

MARCO POLO'S WORLD

THE GREAT WALL AND FOOTBINDING

Doubts about Marco Polo's travel have been in the air since the early twentieth century. His book includes an impressive amount of information, but doesn't mention certain features that today are more than evident. Allowance has to be made for the errors of the copyist and translators, but criticism has centered on a few points that beg the question: Did Marco Polo go to China?

So, what were the things that Marco Polo didn't see and what importance do they have? Marco Polo has been criticized for not having seen the Great Wall, because he entered China through the Gansu corridor and today the Great Wall runs the length of it.

However, the Great Wall of today is not at all the same as it was in the thirteenth century. The building of long defensive walls in China several centuries BCE and at that moment they were built as much between the individual states as along the northern frontier.

When the first emperor unified China he destroyed all the inner walls and linked the already existing exterior ones. The next dynasty, the Han, who faced a strong northern danger from the Xiongnu confederation, built new lines of defensive towers and walls. On the whole, these undertakings, both by the Qin and the Han, were not as awesome as modern literature seems to imply.

The walls were not made of stone but rather of tamped earth, a very ingenious way of building in loess soil, but one that cannot last thousands of years. The so called Qin and Han Great Walls were destroyed long ago by the combined efforts of the rains and of the Chinese living around it, who used its materials for their own benefit.

Chinese official histories give detailed notices of the great building projects of the successive dynasties, and references abound regarding the construction of palaces and great feats of hydraulic engineering like the Grand Canal.

But the northern walls are seldom mentioned, and almost never are they labeled with the suggestive name of Great Wall. Furthermore, only a few of the Chinese dynasties took to repairing or extending the walls.

One of the dynasties who did build frontier walls was the Jin dynasty that occupied north China a century before the arrival of Marco Polo.

The Mongols destroyed the Jin dynasty and, having a multi-ethnic empire stretching north-south from Russia to South East Asia, they **certainly didn't** have any interest in raising walls in the midst of it.

Frontier wall building did not begin on a large scale until the fifteenth century, when the Mongols had already been expelled from China and the Ming needed a defensive structure to stand between them and the Mongols.

This is the impressive Great Wall built of stone that we see now, but Marco Polo entered **China in Mongol's time** and at that moment the crumbling remains of the tamped earth walls need not have called his attention.

Even so, this is a controversial issue, because in the 12th century the Great Wall had been important enough to be included in a charismatic map, the Huayi tu, a Map of China and the Barbarians, carved in stone in 1137 during the Southern Song.

In this map the line of the great wall, probably the one erected by the Jin dynasty in the 12th century, is clearly shown with considerable accuracy. Marco is also criticized for not having mentioned the binding of women's feet, a practice that, as we have seen in previous lectures, began in the Song dynasty.

But it was probably a practice that was neither common nor widespread in Marco Polo's time. Probably it was confined to Chinese women of the upper class, but neither of the successive occupiers of north China, the Qidan, the Jürchen or the Mongols, adopted this Chinese practice.

Marco Polo spent his time in Mongolian circles, and lived mostly in northern China, where the Qidan, Jürchen and Mongols were a significant part of the population. In addition, remember that what Marco noticed were the groups favored by the Mongols, this is to say merchants, artisans, physicians and astrologers. And in all those groups foreigners were a significant presence.

Furthermore, Marco stayed mainly in urban centers, where women seldom went out from their homes, and were usually completely covered. As was the case with the Great Wall, it is in Ming times that foot-binding will become widespread, probably as a means to promote a Chinese practice that was in sharp contrast with those of the Mongolian women, who were used to much more freedom of movement.

Marco does **explicitly mention the Chinese ladies'** dainty way of walking and taking very short steps, without providing an explanation for it.

Even so, as in the case of the Great wall, this is also a controversial issue, because Odoric of Pordenone, the Franciscan friar that went to China some decades later than Marco Polo, does mention foot-binding.