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Marco Polo and his 'Travels'¹

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The year 1998 marks the seven-hundredth anniversary of the initial composition of the book associated with Marco Polo, *Le devisement dou monde*. As the first European to claim that he had been to China and back (not to mention that he had travelled extensively elsewhere in Asia), Polo has become a household name. He has been credited with the introduction of noodles into Italy and of spaghetti into China. With perhaps greater warrant, he has been cited as an authority on—*inter alia*—the capital of the Mongol Great Khan Qubilai, on the Mongol postal relay system, on the trade in horses across the Arabian Sea, and on political conditions on the north-west frontier of India in the mid thirteenth century. The *Marco Polo bibliography* published in 1986 contained over 2,300 items in European languages alone.²

But Marco Polo's reliability has been a matter of dispute from the beginning. It has recently been proposed that the incredulity he met with on his return to Venice sprang from an unwillingness to accept his depiction of a highly organized and hospitable Mongol empire that ran counter to the traditional Western Christian view of the 'barbarian' and especially the view of the barbarian Mongols that had obtained since the 1240s.³ Polo has also met with scepticism from modern commentators. A few years ago, the approach of the rather fine book by Dr John Critchley was that the Polo account is a more valuable source for the minds of late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Western Europeans than for contemporary conditions in Asia. For Critchley, therefore, the question of the authenticity of the Polo material is very much a secondary consideration.⁴ More recently, Dr Frances Wood has queried whether Polo was ever in China. She concludes that the famous Venetian probably never got much further than Constantinople or the Black Sea.⁵ The argument tends to be based (1) on omissions which would supposedly not have been made by anyone who had genuinely visited the country: Polo's failure to mention foot-binding, tea-drinking, or the Great Wall, for instance; (2) on the fact that Polo's name has so far not come to light in any Chinese source; and (3) on what can only be regarded as deliberate falsehood, such as the alleged participation of the Polos in the siege and capture of a Chinese city which is known to have been over one year prior to their arrival. Of these objections,

¹ Earlier versions of this study were read to my colleagues in the History Department at Keele University, and to the Seminar on the History of the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in April 1996. I am grateful for the stimulating questions and discussions that followed.

² Hiroshi Watanabe (comp.), *Marco Polo bibliography 1477–1983* (Tokyo, 1986).

³ Martin Gosman, 'Marco Polo's voyages: the conflict between confirmation and observation', in Zweder von Martels (ed.), *Travel fact and travel fiction: studies on fiction, literary tradition, scholarly discovery and observation in travel writing* (Leiden, 1994), 72–84 (see especially pp. 76–7, 83–4). For earlier views of the Mongols, see Gian Andri Bezzola, *Die Mongolen in abendländischer Sicht: ein Beitrag zur Frage der Völkerbegegnungen (1220–1270)* (Berne and Munich, 1974); Felicitas Schmieder, *Europa und die Fremden: die Mongolen im Urteil des Abendlandes vom 13. bis in das 15. Jahrhundert* (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters, 16, Sigmaringen, 1994). Similarly, the delay in the West's absorption of the new information from the 'sophisticated' East is compared with the easy assimilation of the material on the relatively 'uncivilized' Canary islands: J. K. Hyde, 'Real and imaginary journeys in the later Middle Ages', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, LXV, 1982, 138–40.

⁴ John Critchley, *Marco Polo's book* (Aldershot, 1992), xiv; also the 'Epilogue' (pp. 178–9). My debt to Critchley's book will be apparent to anyone who has read it.

⁵ Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (London, 1995): see especially her 'Conclusions' (pp. 140–51).

the failure to mention the Great Wall carries little weight, given that we can be fairly certain it had not yet been built: walls there certainly were, but not the continuous and impressive structure we see today, which apparently dates from the sixteenth century, the era of the Ming dynasty.⁶

In fact, the authenticity of Polo's stay in 'Cathay' was first challenged years ago, partly for such reasons as these but also on the grounds that the Chinese section contains remarkably little in the way of personal reminiscence and that the accounts of Chinese cities are frequently vague (not to say bland) and hardly compare with the vivid descriptions of life in the Mongolian steppe.⁷ Indeed, one could find further grounds for challenging Polo's firsthand familiarity with the Middle Kingdom: that the book neglects, for instance, to mention finger-printing, a technique with a long history in China.⁸ It seems to me, however, that to consider the visit to China in isolation is to set about it the wrong way: we need, rather, to take the work as a whole. In this paper I want to address the following questions. What is the book we associate with Polo's name? With what purpose was it written? What claims does it make for itself? To what extent does it purport to represent Polo's own experiences? Just where did Polo go? This last question is particularly central to my paper.

Asia in the era of Marco Polo

First, it is necessary to put the travels in context.⁹ The voyages of the three Venetians, Marco Polo, his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo, date from an era when much of Asia lay under the rule of the Mongols; although even as the elder Polos set off on their first journey in the early 1260s the unitary Mongol empire was dissolving into a number of rival khanates, of which those of the Golden Horde (in the steppes of southern Russia) and of Persia were closest to the territories of the Catholic West. Only the Mongol rulers of Persia, the so-called *Īl-khāns*, acknowledged the Great Khan (*qaghan*) Qubilai, whose dominions lay in the east and who was able to compensate himself for the hostility of many of his relatives by completing the conquest of southern China in 1279. For all the book's protestations, the mighty ruler of Cathay immortalized by Polo (and later by Coleridge) was in fact the first *qaghan* not recognized throughout the Mongol empire.¹⁰

The subjection of much of Asia under a single government had greatly facilitated the opportunities for both merchants and missionaries to travel from western Europe across the continent, opportunities which were not appreciably reduced by the empire's disintegration into a number of constituent states.¹¹ In the eastern Mediterranean, Italian and other Latin merchants were active in ports like Ayas (Ajaccio) in the kingdom of Lesser Armenia, lying at the terminus of one of the overland trade routes through the Mongol empire.

⁶ Arthur Waldron, 'The problem of the Great Wall of China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XLII, 1983, 643–63; idem, *The Great Wall of China: from history to myth* (Cambridge, 1990). For a brief defence of Polo in respect of the other omissions, see J. R. S. Phillips, *The medieval expansion of Europe* (Oxford, 1988), 118–19.

⁷ For example, by John W. Haeger, 'Marco Polo in China? Problems with internal evidence', *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies*, xiv, 1978, 22–30.

⁸ Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, II, ed. E. Blochet (Leiden and London, 1911), 481–3, and transl. J. A. Boyle, *The successors of Genghis Khan* (New York, 1971), 280–1; see further E. Chavannes, review of Berthold Laufer, *History of the finger-print system* (Washington, 1913), in *T'oung Pao*, xiv, 1913, 490–1.

⁹ Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, (tr.) J. A. Scott (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), does a good job of placing the Polos' journeys in historical context, though the book is marred by a tendency to be too uncritical and at times excessively eulogistic.

¹⁰ David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford, 1986), 118–19, 156–8.

¹¹ For what follows, see generally Phillips, chs. 5–7.

From the mid thirteenth century merchants from the great Italian commercial cities, Venice, Genoa and Pisa, were beginning to travel at least in Persia and the lands of the Golden Horde.¹² The appearance of rival Mongol khanates further gave rise to promising diplomatic contacts. After the Muslim khan of the Golden Horde reached an understanding with the Mamluk government at Cairo in 1262, negotiations (ultimately fruitless) began between the Pope and various Western monarchs on the one hand and the Ī-khāns on the other regarding the possibility of military collaboration against Egypt, as the principal bastion of Muslim power.¹³ But the shadows were already closing in on the Latin states in Syria and Palestine. When Marco Polo accompanied his father and uncle on their second journey in 1271 the great port of Acre was still in Christian hands; but by the time the Polos came back, the fragile Western settlements had been overwhelmed by the Egyptians (1291).

