Title: Marco Polo

Another View of Mongol Society

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104 ▼ *Marco Polo, DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD*

No chapter on trans-Eurasian travel in the Mongol Age would be complete without a selection from Marco Polo (ca. 1253–1324), a Venetian who spent twenty years in East Asia, most of that time in the service of Kubilai Khan. Around 1260 Marco's father and uncle, Niccoló and Maffeo, both merchants from Venice, set sail for the Black Sea and from there made an overland trek to Khanbalik and the court of Kubilai. When they were preparing to return home, the Great Khan requested that they visit the pope and ask him to send one hundred missionary-scholars to Cathay. The Polos arrived at the crusader port of Acre (in modern Israel) in 1269 and in 1271 received a commission from Pope Gregory X (r. 1271–1276) to return to China with two Dominican friars. The two friars quickly abandoned the expedition, afraid of the dangers that awaited them, but Niccoló's seventeen-year-old son, Marco, was made of sterner stuff. The brothers Polo, now accompanied by young Marco, returned to Khanbalik. Here Marco entered the khan's service and for close to two decades traveled extensively over much of Kubilai's empire as one of the many foreign officials serving the Mongol, or *Yuan,* Dynasty (1260–1368).

In 1292 the three men set sail for the West by way of the Indian Ocean and arrived home in Venice in 1295. In 1298 Marco was captured in a war with Genoa and, while in prison, related his adventures to a writer of romances known as Rustichello of Pisa. Together they produced a rambling, often disjointed account of the sites, peoples, personalities, and events Marco had encountered in Asia. To be sure, the book probably exaggerates Polo's importance and service to the Great Khan, but there is no good reason to reject, as some modern writers have done, its basic historicity or the claim of its narrator to have visited and lived in China.

Despite its literary flaws and a self-puffery that was obvious even to fourteenth-century contemporaries, the book was widely translated and distributed throughout late medieval Europe. Its popularity was due in part to Marco's eye for ethnographic detail, as the book abounds with stories of customs that Westerners found fascinatingly different. In the following selections Polo, like Rubruck, tells his audience about Mongol culture.

Historical research generally consists of sifting through large amounts of textual evidence and comparing partial, and often even conflicting, accounts of an event in the hope of arriving at a reasonably true reconstruction of the past. No single source ever gives us a complete and unbiased view of whatever we are studying. Polo's and Rubruck's descriptions of Mongol society, when studied together, allow us to test each other's worth. When compared, they also provide evidence of some of the continuities and changes in Mongol society over the last half of the thirteenth century.

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QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Draw two columns. In one, list all the significant details regarding Mongol culture provided by Rubruck. In the other, list those provided by Polo. Where are they in agreement? Are there any significant disagreements? What details are provided by only one witness?
2. Consider the points on which they seem to differ. Assuming each is an honest and observant reporter, how do you explain those differences?
3. Based on the exercise you have just done, what can you say with confidence about thirteenth-century Mongol culture?
4. Based on your reading of both sources, what would you conclude were the factors that contributed to the Mongols' success in forging and governing their empire?
5. Toward the end of his account, Polo provides a hint of one of the factors that would lead to the breakup of the Mongol Empire. What is it?
6. Do the Mongols seem to have changed significantly over the course of the thirteenth century?

It is their custom that the bodies of all deceased grand khans and other great lords from the family of Chinggis Khan are carried for internment to a great mountain called Altai.[1] No matter where they might die, even if it is a hundred days' journey away, they nevertheless are brought here for burial. It is also their custom that, in the process of conveying the bodies of these princes, the escort party sacrifices whatever persons they happen to meet along the route, saying to them: "Depart for the next world and there serve your deceased master." They believe that all whom they kill in this manner will become his servants in the next life. They do the same with horses, killing all the best, so that the dead lord might use them in the next world. When the corpse of Mongke Khan[2] was transported to this mountain, the horsemen who accompanied it slew upward of 20,000 people along the way.

Now that I have begun speaking about the Tartars, I will tell you more about them. They never remain fixed in one location. As winter approaches they move to the plains of a warmer region in order to find sufficient pasturage for their animals. In summer they inhabit cool regions in the mountains where there is water and grass and their animals are free of the annoyance of gad-flies and other biting insects. They spend two or three months progressively climbing higher and grazing as they ascend, because the grass is not sufficient in any one spot to feed their extensive herds.

Their huts, or tents, are circular and formed by covering a wooden frame with felt. These they transport on four-wheeled carts wherever they travel, since the framework is so well put together that it is light to carry. Whenever they set their huts up, the entrance always faces south. They also have excellent two-wheeled vehicles so well covered with black felt that, no matter how long it rains, rain never penetrates. These are drawn by oxen and camels and serve to carry their wives, children, and all necessary utensils and provisions.

It is the women who tend to their commercial concerns, buying and selling, and who tend to all the needs of their husbands and households. The men devote their time totally to hunting,

[1]The Altai Mountain range is in eastern Mongolia.

