Marco Polo & his "Travels" to the Imperial Court of Kublai Khan

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, Big History Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.21.16
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Marco Polo served Emperor Kublai Khan in China. Polo was there when the Mongol Empire was at its most powerful. Years later, Polo returned to Venice. He brought back strange tales. His account about his experiences gave Europeans some of their earliest information about China.

Background

In the 1200s, the people of Venice, Italy, believed that the Sun revolved around the Earth. They thought the Universe was created exactly 4,484 years before Rome was founded. As Christians, they considered Jerusalem the center of the world. It made sense to them because that was where Jesus died. Maps of the time put Jerusalem right at the center.

Marco Polo was born in Venice in 1254. Today it is part of Italy. Trade with Asia was increasing during this time. Venice was on the eastern coast. It was a gateway to Asia’s riches. Goods flowed like water through the city. Ships from around the Mediterranean Sea docked at its port. Merchants and traders set sail from Venice. From there they traveled to
Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) and the Black Sea. They would fetch goods from Russia and from merchants traveling the Silk Road. The Silk Road was a trading route. It went from Europe to China, and back. It ran east to west, and west to east. It crossed through the mountains and deserts of Central Asia.

When Marco was born, his father, Niccolo, and two uncles were away trading. They had gone to cities on the Black Sea. But their adventures had actually taken them all the way to China. They had stayed in the Mongol capital of Khanbaliq (city of the Khan). There they had met the most powerful ruler of the day, Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan was the grandson of Genghis Khan. Years before, Genghis Khan had founded the Mongol Empire.

A painting of Marco Polo at the court of Kublai Khan

The three Polo men returned to Venice after 16 years. When he returned, Niccolo found that his wife had died. He also discovered that he had a 15-year-old son named Marco. He had not even known Marco existed.

Travels

Two years later, in 1271, Niccolo Polo and his brother, Maffeo, set off again. They took 17-year-old Marco with them. This time the Polos headed straight to Kublai Khan. The Polos planned to bring him documents from the Pope and holy oil from Jerusalem. Kublai Khan
had given the Polos a gold passport. It allowed them to use lodgings and horses posted by the Mongols along the Silk Road routes. Even then, they took 3 1/2 years to arrive. They finally reached the palace of Kublai Khan in 1275. Niccolo offered Marco to the emperor as a servant.

Marco was a talented young man. On the way to China he learned several languages. He had picked up Mongolian (though not Chinese). He had mastered four written alphabets. Two years before Marco's arrival, Kublai Khan had conquered all of China. In some areas, people did not want the Mongols ruling them. Kublai Khan needed non-Mongols to be in charge there. He sent Marco on diplomatic missions.

Fifteenth-century illustration showing the Polos sailing from Venice in 1271

After more than 16 years in China, the Polos asked Kublai Khan to let them return home to Venice. They had been very useful to the khan. He didn't want them to leave. Finally, he agreed. He sent them to escort a Mongolian princess who was to marry a Persian khan. The Polos were free to head back west.
This time they traveled by sea in Chinese ships. After many difficulties they delivered the princess. But before they could reach Venice, Kublai Khan died. With the khan gone, local rulers reasserted their power. They now demanded money from traveling traders. The Polos were forced to hand over 4,000 Byzantine coins to rulers on the Black Sea. The payment was much of their fortune.

**Return**

The Polos returned to Venice in 1295. They had been away 24 years. Their relatives had thought them long dead. They returned wearing Mongolian clothes with valuable gems hidden in them.

Soon Venice went to war with Genoa. It was a rival city-state on the west coast of Italy. Marco Polo was rich. Like other wealthy merchants, he paid for his own warship. He was captured during a naval battle and ended up in prison in Genoa.

One of his cellmates was a writer named Rusticello. Polo entertained the other prisoners with his adventures in China. Rusticello wrote them down. This is how Polo’s accounts were created.

In 1299, Genoa and Venice declared peace. Polo was released and returned to Venice. He married and had three daughters. Polo’s remaining days were spent as a businessman. He died in Venice in 1324.

**Marco Polo’s book**

Polo could have been forgotten to history. But his book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, slowly became known. It could be passed around only one copy at a time. Book printing in Europe did not begin until almost 200 years later. About 120 to 140 early manuscripts of *The Travels* survive. Each was hand-printed.
Polo was a skilled storyteller. He found Mongolian customs fascinating. While in China, he had seen the use of paper money. He had also watched the Chinese burn coal for heat. Europeans did not use paper money or burn coal at the time.

Polo also missed a few innovations. He failed to notice the books being sold in China. The Chinese were already printing books. They used movable type. Letters were made of wood, clay, or tin. Movable type was not in Europe then. It was not invented there until 1440.

When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492, he hoped to reach China. He brought a copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo* with him. He expected it would be useful. Columbus never made it to China. He discovered the Americas instead.
Quiz

1. Which sentence from the section "Marco Polo's Book" supports the idea that the book was important to Europeans?

(A) Book printing in Europe did not begin until almost 200 years later. About 120 to 140 early manuscripts of The Travels survive.

(B) Polo was a skilled storyteller. He found Mongolian customs fascinating.

(C) Polo also missed a few innovations. He failed to notice the books being sold in China.

(D) When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492, he hoped to reach China. He brought a copy of The Travels of Marco Polo with him.

2. Read the second paragraph of the section "Background."

Which of the following statements can be concluded from this paragraph?

(A) The Silk Road was a dangerous place to travel.

(B) The Silk Road allowed trade to happen more easily.

(C) The Silk Road started in Venice.

(D) The Silk Road was the longest road in the world.

3. Which section of the article explains how the Chinese created paper money?

(A) "Background"

(B) "Travels"

(C) "Return"

(D) "Marco Polo's book"

4. How were Marco Polo's stories written down and turned into a book?

(A) One of Marco Polo's cellmates in prison wrote the stories down.

(B) Marco Polo wrote the stories down himself while in prison.

(C) A Chinese book-printer taught Marco Polo to write the stories down.

(D) Christopher Columbus helped Marco Polo write the stories down.
**Answer Key**

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