Authors and copyists

Who wrote the book? There has been widespread agreement that the original language was a form of Old French strongly influenced by Italian. The style is consonant with the story given in the Prologue to what is possibly the earliest surviving MS (the Paris MS fr. 1116, known as F), that Polo dictated his experiences in a Genoese prison in 1298 to a fellow-captive, the Pisan romance-writer Rusticello.¹⁴ But other versions, in other Western languages, were already being made in the early years of the fourteenth century. It has been proposed that Rusticello had a hand only in the production of one version and that subsequently Polo had other co-authors.¹⁵ One hundred and twenty MSS survive in total. Many contain material not found in others. It seems that F itself is the result of abridgement, and hence that some of these other versions represent MS traditions which are in fact older than F; in other words, that F is not the closest in content to the original.¹⁶ The most important traditions, apart from F, are: T, MSS of a Tuscan version, known as *l'Ottimo*, 'the Best', made by Niccolò degli Ormanni, who died as early as 1309;¹⁷ P, a Latin translation made by the Dominican Friar Francesco Pipino of Bologna from a text in the Venetian dialect, at some time between 1310 and 1314 (and now represented by the largest single group of MSS); Z, another Latin version (but quite independent of P), represented primarily by a Toledo MS of the fifteenth century; and R, the MS used by Ramusio in the mid sixteenth century as the basis for his printed edition and now lost (the edition contains a great many, though not all, of the passages otherwise found only in Z, as well as passages not found in any other extant version).

Many phrases in different MSS may reflect embellishments and accretions

¹² Luciano Petech, 'Les marchands italiens dans l'empire mongol', *Journal Asiatique*, CCL, 1962, 549-74.

¹³ J. A. Boyle, 'The Ī-khāns of Persia and the princes of Europe', *Central Asiatic Journal*, xx, 1976, 25-40. Denis Sinor, 'The Mongols and western Europe', in K. M. Setton (general ed.), *A history of the crusades*, III (ed. H. W. Hazard). *The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1975), 530-9. For Egypt and the Golden Horde, see S. Zakirov, *Diplomaticheskie otnosheniya Zolotoi Ordy s Egiptom* (Moscow, 1966).

¹⁴ Carl Theodor Gossen, 'Marco Polo und Rustichello da Pisa', in Manfred Bambeck and Hans Helmut Christmann (ed.), *Philologica Romanica Erhard Lommatzsch gewidmet* (Munich, 1975), 133-43.

¹⁵ Critchley, 18-19, 52.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 9, 139. For an example of a seemingly abridged passage, on 'Caragian', see the composite translation by [A. C.] M[oule and Paul] P[elliot], *The description of the world*, I, [(London, 1938, 2 vols; II is an edition of the Z version)], 278, n.3: all future references are to this translation.

¹⁷ The most recent edition of this text is by Ruggiero M. Ruggieri (ed.), *Il Milione* (Florence, 1986).

due to particular copyists, working in some cases very soon afterwards but in others, perhaps, up to a century and a half later. But the discovery of the fifteenth-century MS Z in Toledo in 1932 revolutionized scholarly thinking on the subject: the fact that so many passages hitherto found only in Ramusio's edition were encountered also in Z obviously tended to make the Ramusio text appear far more dependable.¹⁸ And since much of the material found in Z, but not present in F, would have been too interesting simply to have been omitted, it is conceivable that these earlier accretions represent supplementary oral information from Marco Polo himself.¹⁹ This had happened with two previous visitors to the Mongols, both Franciscan friars, the papal ambassador John of Plano Carpini and the missionary William of Rubruck. Carpini, returning to the West in 1247, had been in great demand as a dinner guest, and we know at least that the Italian Salimbene de Adam obtained further information from him which is not found in his report.²⁰ Rubruck, an unofficial visitor to the Mongol empire, was nevertheless contacted in Paris a few years after his return by the English Franciscan Roger Bacon, who exploited the opportunity to check particular details in the Flemish friar's *Itinerarium* before incorporating them in his own work.²¹

If I have spent so long on the issue of Polo MS traditions, it is in order to make two important and related points at the outset. First, the book—in any of the forms that have come down to us—is not by Marco Polo. We simply cannot be certain what was in the work originally drafted by Rusticello on the basis of Polo's reminiscences in a Genoese prison. Even if we possessed that original, Polo's own perspective on late thirteenth-century Asia would be refracted for us through the prism of Rusticello's prose. And secondly, this means that we cannot afford to lay too much stress on matters that the book does not mention. Given the kind of material found only in Z, for instance, but omitted in other texts because some copyist did not find it sufficiently interesting, we are hardly in a position to claim that Polo was never in China because he failed to refer to foot-binding or tea-drinking. They might have been mentioned in some MS (or group of MSS) now lost. (In fact, it has been overlooked that Z does mention the fact that Chinese women take very small steps, but gives a somewhat arcane explanation for it (I, 305), on which I do not propose to expatiate.)

Corroborative material

What other information is available to supplement the details furnished by the book about the Polos? How do we know that they actually travelled anywhere at all? Apart from the information supplied in the MSS themselves, sources for Polo's experiences are few. There are some that are near-contemporary, such as the *Imago Mundi* of Jacopo d'Acqui, which dates from the fourteenth century. It is d'Acqui who tells us that after his return Polo was captured in a sea battle with the Genoese in 1296 off Ayas in Lesser Armenia, and that in his final illness he was urged to excise passages that were exaggerated and

¹⁸ See, for instance, the plea of Valeria Bertolucci Pizzorusso, 'À propos de Marco Polo et de son livre: quelques suggestions de travail', in *Essor et fortune de la Chanson de geste dans l'Europe et l'Orient latin: Actes du IX^e Congrès international de la Société Rencesvals pour l'étude des épopées romanes. Padoue-Venise, 29 août-4 septembre 1982*, II, (Modena, 1984), 797.

¹⁹ Hyde, 'Real and imaginary journeys', 130-1.

²⁰ Salimbene de Adam, 'Cronica', ed. O. Holder-Egger, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores* (Hanover etc., 1826-1913), xxxii, 210, 213.

²¹ Roger Bacon, *Opus Majus*, ed. J. Bridges (Oxford, 1897-1900, 3 vols.), I, 305. See generally Jarl Charpentier, 'William of Rubruck and Roger Bacon', in *Hyllningskrift tillägnad Sven Hedin på hans 70-årsdag den 19 Febr. 1935* (Stockholm, 1935), 255-67.

incredible; Polo allegedly replied that he had not told half of what he had seen.²² The physician and philosopher Pietro di Abano (d. 1316) claims to have met Polo, 'the most extensive traveller and the most diligent inquirer that I have ever known'.²³ Pipino claims in his preface that he spoke to those who had known Marco and also that the latter's father and uncle had vouched for his veracity.²⁴ It is also worth noticing that according to one fourteenth-century French MS a version from which it was copied had been presented by Polo himself to Thibaut de Cepoy, visiting Venice as the agent of the Capetian prince Charles of Valois in 1307.²⁵ Lastly, documents from the Polo family have survived. Marco's own will (dated 1324) is less informative than that of his uncle Maffeo (1310), which refers to 'the three tablets of gold which were from the magnificent Chan of the Tartars' (a term that could apply either to the *qaghan*, to the *Īl-khān* or to the khan of the Golden Horde); it is presumably one of these which is listed in an inventory of Marco's property drawn up in 1366, during one of the numerous disputes among his extremely litigious kinsfolk.²⁶ What became of the tablets thereafter is, regrettably, unknown.

The fullest source outside the book itself is Ramusio's introduction to his sixteenth-century edition; but the details found here have to be treated with caution, since we do not know their provenance (possibly in some cases genuine traditions preserved at Venice over the previous 250 years) and in a number of instances Ramusio is demonstrably wrong. On the other hand, much of the additional material in his text has an authentic ring and is difficult to account for if it did not in fact emanate from someone who had visited the Far East (the edition, it should be noted, dates from 1553, some years before Europeans again began to establish themselves in China). But what we are to make of the claim, found only in Ramusio's introduction, that Polo sent home to Venice from his Genoese prison and asked his father to forward his notes,²⁷ and that he profited from the assistance of a noble Genoese in writing the book,²⁸ is anybody's guess.

