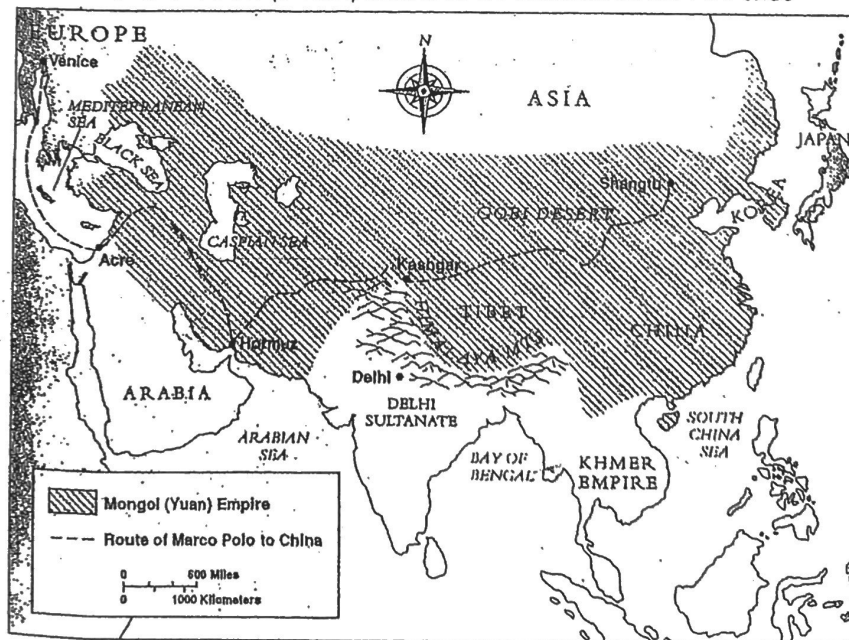


# I. A Ruler Attempts to Conquer Knowledge

In 1206 the great Mongol warrior Temujin was named the *Genghis Khan*—Universal Ruler. His armies had defeated their foes in Mongolia, North China, Central Asia, Persia, and Russia. Even the Great Wall of China did not keep out the Mongol cavalry. By the time Genghis Khan died in 1227, the Mongol Empire extended from east China to the Caspian Sea. His successors invaded Korea, Russia, Hungary, and Poland.

Genghis' grandson, Kublai Khan, conquered South China (the Sung Empire) in 1279. Kublai began the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled all of China until 1368. At first, Kublai did not trust the Chinese. But he later grew fond of Chinese culture and allowed Confucian ceremonies. In fact, non-Mongol religious groups were spared from paying taxes.

THE MONGOL (YUAN) EMPIRE OF KUBLAI KHAN IN 1280



Kublai understood that the Mongols needed help from the Chinese people to govern the vast country. Therefore, he appointed many Chinese to all but the upper-level government offices and organized his state along Chinese lines. However, Kublai refused to permit civil service examinations. Perhaps he feared that the Chinese might win the high-ranking jobs from the Mongols.

Kublai was eager to learn and sought the help of experts from all over the world. He surrounded himself with Confucian scholars, Muslim financial experts, and Christian advisers.

Kublai moved the Chinese capital north to Beijing. He extended the Grand Canal to that city so that food could be shipped in more easily from the south. China's postal system and roads were expanded. Artists and architects were encouraged and paid to create. All of this cost a great deal of money. When high taxes failed to raise enough funds, Kublai turned to printing paper money to pay his growing debts. He even hired foreigners to act as fundraisers.

In 1271 two Venetian merchants, Maffeo and Niccolò Polo, together with the latter's son, Marco, age 17, started a journey eastward across Asia to China. Marco was 21 when the Polo family finally reached Kublai Khan's court. Our story tells of Marco Polo's first audience (meeting) with the khan.

## Shangtu 1275

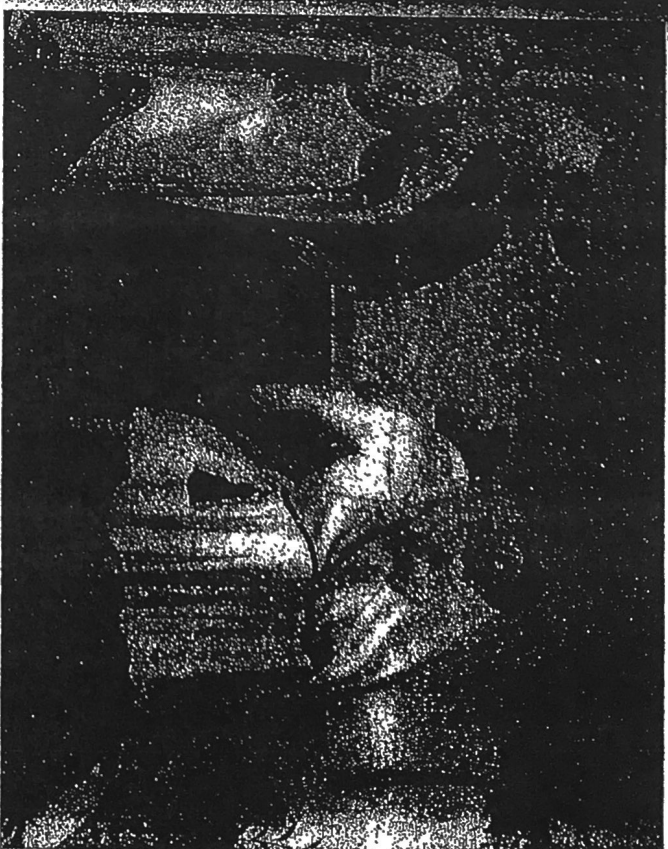
"Niccolò, Maffeo—welcome back," said Kublai Khan. "And who is this young man?"

