

Marco Polo and Korčula

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Introduction

The city of Korcula, in the opinion of its many distinguished visitors throughout its rich history, is one of the most attractive and best preserved towns from the Middle Ages in the Mediterranean area. The island of the same name is one in the long string of 'pearls' forming great archipelago that runs along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea; rightfully the pride of the Republic of Croatia.

Why the modern tourist at the end of the twentieth century (though not acquainted with the details with the rich history) is immediately conscious of the connection between Korcula and Marko Polo is an interesting question. Does the knowledge come merely from tourist slogans and publicity, or from a deeper sense of tradition and historical memory?

The Depolo family have lived in Korcula for centuries, proof of which exists in the numerous documents held in the Korcula archives; and one of member of the family the young flower decorator Mate Depolo happened to meet in 1993 another young woman girl who is a descendant of the Great Kublai Khan, They were both in Wells at the time under the auspices of the BBC. A hotel in Dalmatian style was built in Korcula in 1972 and named "Marko Polo". The tourist agency "Marko Polo Tours" has also existed in Korcula for several years. "Jadrolinija", the Croatian Shipping Line, gave the same name to its most beautiful and biggest passenger ship.

The first question which most visitors ask, while irresistibly attracted towards Korcula in a wish to escape for a while from the trials and burdens of everyday life, is "Where is the tower of Marko Polo"? Does not its position in the immediate vicinity of the St. Marko cathedral, in the central town square, together with the houses of many old noble families, confirm the Korculan origins of Marko Polo? If we add that the sculptor from Corinth, Polo, lived in Korcula in the 5th century B.C. (according to the Encyclopedia Treccani), and that Korcula at that time, according to Skylac, was the main Illyrian emporium in the Adriatic, then it becomes evident that the traditional hearsay about the Korculan origins of Marko Polo must have its ancient roots in history, which is in itself a kind of word of mouth tradition, and an attractive story. Moreover, the belief is also fed also by the oldest legend of all regarding the foundation of Korcula, which says that the town of Korcula was founded by the Trojan hero, Antenor, after the fall of Troy. While one old Venetian manuscript also points out that, together with Antenor, a certain Lucius Polus, arrived on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, as an ancestor of the family Polo.

In 1995 Korcula celebrated the 700th anniversary of Marko Polo's return from China to Europe. Korcula had also solemnly celebrated the 700th anniversary of his birth earlier in

1954. Within the frame-work of celebrating the 700th anniversary of his return from what was then far away though today much more accessible China, the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU) held a scientific symposium under the title "Marko Polo and Korcula in the 13th Century". Concerts, exhibitions, lectures, boat parades, commemorative stamps, seals were organized and produced, and the house of Marko Polo is now being rearranged in the style of his voyages and happenings. A special attraction is the popular song about Marko Polo on disc. This arrangement by the best Croatian pop singers was sent to radio stations all over the world under the title "Seven Hundred Years". One verse in that song speaks about the bright star high in the sky which was guiding Marko Polo during his life-long voyages. this was the North Star, his star of the North Pole, mentioned several times in Marko Polo's book Million.

The purpose of this commemorative work is not to prove that Marko Polo was born in Korcula, though it every Korculan small child feels instinctively that this is so. Even less is its purpose to challenge the undisputed role of Venice in the life of Marko Polo and his family. After all, Korcula was for many centuries under the government of Serenissima, which is to be thanked for the rising prosperity of Korcula in the 14th and 15th centuries. The real aim of this book is to present to the interested tourist all that connects Marko Polo with Korcula and at the same time to emphasize the significance of his interesting voyages and discoveries when he ventured to unknown worlds.

Marko Polo is the property and inheritance of the whole world. His life story still speaks clearly to today's man about the richness of various ambiances, races and cultures, and about the instinctive wish of every well-intentioned inhabitant of the Earth to know the world around him, to get more contact with other people, and live his life in an interesting way in friendly relationships with others and not against them. Exactly as did the first world traveller and writer, MARKO POLO.

Korcula and the Polo Family

The 13th century was the time when Europe lived in constant conflict between its town-states, which were still preoccupied with the Crusades. It was a time when numerous armies were crossing European soil, destroying foreign towns and killing off their inhabitants. This was a time of poor living conditions, when food and clothing were lacking, and when European inhabitants did not know much about raw materials and agricultural skills. They had no knowledge of coal, oil, paper, gunpowder, compasses, coffee, potatoes, corn, tomatoes, tobacco...all the things without which the life of contemporary man would seem inconceivable.

But while political instability and economic poverty were limiting the life of the average European, reducing it to pure survival, the stability of the Roman Catholic Church - in spite of all dynastic struggles and doctrinarian rigidity, often with perilous consequences - at the same time opened to him spiritual perspectives, giving hope and laying down the structural base for cultural development. This was the time of the most splendid Gothic building, as for example the cathedral of Chartres, begun in 1294; of Reims in 1210; of Salisbury, erected in 1220. One of the most significant political events was the proclamation of Rudolf for Holy Roman Emperor, who managed to spread the influence of the Habsburgs to Austria, thus laying the foundations of the state which would, for the next five centuries, represent the bulwark of European culture.

In that interplay - of the material and the spiritual, of violence and reconciliation, a mixture of awareness and dream - an unique position was to be held by that small Italian town-state, called Venice. Built on an island archipelago, near the mainland, it looked like an enchanted vision which emerging like Aphrodite from the Adriatic Sea. But Venice was not an apparition. Built in stone in the magnificent style of the Middle Ages with emphasized Byzantine elements and connected by a network of channels and bridges, it manifested the power of a trading and maritime force, spreading its influence across the Adriatic aquatic surface, and over to the Mediterranean as far as Constantinople itself, which fell into its hands in 1202.

The town and island of Korcula was unprotected, and indeed there were many who fought for it at that time because of its strategic position on the maritime trade routes and also because of its geographical configuration which makes it ideal for the refuge of war ships and merchant galleys. For these reasons Korcula was unlikely to escape the powerful arm of Venice. The Croat population of the island and the town of Korcula tried hard to resist the intensions of the Venetian Republic. In order to hinder Venitian plans and protect their island community, the Korculans adopted their communal statute in 1214. That statute, the

oldest legal document in this part of Europe, codified the whole life of the town and the island and, in many of its decrees, set an example of the European proportions. Numerous decrees regarding maritime law, the abolition of slavery, the protection of the environment etc. witness to a high political and cultural level in Korcula at that time; though it was living as were other Dalmatian towns in the 13th century as well, in the danger due to the avaricious appetites of the powerful forces around it. The Korcula statute protected Korcula from the authoritarian reign of Venice, but at the same time offered Korcula Venetian protection from other possible aggressors as it wanted to continue its relative prosperity, especially in shipbuilding, stone-cutting and shipping. The citizen of Korcula, though under the yoke and protection of Venice could guard his rights and his lifestyle from the outside world because of the legal codex, but he wished to look beyond the borders and the limits of western metaphysics and he he began to broaden his aspirations to take in the outside world, for the fulfilment of his dream regarding a better future. His sailing ships ventured in search of the unknown and, by reason of their masculine violence ploughed the Mediterranean furrows, whereas the citizen himself remained in the secure maternal womb of his city nucleus and his peasant field. Sea furrow, field furrow, and a furrow as the line of his writing, welded in the Korcula statute, spelt for the Korcula citizen the chance of a wondrous joy of existence.

Amidst the overall risks of the European insecurity, Korcula, either by force or willingly, accepts the previous duke of Dubrovnik, Marsilie Zorzi, a Venetian nobleman, as its duke in 1254. In that same year Marko Polo was born.

The Polo family is much respected in Korcula; living over centuries in the town of Korcula. It produced over the years numerous shipbuilders, smiths, stone-masons, tradesmen, priests, and public notaries. Marko's father Nikola and uncle Mate founded their trading outpost in Korcula, and the members of the Polo family were guardians of the walls around the town of Korcula. But, for the skilful tradesmen Nikola and Mate, Korcula was only the starting point of their business trade and their adventurous life. Marko's father and uncle penetrated deeply into Asia. They erected a tower and founded their own trading outpost in the town of Sudac on the Crimea. They had their main trade centre in Constantinople, to which many Korcula businessmen and shipbuilders were travelling and for some time they were living there. Mate and Nikola Polo traded successfully with the Persians. They were cognisant with the secret ways which led through Syria and Iraq as far as the coasts of Persian Gulf. They also knew the areas where the precious pearl oysters could be found. Wherever they ventured they were made welcome as people who were "noble-minded, wise and reasonable". They knew the routes that led to the fur traders of southern Siberia. They had trade contacts with the dignitaries of various Tartar peoples, and they reached the court of the Great Kublai Khan in China. They had started their journey before Marko Polo was born. The successful Korcula tradesmen feeling secure in their centuries-old native soil of Korcula, left their family and still unborn son Marko, as they gazed towards the Far East searching

there for a realization of their dream of the rich life. Their ideas of fusing the cultural structures of the West and the East also decreed the destiny of Nikola's son, Marko Polo, from the day of his birth.

Marko achieved the usual education of a young nobleman of his age. He learned a lot about classical writers, he understood the text of the Bible and knew the basic theology of the Roman Catholic Church. He spoke French and Italian, especially the trade vocabulary, and was skilful in keeping business books. The Church books and songs in Croatian from Marko's time have been preserved in Korcula, and it is most probable that Marko knew the Croatian language as spoken by the inhabitants of Korcula. That knowledge was to help him very much when he traveled with his father and uncle across south Russia, then inhabited by Slavonic tribes and under Tartar reign. The European languages which Marko learned in his youth were to be the basis for the development of his polyglot talents when he came in touch, in the Far East, with Chinese; this, too, he learned successfully.

Korcula first had a bishop in 1300, which contributed a great deal to the writing and maintenance of the archives, both Church and secular, and some well-known families kept their own archives. Thus, the always rich Korcula tradition passed on by word of mouth, received also written support for the preservation of the collective communal memory, thus giving birth to capable men ready for the adventures of body and spirit in distant worlds.

The oldest written document in which the Polo family is mentioned is a deed of gift dated March 14th 1400. The then duke of Korcula, Mihajlo Musi and three Korcula judges donated to a certain Joannis a building in the town quarter on the eastern side, near the house of Bogavaz Dupolo. It is the exact location of the present "tower of Marko Polo"; from which one can see clearly all the Peljesac Channel; the route of trading vessels from Hellenic times to the present day.

A somewhat older document, from 1430, speaks about the life and work of members of the Polo family in Korcula in the 13th century, mostly featuring the centuries-old tradition of building Korcula style wooden boats, well known in the whole of the Mediterranean. That document is to be found in the private archives of the Kapor family in Korcula. In this, Mate Polo applies to the community of Korcula for a piece of land for his ship-yard, near the place where his grandfathers were building boats. That document is concrete evidence that the Polos were living in Korcula and building the boats even before Marko Polo was alive. Korcula shipyards were situated both on the eastern and western shores adjacent to the fortified medieval town. In this a way, the shipbuilders, working in the vicinity of the city walls, and living inside them, were able to defend their town in case of enemy attack. In the list mentioning ship-builders in 1594, there are 16 ship-wrights from the Polo family, and in the 1810 list, 22. From a legal case of 1778, we learn that the name of the owner of a shipyard in the eastern suburb was Marko Depolo. As the skills of ship-building, as well as

the ownership of the shipyards, were passing from generation to generation, from father to son, various families were for centuries using the same plots for the needs of their workshops. It is evident from the land-registry maps of the past century, and from photos exhibited in the City Museum that Mihovil Depolo, Nikola's son, (1864-1943) was the owner of one of the bigger shipyards on the eastern side ("Borak"), and that Lovro Depolo (1853-1943) was the owner of the biggest shipyard of all on the western side of the town of Korcula ("Sv. Nikola").