The aim of the book

With what purpose was the book written? The result, we must presume, of its having been written by a professional romance-writer is that the style of the work is heavily formulaic. Of several Chinese cities we learn little more than that the people are idolators, subject to the Great Khan, use paper money and live by trade and industry. Particularly towards the end there are set battle-scenes, in which identical phrases occur with remorseless regularity: men and horses are slain in profusion, severed arms and legs lie strewn about, and the din is so great that 'you could not hear God thundering' (a phrase encountered half a dozen times in F). All the stock-in-trade of medieval French writers is

²² MP, I, 31–2, 34–5. It is improbable, incidentally, that Polo was captured in the battle off Ayas in 1296; a minor sea engagement, at a slightly later date, has been proposed.

²³ Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the way thither*, new edn. by Henri Cordier (Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, xxxiii, xxxvii, xxxviii, xli, London, 1913–16, 4 vols.), III, 195; a fuller quotation in Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo* (Paris, 1959–73, 3 vols with continuous pagination), I, 601–2.

²⁴ Translated in MP, I, 60; also reproduced in Sir E. Denison Ross, 'Marco Polo and his book', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xx (1934), 201 (text), 202–3 (transl.).

²⁵ This MS was used by M. G. Pauthier as the base for his edition, *Le Livre de Marco Polo* (Paris, 1865): its preface appears *ibid.*, 1–2, and is translated in MP, I, 61–2. Ross, 'Marco Polo', 192, was too dismissive of the 'De Cepoy legend', but it should be pointed out that the date of the gift, August 1307, is impossible, since De Cepoy had left Venice for Brindisi by May: Joseph Petit, 'Un capitaine du règne de Philippe le Bel: Thibaut de Chepoy', *Le Moyen Âge*, x=2e série, I (1897), 231–4.

²⁶ MP, I, 28, 556 (and cf. 555, n.1).

²⁷ Critchley, 21. This detail is not found in Jacopo d'Acqui, as Wood claims (pp. 42, 142).

²⁸ Jacques Heers, *Marco Polo* (Paris, 1983), 290–2.

naturally imported: 'And what shall I say?... 'Why make a long story of it?' (this sometimes a few pages too late.) The book is also rambling and discursive, at times irritatingly so: 'But I will go on to tell you also a marvel which I had forgotten to tell' (I, 188; cf. also 216); 'again I will tell you a thing which I had forgotten...' (I, 244; cf. also 277, 407). Even more evocative of a thoroughly disordered mind are the abrupt and maddening changes of direction:

Now since we have told you of these Tartars of the Levant then we will leave them for you and will turn again to tell about the Great Turquie [i.e. Turkestan] so as you will be able to hear clearly. But it is truth that we have told you above all the facts of the Great Turquie... and so we have nothing more to tell of it. So we will leave it and will tell you... (I, 469).

Or still worse:

Now we will leave this and will tell you of the Greater Sea [i.e. the Black Sea]. Yet it is true that there are many merchants and many people who know it; but there are also plenty more of such as do not know it and for such as these one does well to put it in writing. And we will do so... [There follow three lines of text about the mouth of the Black Sea; following which] And after we had begun about the Greater Sea then we repented of it, of putting it in writing, because many people know it clearly. And therefore we will leave it then, and will begin about other things... (I, 477).

There can be no unanimity regarding the purpose for which the book was produced. It may be that Marco Polo conceived of writing a merchant's handbook in the strict sense—a by no means improbable aim for a member of an Italian merchant family. The various texts do contain references to products and their prices, sometimes in Venetian values,²⁹ and the spices that are not imported into Europe are plainly of no interest.³⁰ But Marco does not emerge from the book in the guise of a merchant.³¹ If a merchant's handbook was ever the aim, it was submerged beneath the priorities of Rusticello and other copyists. The Z text is content to say that Polo whiled away his enforced leisure hours in prison by compiling the work 'for the enjoyment of readers' (*ad consolationem legentium*). There is a fuller statement in F:

He says to himself that it would be too great evil if he did not cause all the great wonders which he saw and which he heard for truth to be put in writing so that the other people who did not see them nor know may know them by this book (I, 73).

The same theme recurs later, at the beginning of the section on India:

which are indeed things to make known to those who do not know them, for there are many wonderful things which are not in all the rest of the world, and for this reason it does well and is very good and profitable to put in writing in our book (I, 353).

So far, then, a concern for the transmission of *mirabilia*. But Jacques Heers has drawn attention to the emphasis on the excellence of the Christian faith and on its triumph.³²

²⁹ Examples in Critchley, 34.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 49, citing MP, I, 276.

³¹ A point well made by Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, 97–9, 111; see also Heers, *Marco Polo*, 165–85, 258. But for a more positive assessment of the mercantile point of view as found in the Polo book, see Antonio Carile, 'Territorio e ambiente nel "Divisament dou monde" di Marco Polo', *Studi Veneziani*, n.s., I, 1977, 13–36; Ugo Tucci, 'Marco Polo, mercante', in Lionello Lanciotti (ed.), *Venezia e l'Oriente* (Florence, 1987), 323–37.

³² Heers, *Marco Polo*, 112–17.

It is clear that even in Polo's lifetime the value of the book varied with the translator or copyist and the era. The fact that a French ambassador, then in Venice to organize a crusade against Byzantium,³³ asked for and received a copy from Polo himself suggests that it might, even at this early date, have acquired an interest for would-be crusaders contemplating the Mongol alliance. And it is worth noticing that some MS copies are found bound up with crusade treatises or related matter.³⁴

Similarly, for some copyists the information it included that was especially relevant pertained to the religious beliefs of the various peoples it surveyed. For that reason the Z scribe frequently noted in the margin *adorant ydola*, and the Dominican Pipino, who had composed his Latin translation for the 'reverend fathers' of his Order and replaced the F prologue with one of his own, lays great stress on the salvation of souls: whether it is the case that those reading of the marvels of creation in Polo's book will be led to wonder all the more at the power and wisdom of God, or that the hearts of 'some devoted to religion' will be stimulated to carry the Gospel to 'the blinded nations of the infidels, where the harvest truly is great but the labourers are few'.³⁵ The difference of approach is sometimes starkly in evidence, as when Polo is speaking of marriage customs in Tibet. The basic text is found in F: 'And there is such a custom of marrying women as I shall tell you: it is true that no man would take a maiden for wife for anything in the world...' [unless she has first lain with many men]. In a mid fifteenth-century Venetian MS, this sentence begins: 'And there is such a pleasing custom of marrying women'; for Pipino, some generations earlier, it had to be 'such a custom of marrying women as I shall tell you, an absurd and most detestable abuse coming from the blindness of idolatry...' (I, 269–70). Such preoccupations rendered it by no means incongruous for all three Polos to appear in friars' garb in the illustrations to certain MSS.³⁶ In one case, indeed, material from the itinerary of the fourteenth-century Franciscan traveller Odoric of Pordenone is inserted at intervals in an abridged Polo text.³⁷

The Prologue purports to furnish a framework for the second and main part of the book, 'a description of the diverse parts of the world'.³⁸ The phrase is revealing, and has been too often overlooked. Although material is often introduced by the first person ('I Marco'), the tone is more frequently impersonal: 'When one leaves this city, one travels...' 'One finds...' In fact, it is generally unclear whether the Polos' own travels are the sole source for the information given; the origin of the information is usually left unspecified. The book is therefore emphatically not a narrative of the Polos' travels, of the sort that we find, for instance, in the reports of Carpini and Rubruck.³⁹ If it were an itinerary, the order of places followed in southern Persia would be bizarre in the extreme. And it is important to note that the treatment is, if anything, *more* impersonal in the sections on Persia and Central Asia than in those on China. In western Asia, Polo virtually parachutes into a few localities—Sāwa and a neighbouring village (I, 113–16), where he picked up stories about the

³³ Critchley, 38. Angeliki E. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins: the foreign policy of Andronicus II 1282–1328* (Harvard Historical Studies, LXXXVIII, Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 206–9.

