cocoons of silkworms. Until the AD 500s, no one outside of China knew how to make silk. The **ancient** Romans (around AD 100) prized silk so highly that they were willing to pay for it with an equal weight of gold.

Much of the trade with China was conducted by way of a long east-west route across the continent of Asia. This route—actually several interconnecting routes—stretched about 4,000 miles (6,400 km). It passed through deserts and across mountain ranges. For centuries, it was a highway for camel **caravans**—long lines of camels loaded with goods.

The caravans carried many valuable things. From Europe and other countries in the West, they transported gold, ivory, wool rugs, precious stones, and other wares to China. In return, they carried Chinese goods to people in Europe and

other parts of the West. Although silk was just one of many items brought back from China, it was probably the most desired. For that reason, the caravan route became known as the Silk Road.



modern silk pillow

## The Mongols Conquer China

The Silk Road was established in about 200 BC. At that time, China was being governed by a **dynasty**—a line of rulers from the same family or group—called the Han (HAHN). During later centuries, use of the Silk Road varied. Sometimes the journey became dangerous because of warring groups and bandits along the road. When dangers arose, few caravans dared to venture along the route.

In AD 907, the road went into a serious decline, and in the early 1200s, dangers on the road multiplied. That is when a people called the Mongols spread out from their homeland of Mongolia on the Asian **steppe** (grasslands). The Mongols launched **conquests** throughout Asia. They were ferocious warriors who showed their

enemies little mercy. Mongol armies sometimes destroyed entire cities and slaughtered everyone in them.



"Fighting with the Mongols" shows a battle scene in Asia.

The Mongols were led by a man named Timujin. In 1206, his people proclaimed him Genghis Khan (JENG-gihs KAHN), a name that meant "Universal Ruler." This is the name by which he has come to be remembered. Genghis Khan and later Mongol rulers conquered a huge area, which became known as the **Mongol Empire**.



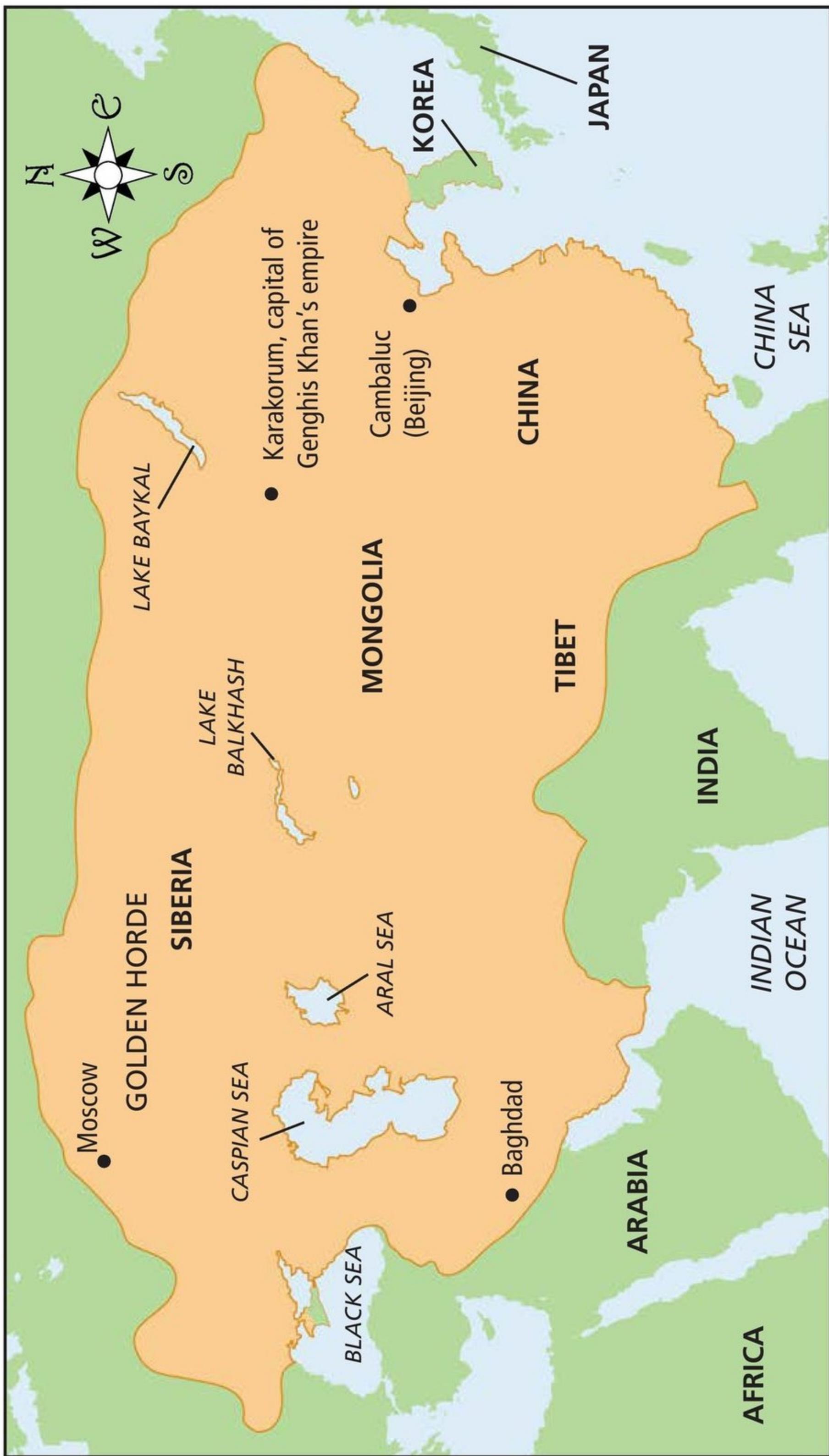
Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan wanted to add China to his empire, but he died in 1227 before he was able to do so. His grandson, Kublai Khan, fulfilled his desire and conquered northern China in 1264. He then conquered the rest of China, and in 1279 he established the Yuan (yoo-WAHN) dynasty. Once the Mongols were in firm control of Asia, peace returned. Even before Kublai Khan finished the conquest of China, the Silk Road had again become safe for camel caravans.