The Korculans were not only outstanding ship-builders but also experienced seamen. They excelled, too, as good warriors in many sea battles; among them, members of the Depolo family. Archive material and memorials confirm that the duke of Korcula, Andrea Zane, in 1584, entrusted, among others, Jerolim, Pavle and Nikola Polo, with finding crews for the participation of the town of Korcula in one of the sea battles.

Archive material concerning Korcula reveals also the rich religious life of the Korcul people especially notable in the founding and regular activities of the brotherhoods. These offered, to the various groups belonging to specific crafts, a spiritual refuge and place of relaxation from every day hard work. Like others, the Polos lived an intensive religious life. Bishop of Vinzenza, Mihovil Priuli issued a charter on January 28 1603, for the founding of the brotherhood of St. Michael (Sveti Mihovil). Among the founders, were listed the names of Pavle, Marko, Jakov, sons of Dominik De-Polo, and Vicko and Ivan, sons of Nikola De-Polo. The name of the Franciscan procurator (representative), Marko de Polo, was inscribed on the apple of the silver carrying cross belonging to the Franciscan monastery founded on the island of Badija, near Korcula. The cross was the work of the Sibenik goldsmith, Dobrosevic, whose name was also inscribed on it. The alter painting of St. Ann in the church of All Saints, dating from the beginning of the 17th century, reveals in the text at its base that the painting was the gift of Vinzentie de Polo, presbyter Marko de Polo, and others.

If we walk through the cemetery of Korcula we can see numerous tombs of the Depolo family, dating from the founding of the cemetery to the present day. Outstanding for its beauty is the family vault of Nikola and Rosa Depolo from 1891.

The surname Polo derives from the name Pavao. It was first mentioned in its Croatian form Paulovic (Pavlovic), then in the Latin form De Paulis, Venetian Di Polo, and afterwards remained only Depolo. The earliest mentioned medieval Identification System was the first name and, beside it, the additions, which specified the particular person, differentiating it from others of the same name. The surname appeared only when one of the additions to the name became hereditary. The confirmation of this rule, and that in the case when the surname Polo derives from the name Paulus (Pavao), is found in the following example. The public notary, Jakov Giricic, drew up a will for the ship-builder Paulus (Pavao) in Korcula on February 1st 1565. His surname is not mentioned, only his first name. The original of that will

is now kept in the Historical Museum in Dubrovnik. It is evident from other documents written after the said will (contracts, wills and registers) that the sons of the testator now bear the permanent surname, De Paulis. The grandson of the will-maker, Nikola, bears the surname Di Paulo, and the great grandsons, Ivan and Vicko, whom we find among the founders of the brotherhood of St. Michael, bear the surname De Polo.

A frequent use of the surname in its Croatian form of Paulovic (Pavlovic) is evident from a review of the registers between the 16th and 18th centuries. It is last time mentioned for the February 2nd 1747 when Margarita, daughter of Ivan Paulovich and Vica Foretich, was born. The form of the surname Depolo became common with the birth of Mihovil, son of Marko and Palma, on June 18th 1771. From that time it has been listed in this form only. There is an interesting case of the brothers Marko and Andrija, of whom each uses another form of the surname. The contract made in 1525, between the Korcula builder, Marko Pavlovic and the Korcula chapter house, states that Marko obliged himself to complete the building of the northern aisle of the cathedral in Korcula. However, he died during the building in 1532, and his brother, the priest Andrija, with the surname De Paulis was proclaimed the tutor of his children.

712 persons with the surname Polo-Depolo were born in the period between 1583 and 1946. Domenego di Polo, god-father at the baptism of Vinzenza Ismaelis on June 26th 1583, appears on the very first page of the first registry of births in Korcula. The most impressive survey of the expansion of the surname Polo-Depolo is the list of priors ("gastaldi") of the brotherhood of St. Roko, founded on August 16th 1575. A review of the archives of Dalmatian town-communities reveals that the members of the Polo family, later Depolo, have lived continuously in the town of Korcula for centuries.

With regard to Italian professional literature, the most frequent opinion is that the Polo family comes from Dalmatia. Such a claim is evidenced in the manuscript chronicle about Venetian history covering the history of Venice from its beginning until 1446, and also in the book *Le vite dei dogi* (The Lives of the Dukes), published in Venice in 1522. The same thesis is expounded in later Italian literature, as for example in *Biografia universale antica e moderna* from 1882 and *Storia di Venezia* from 1848.

Today, there are Depolos living outside Korcula - in Dubrovnik, Split, Rijeka, Zagreb, Athens, Ismir, New Zealand, USA, Chile and Argentina. All of them originate from Korcula, and have family connections with their Korcula relatives.

All the facts mentioned lead to the conclusion that Korcula is the town of the Polo family - Paulovic (Pavlovic) - De Polo - Di Polo - Depolo g continuously in the period from the 13th century, and according to verbal tradition even much earlier, until the present day. At the same time Korcula is the town from which many members of this family have gone to other towns and other countries. Some of them return and some of them spend their whole lives

in the new environment. If the above written documents, especially those printed in Venice, say explicitly that the family of Marko Polo comes from Dalmatia, all available historical sources confirm that Korcula is, without any doubt, the town of origin of the family called POLO - DEPOLO.

The centuries-old oral tradition - handed down by word of mouth in songs, proverbs, stories, legends - connects Marko Polo and Korcula; in the development of writing, the organization of authority, education, and culture. This cedes place gradually to written evidence in the form of archives, manuscripts, contracts, deed of gifts, registry of births, deaths and marriages, and, in the recent times, in the form of literary works. So the legend of Marko Polo expands ever further, and more and more it is taken over by visual and written media: television programmes, expert and popular periodicals, tourist reviews, and set books all over the world. Marko Polo and Korcula become an inseparable structural pair in which each pole enriches and ennobles the other.

Million - a Wondrous Book about the Wonders of the World

Marko Polo described his voyage and his life cycle in the book Million in the French language, which he dictated to a writer of knightly romances, one Rusticiano or Rustichello from Pisa, while in the Genoese prison after the battle off Korcula in 1298.

Marko Polo manifested in this book his undisputed talent as a great story teller, inquiring traveller, connoisseur of various races and culture, historian, cartographer ... The original title of the book "Description of the World" speaks about Marko's ambition that his book becomes an extensive cosmography, a complete account of the then unknown biggest continent - Asia. It is "one of the greatest books of all times". Marko's descriptions and remarks are very objective and self-reticent.

The notes, which he was jotting down for more than 25 years, served him well in presenting in detail the great variety customs and people, of which many are bordering on the fantastic. His cultural approach to various races, peoples, and religions is, for the thirteenth century, outside any of the established canons. He was always impressed by beauty - of woman, character, landscape.

The narration of the book follows quite closely the real voyage of the Polos, but it branches often into descriptions of places which he had not visited himself but about which he heard from his friends. Typical digressions are those about Mesopotamia, the Assassins and their castles, Samarkand, Siberia, Japan, India, Ethiopia and Madagascar. The basic structure of the book is a quest for the Grail. The hero of medieval romance, in this case one young Venetian and Korculan, Marko Polo, goes in search of the far away worlds and for exciting adventures which will reveal his talents, bring him glory, eventually to return in his orbiting cycle to the place from which he started his voyage.

Million - a Long Voyage

It was in Venice in 1269 that the Polos settled after Marko's birth. When Nikola and Mate Polo returned after fifteen years of trading in Asia back to Europe, Marko was fifteen years old and his mother had died a long time previously. Marko listened with enthusiasm to their stories about the wonders and riches of China. His joy knew no bounds when he learned that he was going with them on the next journey. In the summer of 1271, Marko, at the age of seventeen years, embarked with his father and uncle on the galley and gazed with

melancholy at the contours of Venice which he was not see for twenty four years, but he would be seeing more of the world than any man of his time. Navigating along the eastern side of the Adriatic Sea - the usual route of Venetian galleys in the Adriatic - Marko passed near his native Korcula, where he probably stopped to greet numerous relatives, and near which he was to pass again in 26 years time. No sea monsters, in which medieval travellers believed, appeared on their journey across the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean, neither did the pirates who usually threatened Venetian boats. After a fey days voyage, the Polos espied the fortified walls of Acra, a Palestinian stronghold, which was fortified by the crusaders and where pilgrims stopped on their visit to the Holy Tomb in Jerusalem. Walking inside the walls of Acra Marko gazed in wonder at the spires and palaces, as well as at the richly clothed noblemen.

His dreams about the heroes of the knightly romances became a reality. Then the Polos went to Jerusalem to satisfy a request of Kublai Khan to bring him holy oil from Jesus's tomb. The Polos were just preparing to continue the journey, when a messenger caught up with them and brought them good news. Their longtime friend, the pope's legate Theobald was proclaimed Pope Gregorius X and was waiting for them in Acra. Despite his great authority he could not satisfy the request of Kublai Khan to send him a hundred friars to help him in the education of his people. He gave them only two Dominicans, but they escaped and asked for the protection of the templars when they heard that Mamelucs, previously slaves and now the masters of Egypt, were ravaging their way towards them.

The Polos had already loaded their ships with their main equipment, particularly with big quantities of quartz, when they heard about the serious wars in the region of Iraq. So then the trading group continued their voyage by land towards Asia Minor, and then to Turkmania (present-day Anatolia), which was famous for its beautiful carpets. Marko, until then, had only heard about flying carpets in the romantic stories told him at bedtime, and now he had the opportunity to see them in their fascinating colours and touch them by hand.

The Turkomans were citizens of the Great Khan, and Marko was especially impressed by their tolerance. Everybody could worship any god or religion, as long as obeyed the laws. That was great news for Marko and a pleasant surprise, as there was a great religious intolerance in Europe in his time.

The Polos small caravan would sometimes join a bigger caravan, and so they proceeded towards Armenia. Marko was enthusiastic about Mount Ararat, at the foot of which they slept, as it was the resting place of Noah and his ark.

They then went towards the southwest and entered Zorzania (today's Georgia). Marko saw there a geyser which jetted out a big quantity of oil, which he said was used for firing candles and for curing rash. Marko, as a typical European of his age, did not know that the Egyptians,

Romans and Persians had used oil for lighting, heating and even for impermeables. Also that the Chinese had learned to drill oil wells 200 years B.C.. With their bronze drills and bamboo panellings they penetrated more than one thousand metres deep. However, Marko was among the first in the western world to report that these were deposits of oil in the region of the Caspian Sea.

Marko mentions the Nestorian Christians who were scattered all over Asia and were spreading the Christian doctrine which averred that Christ has two natures: divine and human. This was unacceptable to the European Catholics of that time, who considered that Christ had only a divine nature. However, the Nestorians had founded their Church in China A.D. 638, almost a thousand years before the first Jesuit missionaries started to come there. Marko was to mention them later many times. They got their name from the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, who was deposed as a heretic in A.D. 431.

Next, Marko describes Baghdad, the most romantic and mysterious town of the East, although it is not quite sure if he visited it himself. He told the story of how the Khan of Levant occupied Baghdad in 1258 and how he captured the khalif of Baghdad and asked him to eat gold, which he had amassed in enormous quantities on account of his soldiers' wages.

Travelling at the average speed of ten miles a day, the Polos reached the Persian town of Saba (southwest of present-day Tehran). Marko was sightseeing and showed great interest in the magnificent holding the bodies of the three kings who had gone to Bethlehem to bow in front of the new born Christ. Their beards and their hair were still intact.. While in Saba, Marko also visited the sect of the admirers of fire, who were followers of the ancient Persian religion founded by the teacher Zoroaster. Marko explains the origins of that religion by expounding the allegorical story about the box which new the born Christ gave to the three kings. There was a stone in the box, but as they did not know its significance they threw it away. The stone transformed itself immediately into fire and flames. The kings took some fire to their homes, worshiped it as God and offered sacrifices to it. Fire as the symbol of new birth and purification is used in many ancient religions and pagan rituals. In the Catholic liturgy, new fire is connected with the rebirth of Jesus Christ. It has become the anthropological archetype which connects many races and cultures, and it is used often in literature as the structural principle of narration which opens up new visions and adventures to the literary hero. Marko Polo realized the importance of fire for ancient religions, and he uses its description in his story own as well.

