

MARCO POLO'S WORLD

THE GREAT CHINESE CITIES AND CATALAN MAP

Marco's narrative reaches a peak when he crosses the Yangzi, a river that has two-hundred thousand up-stream vessels a year, and 200 cities along its banks. South of the Yangzi he arrives at the city of Kinsai, today's Hangzhou, the former capital of the Song Empire.

The book presents Kinsai as the finest and noblest city in the world, with twelve thousand bridges, each provided with a guard of ten men, and twelve guilds of different crafts, each of them occupying twelve thousand houses for its workmen.

The masters of the craft are so rich that they never work with their hands, and in the middle of the lake there are hostels that cater to all kinds of banquets. According to the book, Kinsai has a population of one million six hundred thousand, and everyone has his name and all those of his immediate relatives written on the door of his house.

This is one of the points in Marco's book that appear clearly corroborated in the Chinese Yuan sources. In Mongol cities households were organized in wards or precincts, in the same way as rural households were organized in communes, as we saw in previous lectures.

In both cases these units were responsible for tax-collecting and for social order maintenance. All the streets in the city are paved with stone, as are all the highways of South China, where there are more than twelve thousand great and wealthy cities, and in each of them the great Khan has a garrison of at least one thousand men.

Kinsai has ten principal markets where everything is sold, and each of them is frequented by forty or fifty thousand people. Around the markets are stone houses where traders from India and other foreign countries store their wares. And certain streets are occupied by the prostitutes, who he labels the "women of the town", noting that they are extremely accomplished and splendidly attired.

Other streets are occupied by Physicians, Astrologers and teachers of reading and writing. As we have already seen in previous lectures, physicians and astronomers were two of the groups specially favored in Yuan China.

As for the reading and writing, Kubilai had also disposed that all rural communes and city wards ought to have a school. The streets are always so crowded that no one would believe that the city could provide food for everyone: 43 loads of pepper alone are needed every day.

Every year this city delivers to the Khan an enormous revenue coming from salt, sugar, spices, rice-wine and silk. Marco Polo was sent to Kinsai several times by the Khan to inspect the incomes of its customs houses and found it to be one of the most enormous revenues ever heard of.

South of Kinsai, Marco entered into Fujian and, after crossing a number of cities, arrived at Zayton, today's Quanzhou, where ships from India brought an astonishing quantity of goods and which received a hundred times more pepper than Alexandria.

Quanzhou was also a mirror of the great variety of religions that thrived in Mongol China, which was certainly the most multi-religious country in the whole world. Quanzhou boasted all kinds of religious buildings, reflecting the permanent establishment of religious communities in the city.

Muslims had the big mosques that are still standing, Hindu symbols and religious icons intermixed with Buddhist figures in the big Kaiyuan Pagoda, Nestorians, Jacobites, Manicheans and Jews had their own temples, while quite a lot of the tombstones found in Quanzhou, are bilingual and written in Syriac, Tamil, Uyghur, Arabic and Chinese, reflecting an impressive variety of peoples and languages.

As happens all through the book, Marco Polo comments on various faiths, but he seems indifferent to the essential contents of their beliefs. Another aspect that struck the Venetian Marco is the Chinese ships.

He comments on them many times in his book: their decks with fifty cabins for merchants, four to six movable masts, two hundred or more sailors. The ships struck him for their sheer size, while their capacity to carry five to six thousand pepper baskets certainly appealed to his merchant side.

He also took special note of their structure, highlighting the security provided by the sternpost rudder and the bulkhead compartments. All these marvels came directly from Song shipbuilding tradition, but the Mongols committed themselves to keeping up with this tradition and they launched quite a lot of naval expeditions.

One of them, the frustrated invasion of Japan, which turned out to be a major failure, took place while Marco was in China. And Marco's book devotes three chapters to talking about Cipango and its endless quantities of gold and marvelous pearls.

This is the first mention of Japan to reach the West. The book contains also the first mentions of Java and Sumatra to reach Europe. The book was especially important for geographers and mapmakers. One scholar has said that never, before or since Marco, has anyone provided such a quantity of geographical information.

The world was wider after Marco, and Eurasia became different, with its Eastern part much bigger, a new shape in which Jerusalem couldn't keep the central position where medieval maps had placed it.

Marco's world went into maps by the mid fourteenth century, in the Catalan map drawn by Cresques, a Jewish family of geographers living in Majorca. The Catalan Atlas, which in its western part follows the usual portulan tradition, marking only port cities, its style when it comes to East Asia.

Here we find Katayo, that is, Cathay, with Kubilai Khan seated in full glory, near Cambalic, his enormous walled capital, and reigning over a territory in which a multitude of cities are connected by a network of rivers.

Excellent ports abound along its coasts, where Zayton and its port are well highlighted. In the center of the atlas there are caravans heading to Cathay, while four-masted ships like those described by Marco Polo round its coasts.

But the new global world of the Catalan Atlas was not only interesting for geographers. In fact, the map was commissioned by the king of Aragon and given as a gift to the king of France.

The broadening of the world had become a question of high geo-political interest.