

Marco Polo was born in 1254 to Niccolo Polo, a leading merchant of Venice. In 1260, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, Marco's father and uncle, traveled to Peking (Khanbaligh), which Kublai Khan had made the capital of his extensive empire. After nine years, the men returned to Venice having made a promise to the Khan that they return to China and bring with them some friars in order to aid in the introduction of Christianity. Seventeen-year-old Marco joined his father and uncle for this second journey, which began in 1271. The party was well-received by the Khan in 1275, although they did not bring the friars he had requested.

Because Marco Polo was more "a studious young man with a gift for languages" than a merchant like his father, the Khan appointed him to civil service in 1277 (Collis 382). Marco rose quickly through the ranks and was sent by the Emperor on several confidential missions. Marco eventually became prefect of Yangchow, a large city on the Grand Canal. "His career was the most brilliant any European has ever had in the Chinese service," and during his fifteen years of duty he gained much information about India and Japan and also learned of China through the Mongol point of view. When Marco applied for leave around 1290, the Khan refused because he could not stand to lose the excellent service of the man. Marco was finally granted leave in 1292, but only because he was thought to be the best man to escort the Lady Kokachin to Persia, where she would marry Kublai Khan's grand-nephew. Marco was allowed to leave on the condition that he would return to the Khan's service; however, the Khan's subsequent death released him from this obligation.

Marco continued his journey and arrived in Venice in 1295. At this time, Venice was at war with the republic of Genoa, and a ship on which Marco was traveling was captured by the Genoese. Marco was held prisoner in Genoa from 1296 to 1299, and it was during these years that the Travels was produced. Polo dictated to a fellow prisoner by the name of Rusticello of Pisa. After his release in 1299, Marco Polo lived in Venice where he became the joke of the townspeople who did not believe his travel stories. He died in 1324 and was buried in the Church of San Lorenzo.

Questions:

1. What is a merchant? Friar?
2. Why did Kublai Khan appoint Marco Polo to civil service in China?
3. What knowledge did Marco Polo gain during his appointment?
4. What allowed Marco Polo to escape from the Khan's service?
5. What did the Europeans think about Marco Polo on his return?