Nikola and Mate Polo, together with Nikola's son Marko, came to Kerman, the town known for its spears, swords and other tempered arms made from fine steel, and also for its fine laces depicting various birds and animals, which was woven by women. Climbing cold mountain peaks over three thousand metres high and descending into warm valleys, Marko had the opportunity to see animals in the form of oxen with a hump and a kind of sheep

which had a tail of more than fifteen kilos. After they had joined a bigger caravan, they experienced an attack by the wild tribe of Karauns amidst the dusty mist. Marko heard stories of how the Karauns conjured up dust on purpose by means of their diabolical chants. The Polos managed to escape from these wild tribes, but they decided to make the rest of the journey by sea. For that purpose they went to the port of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Unlike the poor Iranian plateau, they found themselves in a land full of dates and parrots. They met tradesmen who were offering spices, pearls, linen embroidered with gold, ivory tusks and other goods brought from India. There was such unbearable heat in Hormuz that people spent their whole morning in the nearby river, protecting themselves from the sand which was brought by the wind. Marko heard how that wind, the "simun", has such a tremendous force that it once suffocated the entire army of an enemy which was marching towards Hormuz. The bodies of the soldiers became so fragile that they crumbled into dust. Although Marko's story is incredible, the travellers after him confirmed it. However, when some of the passengers saw the ships in which they had to sail further on towards the Indian ocean and heard about the storms which raged there, they lost any wish to proceed by sea.

They returned to Kerman and from there they went by the famous Silk Road, along which all trade with China was travelling. That was also the way by which Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity were spreading. On their way they faced immediately a great desert full of poisonous green water. After a few weeks spent in the desert they reached Tunocain in which the "most beautiful women in the world" lived. Or perhaps it only seemed so to Marko after such difficult days in the desert!

Marko was even more impressed by the story about the sect of Assassins who spread horror over a large part of Asia for more than one century. Their ruler was the "Old man from the mountain", who built a fortified castle in the mountains of Persia, south of the Caspian Sea. He arranged gardens of exuberant vegetation, fruit trees, flowers and fragrant bushes and murmuring streams. Luxurious pavilions were built around the gardens equipped with attractive paintings and rich carpets. Streams of wine, honey and pure water flowed there, and each of the magnificent houses was the residence of the most beautiful girls, skilful in dancing, singing, making love and playing on various instruments. The great master gathered there strong and bold young men, whom he drugged by drinks of hashish. When they woke up from their paradisiac dreams they believed that they were in paradise itself. Then the Old man from the mountain would ask them to kill his political opponents and promised to return them again into the paradisiac valley if they executed his cruel ideas. As they fulfilled all his tasks without objection, the word started to spread that the Old man had a divine power. Among other great personalities they killed the Persian shah, Grand Vizier of Egypt, two caliphs of Baghdad, several leading crusaders and many outstanding rulers. Only the Mongols, after three years of laying siege to the castle and after killing their ruler, managed to annihilate that dangerous sect of killers, who, like the heroes from medieval romances

went in quest of the Grail, that luxurious paradisiac garden of pleasures and delights. Marko told in detail that wondrous story which so excited his romantic and narrative imagination.

From Tunocain the Polos went towards Balkh, in northern Afghanistan, where the trade routes between West and East cross. Balkh was still lying in ruins after Genghis Khan had destroyed it completely in 1222. Then, after twelve days journeying they came in front of the mountain chain where the precious white salt was extracted. Behind the mountains lay the province of Badakhstan, famous for its mines of rubies and sapphires. The clever king of that province restricted the digging of rubies in order to keep up their value. Marko describes shortly his year-long fever which he cured by changing the air and by staying in the mountains.

After Marko's recovery, the small caravan of Europeans entered the valley of Kashmir, of which Marko says that it is full of shamans who practised black magic. Marko met these shamans later at the court of Kublai Khan.

Continuing their way towards the southeast, our travellers climbed the lofty Pamirs, where three big mountain chains meet, which the local people call the Top of the World. Among the wild animals that Marko noticed there, were huge sheep with curled horns more than one metre long. That 'king' of sheep later got a Latin name in Marko's honour, *Ovis poli*. The mountains were more than 5,000 metres high so there were no birds at their peaks. Marko noticed that the air was so diluted that fire gave less heat and they could not cook their food properly.

The caravan reached the ancient town of Khotan, well-known for its deposits of semi-precious stone nephrite of various colours, from which many decorative objects were made. The travellers were following the southern arm of the Silk Road and thus came to one of the biggest deserts in the world, Takla Makan (in present-day Sinkiang province). There were twenty resting places across the desert, but water was rare and not always drinkable. Our travellers were finding human and animal bones, which laid the foundation for many fearful stories about that big desert. Marko used to listen with great interest how some passengers would sometimes lag behind their caravan and then start to hear voices and see the false figures of their fellow-travellers. Sometimes they would hear music, singing or the clanking of arms. That would lead them in a completely different direction from the caravan, and often to death. Although at the time many people did not believe in Marko's stories, they proved later to be true. The sounds heard by straying travellers came from the falling of sand heaps among the dunes, so that these regions are called "sand which sings". The visions are created by waves of heat and because of the parched thirst of the travellers. Later they were called mirages.

Marko's prose is given poetic beauty by the mixture of dream and waking, reality and imagination, probable and improbable, explicable and inexplicable. Marko's narrative

technique became a model for many writers who did not have the opportunity to experience such interesting adventures as Marko Polo did.

After thirty days of travelling through the desert, the caravan of the Polos arrived in the town of Shachau, which means in Chinese "sandy region", situated in the province of Tangut and belonging to the Great Khan. This fortified city was founded in the seventh century by the first emperor of the T'ang dynasty. Although the Nestorian Christians and Saracens lived there, the majority were "idolaters", as Marko called them. They spoke "unusual" language, made a livelihood from agriculture, and they are bad tradesmen. They built a great number of monasteries and churches full of idols, to whom they worshiped and offered the sacrifices. As a way of baptizing their children, the idolaters killed a large ram offering it to the idol with great ceremony and praying for the well-being of their children. "If you will believe them" - as Marko says - the idol will feed on that meat, while a part of that meat the idolaters took home. The idolaters also offered similar sacrifices in food to their dead before cremating them. The family of the dead would build a small wooden hut, swathed in silk and gold, on the path leading to the place of burning. When the funeral procession passed by that hut it would stop there, and wine, meat and other food would be brought out, "all that in the conviction that the dead person would be paid the same attention in the other world". The relatives would wait for the procession to arrive at the place of burning with prepared figures of people, horses, camels, and with small round pieces cut out from parchment in the form of golden coins, putting them on the fire together with the body. Because they believed that the deceased would, in the other world, receive as many servants, cattle and "soldi", an equal number of parchment substitutes were burned together with them. Before the burning, the astrologers were invited and informed of the year, day and hour of the birth of the deceased. After the astrologers had determined under which constellation planet and sign the deceased was born, they proclaimed the day on which he should be burned. The body was kept, until that day, in the house and in a coffin of thick and nicely coloured plates. To prevent decay they put camphor and spices in the coffin, and filled the fissures with tar and lime. They laid a table with food in front of the deceased because they believed that his soul came every day to eat and drink. When the day determined by the astrologers arrived, the deceased was ritually burnt with the greatest honours.

Marko Polo depicts faithfully the ceremonies of burning the dead, although he does not believe very much in their utility. Later anthropological investigation found that the ceremonies of burning the dead have been known in many civilizations without regard to the level of their development. Fire destroys the material part of the victim, purifies it and liberates it from its material chains in order that its soul comes in contact with the gods. It transforms the material properties of man into immaterial essence, making him closer to the divinity and opening the door of heaven for him. The Sicilian philosopher Empedoclo, who proclaimed himself god while alive, is said to have jumped into the fiery crater of Etna in order to confirm his divine mission. Although Marko Polo, as an educated Christian, speaks

with an ironic smile about the idolaters who believe in more gods, he notices exactly the role of fire in the rituals of the so called primitive peoples. By means of the phenomenon of fire and the ritual ceremony of eating they incorporated themselves into the eternal circle of birth, dying and rebirth and thus gave sense to life on earth.

Marko's travels continued along the mountains of Karakorum and diverged a little towards the south, where Marko admired the unusual ox yak and musk bull. When the Polos were at a distance of forty days from their goal - court of Kublai Khan - his escort waited for them and lead them to his magnificent summer residence in the town of Shangtu (in Chinese a "higher court"). Thus they made the last stretch of their great journey into the unknown in royal style. Marko was excited by the splendour and magnificence of the royal palace with its marble walls with gilded rooms and the exceptional paintings of people, horses, wild animals, birds, and trees. The palace was situated in a park enclosed by a twenty kilometre long wall. The Khan kept there a stud of 10,000 white horses and mares. The milk from the mares served the Khan and his family for drinking. A special tribe kept the horses, but nobody else was to drink the milk when the Khan was in his summer palace. The Khan stayed there during the summer heat only, and then he toured other big towns in China. While looking at the beautiful palace in Shangtu, Marko was convinced that he had come to an exotic and rich land, where he would be able to devote himself, as would do his father and his uncle, successfully to trade.

The beauty of the Khan's summer residence can best be illustrated by the verses of the English romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He fell asleep one day in 1816, after he had read about the travels of Marko Polo, and dreamed a dream which he transposed into a poem the following morning. He called the park in Shangtu Xanadu. Kubla Khan

In Xanadu did KUBLA KHAN
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where ALPH, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice six miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Emfoling sunny spots of greenery.

As Marko's journey proceeded, there appeared more and more signs of prosperity. The land was cultivated. The Chinese population was on a high level of civilization and, although submitting to the Mongol military leaders, they kept their own customs. Although they lost many citizens, the Chinese remained different from their invaders. At that time China was struggling in a sea of troubles and disturbances. The Sung dynasty was peaceful and paid ransoms to various conquerors. When the eastern half of China fell under the Mongol reign, the emperor's court moved to Nanking and then to Hangzhou. That ruling dynasty raised Chinese culture and civilization to a high level but was unable to resist the strong attacks of Genghis Khan and his very bellicose successor, Ogodai. The southern dynasty of Sung fell just before Marko's arrival in China. The Kubla Khan was preoccupied with strengthening his rule and he looked favourably at Chinese culture. Marko took note of the very efficient Chinese organization of society and heard about the many good deeds of previous Chinese emperors. The Chinese had an advanced feeling for belonging to the community and for the care of all members of society, distinguishing them from the simpler and tougher Mongols.

Marko Polo, although under the influence of his medieval western education which supported a social organization based on the mutually opposed poles: nobleman/plebeian, man/woman, native/foreigner, priest/faithful, physician/patient, landlord/shepherd, divinity/mortal ..., realized more and more the value of the Chinese idea of social and economic stability and common harmony. Marko was very much interested in religion and its customs. After meeting, on his journey, several groups of Nestorians, various tribes of idolaters, Muslims, he was enchanted in China by a variant of Buddhism, mahajana-buddhism. He was impressed especially by their rituals with the multitude of priests or lamas. They used, while preaching, wooden or metal rollers with an axis, with prayers written on them. You could say that these were the forerunners of present-day TV invisible screens from which broadcasters read their text.

Marko's caravan came to the very door of the Chinese capital, which was then called Khanabalik; this was the time of the Yuan dynasty.

Million - At the Court of Kublai-Khan

When the two brothers, Nikola and Mate Polo, this time together with young Marko, found themselves again in this big town, they went straight to the emperor's palace where they saw the ruler in the company of a great number of dignitaries. They bowed in front of him with the greatest respect. The Khan ordered them to get up and expressed his great joy at seeing them again. They showed him the letters and the credentials which they had received from the Pope and they handed him, as they had promised, the holy oil from Christ's tomb.