³⁴ See Critchley, 71, 136; though he also points out (pp. 72–5) that the book's attitude towards the Mongol alliance is less than enthusiastic.

³⁵ MP, I, 59–60; and see Ross, 'Marco Polo', 200–1 (text), 202 (transl.).

³⁶ Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, 111, 115 (and see his fig. 3, facing p. 117).

³⁷ John J. Nitti (ed.), *Juan Fernández de Heredia's Aragonese version of the Libro de Marco Polo* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1980).

³⁸ For what follows, see Jacques Heers, 'De Marco Polo à Christophe Colomb: comment lire le *Devisement du monde?*', *Journal of Medieval History*, x, 1984, 125–43.

³⁹ For an attempt to outline an itinerary for the Polos, see Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, 12–38.

Magi; Hurmuz (I, 123–6); a plain in Kirmān where he narrowly escaped capture by the Qara'una Mongols (I, 122); and Badakhshān, where he fell ill (I, 138, R only):⁴⁰ there is little sense of an itinerary. By contrast, the points at which the reader is most strongly under the impression of following in the footsteps of an individual traveller occur in various journeys within 'Cathay': there is no comparison here with the highly improbable description given of China in the 1340s by the Moroccan pilgrim Ibn Baṭṭūta (demonstrably an authentic traveller as far as India).⁴¹

As a whole, however, the Polo book represents an attempt to set out an encyclopedic survey of the different parts of the world 'in order'. The phrase 'in order' recurs extremely frequently, but the order is manifestly not that of any particular journey made in the past: the writer and reader, in Critchley's winsome phrase, 'travel through the book together'⁴²—and it might be added that they frequently turn aside to places that lie off this imaginary route. The only chronological framework is to be found in the prologue, which tells of the departure of Maffeo and Niccolò Polo from Constantinople in 1260 (1250 in all the manuscripts), recounts their return to Venice and their second departure, this time with Niccolò's 15-year-old son Marco, and ends with the three travellers' homeward journey by way of Persia, as ambassadors from Qubilai escorting the imperial princess Kōkechin to the Īl-khān Arghun, in the early 1290s. And even here there is no intimation of route other than a brief allusion to Java.

Personal observation or hearsay?

What claims does the book make for itself and for the Polos? The reader is at intervals assured that the contents are authentic. 'I shall bind myself for certain not to say more of it than is according to the truth' (I, 177, from VB). This statement is found in one of the Venetian MSS, which perhaps understandably take some interest in trophies that they claim Marco brought back to Venice, like a specimen of the hair of the wild ox from Ergiuul (Erji'ül, i.e. Liang-chou)⁴³ and the dried head and hooves of a musk-deer (I, 179, from VB). When on the island of 'Lesser Java' (Sumatra), he obtained some brazil seeds which the travellers took back and planted at Venice, though 'it did not grow there at all' (I, 376), and when in Maabar (Ma'bar; the Coromandel coast of southern India) he took some earth from the place where St Thomas had been martyred and was able to heal many with it back home in Venice (I, 398). In other contexts it is merely claimed that Marco witnessed something, as for example that he saw the head of a gigantic fish in an idol-temple at Quinsai and heard several times the count of the annual revenues of that city (I, 341, Z only; I, 342); and Ramusio's text adds that he saw an estimate of the customs dues there (I, 340). According to one Venetian MS, he had the opportunity to measure a wing-feather of the *ruc* which was brought to Qubilai's court (I, 431, from VB).

Marvels, perhaps; but there is remarkably little of the fabulous. Admittedly, we are treated to an account of men with tails inhabiting the kingdom of

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Lentz, 'War Marco Polo auf dem Pamir?', *ZDMG*, n.F. xi, 1933, 1–32, concluded that the visit to Badakhshān was authentic.

⁴¹ See the remarks of Yule, *Cathay*, ed. Cordier, iv, 48–9, 130 n.1, 140 n.1; Cordier's note on the great mosque at Canton, *ibid.*, 122, n.1; Ross Dunn, *The adventures of Ibn Batuta, a Muslim traveler of the fourteenth century* (London, 1986), 252–3, reviews the problems, but gives Ibn Baṭṭūta the benefit of the doubt. See my review of vol. iv of the translation by H. A. R. Gibb and C. F. Beckingham, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, vi, 1996, 262–6.

⁴² Critchley, 81.

⁴³ Pelliot, *Notes*, II, 646–7.

Lambri (I, 376). But even Carpini, a sober diplomat with a brief to inform the pope of all he had seen in the Mongol world, had mixed in with it well-worn *topoi* with a pedigree that went back to the Alexander Romance: tales about dog-headed people, a race with no heads at all, those with only one leg who propelled themselves along by cartwheeling, and so on. By comparison the Polo account is remarkably restrained, at times even rigorous.⁴⁴ Great care is taken *not* to claim that Polo saw the *ruc* (I, 430–1). The book seeks to put the record straight regarding the salamander (asbestos) which is not consumed by fire: not an animal, as hitherto believed, but a cloth manufactured out of a vein in the earth (I, 156).⁴⁵ It is also concerned to explain tales about the unicorn (in this case, evidently a rhinoceros) and the trade in what purported to be pygmy corpses (actually the dried and decorated carcasses of monkeys) on Sumatra (I, 372). There is the attempt—by this time obligatory for all European travellers in Asia—to locate Prester John, and the Polo account is an interesting and not unintelligent variation on previous themes (I, 181–3).⁴⁶ There are improbable stories, certainly: a long tale about the Christian inhabitants of a village near Baghdad, oppressed by an evil Caliph, who were able by dint of prayer to induce a mountain to move as promised in the Gospel (I, 105–12); or the shoemaker of Baghdad who, after lusting after a beautiful woman who entered his shop, put out his own eye because it was better to enter Heaven with one eye than to go to Hell with two (I, 108–9); or the relation of the death of the last caliph of Baghdad, whom the Mongols allegedly left to starve amidst the treasure he had accumulated instead of spending it on his army (I, 102–3). Such tales are met with in other sources, and Polo (and indeed anyone else) could have picked them up in eastern Christian circles when passing through Persia or Iraq on the way home.⁴⁷ And it has been suggested that he could have heard a tale about a miracle involving a church at Samarqand that was threatened by the venom of local Muslims (I, 144–6) from a Nestorian prelate domiciled at Chên-chiang-fu, Mar Sargis, whom he mentions elsewhere (I, 323) and who is known to have originated in Samarqand.⁴⁸ Generally speaking, the accent, in other words, is on the edifying and the moralistic, rather than on the zoologically preposterous.

The book is concerned to detach hearsay from personal experience. At the outset we find an assurance to this effect:

But there are some things which he did not see, but he heard them from men fit to be cited and of truth. And therefore we shall put the things seen for seen, and the heard for heard, so that our book may be right and truthful, with no falsehood... (I, 73).

Although it cannot be said that this laudable aim is adhered to consistently, it nevertheless does resurface at intervals:

But do not believe that we have treated of the whole province of Catai [north China] in order, nor indeed of a twentieth part; but only as I Marco

⁴⁴ This did not prevent fabulous creatures finding their way into the illustrations in some of the Polo MSS: see R. Wittkower, 'Marco Polo and the pictorial tradition of the marvels of the east', in *Oriente Poliano. Studi e conferenze tenute all'IsMEO in occasione del VII centenario della nascita di Marco Polo (1254–1954)* (Rome, 1957), 155–72; John Block Friedman, *The monstrous races in medieval art and thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 154–8.

⁴⁵ For the old misconception, see Berthold Laufer, 'Asbestos and salamander: an essay in Chinese and Hellenistic folk-lore', *T'oung Pao*, xvi, 1915, 299–373.