[2]Mongke, or Mangu, ruled as Great Khan from 1251 to 1259.

hawking, and warfare. They have the best falcons in the world, as well as the best dogs. They subsist totally on meat and milk, eating the produce of their hunting, especially a certain small animal, somewhat like a hare, which our people call Pharaoh's rats,[3] which are abundant on the steppes in summer. They likewise eat every manner of animal: horses, camels, even dogs, provided they are fat. They drink mare's milk, which they prepare in such a way that it has the qualities and taste of white wine. In their language they call it *kemurs*.[4]

Their women are unexcelled in the world so far as their chastity and decency of conduct are concerned, and also in regard to their love and devotion toward their husbands. They regard marital infidelity as a vice which is not simply dishonorable but odious by its very nature. Even if there are ten or twenty women in a household, they live in harmony and highly praiseworthy concord, so that no offensive word is ever spoken. They devote full attention to their tasks and domestic duties, such as preparing the family's food, managing the servants, and caring for the children, whom they raise in common. The wives' virtues of modesty and chastity are all the more praiseworthy because the men are allowed to wed as many women as they please. The expense to the husband for his wives is not that great, but the benefit he derives from their trading and from the work in which they are constantly employed is considerable. For this reason, when he marries he pays a dowry to his wife's parents. The first wife holds the primary place in the household and is reckoned to be the husband's most legitimate wife, and this status extends to her children. Because of their unlimited number of wives, their offspring is more numerous than that of any other people. When a father dies, his son may take all of his deceased father's wives, with the exception of his own mother. They also cannot marry their sisters, but upon a brother's death they may marry their sisters-in-law. Every marriage is solemnized with great ceremony.

This is what they believe. They believe in an exalted god of heaven, to whom they burn incense and offer up prayers for sound mind and body. They also worship a god called Natigay, whose image, covered with felt or other cloth, is kept in everyone's house. They associate a wife and children with this god, placing the wife on his left side and the children before him. . . . They consider Natigay as the god who presides over their earthly concerns, protecting their children, their cattle, and their grain. They show him great respect. Before eating they always take a fat portion of meat and smear the idol's mouth with it, as well as the mouths of his wife and children. Then they take some of the broth in which the meat has been cooked and pour it outside, as an offering. When this has been done they believe that their god and his family have had their proper share. The Tartars then proceed to eat and drink without further ceremony.

The rich among these people dress in gold cloth and silks and the furs of sable, ermine, and other animals. All their accouterments are expensive.

Their weapons are bows, iron maces, and in some instances, spears. The bow, however, is the weapon at which they are the most expert, being accustomed to use it in their sports from childhood. They wear armor made from the hides of buffalo and other beasts, fire-dried and thus hard and strong.

They are brave warriors, almost to the point of desperation, placing little value on their lives, and exposing themselves without hesitation to every sort of danger. They are cruel by nature. They are capable of undergoing every manner of privation, and when it is necessary, they can live for a month on the milk of their mares and the wild animals they catch. Their horses feed on grass alone and do not require barley or other grain. The men are trained to remain on horse-

[3]The brown marmot, a burrowing rodent of the steppes.

[4]*Qumiz* (see source 103, note 4).

back for two days and two nights without dismounting, sleeping in the saddle while the horse grazes. No people on the earth can surpass them in their ability to endure hardships, and no other people shows greater patience in the face of every sort of deprivation. They are most obedient to their chiefs, and are maintained at small expense. These qualities, which are so essential to a soldier's formation, make them fit to subdue the world, which in fact they have largely done.

When one of the great Tartar chiefs goes to war, he puts himself at the head of an army of 100,000 horsemen and organizes them in the following manner. He appoints an officer to command every ten men and others to command groups of 100, 1,000, and 10,000 men respectively. Thus ten of the officers who command ten men take their orders from an officer who commands 100; ten of these captains of a 100 take their orders from an officer in charge of a 1,000; and ten of these officers take orders from one who commands 10,000. By this arrangement, each officer has to manage only ten men or ten bodies of men. . . . When the army goes into the field, a body of 200 men is sent two days' march in advance, and parties are stationed on each flank and in the rear, to prevent surprise attack.

When they are setting out on a long expedition, they carry little with them. . . . They subsist for the most part on mare's milk, as has been said. . . . Should circumstances require speed, they can ride for ten days without lighting a fire or taking a hot meal. During this time they subsist on the blood drawn from their horses, each man opening a vein and drinking the blood. They also have dried milk. . . . When setting off on an expedition, each man takes about ten pounds. Every morning they put about half a pound of this into a leather flask, with as much water as necessary. As they ride, the motion violently shakes the contents, producing a thin porridge which they take as dinner. . . .

All that I have told you here concerns the original customs of the Tartar lords. Today, however, they are corrupted. Those who live in China have adopted the customs of the idol worshippers,[5] and those who inhabit the eastern provinces have adopted the ways of the Muslims.

[5]Buddhists.

A European Missionary in China

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105 ▾ John of Monte Corvino, LETTER TO THE WEST

Despite disappointment at the Mongols' reception of their early embassies to the Great Khan and his lieutenants, popes and kings in the West did not abandon hope of converting the Mongols to Roman Christianity and allying with them against Islam. On their part, various Mongol khans continued to flirt with the idea of joining with European Christian powers against a common Muslim foe.

In 1287 Arghun, *il-khan* of Persia (r. 1284–1291), a nephew and subordinate of the Great Khan, Kubilai (r. 1260–1294), sent a Nestorian Christian monk, Rabban (Master) Sauma (ca. 1230–1294) to the West, bearing letters for the pope, the kings of France and England, and the emperor of Constantinople, in which the Mongol prince offered to become a Christian in return for an alliance against a common enemy, the Muslim Mamluks of Egypt. The Mamluks had rolled back a Mongol invasion of Syria-Palestine with a decisive victory at 'Ayn Jalut in 1260,