Then the Khan saw Marko, who was by then twenty one years old and asked: "Who is that young and handsome young man?" "Your majesty", replied Nikola Polo, "this is my son and your servant." The Great Khan replied "He is welcome and it pleases me much."

In the time of Marko Polo, Peking was a densely populated town. The tradesmen and the citizens of all possible professions had their own quarters. There was a special quarter for about 20,000 prostitutes, who were treated with respect because they were considered persons of social significance in a big city. The body guards of the Great Khan numbered 10,000 people. Roads lead from the capital to various parts of China. Every region was properly noted in the official books, as well as the distance from Peking to every town and village of the empire. Marko was impressed especially by the Khan's courier service on horseback which could bring him information from the most distant part of the huge country in a few days. This was possible due to courier stations where both horse and horsemen were exchanged. In this way message could travel about 500 kilometres in one day. Besides the couriers on horseback there existed a postal service run by messengers. They would carry small objects from place to place along a system of roads. Every horseman and messenger would be given permission to pass in the form of a small plaque on which was written where he came from and in which direction he was going. When he reached one station he would show his plaque and take another which would serve him as permission to pass until the next station. Any mistake, and its maker, was revealed in such a way. According to Marko's opinion there were 10,000 stations in China and at least 300,000 horses. He expressed his doubts in his book that Europeans would believe in these inconceivable numbers.

The fortified inner town was situated inside Khanabalik (Peking); here stood the emperor's palace, halls and gardens. The walls of the palace were decorated with carved and gilded dragons and paintings of birds, animals and war scenes. The roof shone in the sunshine with its spectrum of colours: yellow-red, azure blue, green and violet. Not far from the palace was an artificial hill, about thirty metres high and more than a thousand metres in circumference. On it Kublai Khan ordered the most beautiful trees from all over the world to be planted. On the top of the hill, called Green mount, there was a magnificent pavilion where the Great Khan used to go to refresh his spirit. At the foot of the Green mount, there was a big lake in which all kinds of fish were swimming intended for the Khan's table. The Khan's four wives were living inside the palace. Numerous concubines were also living close to the Khan in the palace, and about thirty would be chosen every year among the most beautiful girls from Kungurat, the province known for its beautiful women. The parents considered the choice of their daughter for the Khan's concubine as the greatest possible happiness.

However, Marko was most impressed by the banquets of Kublai Khan, which were taking place in the halls for six thousand people. The Great Khan would be sitting on an elevated pedestal, and beside him, on an enormous table, was a big jar of pure gold filled with wine. There were also jars of kumiss and other drinks. Kublai Khan preferred kumiss which was

prepared for him exclusively from the herd of white mares. As the Khan drew the vessel to his lips, musicians would start to play and everybody would kneel down until the Great Khan had finished his drink. When eating was done entertainers and dancers would amuse the guests until dawn.

The great annual spectacle was the Khan's birthday, September 28th. 20,000 noblemen attended, all in golden habits, ornamented with jewels and pearls of enormous value. Another court celebration was the New Year. The Great Khan would receive on that day gifts in the form of gold, silver, precious stones and beautiful horses from the whole empire. Sometimes he would amass a hundred thousand horses. All were of white colour which was considered exceptionally lucky. Up to five thousand elephants would be in the procession, wrapped in silk linen quilted with golden filigree. After the procession, the rulers, noblemen, and high clerks would gather in the great hall. One of the dignitaries would stand on an elevated platform and cry: "Bow down and worship!", and everybody had to bow until his forehead touched the floor. Then they would treat themselves with abundant food and drinks amidst great merriment.

The Great Khan was enormously respected. Everybody coming within 500 metres from him had to lower his voice and behave humbly. If somebody had an invitation to the palace, he had to take off his shoes and put on white leather slippers before he entered the palace. If he wished to spit he had to take with him a small covered vessel.

Marko was also fascinated by the method of heating. As the Chinese used to take baths three times a week in summer and every day in winter, the Mongols took on that habit from them. They therefore needed a big quantity of fuel in the form of "black stones", which was burning, Marko says, from the evening until the next morning.

Marko describes Kublai Khan as a benevolent dictator. He wished his subjects, of whom the majority were peasants, to live a decent life. Kublai Khan was shrewd enough to express his benevolence not only as a trait of his character but as a useful principle as well. His own income depended on the destiny of the peasants. If storms, blight or locusts devastated their harvest, he would liberate them from paying taxes and give them corn both for sowing and for food. To secure himself from a period of dearth, he would store big quantities of corn when it was abundant. If a family experienced a disaster it would be given as much food and clothes as it had the previous year. Children without a family home were brought up in special institutions, and many hospitals were also built. His officials were distributing thirty five thousand dishes of rice and barley to those who needed it most. Such a policy was very distant from the Mongol scorn for the poor, and was closer to the then Chinese moral principles about help for the needy.

A very significant mark of Kublai's efforts was the building of the Great Canal, which stretched from Peking to Hangchow. He also planted trees on both sides of every big road.

Kublai Khan knew how to connect the useful with the beautiful. He encouraged the development of various sciences as well. So he built observatories for the astrologers and astronomers who were very much esteemed then in China. He also showed a great tolerance towards various religions, which was also not only the expression of his character but also a useful approach which prevented conflicts in the empire. He asked the Christian Bible to be brought to him for Easter and Christmas, which he would then kiss. He also worshiped Saracen, Jewish and Buddhist feast days. When asked why he did so he answered: "I respect and honour all four great Prophets: Jesus Christ, Mohamed, Moses and Buddha, so that I can appeal to any one of them in heaven."

Marko liked to watch at the magician's skills of the Buddhist lamas, who mostly came from Tibet. He says that they could stop storms, and he was most impressed when one of them made a vessel containing wine fly from the table into Kublai's hand and back to the table again, after the Khan had drunk it.

Marko was advancing excellently in learning Mongol customs and military skills. He learned several Asian languages in a very short time and excelled in wisdom. The ruler of China noticed immediately his common sense, and was also impressed by his looks and behaviour. He ordered him to be his envoy in a province that was six months by caravan journey away from the capital. On his return, Marko described to the Great Khan all he saw and reported to him the work he had done for him. The ruler was delighted by Marko's intelligent report and Marko Polo, after that time, enjoyed great favour and affection from the Great Khan. The ruler ordered that all must address him by the title "master Marko Polo". So our great traveller remained seventeen years in the service of the Great Khan.

Marko gradually became one of the most devoted dignitaries to Kublai Khan. Realizing how much the Khan was interested in the customs of the peoples of his empire, Marko carefully noted all his observations and experiences so that the official reports were transformed into interesting stories. Unlike the legendary Sheherazade, who delayed her death with her story telling to the cruel shah, Marko Polo was achieving, by his report-stories, greater and greater respect in the eyes of his master and so he became a kind of court writer. But the Great Khan knew how to use other talents of the young Marko. He pointed out, in his descriptions, to the abilities of various provincial rulers, and their shortcomings, and provided the Khan with a knowledge of trade, geography and governing. The Great Khan used this as the basis for his policy for the controlling of the distant regions within the enormous area of his empire. So Marko visited Burma and Korea, and came to Tibet and India. Wherever Marko Polo arrived he found prosperous communities, each of them trying to make use of its economic advantages. As skilful businessman, Marko noticed the advantage of using paper money in some places. This was an entirely new thing introduced by Kublai Khan. He issued special banknotes made of strong thick paper which was produced by pounding the bark of mulberry trees. The paper was cut to the desired size, reliefs were impressed inside and the

cliches were done. The banknotes were stamped in the imperial palace with special colours, diluted in red ink. This paper money could be exchanged for gold of equal value instantly. After five years all banknotes were withdrawn from use. As the buying power of money decreased over the years, so its value in circulation also decreased. Thus the Great Khan fought inflation. Paper money was used in the provinces which today comprise the regions of modern China, whereas the hunting peoples of the Siberian north and various tribes of the far away south used a more primitive way of paying, with snails for example. Marko, however, was not conscious of the epoch making discovery which consisted in the fact that money was printed. This had been known in China since the ninth century. But he was especially delighted to see on his travels that the Mongol rulers did not destroy Chinese culture. Not only did they not destroy the towns but they respected the imprisoned Chinese emperor and his main wife and gave him a palace. There they continued to live isolated but in luxury. The Mongols adopted the basic ideas of Chinese philosophy, which distinguished man from things, so that they were only killing their opponents if it was necessary for the achievement of their strategic aims.

Marko Polo arrived in Burma as the official envoy of Kublai Khan in 1278, one year after the big battle between the kings of Burma and Bengal and the Mongol army. He describes that great event which took place in the plain of Vochan. The Mongols were approaching that valley with 12,000 well-equipped horsemen to face a much bigger Burmese army of 60,000 horsemen and infantry-men and 2,000 elephants. When the Mongol soldiers saw the elephants they were so scared that they turned back and started to gallop to the rear. Then the Mongol captain had the salutary idea of making the horsemen dismount from the horses and tie them to trees in the nearby wood. His soldiers then started to shoot at the elephants hitting their vulnerable parts with numerous arrows, which was the Mongol's favourite weapon. The elephants started to run away towards the wood with enormous noise, while the wooden "castles" on their backs, holding twelve to sixteen well-armed warriors, were falling down while striking the branches of the trees. When the Mongols saw that the elephants ran away, they mounted their horses again and began to chase the enemy. Then a fierce battle occurred. "Then might you see swashing blows dealt and taken from sword and mace; then might you see knights and horses and men-at-arms go down; then might you see arms and hands and legs and heads hewn off: and beside the dead that fell, many a wounded man, that never rose again, for the sore press there was. The din and uproar were so great from this side and that, that God might have thundered and no man would have heard it!" After the battle the Mongol commander took some elephants to Kublai Khan and from that time he always included them in his armies. Kublai Khan knew how to use them better than the Burmese king.

Marko's second important mission took him to the province of Manzi. This was an independent province in southeast China, which Marko describes as the richest province of the Eastern world. Immediately after Marko's arrival there Kublai's general, Bayan, crushed

its resistance to the Mongol force, forcing the minor king and his queen-mother to recognize Mongol reign. Both were spared their lives, and the new Son of heaven did not humiliate them. Marko tells of how the Queen only consented to give up the struggle when she heard that the commander of the Mongolian army was called Bayan-Hundred Eyes. Their astrologers had earlier predicted that the man with hundred eyes would bereave them of their kingdom. The city of Yangchou lay within the same province; it was one of the biggest towns in the province, and Marko served there as a governor. Is it because of Marko's modesty that he speaks little about that town and nothing about his experiences as the governor?

However, with all his modesty and cautiousness he could not avoid mentioning the greatest event in which himself, Master Polo, and Masters Nikola and Mate took part directly. The Mongol army laid siege for three years to the rich silk town Sa-yan-fu (Siang-yang-fu) but did not manage to capture it because of the ditches filled with water that encircled it. The Great Khan himself was with the majority of his army in the vicinity of the town. Messengers told him that their siege could not succeed because the town received its victuals from the areas they could not occupy. But the Khan ordered them to find some solution. Then the two brothers Polo and their son - then already an experienced Khan's diplomat - appeared on the stage and said: " Oh Great Prince, among our co-travellers are people who know how to construct catapults which will throw such big stones that the town will not be able to withstand the siege and they will give up immediately when mangonels and trebuchets start to hit the town." Khan begged them to construct these catapults as quickly as possible, although he had never heard of them before nor had he seen them. Then the three Polos started to work, ordered wood in big quantities, and sought out among the co-travellers there were a Nestorian Christian and a German who knew well how to build this efficient weapon. They built three catapults each of which could carry a stone of 150 kilos. The emperor insisted that they tried them in his presence, and when he saw the orbit of the stone he was delighted. Then he ordered the catapults to be brought to his camp in the vicinity of Sa-yan-fu. When the apparatuses were ready, one big stone was shot from each catapult to the town. They destroyed several buildings and caused panic among the population. The leaders of the besieged town began to consider what to do, but the opinion prevailed that it was some kind of magic and that they would all be killed if they continued to resist. They declared that they were ready to surrender under the same conditions as other towns and to become loyal citizens of the Great Khan. "So the men of the city surrendered, and were received on terms; and this all came about through the exertions of Messers Nicolo, Maffeo, and Marco; and it was no small matter. For this city and province is one of the best that the Great Khan possesses, and brings him in great revenues."

