

## MARCO POLO'S WORLD

### THE CHINESE URBAN CIVILISATION

What made Marco Polo's book so fascinating and compelling for its reluctant European readers?

The real wonder of wonders was China itself, a new world of cities, much bigger and much richer than those of the west. Marco Polo was a city lad from the watery world of Venice, where prosperity was not measured in crops, but in ships, money and salt.

What fascinates him are the cities - their size, their means of communication, their populations, their shops, their merchants and artisans, in fact everything about the urban network of Yuan China. It's worth to note that Marco Polo's account of the flourishing and lively Chinese cities completely matches Chinese records.

Marco begins by describing the summer capital where he first arrived, Shangdu, with its outer and inner city constructed following a very Chinese layout. One hundred thousand people lived in Shangdu until the Ming burned it to the ground.

Modern archaeology has recently proved that Marco's description was accurate. He paid great attention to Cambalich, the city of the Kahn, in today's Beijing, presenting its grandeur as symbolic of the nobility of Kubilai Khan, the main hero of his book.

He describes the city plan of Cambalich, the walls that encircle it, the suburbs for foreign merchants and travelers, with hostels for each of the nations that come. He is amazed by the size of its population, which he calculates in more than one million based on the number of 20,000 prostitutes serving the city dwellers.

He estimates the volume of the city trade from the thousand cart-loads of silk that enter the city every day. And he states, to the utter astonishment of his European audience, that Cambalich is surrounded by 200 other cities, all of them linked by trade to the capital.

Let's remember that the average population of big European cities at the turn of the 14th century was 50 thousand, with the biggest ones, like Venice, reaching one hundred thousand.

More astonishing yet is the fact that in Cambalich the Great Khan mints paper money. But Marco has a keen interest in money. As a boy he was taught how to value and how to exchange it, and he is an excellent observer of how paper money circulates in the different regions of China.

He neatly differentiates between the regions where paper money is really the predominant currency and those where it is combined with gold, silver, cowries and even salt monies. Recent scholarship has shown that Marco Polo is extremely accurate in everything related with paper money, not only concerning its physical appearance, but also its values and exchange rates, counterfeiting regulations, replacement of spoilt notes, and the role of paper money in public revenue and expenditure.

While still in Cambalich he notices the importance of the yam, the postal system that connects the whole empire, with relay stations located every thirty miles, each of them provided with between two hundred and four hundred horses, while every three miles there are small houses for the foot-runners who carry messages through the land.

His father and uncle had already made use of the Mongol postal system on their way back. Marco also provided an accurate description of the Grand Canal. This impressive water artery had been constructed almost seven centuries before, but the Mongols extended it to serve the new capital, Cambalich.

The idea of an artificial river running two thousand kilometers inland and parallel to the coast was certainly one of the wonders that struck Europeans as incredible. This much later Qing painting of the Grand Canal confirms Marco Polo's description of a great artery with a heavy traffic of ships, and with hundreds of cities along its banks.

Some of the cities are so big that even their suburbs are walled; others, though lower in the administrative hierarchy, are still surrounded by walls; and in between are a multitude of small towns and villages that come under the cities' rule. This is the kind of pyramidal administrative structure that Marco Polo understood well, stating for instance that the city of Suzhou has sixteen other great cities under its rule, while Kinsai rules over a hundred and forty great and wealthy cities.

He also notes the relief system that he attributes to the goodness of the Khan, when in fact it was a revival of the traditional Chinese state relief systems.

He points out that the state decrees a suspension of taxes in regions struck by floods or drought; that there are ever-normal granaries that stock grain in order to control price fluctuations; and that measures to cope with famines are highly recommended.

Once Marco proceeds inside China, there is a litany of city after city, all of them well connected, mostly by rivers, and with plenty of trade and industry, with innumerable towns lying in between. From time to time other marvels appear, like the use of 'burning black stones' all across the north.

Marco is the only traveler to have understood exactly what coal was. He is also an extraordinary astute observer regarding production, administration and transportation of salt. Being a Venetian, it was natural that Marco would be sensitive towards salt production, and he identifies the most important production areas of the sea salt monopoly administration, and carefully names the places where taxes are paid in salt.