

Editor's note:

Marco Polo was the first Western traveller to speak of Burma (Mien). His late thirteenth century account has been translated numerous times, one of the most popular editions being Henry Yule's (tr.) *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* in the nineteenth century and the revision of this translation by Henri Cordier in the early twentieth. The Yule-Cordier edition of 1903 is widely available in reprint. Less widely available is the present translation made by W. Marsden from Ramusio's collection of travels published in 1818 and re-edited by Thomas Wright in September 1854, published as *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*. (London: Henry G. Bohn). Polo's account of events in Burma can be dated to the early-mid 1290s, for he returned to Venice in 1295, although the Travels were not put into writing until 1298. The version below has been made from the copy in the British Library.

M.W. C.

**THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO, THE VENETIAN
(1298)**

Marco Polo of Venice

Translated by W. Marsden

Re-edited by Thomas Wright

**Chapter XL
Of the Province named Karazan**

Leaving the city of Yachi, and traveling ten days into a westerly direction, you reach the Province of Karazan which is also the name of its chief city...Here are seen huge serpents, ten paces in length, and ten spans in the girth of the body. At the fore-part, near the head, they have two short legs, having three claws like those of a tiger, with eyes larger than a fourpenny loaf (*pane da quattro denari*) and very glaring. The jaws are wide enough to swallow a man, the teeth are large and sharp, and their whole appearance is so formidable, that neither man, nor any kind of

animal, can approach them without terror. Others are met with of a smaller size, being eight, six, or five paces long; and the following method is used for taking them. In the day-time, by reason of the great heat, they lurk in caverns, from whence, at night, they issue to seek their food, and whatever beast they meet with and can lay hold of, whether tiger, wolf, or any other, they devour; after which they drag themselves towards some lake, spring of water, or river, in order to drink. By their motion in this way along the shore, and their vast weight, they make a deep impression, as if a heavy beam had been drawn along the sands.

Those whose employment it is to hunt them observe the track by which they are most frequently accustomed to go, and fix into the ground several pieces of wood, armed with sharp iron spikes, which they cover with the sand in such a manner as not to be perceptible. When therefore the animals make their way towards the places they usually haunt, they are wounded by these instruments, and speedily killed. The crows, as soon as they perceive them to be dead, set up their scream; and this serves as a signal to the hunters, who advance to the spot, and proceed to separate the skin from the flesh, taking care immediately to secure the gall, which is most highly esteemed in medicine. In cases of the bite of a mad dog, a pennyweight of it, dissolved in wine, is administered. It is also useful in accelerating parturition, when the labour pains of women have come on. A small quantity of it being applied to carbuncles, pustules, or other eruptions on the body, they are presently dispersed; and it is efficacious in many other complaints. The flesh also of the animal is sold at a dear rate, being thought to have a higher flavour than other kinds of meat, and by all persons it is esteemed a delicacy.

In this province the horses are of a large size, and whilst young, are carried for sale to India. It is the practice to deprive them of one joint of the tail, in order to prevent them from lashing it from side to side, and to occasion its remaining pendent; as the whisking it about, in riding, appears to them a vile habit. These people ride with long stirrups, as the French do in our part of the world; whereas the Tartars, and almost all other people, wear them short, for the more conveniently using the bow; as they rise in their stirrups above the horse, when they shoot their arrows.

They have complete armour of buffalo-leather, and carry lances, shields, and cross-bows. All their arrows are poisoned. I was assured, as a certain fact, that many persons, and especially those who harbour bad designs, always carry poison about them, with the intention of swallowing it, in the event of their being apprehended for any delinquency, and exposed to the torture, that, rather than suffer it, they may effect their own destruction. But their rulers, who are aware of this practice, are always provided with the dung of dogs, which they oblige the accused to swallow immediately after, as it occasions their vomiting up the poison, and thus an antidote is ready against the arts of these wretches.

Before the time of their becoming subject to the dominion of the Grand Khan, these people were addicted to the following brutal custom. When any

stranger of superior quality, who united personal beauty with distinguished valour, happened to take up his abode at the house of one of them, he was murdered during the night; not for the sake of his money, but in order that the spirit of the deceased, endowed with his accomplishments and intelligence, might remain with the family, and that through the efficacy of such an acquisition, all their concerns might prosper. Accordingly the individual was accounted fortunate who possessed in this manner the soul of any noble personage; and many lost their lives in consequence. But from the time of His Majesty's beginning to rule the country, he has taken measures for suppressing the horrid practice, and from the effect of severe punishments that have been inflicted, it has ceased to exist.