But Marko Polo was not interested only in the battles. With his Mediterranean curiosity he admired even more the achievements of Chinese civilization, and he had unique opportunity to get acquainted with it at the peak of its glory. He was impressed especially by the

"Heavenly city" of Kinsai, on the river of Yangtze, which he calls Coromoran. That city was saved from destruction by the Great Khan so that Marko experienced it in all its magnificence. The town extended in area more than a hundred kilometres and had 1,600,000 families, 12,000 stone bridges, which were so high that a big fleet could pass under them. There were twelve guilds, and each of them had 12,000 craftsmen's buildings, in each of which 20 to 40 craftsmen worked. They also supplied other big Chinese towns with their products. The number of tradesmen and the town's wealth is unknown. They lived in the greatest luxury and their wives did no any physical work but enjoyed their luxurious robes and various entertainments. "These women are indeed very noble and angelic creatures!" There is a lake inside the town of almost fifty kilometres in area. Beautiful palaces are erected around it, as well as many churches. There are two islands in the middle of the lake, and a large building is built on each of them, equipped as the emperor's palace. Any citizen can use it for a wedding or some other ceremony. Sometimes a hundred different feasts take place in these buildings. There are also luxurious apartments in them, where guests can sleep after the banquet. There are many pleasure boats for relaxation on the lake, on which the citizens of Kinsai embark after a work. When the Great Khan occupied that town he ordered a the guard of ten people to be on each bridge in case of trouble. Each watchman had a hollow instrument of wood and metal on which they struck every hour, day and night. Special precautions were taken in case of fire because there were many wooden houses in the town. The guards watched lest someone lighted a fire at an inappropriate time and without care. If this happened the offender was severely punished. There is a big tower in the middle of the town on which a wooden plaque hangs. When fire appears somewhere, the watchman strikes the plaque with the hammer so that the sound can be heard everywhere. All streets are paved by stone or brick. But the earth is left unpaved at the sides of the paving in order that the Khan's horses may gallop. The main street is paved with two parallel ways of which each is ten paces wide. A space of fine pebble is left in the middle and under it arched conduits take water into the canals. Thus the road is always dry. The city of Kinsai has 3,000 baths to which water is brought from a source. There are hot baths which people can enjoy several times a month. "These are the most beautiful baths in the world; large enough for 100 persons to bathe in together. The ocean is only 40 kilometres from the town at a place called Gan-fu, where there is a town and an excellent harbour. Many merchant ships from India and other countries come there. And the great river Coromoran (Yangtze) flows from the city of Kinsai to that sea port, so that ships can sail to the city itself." Marko was so impressed by the outside appearance of the town that he hardly noticed that Kinsai was one of the greatest centres of culture, education and art the world has ever known. There were more books in the libraries of Kinsai in Marko's time than in the whole of the rest of Asia.

Million - Return to Europe - Travelling by Sea

Marko Polo spent seventeen years in the service of Kublai Khan. Those were the best years of his life, filled with exciting happenings, merchant business, diplomatic missions, love affairs. His father and his uncle also experienced the greatest honours and received prizes for their cleverness in trading and for their fidelity to the greatest ruler of the then world, the powerful Mongol political magician, Emperor Kublai Khan. But their life-cycle and the adult years of Marko Polo had to end in their native soil of Europe and in their homeland Venice, the powerful trading republic to which they had come from the ancient region of Dalmatia and the small Mediterranean town of Korcula.

They communicate their decision to Kublai Khan with a heavy heart. The Khan at that time was already seventy five years old. There was a great risk that the Great Khan would not release them from his service, because the Polos, and especially the young Marko, were dear to his heart. He had got used to them as extremely capable and not just ordinary persons coming from another civilization that, though it had not achieved the level of civilization of the greatest Asian country, China, from whom just the same he learned a lot. However, as always on their Odyssey through Asia, fortune smiled at them at the right moment. Bolgana, the first wife of the Persian khan Arghun wanted, before her death, a woman from her tribe in Mongolia to succeed her. Therefore, Arghun sent, in 1286, three messengers to Khanabalik asking the kindly Kublai Khan to choose a new wife for him among the beautiful Mongol girls. Kublai chose the princess Cocachin, a seventeen year old beauty. But the messengers, together with Cocachin, had to return to Khanabalik, because war broke out between the Mongol tribes en route. Marko Polo had then just returned from his successful mission in India. The Persian messengers suggested that he might help them to return to Persia by sea. Kublai Khan, although reluctantly, agreed to part company with his faithful dignitaries. He proclaimed the Polos his envoys to the Pope and the European kings and he gave them the small imperial plaque as a permit to secure them safe passage across his big empire. He ordered thirteen ships and enough food and equipment for two years of travel to be put at their disposal. Marko was amazed when he saw these big and powerful ships which were to carry them on their long journey. These were ships built with a double layer of planking, fastened with iron nails, and caulked with oakum. And since the Chinese had no pitch, the boats were coated on the bottom with a paste of quicklime and tung oil. There were sixty cabins in the interior of the boats, and the hold of the ship was divided by bulkheads into small, watertight compartments. In case whales rammed the vessel, the crew could confine the water to one compartment only, remove the cargo from it and repair the damage. This safety measure was not introduced into European vessels until the nineteenth century. As well as the big ships there sailed tug-boats with them in case of need. There were also, on each of the big boats, several smaller ones for fishing, anchoring and other

work. The captain, with a crew of three hundred people, enjoyed really royal benefits and was regarded as a divinity.

So the convoy of the Polos, with the princess Cocachin, and with at least two thousand people, left the port of Zayton in spring 1292.

Polo interrupts his story at this point to disclose to us what he had heard about the mysterious island 1,500 miles away from the Asian continent. He calls it Chipangu (modern Japan) and speaks with admiration about its great richness. He mentions the imperial palace with the golden roof, and with floors and windows of golden plaques, and about the abundance of pink pearls which are put in the mouth of the dead before a funeral. Marko's description of the richness of Japan excited the imagination of the European discoverers of the new world - among others of Christopher Columbus, and the cartographer Toscanelli, whose map was used by Columbus, and which put Japan seven thousand miles west of Portugal. At that time, the famous European discoverers did not have the slightest idea that Japan is double that distance away from Europe, and that, between it and Europe there is a whole continent, North America. The famous Kublai Khan heard also about the richness of Japan and sent there two armies of 150,000 Mongol and Korean soldiers combined. They managed to establish a bridgehead on the island of Kyushu, but the Japanese held them there. Then a storm smashed almost the whole of Kublai's armada. From 4,000 ships only 200 of them managed to escape a terrible destiny. Marko Polo, as Kublai's loyal diplomat explains this rare defeat of his master as due to a dispute between two generals ("barons") who commanded the united forces of the Mongols and the Koreans. However, Kublai's great strength lay in horses, not in boats. Marko speaks also about a curious event which happened to the Khan's soldiers when they managed to disembark on Japanese soil and continued to make war there. When they attacked one of the towers of the defenders they killed all the warriors except eight of them whom they were unable to hurt. They had embedded under their skin gold and precious stones so that no steel could pierce them. European explorers in the nineteenth century confirmed these curious stories of Marko's. That was usual way in which Japanese soldiers tried to be invulnerable.

For two months the Polo's convoy was sailing from the port of Zayton to Indo-china (which Marko calls Champa). The king of Indo-china was paying annual tribute to the Great Khan of twenty elephants and much of the scented aloe wood.

Marko Polo and his escort were forced to stop in Sumatra for five months because of the southwest monsoons. As the natives were cannibals, Marko arranged a ditch filled with water round the camp on the coast and a strong guard. But, due to Marko's diplomatic skill, these cannibals became very friendly and supplied our travellers with food. Then Marko saw, for the first time in his life, "nuts as big as human head" (coconuts), and the tree which gave flour for bread and cakes (sago). Marko says that fish in Sumatra is the best in the world.

Marko's escort drank palm wine after fish. They would put a cup under a cut in the palm tree and the vessel would be filled with white or red wine in a day and a half. Marko wrote that this wine is a cure for the sick spleen. When the cut branch does not give any more wine, the natives water the roots of the tree and wine starts to flow again very soon. The Malayans call this tree "gomuti" and they can also get sugar from it. Marko says that the liquid in the coconut "has a better taste than wine and than any drink that has ever existed". Marko "saw" in Sumatra the mountain tribe whose members had tails like a dog.

Marko discovered divers searching for pearls in the shallow waters near Ceylon. As there were a lot of sharks in these waters, the tradesmen of the pearl shells would protect the divers by hiring a special caste of Brahmin sorcerers who would cast a spell on the sharks while the divers were picking up the shells. However, the sorcerers would remove their spell during the night lest rival divers should appear. It seems that the sorcerers did find some means of deterrence of sharks, as this practice was exercised for centuries.

Sailing towards the coasts of India, Marko Polo's convoy reached the large nearby island of Ceylon. Marko sets here the story about the life of the Indian prince Sakyamuni, who became Buddha and founded the Buddhist religion. He was the son of the king of that big and rich island, who had an inclination towards the life of the saints from his early childhood. The king tried to persuade him to take over his throne. He built for him a big palace and ordered beautiful girls to entertain him with song, dance and other worldly pleasures. However, no girl managed to lure him into the world of pleasure, so that he remained alone, shut in the palace. His father did not allow any old or sick man to approach him, so that the young man was not aware about the inevitable end of every living being. But one day, the ill-fated prince rode to the nearby wood and saw a dead man on the road. When he asked what that thing which lay on the earth was, they told him it was a dead body. "Must all men die?" asked the prince with sorrow. He saw on the same road a toothless old man who could not walk. When he received, in this way, his first experience of the old age and death, the young prince returned to the palace and took a vow that he was going to look after That one who does not die and Who created him. Thus he reached the high mountains where he decided to live an ascetic life. If he were a Christian, Marko says, he would have become "the great saint of our Lord Jesus Christ" due to his good and pure life. When he untimely died, his body was brought in front of his father who loved him very much. The father ordered his servants to make a figure of gold and precious stones in his likeness and decreed that all had to worship it. The inhabitants of Ceylon proclaimed him the greatest of all their gods and they idolised him. Marko adds that the young prince died four times and each time he was reborn as another animal: ox, horse etc. But he was reborn as a god only after he had died eighty four times. Thus the Europeans learned from Marko' story about the noble founder of the Buddhist religion. Although a member of another Church, Marko speaks with sympathy about the young Buddha. He confirms this affection for him by emphasizing that the Great Khan sent for Buddha's relics from his tomb on the top of the mountain.

Marko shows similar benevolence towards the Indian Brahmins and yogis. He says that the Brahmins are the most honest tradesmen in the world, that they never lie and that they help foreigners to sell their goods without profit to themselves. They hate all killing and even the killing of animals. They believe very much in various signs and omens, as shades, and especially the movements of the tarantula spider. He says that yogis believe that all things have souls, and that they do not wish to kill either worm or lice. They do not use plates but they eat from dry leaves and they drink only water. They never mix with women. They sleep naked in nature without any covering and they reach a very old age.

However, Marko liked more the luxurious royal courts than the shacks of the poor. He was especially impressed by the Indian king from the Coromandel coast. The king did not wear any clothes because of the warm climate and he was always adorned with precious decorations; among other things, with a medalion of diamonds, a necklace of 104 pearls and rubies, gold bracelets on hands and legs and with rings on the fingers of both hands and legs. Five hundred women, together with many noblemen, accompanied the king wherever he went. When he died and was cremated, his subjects were throwing themselves in the fire in order to follow him. Marko mentions also the custom of suttee when wives throw themselves on the funeral pyre after their husband.