"Your highness, this is my son, Marco," replied Niccolò. "He is eager to see the wonders of your land, which we told him about when we returned home to Venice."

"I am happy to greet the son of my Venetian friends. Marco, you have a great deal to learn about my country. Now, Maffeo and Niccolò, you two must explain the reason for your long-delayed return."

"Sire, you sent us on a mission to Rome to speak to the Holy Father, Pope Clement IV," said Maffeo. "We were to ask him to send a group of educated Christians to China to teach you, and members of your court, about Christianity."

"I'm aware of what I asked you to do. Tell me, without wasting more words, why you took so long."



Kublai Khan (left) greets Marco Polo and his father on their arrival in China.

"Sadly, Pope Clement died soon after our arrival in Rome. A year passed and a new pope had not been named," added Niccolò. "We grew weary of waiting and returned to Venice. After all, we had not seen our home and family for ten years."

"Go on," said the khan impatiently.

"My wife had died," added Niccolò, "and Marco was no longer a boy. We decided to bring him with us and return to China."

"I accept the reasons for your delay. But what happened to your mission to the pope?"

"The new Pope, Gregory the Tenth, is a personal friend. He promised to send to your court the Christian scholars Your Highness requested."

"Fine. All is forgiven," smiled Kublai Khan. Then he turned to

"Marco, tell me all that you saw and did on your journey from Venice to my court."

"We traveled from Venice to the Holy Land, then to Persia, and across many mountains and deserts," replied Marco. "Here, Highness, let me draw a map for you. We traveled from Acre to Hormuz. Next, we went northeast to Kashgar. Finally, we crossed the Gobi. The days were long, but the lonely nights were even longer."

"I am very impressed with your son, Niccolò," said the khan.

"Now, at last, I understand why your return trip from Venice to China took almost four years."

"Highness, I would like to ask you one question," said Marco Polo with some hesitation. "Why are you interested in the beliefs of people who live far from here?"

"Excellent question, Marco. You see, I am very curious. I must know about everything that exists in this world of ours. Before I die, I must be sure that there are no puzzles left to solve, no secrets that are unknown to me."

### Postscript

Marco Polo became one of the khan's most trusted advisers. He was sent to many parts of the empire to study problems and report back to Kublai. Marco was even given the task of governing cities and provinces. As a spokesperson for the khan, he traveled on missions to many countries: India, Japan, Sumatra, Myanmar, Thailand, and beyond.

Kublai Khan found all three Polos so interesting and useful that he kept them in his service for 17 years. Finally, in 1292 they were permitted to leave China. They were asked to escort a Mongol princess who was to become the bride of the Persian ruler.

The Polos returned to Venice after an absence of 24 years. At first, their family and friends did not recognize them. According to the story, the Polos then threw back their worn oriental robes and ripped open the linings. Hundreds of emeralds, rubies, and pearls fell all over the floor. Now their friends and family remembered the Polos!

Marco Polo later wrote a book about his journey and adventures in China and eastern Asia. The book, *Description of the World*, told about the lands and customs of the East. Europeans were amazed. It became one of the most celebrated and widely read books of the age.

### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What was the extent of Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire?
2. How did Kublai Khan enlist the help of the Chinese people?
3. How did Kublai use the talents of foreigners?
4. How did the Polos explain their delayed return to China?
5. How did Marco Polo describe his trip from Venice to China?

### UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

A. Write K for each statement that Kublai Khan made or might have made and P for each statement that the Polos made or might have made.

1. You have a great deal to learn about my country.
2. You sent us on a mission to Rome.
3. Pope Clement died soon after our arrival.
4. I'm aware of what I asked you to do in Rome.
5. Tell me all that you saw and did on your journey to China.
6. We decided to bring my son with us.
7. I am very impressed with your son.
8. The days were long, but the nights were even longer.
9. Tell me why you are interested in people who live far away.
10. I am very curious about everything that exists in this world.

B. Suppose the president of the United States followed the example of Kublai Khan. The president decided to appoint his advisers and cabinet from among the world's greatest scholars and financial experts. These men and women were brought to the United States from all corners of the globe. How would this differ from the usual manner of choosing government appointees? Do you approve? Why or why not?

### ACTIVITIES AND INQUIRIES

1. On the map of Kublai Khan's empire, on page 189, trace Marco Polo's route from Venice to China. Compare the trip during the 1200s with a trip you would take to China today.
2. Kublai Khan felt that he had to know about everything that existed in the world. Are you that sort of person? Why or why not? Name that you are as curious as the khan was. How might your life change?