Kublai Khan

## The Mongol Empire, circa 1260



## Marco Polo and His Family

Just ten years before Kublai Khan ruled northern China, Marco Polo was born in 1254 in Venice. The northern Italian city of Venice had grown rich by trading with faraway lands. Marco's father, Nicolo, and his uncle, Maffeo, were both **merchants**.

When Marco was just a baby, the two elder Polos departed on a trading journey. His mother was left alone to raise Marco. She probably saw to it that Marco received an education typical of the sons of merchant families. The boy most likely studied reading, writing, and arithmetic, and learned about foreign money. He also may have received some instruction on how to handle a cargo ship.





When Marco was 13 years old, his mother died. An aunt and uncle then cared for him. Everyone in the family must have wondered when, if ever, Marco's father and his uncle Maffeo would return.

Nicolo and Maffeo Polo finally got back to Venice in 1269. They had been gone about 14 years. They explained that their trip had unexpectedly taken them all the way to China. There, they met Kublai Khan. The great Mongol ruler had treated them very well and had asked that they return.

Almost at once, Nicolo and Maffeo started preparing for a return trip to China. This time, they decided, they would take Marco with them.

Before leaving, the Polo brothers obtained letters and gifts for Kublai Khan from the new pope, Gregory X. During their first trip to China, the Polo brothers had told Kublai Khan about the Christian religion. The Mongol ruler became very interested in Christianity. He asked the brothers to bring him missionaries and information.

## The Long Trek to China

In late 1271, when Marco was 17, he left Venice with his father and uncle on their second trip to China. They were accompanied by two missionaries appointed by Pope Gregory. The travelers planned to sail to China from a port city named Hormuz in the country of Persia—present-day Iran. Since all of the ships at Hormuz were very poorly made, they decided to make the long trip to China by land instead.

They obtained camels and set off toward the East. For much of their journey, they followed the Silk Road. The journey was very difficult, taking