Marko's frequent observation of the ritual of fire, as the way to achieve the divine life in heaven, speaks also about his restless, fiery temperament which incited him always to thirst after new knowledge and new adventures of both spirit and body.

Although Marko introduced India to Europe, with his accurate observations of the customs and the way of life of Indian inhabitants two centuries before Vasco de Gama - who was later celebrated as the discoverer of that "unknown" subcontinent - he could not ignore the fantastic legends extant before the time of his travels. One such story is about "the island of women" which was visited by men from their own island only in spring time. Another fable is that about the "roc" bird from Madagascar, which was so strong that it could carry three elephants. Even this fantastic story might prove to be true as was the case with other descriptions Marko's. This bird is mentioned in the "Arabian Nights" from the seventh century in the story about the sailor Sinbad.

Finally, after more than two years of toilsome but exciting travelling across the south seas, the convoy arrived in Persia. Marko does not mention at all Scylla and Charybdis through which his expedition passed, all possible storms and distresses, the attacks of various native tribes and diseases, unbearable heat, rotten food and water. He summarizes all this in one single sentence when he says that from six hundred travellers, not counting the crew, only eighteen survived the journey.

After arriving at their destination, the court of the Persian shah Arghun, the Polos learned that he had died, but his son Ghazan resolved the awkward situation and decided to marry

the princess Cocachin, who had been intended for his father. The Polos rested in Persia for eight months from their tiresome travelling and there they received the news that their friend and protector, the Great Khan, had died. The man they must thank, to a great extent, for their riches and their rich life filled with exciting events. The princess Cocachin was cried while she was bidding farewell to Marko Polo, and our convoy converted itself into a caravan. The Polos arrived over land to Trebizond on the Black Sea, where they were happy to meet the familiar faces of Venetian and Korculan tradesmen. But they experienced their first setback in that first port in touch with the Christian world. Thieves stole from them a big quantity of golden coins.

From Trebizond, via Constantinople and the Aegean Sea, they finally entered their Adriatic Sea and, by that well-known trade route passed by Marko's native Korcula. That was in 1295, exactly 701 years ago.

When he returned to Venice Marko was forty one years old and he had seen and experienced more than any of other citizen in the medieval Europe. Nobody among their friends (who did not even recognize them) believed in their stories. But Marko conceived a cunning plan. He organized a banquet at which he invited all his friends and distant relatives. Our three travellers put on the most expensive robes of satin, silk and damask. To their visitors' amazement, the Polos took off their sumptuous clothes, left the banqueting hall and returned in the rags in which they had entered Venice, fearing that they would experience the same ill-luck as in Trebizond. Then, like the wizards from Thousand and One Night, they took off the poor rags and cut the seams with a knife. To the amazement of the incredulous Venetians, rubies, sapphires and emeralds started to fall. After that they were treated by their co-citizens with the greatest respect.

That was one more moral from Marko's entire quest for the Grail. The human desire for the unattainable breaks all obstacles. But the real pleasure is in the journey towards the shining Grail, and not in the treasure itself, which Marko attained.

The Battle Before Korcula

The great world traveller Marko Polo could not rest in the narrow confines of Venice, so he travelled along the Dalmatian Coast making trade with small town-principalities, which were under the reign of the Serenissima. He very probably visited his native town of Korcula. Marsilie Zorzi, the first Venetian duke of Korcula, died in 1271. According to his testament he was succeeded by Ruggiero Zorzi, and a respected member of the Venetian Big Council, Marin Zorzi, reigned over Korcula in 1281. This supreme body of the Venetian Republic gave him one galley which he had to keep at the ready for the defence of Korcula and Venetian interests at sea. The crew of the galley consisted of young Korcula men, who were always on call. Korcula ship-builders were among the first in the building of wooden war galleys for Venice, either in the Korcula shipyards or in Venetian ones. They were a precious source of that craft for Venice, so that they played an outstanding role in its Arsenal in the town of Venice itself.

In one of the biggest and cruellest sea battles of the Middle Ages, in the conflict between the fleets of Venice and Genoa on September 7th 1298, in front of the town of Korcula, the great Venetian traveller and explorer, originating from Korcula, Marko Polo, was taken prisoner. His imprisonment and his stay in a Genoese prison are significant events in the life of that citizen of the world.

Already in the 11th century, the power of Genoa, a free commune on the coast of the Ligurian Sea, was representing a threat to the business trade of the Venetian Republic, both on land and on the islands of the Levant - Eastern Mediterranean. Genoa was becoming stronger and stronger and their seamen ever more enterprising. They were already sailing on the Atlantic in the 13th century, in an effort to reach by sea the promised lands of the Far East.

In the middle of the 13th century the conflict between the two Mediterranean powers culminated in open war for the prize of Constantinople and other towns of the newly created Byzantine empire. The armistice of 1269 did not hold, and a new war began in 1293. The climax of that war came when the Venetian admirals, Ruggiero Morosini Malabranca and Giovanni Soranzo sailed towards the port of Constantinople with the intent of destroying the Genoese ward Pere, which they did. Morosini in the Golden Horn, lowered his anchor demonstratively in front of the imperial palace. They ravaged and burned down the important Genoese plant of alaun on the Anatolian coasts. Thus they endangered the significant trade of alaun, important for the production of colours and they broke the chains of the slave trade, and endangered the Genoese sea routes. The Genoese and the Greeks replied by massacring the Venetians in Constantinople, and they even killed the president of

the Genoese colony, "bailo" Marco Bembo throwing him down from the roof of his house. The hatred between the Venetians and Genoese was made into verses of ridicule, intolerance and vengeance, which echoed on board both fleets. The final endeavour for settling of accounts between these two strong powers was at hand.

Both parties had strong well-built ships, skilful sailors and ready commanders, as well as experience in great sea battles. So, the Genoese, under the command of Oberto Doria, in the battle of Melori, in 1284, completely defeated the Pisan fleet and took control over all shipping on the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The galleys - traditional vessels of the Mediterranean - were the basis of both fleets. At the time of the battle in front of Korcula, they were already equipped with a modern rudder in the middle of the stern. That technical invention made them quick and mobile in manoeuvring, and the Genoese were the better masters of that technique. The galleys were moved both by rowing and sailing. They were 40 to 60 metres long, and they were distinguished, first by the number and arrangement of oars - from one-oar galley, "zenzila" to mighty three-oar and four-oar galleys - as well as by the number of rowing "galliot", which numbered between 50 and 120. The lateen sails were raised on two masts, and one could sail down-wind only. On the elevated "scafs" - castles - on the prow and on the stern, there were devices by means of which lances, arrows, stones and other projectiles could be thrown on to enemy boats. The "beak" for piercing another boat was already fading out in the 13th century, and there was a prolongation - "proboscis" on the prow of the boat instead of the beak. The soldiers and sailors would rush across it and board the enemy boat in the procedure of "abordaza" and occupy it. The defence of the "boarded" boat consisted of the close battle at the barricades set in advance from the prow to the stern of the threatened ship.

The commander of the galley was a "sopracomito" with the aid of one or more officers, "comiti". Military officers were in charge of the battle and commanded both soldiers and gunmen - "bombardieri", and sopracomito, while officers ran the boat with sailors and rowers - galliots.

The admiral or "captain general" was issuing battle commands to other boats by means of signals; he used flags and a trumpet for the commencement of the battle and gave other commands with a cone hanging on the mast during the day, and with lamps during the night. He also had at his disposal smaller but quicker reconnaissance boats.

The Venetians equipped their war galleys using contributions from trading families depending on their ability to pay, and their credits were then transformed into a public debt with interest. Soldiers and sailors were recruited from various regions - "contradas" - between the age of 20 and 60 years in the following way: dice were cast in the group of twelve recruited and this determined the priority of entering the service. A person who was

allotted by the die to enter the service received five liras a month from the state, and one lira from each of the group who stayed at home. The communes under Venetian rule on the Adriatic Sea or in other seas of the Eastern Mediterranean, were required to produce one or more equipped ships for the fleet, which was quite a significant expense for them. This was one of the heavier obligations of the Korcula commune during its history.

The usual tactical arrangement at the commencement of battle was the formation of ships arranged like a sickle or crescent; the aim being to incite confusion in the enemy ranks. The commanders always tried to use the advantage of open sea in this so that they had a greater choice of movement, while those on the windward side gained absolute advantage.

There is more data about the composition of the fleet, and about the preparations and the very unfolding of battle, on the Genoese side - the side of the winner - where even today there still exist public monuments and inscriptions commemorating the great victory.

Genoa gave the command of the fleet, in the range of "admiral general" to Lamba Doria, younger brother of the legendary Oberto Doria, under whom Lamba served in the afore mentioned battle against the fleet of Pisa by the rock of Melori 14 years earlier. The aims of the campaign were faithfully described by a contemporary poet: to burn down and destroy everything, houses, ships... The poem says that this time Genoa would challenge St. Marco's Lion in his own den. A mighty fleet of 85 war ships gathered in the bay of La Spezia and moved towards the Adriatic. On its way, it put to shore in the Tunisian port of Djerba, and then at Messina, continuing towards Korcula (Curzola). When it passed Gates of Otranto, a stormy wind (the August south wind) scattered the fleet, so that Lamba Doria had to take shelter in the Albanian port of Antivari (present-day Bar) with a fleet of twenty ships. He was joined the following day by 58 vessels and he continued with them, sailing along the Dalmatian coast ravaging and destroying all Venetian property on his way. The 16 boats that lagged behind were to join him later; this was to be crucial for the result of the battle. Doria came to the island of Korcula, "Black Korkyra", whose "main town is a rich and prosperous place" at the beginning of September. Doria started to plunder and pillage on the island and in the town of Korcula, and he burned down some houses. At that moment his messenger reported that the Venetian fleet was in sight.

At the first sign of the Genoese campaign, the Venetians sent to the Adriatic the Admiral Andrea Dandolo with the order to take over the naval squadron of Maffeo Quirini, which was patrolling along the Ionian Sea. Receiving more precise reports about the strength of Doria's ships, Venice quickly equipped and dispatched 32 galleys from Chioggia and from the Dalmatian communes. Ruggerio Zorzi was reigning in Korcula at that time, and the Venetian doge was Pietro Gradenigo, whereas Andrea Dandolo himself was the son of the doge Giovanni Dandolo, who died in 1289. Chroniclers speak about the difficulties of such a quick equipage of the boats: neither military nor ship's crews were up to the level of Venetian

reputation. The Sopracomito of the galley, equipped at their own expense, by the Polo family, was the great traveller, Marko Polo himself. This was the biggest war fleet the Venetians had ever sent to sea: 96 galleys and three big ships. The only fleet which could match it was the fleet the Venetians equipped for the Saint League at the battle of Lepanto in 1571.

In the afternoon of September 6 1298, visual contact occurred between the opposing sides. The Venetian fleet was sailing from the west along the south side of the island of Korcula towards the cap of Ra`njic, whereas the Genoese fleet was situated in the sheltered area of cap Ra`njic, in the vicinity of the village of Lumbarda, northeast towards the peninsula of Peljesac (location Mokalo-Postup), the island of Mljet being on its left side. As sunset approached, both fleets showed in their manoeuvres a readiness to postpone battle until the next day, a Sunday. When the Genoese saw the strength of the Venetian fleet they were amazed. However, Doria called a meeting of his commanders and they all voted to attack. The Venetians, on the other hand, considered the Genoese fleet to be a ready prey and they sent out small reconnaissance boats in order to be sure that the Genoese fleet did not escape under the darkness of night.