Chapter XLI
Of the Province of Kardandan and the City of Vochang¹

Proceeding five days' journey in a westerly direction from Karazan, you enter the province of Kardandan, belonging to the dominion of the grand khan, and of which the principal city is called Vochang

Chapter XLII
Of the manner in which the Grand Khan effected the Conquest of the Kingdom of Mien [Burma] and Bangala

BEFORE we proceed further (in describing the country), we shall speak of a memorable battle that was fought in this kingdom of Vochang [Unchang, or Yun-chang]. It happened that in the year 1272 the Grand Khan sent an army into the countries of Vochang and Karazan, for their protection and defence against any attack that foreigners might attempt to make; for at this period he had not as yet appointed his own sons to the governments, which it was afterwards his policy to do; as in the instance of Cen-temur, for whom those places were erected into a principality.

When the king of Mien and Bangala, in India, who was powerful in the number of his subjects, in extent of territory, and in wealth, heard that an army of Tartars had arrived at Vochang, he took the resolution of advancing immediately to attack it, in order that by its destruction the Grand Khan should be deterred from again attempting to station a force upon the borders of his dominions. For this purpose he assembled a very large army, including a multitude of elephants, upon whose backs were placed battlements or castles, of wood, capable of containing to

¹ Wright explains Vochang is the "city of Yung-chang, in the western part of Yun-nan."

the number of twelve or sixteen in each. With these, and a numerous army of horse and foot, he took the road to Vochang, where the Grand Khan's army lay, and encamping at no great distance from it, intended to give his troops a few days of rest.

As soon as the approach of the king of Mien, with so great a force, was known to Nestardín, who commanded the troops of the Grand Khan, although a brave and able officer, he felt much alarmed, not having under his orders more than twelve thousand men; whereas the enemy had sixty thousand, besides the elephants armed as has been described. He did not, however, betray any signs of apprehension, but descending into the plain of Vochang,² took a position in which his flank was covered by a thick wood of large trees, whither, in case of a furious charge by the elephants, which his troops might not be able to sustain, they could retire, and from thence, in security, annoy them with their arrows.

Calling together the principal officers of his army, he exhorted them not to display less valour on the present occasion than they had done in all their preceding engagements, reminding them that victory did not depend upon the number of men, but upon courage and discipline. He represented to them that the troops of the king of Mien and Bangala were raw and unpractised in the art of war, not having had the opportunities of acquiring experience that had fallen to their lot; that instead of being discouraged by the superior number of their foes, they ought to feel confidence in their own valour so often put to the test; that their very name was a subject of terror, not merely to the enemy before them, but to the whole world; and he concluded by promising to lead them to certain victory.

Upon the king of Mien's learning that the Tartars had descended into the plain, he immediately put his army in motion, took up his ground at the distance of about a mile from the enemy, and made a disposition of his force, placing the elephants in the front, and the cavalry and infantry, in two extended wings, in their rear, but leaving between them a considerable interval. Here he took his own station, and proceeded to animate his men and encourage them to fight valiantly, assuring them of victory, as well from the superiority of their numbers, being four to one, as from their formidable body of armed elephants, whose shock the enemy, who had never before been engaged with such combatants, could by no means resist.

Then giving orders for sounding a prodigious number of warlike instruments, he advanced boldly with his whole army towards that of the Tartars, which remained firm, making no movement, but suffering them to approach their entrenchments. They then rushed out with great spirit and the utmost eagerness to engage; but it was soon found that the Tartar horses, unused to the sight of such

² According to Burmese sources, this battle did not take place at "Vochang," but rather at Nga-zaung-kyàn. As G. E. Harvey points out Polo's Vochang (Yung-ch'ang) is 112.65 kilometres from Nga-zaung-kyàn. Harvey 1926, 336n. Polo also gives the year as 1277, While Û Kalà gives it as 1281. See Kalà 1960-1961, 1.299-300.

huge animals, with their castles, were terrified, and wheeling about endeavoured to fly; nor could their riders by any exertions restrain them, whilst the king, with the whole of his forces, was every moment gaining ground. As soon as the prudent commander perceived this unexpected disorder, without losing his presence of mind, he instantly adopted the measure of ordering his men to dismount and their horses to be taken into the wood, where they were fastened to the trees.

When dismounted, the men, without loss of time, advanced on foot towards the line of elephants, and commenced a brisk discharge of arrows; whilst, on the other side, those who were stationed in the castles, and the rest of the king's army, shot volleys in return with great activity; but their arrows did not make the same impression as those of the Tartars, whose bows were drawn with a stronger arm.