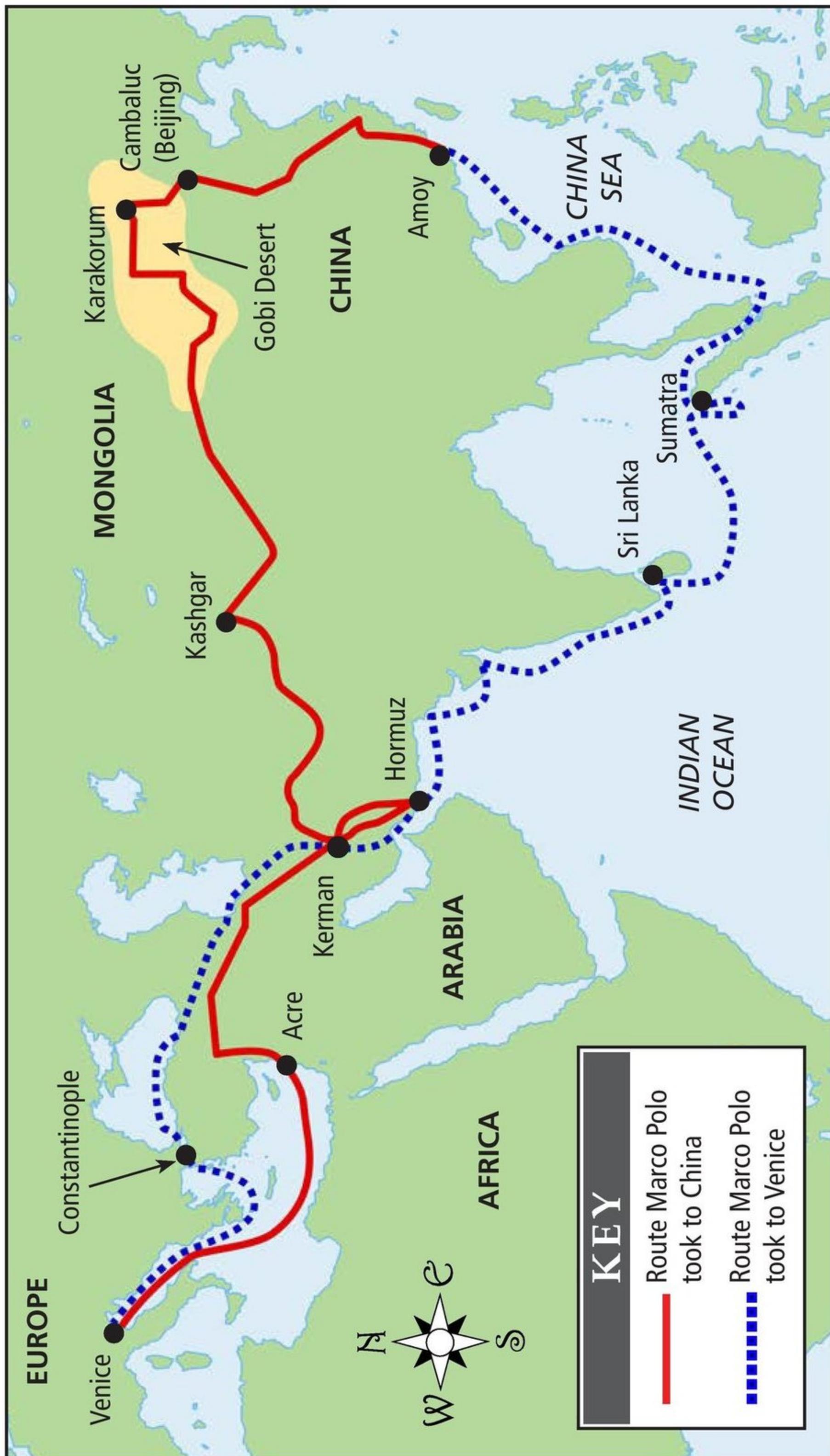
them across deserts and mountains.

Sometimes they rode camels and sometimes horses. Early in the journey, the missionaries refused to go any farther and turned back. Marco and the two elder Polos pushed on without them.



Pope Gregory X,  
1210–1276

## Marco Polo's Silk Road





The Gobi Desert and a modern camel caravan

One of the most difficult parts of the journey was traveling across the Gobi Desert. This is a huge, primarily rocky desert in western Asia, where temperatures soar above 45 degrees Celsius (113°F) in summer and plummet to –40°C (-40°F) in winter. Marco and his companions were relieved when the Gobi was behind them. By then, they were in China.

After traveling for three and a half years, the Polos reached the court of Kublai Khan. The Mongol ruler greeted them warmly. After the Polos had rested, they went with Kublai Khan to the capital, Cambaluc, also called Ta-tu (present-day Beijing). There, Marco was amazed by the size and beauty of Kublai Khan's palace. He called it "the greatest palace that ever was."



(Above) Marco Polo kneels before Kublai Khan. Under Kublai Khan's rule, blue and white porcelain (right) became more refined and impressed Europeans, especially the Dutch, with its quality; use of written language (below) increased; and Tibetan Buddhism, represented by figures such as Guanyin (left), flourished.