The battle started early on Sunday September 7th and lasted until the afternoon. The Venetians had the wind (north-west) in their favour but the morning sun was blinding their vision. They took advantage of the wind and captured ten Genoese galleys. However, some Venetian galleys were sunk in a fierce skirmish, and some of them were grounded. The Genoese captured one of them and used it against the Venetians, after they had changed the crew. This produced the confusion among the attackers, and the Genoese changed their order of battle. Lamba Doria ordered the arrangement of a dense row of ships and began attacking the scattered Venetian fleet. The day was coming to an end, when the sixteen Genoese galleys, which had lagged behind at Otranto, appeared from the direction of Mljet. They engaged themselves in the battle readily attacking the tiresome Venetian flank. Maybe that was not only the luck of war but the skilfulness of the Genoese, who used tactical flanking reserves in other battles as well, producing them in battle only at the last moment. Doria's victory was great: all Venetian vessels were captured or destroyed, including Admiral Dandolo's big ship. Only a few Venetian boats managed to escape from the battle site of this historic event, in order to bring the news to Venice of their defeat. The Genoese losses, which occurred at the beginning of the battle, were also significant. Octavian Doria, the older admiral's son was also killed. The proud Genoese poet describes that happening:

"The Genoese are deemed the most valiant men in the world. Such an one was Lamba, of that very Doria family - a man of high courage. For when he was engaged in that sea-fight against the Venetians, and was standing on the poop of his galley, his son, fighting valiantly at the forecastle, was shot by an arrow in the breast, and fell wounded to death; a mishap over which his comrades were sorely shaken, and fear came upon the whole ship's company.

But Lamba, hot with the spirit of battle, and more mindful of his country's service and his own glory than of his son, ran forward to the spot, loftily rebuked the agitated crowd, and ordered his son's body to be cast into the deep, telling them for their comfort that the land could never have afforded his boy a nobler tomb. And then, renewing the fight more fiercely than ever, he achieved victory."

The Venetian losses were scarcely to be believed: 18 sunk galleys, 66 captured galleys, which Lamba burned on the Korcula beaches because he could not tow them as far as Genoa; 7,000 soldiers, sailors and rowers killed, and 7,400 captured. The entire galley of the Polos was destroyed - a big ship with a total of 120 oars, a massive catapult at the forward castle, a boat with the ancient oar-rudder, with two masts and lateen sails, on which the flags of the Republic waved on the forward mast, and the flag of the Polos with three crows on the stern mast. Marko Polo himself was imprisoned and his heroism was described in these words: "He was captured because he threw himself and his galley to the front of the battle and because he was fighting for his country with great courage and then injured, in chains, he was taken off to Genoa."

Marko Polo, then a mature man of forty-four years, had at his disposal all the necessary knowledge and skill demanded by a great naval battle. Besides this, he had a great knowledge of people and human nature, and he had the money necessary for equipping the ship. There were other examples of heroism on the Venetian side. Thus the commander of the Ionian squadron, Maffeo Querini, received the order from Dandolo at the end of the lost battle to withdraw. He gathered 14 galleys together and they were the only ones preserved, withdrew them from the battle, and then returned once more with his boat to the site of the skirmish continuing to fight fiercely until his heroic death.

Among the chained Venetians - and all were in chains without regard to rank and position - was the admiral Andrea Dandolo himself. Dandolo, in despair because of the defeat, and even more in despair at the thought of going to the Genoese prison, committed suicide by bashing his head against the oarsmen's bank. According to some sources he was buried in Korcula, and according to others he was buried, with due respect, in Genoa.

Lamba Doria celebrated his victory in the town of Korcula for four days, and then sailed towards Genoa where a magnificent welcome was waiting for him. The victorious fleet sailed into the Genoese port on October 16. Genoa was to remember him as the great victor. An annual feast was established of worshipping at the altar of Our Lady in the church of Saint Mathew every September 8th, on the Day of Our Lady, on the eve of which feast Lamba Doria achieved his historic victory. The admiral was given a splendid palace opposite the church of Saint Mathew as a gift of thanks from the town. The glorious admiral, Lamba Doria died in Savona on October 17th 1323, just a few months before his most famous prisoner, Marko Polo died himself. The youngest son Cesare continued in the family tradition of the

Doria family. Besides the afore mentioned heroic death of Octavian, it is worth noting the death of another of Lamba's sons, Tadisi, who took part in the Vivaldi Atlantic campaign towards the Far East in 1291, from which he never returned. We meet The Dorias among Croatian admirals in the 14th and 15th centuries, and in the 16th century the star of the great "condottiero", Andrea Doria, shone high in the sky.

Marko Polo found himself in prison in Genoa, together with thousands of his comrades. In his uncomfortable prison cell, he started to dictate his memoirs of the magnificent travels to China, to Rustichello the writer from Pisa of romantic tales. If the battle before Korcula had not taken place, the stormy and exciting biography of Marko Polo might never have been written. The masterpiece of adventurous and travel literature left unknown!

Marko Polo and the Venetian Government

Marko was released from the Genoese prison on August 28 1299, after the peace treaty between Venice and Genoa was signed in July that year. He was forty-five years old, which was an advanced age for that time, but further adventures lay in front of the energetic and enterprising Marko. He married in Venice for the first time a girl called Donata, who belonged to one of the most respected Venetian families, that of Badoer. He had three daughters by her: Beleta, Fantina and Moreta. Approximately at the time of his marriage with Donata, his father Nikola died. He was real explorer of unknown regions who took Marko to the Far East and got him acquainted with Kublai Khan.

Marko continued his trade activities in Venice. He traded furs with Russia, flint and wool with England, and sometimes, like a modern tour operator, he organized pilgrimages by ships to the Holy Land. He was also selling Venetian mirrors. But how could a handful of merchant ships in a Venetian port compare with the forest of masts on the Yangtze river? Could the market in Venice attract him as much as did only one of ten luxurious market places in Kinsai?

As in an adventure novel, Marko Polo experiences a turning point in his life by revolting against the existing state of things. That very same trading and sea power, the Republic of Saint Marco, that had enabled him, by its tradition and expansion of influence to distant countries, afforded him his adventures life, becomes, in Marko's eyes, the main obstacle to the true life of a medieval knight, fighting always for justice and love. The cosmopolitan spirit of Marko Polo could not accept the narrow-minded policy of the Venetian Republic, which relied on strictly hierarchical principles within the Republic and on imperial desires in its relationship with the outside world. He understood the dichotomy of nobleman/plebeian as the framework of western society only, with a tendency towards the mutual meeting of the poles in this structural pair and not towards their ever greater separation. Therefore, it is not strange that he found himself among the most ardent critics of the government. Specifically, they requested that the Big Council abolish the decree by which only noblemen and their descendants could be elected as members of that supreme body. The revolt was led by the plebeian Marin Boccon, and many respected Venetians were on his side as, for example, the rich nobleman Baiamonte Tiepolo. But the revolt of the plebeians was very soon crushed in bloodshed in the very style of an unenlightened medieval "Republic". According to the Venetian chronicle of 1413, Marin Baccon and other leaders of the conspiracy were executed, while other conspirators, 43 of them, managed to escape from the town of Venice, outside the reach of the Big Council. Some of the conspirators took refuge in Hungarian-Croatian territory, which was then under the rule of the mighty nobleman, Pavao

Subic, with his seat in Skradin. As Tiepolo and his associates came there, some historians think that Marko spent long years of exile in his native Dalmatia. But that remained the greatest mystery in the otherwise transparent life orbit of the first world traveller.

Fra Jacopo d'Acqui, a contemporary of Marko Polo and his first biographer, described Marko's words at his death bed, one winter day in January 1324. When the priest, and Marko's relatives and friends asked him to refute finally all those countless lies which he presented as his real adventures, Marko Polo raised himself from the bed, rebuked them and said: "I have not told you the half of what I had experienced because I knew that you would not believe me."

Literary Works that Feature Marko Polo

The life and personality of Marko Polo are so charged with meaning for today's man that they have to leave their mark in contemporary literature. In this chapter we shall present two wighty novels, in which the adventures of Marko Polo on his voyage through Asia are described, and we shall mention in short one which speaks about Korcula as his birth place and about the traditional tower of the Polos, where action in the 1980-s takes place, and also the most recent imaginery dialogue between writer and literary hero. These are: the novel by Egmont Colerus, *Marko Polo, The Novel of two Worlds*; *The Journeyer* by Garry Jennings, known for his best-seller *the Aztek*; *The Masterstroke* by Marilyn Sharp; and *Myself and Marco Polo* by Paul Griffiths.

Egmont Colerus: Marko Polo - the Novel of Two Worlds - a knightly romance

Starting with the traditional view that Marko Polo was born in Venice, or not taking into consideration the controversy about his Venetian origins, Egmont Colerus created, on the basis of Polo's travel book, a large novel in which he describes the character of Marko Polo very imaginatively, as well as the atmosphere which reigned in Venice in the 13th century. Court intriguers, scholars and astronomers, the doge's councillors and foreign deputies, then romantic medieval robbers - mercenaries, "bravi", the smugglers of corn and tradesmen file past the reader and they are all the a constituent part of the atmosphere of insecurity and exceptional luxury which surrounded Marko Polo during his youth. The young Marko Polo departs, together with his father Nicola and uncle Maffeo, to distant unknown "Tartar" Asia, and arrives at the court of the Great Khan Kublai, becoming his councillor. He travels through enormous areas of China and becomes an excellent connoisseur of the situation in its provinces.

Describing the stay and travel of Marko Polo across China, Colerus depicts vividly life in Kublai's empire, which was completely unknown to Europeans of that time. Colerus's novel, despite its big scope, is easy to read and one follows, with great interest, the hero - world traveller Marko Polo. The contemporary reader gets acquainted with people of that time, courtiers around the Great Khan, ministers and mandarins, missionaries and Taoist friars, writers and astrologers, who are all presented with great creative force. Colerus manages to put in this literary work all the controversies which tore up the soul of the shrewd traveller and to present in a rare way a multitude of characters who cleanse themselves "at the field of absolute consistency of desire" (G. Deleuze, F. Guattari).

After many years of "rambling adventures" concerning both Marko's spirit and body, as the writer calls them, and the fulfilment of all possible dreams of both material and spiritual richness in the world of the enchanting China, Marko returns to Venice and thus he rounds off his cyclical journey which gets, in this novel, the treatment of a knightly romance.

Marko Polo, at the age of sixty years, lives in great richness in the Venetian palace "Corte milione", surrounded by his beautiful daughters, Fatima and Moretta and by many of his friends. His faithful follower, Enrico, now the captain of the galley, brings delightful news about the new riches which he brought to the Polos after capturing three Genoese galleys in the Adriatic Sea. Among the guests, there is Orio Morosini, the youngest son of Gaspar and Melissa, with whom Marko had experienced his first love in his youth. Encouraged by his daughters and his friends Marko speaks about his adventures at the court of Kublai Khan, but he mentions also later events, notably the battle at "Curzola" in which he took part with his galley. Marko gives to his guest from Pisa, Domenico di Ferli, his "libro", "book above all books", in order that Pisa gets acquainted with the world of the East.

The novel ends with a clever scene, in which Marko talks with Dante Alighieri, who lives in exile in Venice at that time. Marko wishes to help poor Dante to return to his beloved Florence, with his richness and influence but at the same time, he feels enormous respect, because Dante had managed, by his divine work *Divina Comedia*, to achieve what only a very few people did. Marko finds comfort, in the words of the great Dante, because he had not been able to realize the Romantic aim of the quest: he did not become analogic to the mythical Moses or to the Redeemer who comes from the upper world, although he conquered, owing to his service at the court of Kublai Khan, the demonic powers of the lower world, connected with winter, darkness, confusion, unfruitfulness, and old age.

Marko Polo, in his quest for a world of richness and power, which he was searching far away from his homeland, realized the power of difference, which enabled him to fictionalize his actual experiences. His worldly life is coming to an end, but his writing, his "libro", the Book, by its trace and supplement, assures it of a place in eternity.