⁴⁶ Louis Hambis, 'Le voyage de Marco Polo en Haute Asie', in *Oriente Poliano*, 183–4. David Morgan, 'Prester John and the Mongols', in Charles F. Beckingham and Bernard Hamilton (ed.), *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes* (Aldershot, 1996), 165–6.

⁴⁷ Critchley, 83–4.

⁴⁸ Pelliot, *Notes*, II, 774–5.

used to cross through the province, so the cities which are on the way across are described (I, 309, Z only).

Regarding Mangi (Man-tze, i.e. south China) we read in F: 'We have not told you of the nine provinces ["kingdoms"] of Mangi but of three: these are Yangiu, Quinsai and Fugiu...'. The Z text adds: 'Of these three, however, we have told you this in order because Master Marco made his passage through them, for his way was directed thither. But of the other six also he heard and learned many things...; but because he was not in any of them as he was in Quinsai... and because he did not travel over them he would not have been able to tell so fully as about the others, so we will leave them aside' (I, 353). Similarly, when we reach the island of 'Lesser Java', to F's statement that it contains eight kingdoms a fourteenth-century Latin MS adds: 'of which I Marco was in six, namely in the kingdoms of Ferlec, Basman, Sumatra, Dagroian, Lambri and Fansur, but I was not in the other two' (I, 371); and subsequently we find: 'And we will tell you nothing of the other kingdoms on the other side [i.e. on the southern coasts of Sumatra] because we were not there at all' (I, 377). The lengthy section on the 'Old Man of the Mountain' (the head of the sect of the Assassins) is prefaced with the words: 'I Master Marco Polo heard it told by several men...' (I, 129). The account of the salamander/asbestos in 'Ghinghin Talas' is credited to a 'companion, named Çulficar, a Turk..., who stayed three years in that province for the Great Khan to have that salamander brought out'; but, the author adds, 'I saw them myself' (I, 156-7). At one point, in the account of the city of Quenlinfu (Chien-ning fu),⁴⁹ Ramusio's text inserts the words, 'and I was told, though I did not see...' (I, 346).

In the vast majority of cases where there is a personal note, incidentally, it is Marco's experiences that are transmitted, and not those of his father and uncle. Exceptions are the reference to all three Polos staying for a year in the city of Campçio (Kan-chou) 'for their business which is not worth mention' (I, 160),⁵⁰ and the discovery, during a visit by Marco and his uncle to the city of Fugiu, of a strange sect whom they identified as Christians (I, 349, Z only), although modern commentators have seen here an isolated pocket of Manichaeans.⁵¹ But generally speaking the elder Polos are eclipsed: what they saw on their first journey across Asia to Qubilai's court, the Prologue tells us, Marco also saw (later), 'and so he will tell you clearly in the book below' (I, 77).⁵²

So where precisely are we told that Marco Polo went? If we take the book at face value, Marco himself was employed on numerous missions by the *qaghan*, on which he was under orders to write interesting reports, and these were the means whereby he was so well informed about the world (I, 87). The suggestion has been made that this helps to explain the tone of much of the information, given the formulaic character of Chinese reports of this kind—and, incidentally, of those of Venetian ambassadors.⁵³ Some of this imperial

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, II, 814-15.

⁵⁰ For Kan-chou, see *ibid.*, I, 150-3. It is noteworthy that the Tuscan version (Ruggieri, 150) omits Marco's name here, which might suggest that the visit fell during the first journey.

⁵¹ Paul Pelliot, 'Les traditions manichéennes au Fou-kien', *T'oung Pao*, xxii, 1923, 193-208; and in his *Notes*, II, 726-8.

⁵² This reference to Marco is omitted in the Tuscan version (Ruggieri, 106).

⁵³ Critchley, 78-9, and cf. also 82-3 for pilgrims' guides; for Chinese geographical writing, see *ibid.*, xii. Heers, *Marco Polo*, 241-2, draws analogies between the tone of Polo's book and the spiced-up account of Hülegü's invasion of Persia, based on the report of Ch'ang Te and presented to Qubilai by Liu Yu in 1263: for the text, see Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval researches from eastern Asiatic sources* (London, 1888, 2 vols.), I, 122-56.

business seems to have involved land journeys through China. Thus Marco was sent as messenger to Qarajang, i.e. Yün-nan (I, 86); and he also travelled westwards for four months' journey from Qubilai's capital, Khanbaligh, and Pul-i Sangin ('the bridge over the Sang-kan')⁵⁴ lay en route (I, 255). Elsewhere we are told that 'from Sindufu [Sheng-tu] one sets out and rides quite seventy days' journey through provinces and through lands [in] which we have been and have written them in our book above' (I, 300).

But there are other references to sea voyages on Qubilai's behalf, entailing visits to the great Chinese ports to which the book devotes so much attention. Considerable stress is laid upon Marco's experience of India (i.e. south and south-east Asia in general):

Moreover, I tell you quite truly that Master Marco Polo stays there in India so long and knows so much of them, of their affairs and of their customs and of their trade, that there was scarcely a man who would know better how to tell the truth about them... (I, 354).⁵⁵

In fact a careful reading reveals that an account of India is practically as vital to the book's purposes as is the account of China: 'our book was not yet filled with that which we wish to write there,' the reader is assured, 'for there were wanting all the doings of the Indians' (I, 353). Marco had allegedly just returned from India when the *qaghan's* envoys to the Īl-khān Arghun ascertained that the land route across Asia was unsafe, i.e. in about 1290 (I, 89; embellished in some other MSS); which was why he and his father and uncle were able to latch onto the embassy when it was decided to go by sea to Persia instead.

The book claims that Polo was in six out of the eight kingdoms on 'Lesser Java', as we have seen, and was marooned in one of these, 'Sumatra', by adverse weather for five months (I, 373). It was presumably by sea also that he visited Čiampa (i.e. part of present-day Vietnam: I, 368), whose king, he learned, had fathered 326 children. We cannot always be sure whether a particular visit—that to the island of Lesser Java, for instance—occurred in the course of the long return journey or formed part of some earlier official mission; and the various MS traditions render it difficult for us to know, in some cases, because they contradict one another. Thus a Venetian MS adds that Polo was part of an embassy which Qubilai sent to Ceylon to ask its king for an enormous ruby and that he saw the ruby with his own eyes, though the mission was a failure (I, 380); whereas Ramusio's text specifies that Polo stopped off in Ceylon on the way home (I, 407). The two statements are not mutually exclusive, of course. Similarly, the visit to Maabar, on which Polo says he witnessed its king being pursued for debt and which is mentioned without embellishment by Z, is alleged in Ramusio's text to have fallen during the return voyage (I, 389). The halt at the great port of Tana in Gujarat (I, 421), on the other hand, is most likely to have occurred just prior to the Polos' arrival in Persia.

Europeans in Mongol Asia

How plausible, then, is the book as a whole? The notion that Italian merchants might travel from Europe across the breadth of Asia, and come back to tell

⁵⁴ Pelliot, *Notes*, II, 812.

⁵⁵ For a *resumé* of the material on India, see K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, 'Marco Polo on India', in *Oriente Poliano*, 111–20.

the tale, is not as far-fetched to us, of course, as it would perhaps have appeared to the citizens of Venice around 1300. It seems that the arrival of Europeans of some sort (*Fu-lang*, i.e. 'Franks') at Qubilai's court is recorded in the Chinese annals as early as 1261, though the obscure details associated with them, which include a reference to the Land of the Midnight Sun, make it unlikely that they were Italians: more probably they hailed from Scandinavia or from some northern Russian city like Novgorod.⁵⁶ The Italian presence in the Far East (as opposed to Persia) was more a feature of the fourteenth century, and even then the Venetians appear to have been outnumbered by their rivals the Genoese, who already by c. 1320 had a reputation for unrivalled daring and curiosity: Polo learned that they had recently ventured onto the Caspian Sea (I, 99).⁵⁷ But we do have evidence that Venetians had got as far as China at least by the time the Polos embarked on their return voyage. The Franciscan missionary John of Montecorvino—later, in 1307, to become the first Latin archbishop of Khanbaligh—speaks in his third letter of a Venetian merchant, Pietro da Lucalongo, who had travelled out with him to China from Tabriz in 1291 and purchased for him the land on which he had built his church.⁵⁸ The remarkable thing about the Polos' two journeys to the *qaghan's* court is that they occurred some years before an Italian presence in the Far East is documented.