## Marco Polo's Experiences in China

Kublai Khan soon gave the Polos positions of **authority**, which allowed them to get wealthy. Kublai Khan did not like using Chinese people in his government. He and other Mongols discriminated against the Chinese. All the best government positions were filled by Mongols or other **foreigners**. Marco became a member of an important government group called the Privy Council. And for three years, he was a high-ranking tax official in the city of Yangzhou (yang-JOE).

As he moved among the people of China, Marco observed them carefully. He saw that the Chinese hated their Mongol rulers. He said the people felt "that they were no more than slaves." But Kublai Khan and the other Mongols didn't care about the great unhappiness of the people. They felt secure in their power.



Marco was constantly **astonished** by China and its culture. China at that time was more advanced and wealthy than the countries of Europe.

Marco commented on several things in particular. One was a postal system that used runners and horseback riders. He was even more impressed to see the Chinese use paper money. At that time, coins were the only form of money used in Europe. Giving worthless paper the value of silver or gold demonstrated government power. China's government simply declared that the paper money it issued had value. This is how almost all paper money works today.



Modern  
Chinese paper money

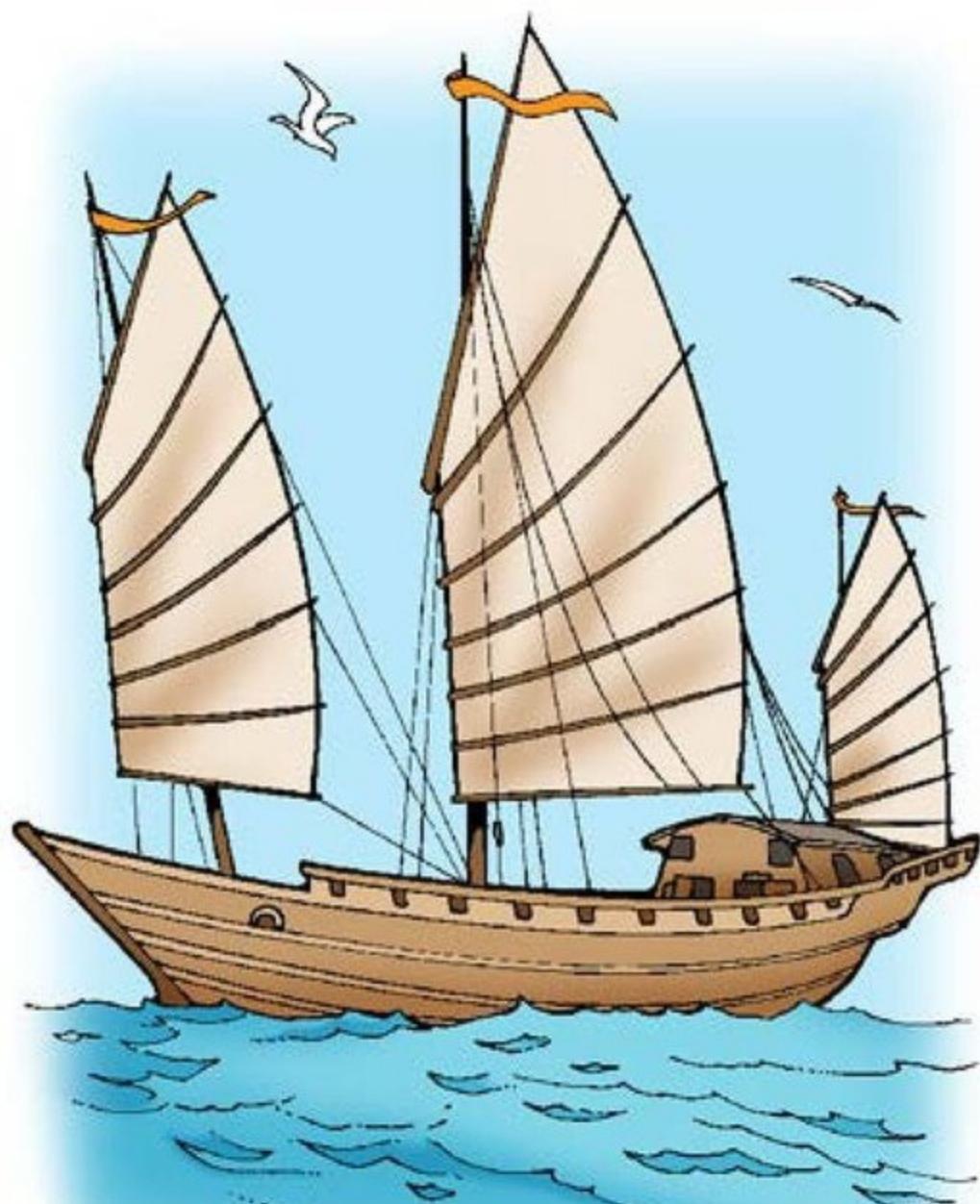
Marco was also surprised to see people using "stones that burn like logs" to create heat. These "stones" were coal. Coal was common in Europe, but people hadn't discovered its use yet.

