



**COVER STORY**

# Marco Polo:

**Nice to see caravanserais  
are still working**

*This is an imaginary interview with Marco Polo.*



Elisabetta Ragagnin

Marco Polo (1254-1324), one of the first Europeans to travel to the Orient, is undoubtedly one of the prominent symbols of the Silk Roads. His world-renowned travel account – passed down to us by different names such as *Devisement dou Monde* (“Description of the World”), *Livres des Merveilles du Monde* (“Book of the Marvels of the World”), and, in Italian, *Il Milione* (“The Million”) – contains a huge wealth of information regarding what Europeans of the time thought of as the practically unknown and rather mysterious countries and peoples of the Silk Roads and the Orient. Marco Polo’s travelogue gained great success in medieval Europe. It was copied several times, and translated in different languages, becoming a genuine best-seller. Furthermore, it inspired Christopher Columbus and had a huge influence on the development of European cartography. The original manuscript is, however, lost.

We have the great honour to interview Marco Polo today.

*Q: Messer Marco Polo, we would like to have some first-hand information on your travels. Could you help us?*

*A:* Sure, it is my great pleasure. When our travel to the Orient started, I was very young, a teenager. At that time, I did not know how important this travel was to me, as it totally shaped the rest of my life and forged my character and my view of the world.

It was very often very strenuous; I remember the harsh times on the high snow-capped mountains in the heart of Central Asia and in the Taklamakan desert. But I also remember how comfortable it was to travel in Asia with imperial paizas, much better than your diplomatic passports. It is nice for me to see that many auberges and caravanserais we stayed at are still working nowadays along the Silk Roads.

All the new knowledge I gained! Ah, those fantastic burning stones. We did not have them in Europe at that time; “coal” you call them, don’t you? How much I would have liked to have some during the wet Venetian winters! And all the zoological and botanical knowledge I acquired. I remember the first time I saw yaks and rhinoceroses. And not to mention all the scientific information that was unknown to medieval Europe. I discussed many of these topics with my friend Pietro d’Abano, at that time a professor in Padova.

Then, the memories of all the years passed working as a foreign emissary, that is, as eyes and ears of my Great Qa’an Qubilai - peace to his soul - travelling extensively in the southern provinces of the empire and beyond.

And finally, the adventurous travel back home. As you surely know, we would



Statue of Marco Polo in downtown Ulaanbaatar

have preferred to travel by land, since we knew the roads very well. However, the land journey was going to be too dangerous at that time, especially owing to the rebellions of Qubilai Qa’an’s nephew Qaidu and his supporters, who were causing severe unrest in Central Asia. We were in charge of a highly important mission: escorting the beautiful Mongol princess Kökečĭn to her future husband, the Ilkhanid Qan Arghun, and we could not risk losing her. So, we had no other option than to travel by sea. We delivered Kökečĭn – who had been a fantastic travel companion – to her husband at the Ilkhanid court, as agreed with Qubilai Qa’an...well...not exactly. Arghun meanwhile had died, so Lady Kökečĭn married his son Ghazan. We then proceeded further West back to Venice with the intention, as promised to the Great Qa’an, to go back to him in due time. Unfortunately, Qubilai passed away in 1294. Moreover, my father and uncle had grown old and were keen to pass the rest of their lives in Venice with the capital we had managed to raise during all those years of absence from our homeland. As for me, the Mongol court without my Great Qa’an would not have been the same. So, after a totally unplanned little detour in Genoa – as you surely remember, I fell prisoner to the Genovese, and shared a cell with Rustichello da Pisa – I went back to Venice, married the Venetian Donata Badoer, and passed the rest of my life as a wealthy merchant together with her and our three adorable

daughters, Fantina, Bellela and Moretta.

*Q: Messer Polo, maybe you have heard that some people doubt that you actually travelled to China since you neglected to mention important parts of Chinese civilization, as for instance drinking tea and the Great Wall of China. Could you give us some explanation in this concern?*

**A:** Oh, yes, sure, my pleasure. Let's start with tea. I drank tea only a few times. At the court, I rather stuck to the more familiar beverages of the Mongols as well as to various types of sherbets, which I, honestly, enjoyed much more than tea.

Why didn't I mention tea? Well, the answer is very simple. In my travelogue, you can find less than half of all what I have seen and experienced in my travels in Asia. Besides, as you know, I am a merchant. I tried to focus on products which could be interesting for our business at home, in Venice. Medieval people used to drink various kinds of red and white wines, as well as strong beers, especially in more northern countries, like for instance *Affligem*. So, tea was surely not going to be an attractive business item in medieval Europe.

Coming now to your second question, why I did not mention the Chinese Wall. Well, the answer here is straightforward: I simply did not see it. What you know now as the Great Wall of China are especially those parts built during the Ming time. Yes, I recollect, now that you ask me, ramparts made of pounded earth and sometimes reinforced with wooden stakes and the like. I saw several similar ones in other parts of Central Asia as well.

*Q: One last question Messer Polo: where are your personal travel notes preserved? I cannot imagine that in all those years you have never noted down anything.*

**A:** I knew you were going to ask me this! This was also the first question that three professors – namely Paul Pelliot, Luigi Foscolo Benedetto and Igor de Rachewiltz – asked me upon reaching the Celestial City. During the 24 years of my travels and sojourns in the Orient, I had written down several notes in the crypto-language I used with my father and uncle as well as with Petrus – my Tatar slave and dear friend – and Kökečîn, who masterfully learned it during our sea travel. This language – we called it Monpervenian – is a mixture of the four foreign languages we knew, namely Mongolian, Persian – that, as you know, had the status of a lingua franca in my circles at Qubilai Qa'an's court – Turkî and Arabic, intermixed with Venetian, our native tongue. Some papers got unfortunately lost during a violent monsoon...I was working on the edition of the very first notes together with Petrus and Kökečîn during our endless days at sea on our way back to Venice. We managed, however, to save a large part of this

treasure. Where is it now? Well, in Venice of course, where else!

And here I have a nice offer for you: show me some further interesting developments of the new Silk Roads and I will tell you about my secret notes next time! Then, you will have the satisfaction to compare my own version of the facts with the information passed down by the various codices you already have at your disposal. You will see that you are informed about less than half of what I saw. And only then will you be able to see in what measure Rustichello contributed with exaggerations and embellishments to my text.

Recollecting now the time passed together as cellmates in the prisons of Genoa, I remember with nostalgia how much he enjoyed listening to all that I told him about the Orient. It was he who first had the idea to write everything down together. So we started...in prisons days and nights are long...I remember very vividly how passionate he was in adding daring details to some of what were, in his opinion, the too factual and boring stories of mine. Some of his exaggerations make me blush even now! But, as you know, he was a writer of romance stories and his duty simply was to amuse the public. I do actually appreciate that he did not infuse the stories with all of those irrational and fantastic marvels circulating at that time on the lands and creatures of the Orient – you surely know about the medieval so-called mirabilia, that so much amused our European people back then.

*Thank you very much Messer Marco Polo. We hope to come back to your offer very soon.*

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