What we know of Yüan China from other sources—notably the *Yüan Shih*, the dynastic history compiled after the fall of the Mongol regime in 1368, but from contemporary records—serves to make much of the detail of the account of Polo's activities there rather convincing. Even the mention of asbestos deposits appears apt, since Qubilai's finance minister Ahmad had in 1267 submitted a memorial to the throne in which he advocated their proper exploitation.⁵⁹ Nor were far-flung missions on the *qaghan's* behalf uncommon either by land or by sea. Qubilai is known to have despatched a party to explore the sources of the Yellow River in 1281,⁶⁰ and the Mongol government's concern to revive trade with the Indian subcontinent and the islands of the eastern archipelago is apparent from 1278 onwards. Yüan embassies visited Ma'bar in 1280, Ceylon, Ma'bar and Kawlam (Quilon) in 1281, Ceylon again in 1282, Kawlam in 1283, and Ma'bar in 1285, 1287 (with Ceylon) and 1290. The purpose was not always simply an exchange of goods. The 1282 mission appears to be that mentioned in the Polo texts (though with the year 1281 or, in one MS tradition, 1284), since one of its goals was to inspect or secure the alms bowl and mortal remains of the Buddha (identified by Polo as 'Adam':

⁵⁶ Herbert Franke, review of Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, in *ZDMG*, cxii, 1962, 229–31; and his 'Sino-Western contacts under the Mongol empire', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vi, 1966, 54–5.

⁵⁷ Guillaume Adam, 'De modo Sarracenos extirpandi', in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades* [hereafter *RHC*]. *Documentis Arméniens*, II (Paris, 1906), 553. See also the comments in B. Z. Kedar, *Merchants in crisis* (New Haven and London, 1976), 10–11; Michel Balard, 'Les Génois en Asie centrale et en extrême-orient au XIV^e siècle: un cas exceptionnel?', in *Économies et sociétés au moyen âge: Mélanges offerts à Edouard Perroy* (Paris, 1973), 681–9.

⁵⁸ 'Epistolae Fr. Iohannis de Monte Corvino', in Anastasius Van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana*, I. *Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Quaracchi-Firenze, 1929), 352–3; tr. in Christopher Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol mission* (London, 1955), 229. For the date of Montecorvino's departure from Tabriz, see his second letter, in Van den Wyngaert, 345 (tr. Dawson, 224).

⁵⁹ Laufer, 'Asbestos and salamander', 365.

⁶⁰ Emilio Bottazzi, 'Un'esplorazione alle sorgenti del Fiume Giallo durante la dinastia Yüan', *Annali: Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, n.s. xix, 1969, 529–46, with the year 1280 in error. Herbert Franke, 'The exploration of the Yellow River sources under emperor Qubilai in 1281', in G. Gnoli and L. Lanciotti (ed.), *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci memoriae dicata* (Rome, 1985), 401–16; repr. in Franke, *China under Mongol rule* (Aldershot, 1994).

1, 411); and the envoys in 1290 were under orders to bring back men of learning and interpreters.⁶¹

The Polo texts do not claim that the Venetians participated in all of the embassies mentioned. Thus in the account of the mission sent to Ceylon in 1281 to ask its king for relics of Adam the book makes no mention of Marco or his father and uncle. Admittedly Qubilai is not known, from Chinese sources or indeed any others apart from the Polo book, to have employed expatriate Europeans (and Chinese sources are remarkably unhelpful in this regard, given their tendency to lump together everyone from the West, whether Muslims or Central Asian Buddhists, as *Hsi-yü*, 'Westerners', or *Se-mu*, 'people of diverse nations').⁶² On the other hand, Qubilai's relatives the *Ī-khāns* certainly employed Europeans. Such men are found as early as the 1260s acting as interpreters and envoys on behalf of Hülegü and Abaqa.⁶³ Ghazan, who eventually married the princess Kökechin and himself became *Ī-khān* in 1295, had in his service around 1300 a Pisan called Isolo; and he and his father Arghun were represented on diplomatic missions to Western Europe in 1289–91 and in 1302 by a Genoese named Buscarello di Ghisolfi.⁶⁴

It may be that we can begin to explain the frustrating nature of much of the detail on China. In the first place, Marco spent a significant proportion of his 17 years in the *qaghan's* service travelling abroad, possibly in the main to the ports of southern India. And secondly, both then and during his stay in China itself, he would have associated largely with non-Chinese: this would account for the absence of references to tea-drinking. As a foreigner in the imperial service, he would have been employed as part of a deliberate policy of reducing dependence on the native Chinese.⁶⁵ Nor would he have been required to learn the Chinese language. That he did not seems clear from his error in interpreting the Chinese title of the Mongol general Bayan ('Cingsang' = *ch'eng-hsiang*, 'minister') to mean 'a hundred eyes' (1, 310, 311);⁶⁶ although this does, incidentally, look like just the kind of mistake that could only have been made by someone who had visited China. Competence in other languages was at a premium in the *Yüan* dominions, as it had been throughout the Mongol world since the beginning.⁶⁷ The book does not specify which were the 'languages and four letters and writings' that Marco Polo

⁶¹ W. W. Rockhill, 'Notes on the relations and trade of China with the eastern archipelago and the coast of the Indian Ocean during the fourteenth century: part I', *T'oung Pao*, xv, 1914, 429–42.

⁶² Ch'ên Yüan, *Western and Central Asians in China under the Mongols*, tr. Ch'ien Hsing-hai and L. Carrington Goodrich (Monumenta Serica Monographs, xv, Los Angeles, 1966), 1–2. Igor de Rachewiltz, 'Some remarks on the language problem in *Yüan* China', *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, v, 1967, 65.

⁶³ Denis Sinor, 'Interpreters in medieval Inner Asia', in Marcel Erdal (ed.), *Studies in the history and culture of Central Eurasia* (Jerusalem, 1982 = *Asian and African Studies*, xvi), 307–16.

⁶⁴ Jean Richard, 'Isol le Pisan: un aventurier franc gouverneur d'une province mongole?', *Central Asiatic Journal*, xiv, 1970, 186–94; repr. in his *Orient et Occident au Moyen Âge: contacts et relations (xii^e–xv^es.)* (London, 1976). Jacques Paviot, 'Buscarello de' Ghisolfi, marchand génois intermédiaire entre la Perse mongole et la Chrétienté latine (fin du xiii^{me}-début du xiv^{me} siècles)', in *Storia dei Genovesi*, xi (Genoa, 1991), 107–17. Sinor, 'The Mongols and Western Europe', 534–7.

⁶⁵ Morris Rossabi, 'The Muslims in the early *Yüan* dynasty', in John D. Langlois (ed.), *China under Mongol rule* (Princeton, 1981), especially 257–60, 270–95; idem, *Khubilai Khan: his life and times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), 70–5. For a revisionist view of the effectiveness of this policy, especially in the later decades of Mongol rule, cf. Elizabeth Endicott-West, *Mongolian rule in China: local administration in the Yuan dynasty* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph series, 29, Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 78–88; see *ibid.*, 122, for the social isolation of the Mongols (and presumably, therefore, of other foreign officials) in *Yüan* China.

⁶⁶ Pelliot, *Notes*, 1, 68. Francis Woodman Cleaves, 'The biography of Bayan of the *Bārin* in the *Yüan Shih*', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, xix, 1956, 186–8. Polo (or perhaps Rusticello) transferred to Bayan's Chinese rank an incorrect explanation of the Mongol name *bayan* ('rich') as deriving from Chinese *po-yen*, 'hundred eyes'.