## The Return Voyage

After 17 years in China, the Polos wanted to go home. They had acquired a fortune in gold, jewels, and other treasures. Kublai Khan was now in his mid-70s, and the Polos were afraid he might die soon. If that happened, the next ruler might not let them leave with their wealth.

Kublai Khan liked the Polos and did not want them to go. Finally, however, he gave them his consent to leave if they would perform a favor for him. He asked them to accompany a Mongol princess to Persia, where she was to marry the Mongol ruler of that land. The Polos agreed, and in 1292, they and the princess departed for Persia on ships.

After taking the princess to Persia, the Polos continued their homeward journey. They traveled by both land and sea. Finally, in 1295, they arrived in Venice. They had been gone for 24 years.



Marco Polo described four-masted Chinese ships with crews of 300 people, which were more advanced than European vessels.



Miniature painting depicting Venice in the late 1200s

## War and Captivity

Marco Polo got home at a bad time. Venice was competing with rival Italian city Genoa for control of the Mediterranean Sea. War broke out between the two cities. Although he was now in his early 40s, Marco enlisted in the Venetian navy. He was placed in command of a war galley—a ship powered by many human rowers.

Genoa defeated Venice in the war in 1298 and took about 7,000 prisoners, including Marco. He was thrown into a prison in Genoa. There he met the writer Rustichello, whom we met at the beginning of this story.

Marco and the other Venetians spent a year in the Genoese prison. By the time they were released, Rustichello had written down all of Marco's tales about China. He was about to make **Marco Polo famous**.

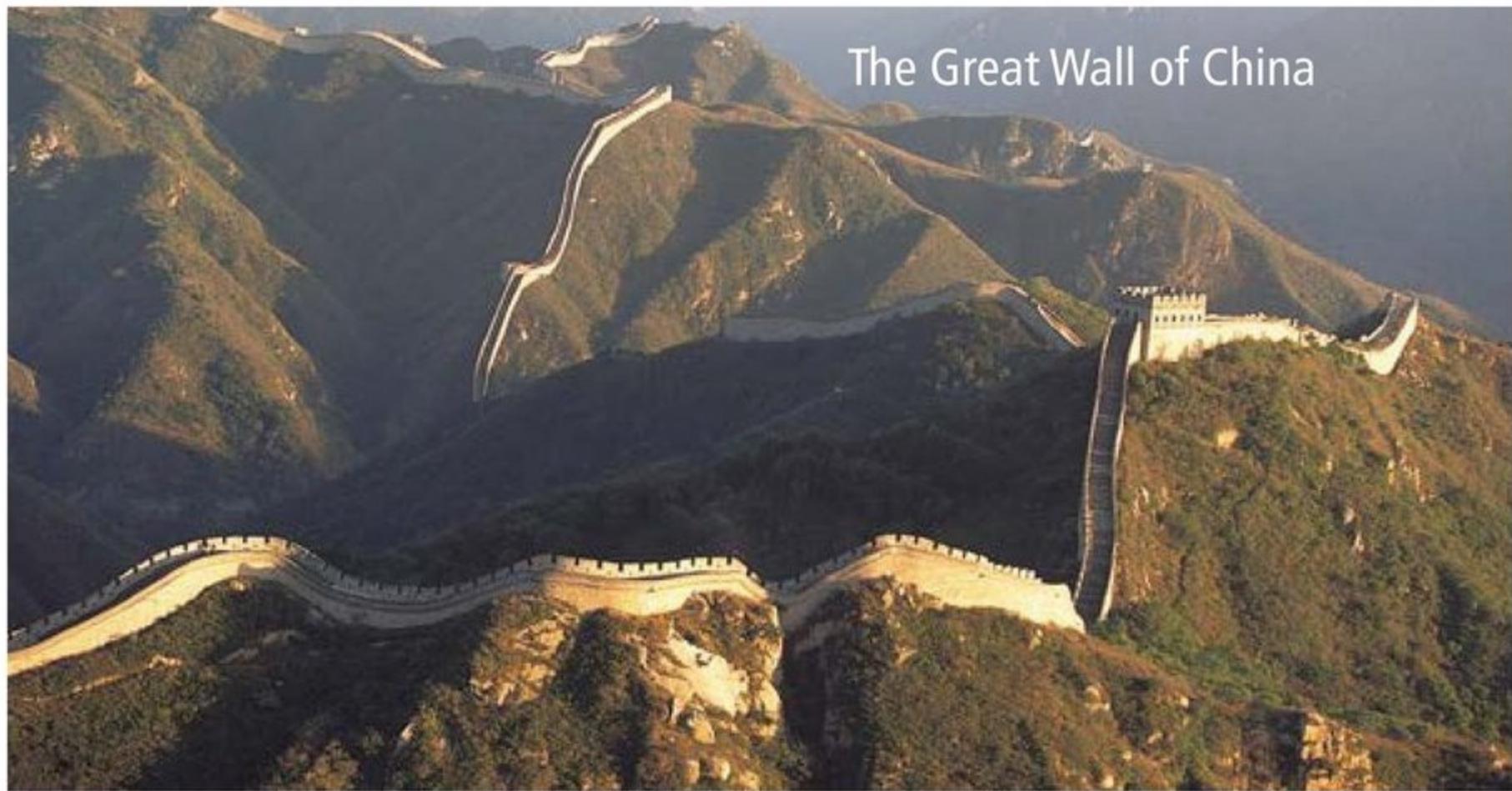
### A Million Stories or a Million Lies?