So incessant were the discharges of the latter, and all their weapons (according to the instructions of their commander) being directed against the elephants, these were soon covered with arrows, and, suddenly giving way, fell back upon their own people in the rear, who were thereby thrown into confusion. It soon became impossible for their drivers to manage them, either by force or address. Smarting under the pain of their wounds, and terrified by the shouting of the assailants, they were no longer governable, but without guidance or control ran about in all directions, until at length, impelled by rage and fear, they rushed into a part of the wood not occupied by the Tartars. The consequence of this was, that from the closeness of the branches of large trees, they broke, with loud crashes, the battlements or castles that were upon their backs, and involved in the destruction those who sat upon them.

Upon seeing the rout of the elephants the Tartars acquired fresh courage, and filing off by detachments, with perfect order and regularity, they remounted their horses, and joined their several divisions, when a sanguinary and dreadful combat was renewed. On the part of the king's troops there was no want of valour, and he himself went amongst the ranks entreating them to stand firm, and not to be alarmed by the accident that had befallen the elephants. But the Tartars, by their consummate skill in archery, were too powerful for them, and galled them the more exceedingly, from their not being provided with such armour as was worn by the former. The arrows having been expended on both sides, the men grasped their swords and iron maces, and violently encountered each other. Then in an instant were to be seen many horrible wounds, limbs dismembered, and multitudes falling to the ground, maimed and dying; with such effusion of blood as was dreadful to behold. So great also was the clangour of arms, and such the shoutings and the shrieks, that the noise seemed to ascend to the skies.

The king of Mien, acting as became a valiant chief, was present wherever the greatest danger appeared, animating his soldiers, and beseeching them to maintain their ground with resolution. He ordered fresh squadrons from the reserve

to advance to the support of those that were exhausted; but perceiving at length that it was impossible any longer to sustain the conflict or to withstand the impetuosity of the Tartars, the greater part of his troops being either killed or wounded, and all the field covered with the carcasses of men and horses, whilst those who survived were beginning to give way, he also found himself compelled to take to flight with the wreck of his army, numbers of whom were afterwards slain in the pursuit.

The losses in this battle, which lasted from the morning till noon, were severely felt on both sides; but the Tartars were finally victorious; a result that was materially to be attributed to the troops of the king of Mien and Bangala not wearing armour as the Tartars did, and to their elephants, especially those of the foremost line, being equally without that kind of defence, which, by enabling them to sustain the first discharges of the enemy's arrows, would have allowed them to break his ranks and throw him into disorder.

A point perhaps of still greater importance is, that the king ought not to have made his attack on the Tartars in a position where their flank was supported by a wood, but should have endeavoured to draw them into the open country, where they could not have resisted the first impetuous onset of the armed elephants, and where, by extending the cavalry of his two wings, he might have surrounded them. The Tartars having collected their force after the slaughter of the enemy, returned towards the wood into which the elephants had fled for shelter, in order to take possession of them, where they found that the men who had escaped from the overthrow were employed in cutting down trees and barricading the passages, with the intent of defending themselves.

But their ramparts were soon demolished by the Tartars, who slew many of them, and with the assistance of the persons accustomed to the management of the elephants, they possessed themselves of these to the number of two hundred or more. From the period of this battle the Grand Khan has always chosen to employ elephants in his armies, which before that time he had not done. The consequences of the victory were, that the Grand Khan acquired possession of the whole of the territories of the king of Bangala and Mien, and annexed them to his dominions.

Chapter XLIII **An Uninhabited Region, and of the Kingdom of Mien**

Leaving the province of Kardandan, you enter a vast descent, which you travel without variation for two days and a half, in the course of which no habitations are to be found. You then reach a spacious plain, whereon, three days in every week, a number of trading people assemble, many of whom come down from the neighbouring mountains, bringing their gold to be exchanged for silver, which the merchants who repair thither from distant countries carry with them for this purpose; and one saggio of gold is given for five of silver. The inhabitants are not

allowed to be the exporters of their own gold, but must dispose of it to the merchants who furnish them with such articles as they require; and as none but the natives themselves can access to the places of their residence, so high and strong are the situations, and so difficult the approach, it is on this account that the transactions of business are conducted in the plain. Beyond this, in a southerly direction, towards the confines of India, lies the city of Mien. The journey occupies fifteen days, through a country much depopulated, and forests abounding with elephants, rhinoceroses, and other wild beasts, where there is not the appearance of any habitation.