Gary Jennings: *The Journeyer* - a contemporary best-seller

Whereas Colerus's novel of two worlds, as he calls it himself in the subtitle, is a pleasant, delightful story of a medieval knight, enriched with moral dilemmas and a tendency towards a philosophical explanation of the sense of life in all its diversity, the novel of Gary Jennings *The Journeyer* is a real postmodern best-seller of more than 1200 pages of text. Written according to the postmodern formula of success: "sex, violence, tension", that boundless saga conjures up for the contemporary reader - who is desirous of momentary relaxation and easy entertainment - splendid wild landscapes, exotic eroticism, conspiracies, battles,

horrible torturing, in a word, the intoxication of the senses on every page. Thus, one of the main criteria of postmodernism is fulfilled: curiosity. After his previous best-seller *The Aztec*, Jennings conceived "a fabulous pie... stuffed with spices from his bursting imagination...its sweep, its humour, its vivid scenery" ("*New York Times*"), "a star-burst of new foods, sights, smells, noises...a baldly bawdy, robust entertainment, craftily staged and sustained" ("*Kirkus Reviews*"). The author achieves a postmodern novelty by a skilful device in a short introduction, where Marko Polo, at the age of sixty five answers a letter from Rustichello sent from Pisa and agrees with his proposal that they both write a new book, though this time they would include all that was omitted in the previous one. So the world would think that everything is invented, which means that it is a question of novel and not of travel book. Left out in *The Million* were the unbelievable, the bawdy and the scandalous.

Jennings used thus the postmodern strategy of connecting the historical with the fantastical which is in complete opposition to the realistic forms of the historical novel. Jennings sticks basically to his model, so that the reader can follow Marko's voyage from *The Million* in the very titles of Jennings' chapters: Venice, The Levant, Baghdad, The Great Salt, Balkh, The Roof of the World, Kithai, Khanbalik, To-bhot, Yun-nan, Xan-du, Khanbalik Again, Manzi, Champa, India, Home.

Using the technique of the labyrinth, the writer puts his hero, Marko Polo, into the stories and legends, that develop one from the other and mix with the real experiences of Marko Polo on his voyage, without a visible end and purpose.

One of the possible aims is Marko's stay at the court of Kublai Khan and his visit to the richest province of Manzi. Marko Polo had the opportunity there to develop in full all his skills but he also showed all the virtues of his character. Serving Kublai Khan, he experienced his greatest and only true love in touch with the very well educated and intelligent deaf girl Hui-sheng, who compensated her deafness with the sharpness of all her other senses and by a developed Chinese style of behaviour. The empire of Kublai Khan is an epiphanic area in which Marko discloses his Dionysian energy and experiences the present as eternity. His daily state work and endless travelling across the Chinese provinces are accompanied by the descriptions of the festivals. He was especially attracted by the festival of the rockets and by the game of chess with living figures in which the slaves experienced the destiny of the figures in the game so "that it was rare that the flower-beds did not get moistened by blood".

Popular feasts, wanton games, entertainments with a multitude of people, circuses, fairs, luna parks, travelling plays appear in the postmodern writing as a device to break the narrative, the way that the supernatural enters the "normal" reality. Postmodern prose, like Jennings's, is the successor of the Manippean satire, which developed originally through

contact with popular carnivals. Mikhail Bakhtin calls this fictional technique "carnivalized literature".

Garry Jennings made, through his novel *The Journeyer*, a divine person of Marko Polo because he broke the boundary between the real and the invented, between history and literature and between the author and the literary hero, as well as between the writer and the reader. All of them sail through the sea of postmodern writing, and their sailing is infinite. Its purpose is in the sailing itself.

Marilyn Sharp: The Masterstroke - a political thriller

The American writer Marilyn Sharp stayed in Korcula at the beginning of the seventies, attended courses of the Summer Philosophical School, where she had the opportunity to meet the greatest world philosophers. Inspired by Korcula and by the atmosphere of the intellectual discussions during the hot summer months, she wrote in 1984 the novel *The Masterstroke*, in which the greatest part of the action takes place in the town of Korcula, while the main plot of the novel is the quest for the real origins of Marko Polo, namely Korcula, where the presidents of USA and USSR are arriving. The novel is full of intrigue and the mutual settling of accounts of secret of the services, as well as the politicians representing various ideologies, who have different views on how to resolve the lasting cold war. The warm ambience of Korcula is an ideal locus for such an historical outcome, and the protagonists of the novel have as their model the great Korcula diplomat, Marko Polo. One of the heroines of the novel is Nicole, daughter of the American secretary of state, Compton, who explores in a hired boat the Korcula archipelago, looking at the distant island of Lastovo on which, according to legend, the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus, Marko's predecessor, imprisoned for seven years. In her phantasies about the history and mythology of that part of the Mediterranean, Nicole hears the voice of sirens, which contributes to the creating of an atmosphere of an earthly paradise. Nicole's fiance, Peter Lucas and the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Miloslavsky, climb the steps leading up to the old city beside the Renaissance loggia on the opposite side of which there is an inscription in Russian and English "Welcome to Korcula". Behind the inscription, there is part of a cassette which is to be synchronized with its other half in the house of Marko Polo. The role of the mysterious islet, often a place of action in contemporary political thrillers, is taken over by the wooded Badija, where there is a world computer centre whose aim is to control, in the Orwellian sense, the zones of responsibilities of each of the big powers. Although each of the big powers want to define exactly their "zones of responsibility", they do not have firm boundaries and they become postmodern "heterotopic" areas, like the invisible towns of the novel of Italo Calvino. The role of the victim is played by the Russian minister Miloslavsky, who wanted to depose his president Sukhov; because of this he must drink poison, whereas the medicine is drunk by the presidents of the USA and USSR in the form of chilled whisky on the warm islet of Badija,

because they agreed on a new arrangement which would respect the interests of all and not just that of the big powers.

The glasses are raised for peace and a wish that the true Korcula, where the first world traveller and the great messenger of peace, Marko Polo was born, be realized in future.

Paul Griffiths: *Myself and Marco Polo* - a postmodernist puzzle

The postmodernist byplay interchanging the roles of the author and the literary hero continues in the most recent literary works as in the novel *Myself and Marco Polo*, by Paul Griffiths, published in 1989. This London music critic of "Times" received, in 1990, the Commonwealth literary prize with this novel. It is written in the style of a refined postmodernist puzzle, in which the sections of travel literature and the Far East are gradually introduced into the text. The action takes place in the Genoese prison in the continuous dialogue between Marko Polo and his ghost-writer Rustichello from Pisa. Marko Polo constantly corrects his friend and fellow prisoner - the contributor to the text of the historical novel *The Million*. But Rustichello goes his own way, because for him literary truth is more important than historical accuracy. Rustichello changes, in his text, Polo's verbal narration, makes some places more beautiful, drops some items so that a completely different journey takes place before the reader's eyes: a journey in which the Far East becomes the unrealized desire of Western man, in which the past and the present are mingled.

Marko Polo's theme of the wondrous world of the Far East and the theme about Marko Polo himself, that amazing world traveller/writer, is an inexhaustable source of postmodern romantic displacements. It overflows to other genres as well, so that an opera and drama about Marko Polo have been written, while the electronic media, in film, television, and video find their inspiration in it, under the postmodern perpetual tendency to attract ever bigger numbers of consumers to the mass media drawing them into the marketing inerplay of huge numbers and big money. However, the literary text is still the most expressive of all, because it is capable uniquely of presenting Marko Polo's greatest value, as a world traveller and writer about the world: emotion, energy and excitement.

Epilogue

Marko Polo experienced the cruellest destiny that his homeland, Venice, and medieval Europe could give him. Though it admired his diamonds, it neglected his discoveries. It gave him the derisive nickname "Il milione", and the word "million" was the only one which could, in some measure, express the disproportionate levels of civilization between medieval Europe and the greater world discovered by Marko Polo. Instead of honouring him as the discoverer of new trade routes, which would be of great use to the Venetian Republic and the whole of Europe, it sentenced him to keep silent about his achievements. Why do the Venetian books not speak about that shame. His book *The Million* was read as a collection of fantastic stories, similar to the *Arabian Stories* from *A Thousand and One Nights*. It described new and enchanting geographical regions: Persian deserts, fertile plains, wild mountain canyons of Badakhshan, Cotan rivers throwing up jade. It spoke of Mongolian steppes, the cradle of the biggest empire on earth which threatened Europe itself, enormous space and the flourishing culture of China, with its big towns. It described the well developed infrastructure, diligent and inventive inhabitants, and their art and crafts. It marvelled at the numerous fleets of sailing ships which linked the Chinese interior waters; Burma's jungles where the golden pagodas are erected, Japan with its pink pearls, which will incite the rich imagination of future explorers. It goes on to describe the Indian archipelago, full of wonders and the beauty of mysterious scents and aromatic spices, big island-monarchies, Java and Sumatra, where the cannibals live with whom the great diplomat, Marko Polo, managed to come to terms. The sacred mountains of Ceylon with Buddha's tomb are mentioned, and the huge subcontinent of India, with its deposits of diamonds and the strong sunshine which gives birth to various uncommon sects, ascetic yogis and honest Brahmin tradesmen... That enormous catalogue of distant regions unknown to Europe, would alone be sufficient to secure the fame of the first Traveller.

But it was only in 1426 that the Portuguese prince Pedro brought to Venice the geographical map which Marko Polo had drawn. Marko's description of Japan ("Zipangua") later led Christopher Columbus finally to the decision to depart towards the land of the rising sun in the year 1492. Columbus's notes are written in the Latin version of Marko's book *The Million*, which has been kept in the Colombina library in Seville. They disclose the deep interest with which he read about Polo's travels. Therefore Genoa, unlike its trade opponent, Venice, set up in its Municipio a mosaic portrait of Marko Polo vis-a-vis a similar portrait of the Genoese, Christopher Columbus; while a Catalan map dated 1375, to be found in the big Paris library, is the most complete account of Polo's geographical knowledge and the art of cartography. Another great Korculan, the naval theoretician and cartographer Vicko Palatin, was among the first in Europe to make, after his adventures in America in the second half of

the 16th century, a large globe following Marko's description of Asia. He made this globe while staying in the Franciscan monastery on the island of Badija in the Korcula archipelago, which at that time was the nursery school of the geographical knowledge and art.

Marko's travel opus served as a great inspiration to many ethnographers, zoologists, botanists, geologists, climatologists, sociologists, tradesmen, administrators, diplomats and statesmen and, surely, to later travel writers and authors. Even the Persian historians drew their information from Marko's wondrous book. Marko Polo brought from China examples of wooden letters whose images were transposed on to paper. Gutenberg used them as the basis for his first printing machine.

During Marko Polo's lifetime, few people in Europe were aware of the significance of those far-reaching discoveries that he had made. But one exception was Pietro from Aband, a famous physician and philosopher, who personally knew the first Traveller, as well as John of Ypres, the abbot of saint Bertin, known as John the Long, who included Marko's Travels in his collection of historical-geographical discoveries.

But Marko Polo did receive the real recognition as the first world tourist in "The Declaration from Samarkand" on October 5th 1994. The World Tourist Organization (WTO), announced, in this declaration, on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of his return from China to Europe, its far-reaching project, the renewed discovery of the ancient Silk Road, over which the Polo's caravan was travelling. The main aim of this project was to reconstruct the historical routes between China and Europe and to open up the still insufficiently discovered lands on that route, such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenstan, Kazahstan... for European and world tourists. This would be a beginning in the modern development of these countries, as well as a renewal and renovation of cultural monuments of priceless value. The WTO appealed, in the first instance, to the governments of all countries to facilitate (in their wish for peace and cooperation among the peoples) travels for ordinary people who would be able to discover again the legendary routes of the Silk Road.

Tourist publications (newspapers, periodicals, travel books, guides...) all over the world, connect the name of Marko Polo with his birth place on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, among the magnificent waters of the southern part of the Republic of Croatia. Therefore, the postmodern tourist goes more and more frequently searches for of the real origins of Marko Polo, and that pearl of the Mediterranean, the medieval town of KORCULA.