Marco Polo's account of his years in China first became available in 1298 while Marco was still in prison. Because printing had not yet been invented in Europe, copies of the book were all written out by hand. The book was issued in several languages and under several titles, including *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which is the title used today.

Marco's **memoir** became a sensation. And he became well known throughout Europe. People called him *Il Milione*, an Italian name meaning, roughly, *the man of a million stories*, or, as some said, *the man of a million lies*. Most readers of Marco's book considered it nothing but a collection of tall tales. They refused to believe that China could be so much more advanced than Europe.



This is a miniature painting from one of the many versions of Marco Polo's book about the wonders he saw in China. The scene shows Marco Polo trading with Kublai Khan.



The Great Wall of China

Even today, there are doubters. Although most historians think that Marco Polo's book is a true account of his travels, others disagree. They say he probably went no farther than Persia. There, he could have learned about the wonders of China from Persia's Mongol rulers.

Why do some people still think that Marco Polo lied? It is because he made no mention in his book of some obvious things, such as tea drinking, Chinese writing, and the Great Wall of China. The doubters also point out that Chinese records from the 1200s contain no mention of the Polos.

Marco Polo always swore that he was telling the truth. When he was on his deathbed in 1324, the 70-year-old Marco was visited by a priest. The priest urged him to save his soul by admitting that his book was all lies. But Marco refused, saying, "I have not told half of what I saw."

## Glossary

<b>ancient</b>	from a very long time ago (p. 6)
<b>astonished</b>	very surprised (p. 17)
<b>authority</b>	having the power to make laws and give orders (p. 16)
<b>caravans</b>	processions of vehicles or animals traveling on land (p. 6)
<b>conquests</b>	acts of invading and ruling other lands (p. 7)
<b>dynasty</b>	a group of relatives that rule for many years (p. 7)
<b>empire</b>	a nation that rules conquered lands (p. 8)
<b>famous</b>	well known (p. 20)
<b>foreigners</b>	visitors from a foreign land (p. 16)
<b>journeys</b>	long trips (p. 5)
<b>memoir</b>	a retelling of one's experiences (p. 20)
<b>merchants</b>	people who trade or sell goods (p. 10)
<b>mysterious</b>	odd and difficult to understand (p. 4)
<b>steppe</b>	a wide area of dry land that lacks trees (p. 7)

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Cover: Engraving of Marco Polo

Back cover: Ships dock in Venice, Italy.

Title page: This portrait of Marco Polo is based on a mosaic created in the 1860s, more  
than 500 years after Marco's death.

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