⁶⁷ Sinor, 'Interpreters', 307–16.

learned (I, 86). Two of them were almost certainly Persian and Turkish (the languages of most of the non-Mongol foreigners employed in the administration), and it has been suggested that the other two were both Mongolian, but written in two distinct alphabets, the older Uighur script and the new *phags-pa* script introduced by Qubilai's regime in 1269 and borrowed from Tibet.⁶⁸ There is nothing surprising about the fact that the information in the book has in large measure a Persian slant: similarly, merchants who told the Master of the Temple in Cyprus some time before 1308 about the great Chinese port of Hsin-Ts'ai (Hang-chou) employed an Arabic-Persian form ('Hansa') not too remote from the 'Quinsai' of the Polo account.⁶⁹ Persian was by now a *lingua franca* throughout much of the Mongol empire,⁷⁰ and was doubtless the language Marco knew best. He was an alien who was surely thrown together with other aliens, and it is through the eyes of aliens that we see late thirteenth-century China in the book.

The status of the Polos

It is not so much the main portion of the book that fails to withstand scrutiny as certain of the details supplied in the Prologue, specifically regarding the status enjoyed by the Polos. Let us examine the story, which begins with a commercial expedition by Maffeo and Niccolò from Constantinople to the lands of the Golden Horde. Here they allegedly found themselves unable to retrace their steps owing to the war that had broken out between the khan, Berke, and his southern neighbour, the Il-khān Hülegü (a war known to have begun in 1261–62), and so travelled east into Central Asia, where they met an envoy from Hülegü to Qubilai's court and were persuaded to accompany him to the *qaghan* (I, 74–7). As Pelliot pointed out some decades ago, the war between Berke and Hülegü in the Caucasus region hardly prevented the Venetians from returning via the Pontic steppes, and the real reason must have been the problems that developed between Berke and the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus and which led to a Mongol invasion of Thrace at some point in the early 1260s.⁷¹

Qubilai sent back the Polo brothers with a gift of some asbestos cloth (I, 157–8) and with the Mongol noble 'Cogatai', as his ambassadors to the Pope, who was asked to send 100 Christian missionaries; and he instructed the Venetians in addition to obtain for him oil from the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem (I, 78–9; cf. also I, 201–2). What became of the asbestos cloth, we are not told; but both the other details of their commission are strikingly reminiscent of episodes documented elsewhere. When the Nestorian prelate Mar Yaballaha and his companion Rabban Sauma travelled from China to Persia in c. 1275, we are told that they went on Qubilai's behalf and that the *qaghan* had given them garments with which they were to touch the Sepulchre after dipping them in the Jordan.⁷² And again, a few years later, in 1278, we

⁶⁸ On this script, see N. N. Poppe (ed.) and John R. Krueger (tr.), *The Mongolian monuments in ḥP'ags-pa script* (Göttinger Asiatische Forschungen, VIII, Wiesbaden, 1957); De Rachewiltz, 'Some remarks', 71–3; Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, 155–60. Heers, *Marco Polo*, 234, suggests that Arabic was one of Polo's four languages.

⁶⁹ 'Les Gestes des Chiprois', *RHC Documents Arméniens*, II (Paris, 1906), 842.

⁷⁰ Huang Shijian, 'The Persian language in China during the Yuan dynasty', *Papers on Far Eastern History*, XXXIV (September 1986), 83–95.

⁷¹ Pelliot, *Notes*, I, 94–5. For the outbreak of hostilities between Berke and the Emperor Michael, see Marius Canard, 'Un traité entre Byzance et l'Égypte au XIII^e siècle', in *Mélanges offerts à Gaudefroy-Demombynes* (Cairo, 1939–45), 213–19.

⁷² M. M. Siouffi, 'Notice sur un patriarche nestorien', *Journal Asiatique*, 7^e série, XVII, 1881, 90. The evidence is discussed by Pelliot, *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'extrême-orient* (Paris, 1973), 257–9, and by Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the first journey from China to the West* (Tokyo and New York, 1992), 43–6.

learn from a letter of Pope Nicholas III to Qubilai that the *qaghan* had asked his short-lived predecessor, John XXI, for the despatch of missionaries.⁷³ So there is nothing particularly odd about Qubilai's commission to the Polo brothers; although equally, it raises the possibility that Rusticello inserted the details about Jerusalem in the light of Rabban Sauma's own relatively recent visit to western Europe as the ambassador of the *Īl-khān* Arghun: it is worth noting that the Nestorian had spent the winter of 1287–88 in Genoa, where his arrival had created a great stir.⁷⁴

'Cogatai' having fallen ill en route and been left behind, the Polo brothers continued on to Acre, but were unable to prosecute their business because their arrival there (probably in April 1269) fell during a three-year vacancy in the Holy See: this fits well, since no pope was elected for three years following the death of Clement IV in 1268. On the advice of the papal legate at Acre, they waited until the election of a successor and occupied themselves with a visit to their home in Venice. After two years, with the conclave still undecided, they determined to return to Qubilai before it was 'too late'. Leaving Venice once more, this time with Niccolò's young son Marco, they stopped off at Acre, where they consulted the legate, Tedaldo Visconti, archdeacon of Liège. He furnished them with a letter to Qubilai certifying that they had been prevented from fulfilling their mission by the vacancy in the Holy See. But they had got no further than Ayas when they learned that the legate had himself been elected Pope as Gregory X; and soon afterwards the new Pope himself ordered them to return. The Polos thus became part of a diplomatic mission from Gregory to Qubilai. Initially they were accompanied by two Dominican Friars, named as Niccolò da Vicenza and William of Tripoli. The friars took fright, however, at the news of a devastating invasion of Armenia by the Egyptian Sultan Baybars, handed over their letters to the Polos, and returned with the Master of the Templars. The Polos pressed on, and after a three and a half year journey reached the *qaghan's* court (I, 80–4).

M. H. Laurent, who examined the account of the early journeys in the Prologue in some depth, concluded that the details can all be harmonized with known conditions, except that the book makes two different clerics into one: the legate on the first occasion was William of Agen, who died in April 1270, and not Tedaldo Visconti, who was in Palestine only for something like 12 months, from the autumn of 1270 until he left Acre for Italy in November 1271.⁷⁵ Contrary to the Polo prologue, it does not seem that Tedaldo was ever papal legate. He is described merely as a pilgrim in the *Estoire de Eracles*, which mentions his arrival in Palestine, and in the dedication of William of Tripoli's *De Statu Sarracenorum*;⁷⁶ and it is difficult in any case to see how he could have been appointed on the death of William of Agen in 1270, given that there had been no pope for two years.

⁷³ Karl-Ernst Lupprian (ed.), *Die Beziehungen der Päpste zu islamischen und mongolischen Herrschern im 13. Jahrhundert anhand ihres Briefwechsels* (Vatican City, 1981), 237–41 (no. 47); cf. also Nicholas's letter to the *Īl-khān*, 1 April 1278, *ibid.*, 233–6 (no. 46). For Rabban Sauma, see Jean Richard, 'La mission en Europe de Rabban Çauṃa et l'union des églises', in *XII Convegno Volta* (Rome, 1957), 162–7; repr. in his *Orient et Occident*.

⁷⁴ E. A. Wallis Budge (tr.), *The monks of Küblai Khān Emperor of China* (London, 1928), 181. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu*, 134–8.

⁷⁵ M. H. Laurent, 'Grégoire X et Marco Polo (1269–1271)', *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome*, LVIII (1941–6), 132–44. 'Annales de Terre Sainte', B, ed. R. Röhrich and G. Raynaud, *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, II (1884), documents, 455, has 10 November; 'L'estoire de Eracles empereur', *RHC Historiens Occidentaux*, II (Paris, 1859), 471, gives the date of Gregory's embarkation as the octave of St. Martin, i.e. 18 November. For William of Agen, see Bernard Hamilton, *The Latin Church in the Crusader states: the secular church* (London, 1980), 270–5.