Chapter XLIV **Of the city of Mien, and of a Great Sepulchre of its King**

AFTER the journey of fifteen days that has been mentioned, you reach the city of Mien, which is large, magnificent, and the capital of the kingdom. The inhabitants are idolaters, and have a language peculiar to themselves.

It is related that there formerly reigned in this country a rich and powerful monarch, who, when his death was drawing near, gave orders for erecting on the place of his interment, at the head and foot of the sepulchre, two pyramidal towers, entirely of marble, ten paces in height, of a proportionate bulk, and each terminating with a ball. One of these pyramids was covered with a plate of gold an inch in thickness, so that nothing besides the gold was visible; and the other with a plate of silver, of the same thickness. Around the balls were suspended small bells of gold and of silver, which sounded when put in motion by the wind. The whole formed a splendid object. The tomb was in like manner covered with a plate, partly of gold and partly of silver. This the king commanded to be prepared for the honour of his soul, and in order that his memory might not perish. The Grand Khan, having resolved upon taking possession of this city, sent thither a valiant officer to effect it, and the army, at its own desire, was accompanied by some of the jugglers or sorcerers, of whom there were always a great number about the court.

When these entered the city, they observed the two pyramids so richly ornamented, but would not meddle with them until his majesty's pleasure respecting them should be known. The Grand Khan, upon being informed that they had been erected in pious memory of a former king, would not suffer them to be violated nor injured in the smallest degree; the Tartars being accustomed to consider as a heinous sin the removal of any article appertaining to the dead. In this country were found many elephants, large and handsome wild oxen, with stags, fallow deer, and other animals in great abundance.

Chapter XLV Of the province of Bangala (Bengal)

THE province of Bangala is situated on the southern confines of India, and was (not yet) brought under the dominion of the Grand Khan at the time [c. 1290] of Marco Polo's residence at his court; (although) the operations against it occupied his army for a considerable period, the country being strong and its king powerful, as has been related. It has its peculiar language. The people are worshippers of idols, and amongst them there are teachers [eunuchs] at the head of schools for instruction in the principles of their idolatrous religion and of necromancy, whose doctrine prevails amongst all ranks, including the nobles and chiefs of the country. Oxen are found here almost as tall as elephants, but not equal to them in bulk. The inhabitants live upon flesh, milk, and rice, of which they have abundance. Much cotton is grown in the country, and trade flourishes.

Spikenard, galangal, ginger, sugar, and many sorts of drugs are amongst the productions of the soil; to purchase which the merchants from various parts of India resort thither. They likewise make purchases of eunuchs, of whom there are numbers in the country, as slaves; for all the prisoners taken in war are presently emasculated; and as every prince and person of rank is desirous of having them for the custody of their women, the merchants obtain a large profit by carrying them to other kingdoms, and there disposing of them. This province is thirty days' journey in extent, and at the eastern extremity of it lies a country named Kangigu.

Chapter XLVI Of the province of Kangigu

KANGIGU is a province situated towards the east, and is governed by a king. The people are idolaters, have a peculiar language, and made a voluntary submission to the Grand Khan, to whom they pay an annual tribute. The king is devoted to sensual pleasures. He has about three hundred wives; and when he hears of any handsome woman, he sends for her, and adds her to the number. Gold is found here in large quantities, and also many kinds of drugs; but, being an inland country, distant from the sea, there is little opportunity of vending them.

There are elephants in abundance, and other beasts. The inhabitants live upon flesh, rice, and milk. They have no wine made from grapes, but prepare it from rice and a mixture of drugs. Both men and women have their bodies punctured all over, in figures of beasts and birds; and there are among them practitioners whose sole employment it is to trace out these ornaments with the point of a needle, upon the hands, the legs, and the breast. When a black colouring stuff has been rubbed over these punctures, it is impossible, either by water or

otherwise, to efface the marks. The man or woman who exhibits the greatest profusion of these figures, is esteemed the most handsome.

Chapter XLVII Of the Province of Amu

AMU, also, is situated towards the east, and its inhabitants are subjects of the Grand Khan. They are idolaters, and live upon the flesh of their cattle and the fruits of the earth. They have a peculiar language. The country produces many horses and oxen, which are sold to the itinerant merchants, and conveyed to India. Buffaloes also, as well as oxen, are numerous, in consequence of the extent and excellence of the pastures. Both men and women wear rings, of gold and silver, upon their wrists, arms, and legs; but those of the females are the more costly. The distance between this province and that of Kangigu is twenty-five [other texts, fifteen] days' journey, and thence to Bangala is twenty days' journey. We shall now speak of a province named Tholoman, situated eight days' journey from the former.