⁷⁶ 'L'estoire de Eracles', 471. Hans Prutz, *Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin, 1883), 575.

Laurent's otherwise admirably meticulous study left two details unexplored. One relates to the Egyptian invasion. Only a single Armenian source mentions this campaign, for the good reason that it never materialized. News reached the capital, Sis, that Baybars was on his way north, and this caused some alarm; King Leo III was able to deflect him with a placatory embassy.⁷⁷ As we learn from Arabic chroniclers, which completely neglect to mention Armenia in this context, the whole affair had been a false alarm. At Damascus Baybars received word of the advance of a Mongol army from Ilkhanid Persia in October 1271. From Ḥamā he sent ahead two expeditionary forces which penetrated as far as Mar'ash and Edessa (al-Ruhā) respectively, but he himself advanced no further than Aleppo before withdrawing southwards in response to an attack on Caco (Qāqūn) by the Lord Edward, then on crusade in Palestine. The sultan was back in Cairo by December.⁷⁸ We could surmise that the two friars deserted the mission on hearing the news of the Mongol attack, which at this early stage might have seemed at least as threatening. But the Mongol advance was in response to an appeal from the Lord Edward, and one early recension of the Polo book has Pope Gregory sending the Venetians and the two friars specifically to secure aid from the Īl-khān Abaqa for a future crusade (I, 83).⁷⁹ On these grounds Soranzo as long ago as 1930 suggested that Gregory's embassy was in fact directed to Abaqa. This would rather undermine the need for any pusillanimous reaction on the part of the Dominicans.⁸⁰

The second detail relates to the letters which the pope entrusted to the friars. To write to the *qaghan* when merely archdeacon of Liège on pilgrimage in the Holy Land is one thing; it is quite another to do so immediately after being elected pontiff. We might have hoped that Gregory, mindful of the importance his correspondence had now acquired, kept a copy to be inserted in the registers after his arrival in Italy. No such copy has survived.⁸¹ Arguments from silence are always hazardous. But it is odd that Gregory seemingly failed to recall his letter to Qubilai at the time of the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, and that, when Pope Nicholas III came to write to the *qaghan* on 4 April 1278 (the letter we noticed above), he made no reference to a correspondence with Gregory: he mentioned only the fact that Qubilai had sent word to Pope John XXI, via the Īl-khān Abaqa, asking for baptism and for the despatch of missionaries (i.e. in 1276–77).⁸²

It will be observed that on two occasions the Polos are said to have been part of an embassy but deprived of the company of the official envoys en route. The Mongol noble 'Cogatai' abandoned the elder Polos on their way back from Qubilai in the 1260s (we are not told whether or not they still had a Mongol escort), and the Dominicans selected to head the mission from

⁷⁷ *La chronique attribuée au Connétable Smbat*, (tr.) Gerard Dédéyan (Paris, 1980), 134; also transl. in A. G. Galstian, *Armiānskie istochniki o Mongolakh izvlecheniya iz rukopisei XIII–XIV vv.* (Moscow, 1962), 64.

⁷⁸ Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the thirteenth century*, (tr.) P. M. Holt (London, 1992), 208–9. Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: the Mamluk-Īlkhānid war, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), 125.

⁷⁹ Critchley, 66–8. For the Lord Edward's appeal, see 'L'estoire de Eracles', 461; R. Röhrich, 'Études sur les derniers temps du royaume de Jérusalem, A. La croisade du prince Édouard d'Angleterre (1270–1274)', *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, 1 (1881), 623.

⁸⁰ Giovanni Soranzo, *Il papato, l'Europa cristiana e i Tartari* (Milan, 1930), 217 and n.2.

⁸¹ Burkhard Roberg, 'Die Tartaren auf dem 2. Konzil von Lyon (1274)', *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum*, v (1973), 288, n. 268, suggests that Gregory wrote to the Īl-khān Abaqa, at least, from the Holy Land prior to his departure for Italy, in order to notify him of his plans to convene the council.

⁸² See Jean Richard, *La papauté et les missions d'Orient au Moyen-Âge (XI^e–XV^e siècles)* (Rome, 1977), 85–6. Salimbene, 'Cronica', 210, who names the papal envoys, says in error that they were sent by John XXI.

Gregory X in 1271 deserted the three Venetians at Ayas on learning of the northward advance of an Egyptian army. 'Cogatai' is so far unidentified.⁸³ But William of Tripoli appears to be identical with the homonymous Dominican author of the *De Statu Sarracenorum*, written at Acre and dedicated to none other than the future Gregory X: there is no corroboration of his appointment as an ambassador to the Mongols. To be asked to believe that two members of a Mendicant Order—men who usually emerge from the sources as intrepid and conscientious observers of their Rule—panicked and aborted their mission on the rumours of the Egyptian advance places the reader's credulity under something of a strain. And taken together with the disappearance of 'Cogatai' a few years earlier, it leaves the nagging impression that the Polos had a habit of losing their fellow travellers en route. It begins to look as if Rusticello (with or without Polo) cobbled together an apparently plausible background for the outward journey. Perhaps it was not the first occasion that the Pisan writer had invented prestigious connections of this kind: the claim in one of his other works to have been lent an Arthurian romance by the Lord Edward is decidedly suspect.⁸⁴ Traders described as *mercatores et homines Abagacham* were among those who at Ayas at this very time, in October 1271, received satisfaction for losses suffered at the hands of the Genoese;⁸⁵ and it is possible that the Polos met this party in Armenia and travelled back with them to Persia. But in any case, it was not unknown for merchants to travel with friars, though in no sense forming part of their mission: the Venetian Pietro da Lucalongo, as we have seen, accompanied Montecorvino from Tabriz to China in 1291.⁸⁶

Regarding the return voyage in the early 1290s, we seem to be on firmer ground. The Polos were selected to accompany a mission taking an imperial princess, Kōkechin, from China to Persia as a bride for the Īl-khān Arghun: she was to replace the queen Bulughan, who had recently died. The authenticity of the mission from the *qaghan* which brought the princess Kōkechin is confirmed by both Chinese and Persian sources. We know that the three ambassadors named in the Polo account—the Mongol nobles Uladai, Abushqa and Qocha—received orders from Qubilai in April–May 1290 to prepare for their departure. The Ilkhanid historian Rashīd al-Dīn describes the arrival of the embassy, headed apparently by Qocha, in Persia in c. 1292–93: Arghun having himself died in the interim, they were received by his son Ghazan, who took delivery of the princess and sent a share of the *qaghan's* gifts to his uncle, the Īl-khān Gaykhatu.⁸⁷ The mention of Qocha in particular appears to corroborate the statement in the Polo account that he alone of the ambassadors survived the long sea voyage. Although the Europeans are not mentioned in either of these eastern accounts, the Polo prologue here seems to do a more

⁸³ Louis Hambis, 'Le prétendu "Cogatal" de Marco Polo', in *Nel VII. centenario della nascita di Marco Polo* (Venice, 1955), 235–40.

⁸⁴ Critchley, 4, 6–7.

⁸⁵ Cte. L. de Mas Latrie, *Histoire de l'île de Chypre sous le règne des princes de la maison de Lusignan* (Paris, 1852–61, 3 vols.) II, 78–9; Cornelio Desimoni (ed.), 'Actes passés en 1271, 1274 et 1279 à l'Aïas (Petite Arménie) et à Beyrouth par devant des notaires génois', *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, I (1881), documents, 441. Catherine Otten-Froux, 'L'Aïas dans le dernier tiers du XIII^e siècle d'après les notaires génois', in B. Z. Kedar and A. L. Udovitch (ed.), *The medieval Levant: studies in memory of Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984)* (Jerusalem, 1988 = Asian and African Studies, xxii), 154–5.

⁸⁶ 'Epistolae Fr. Iohannis de Monte Corvino', in Van den Wyngaert, 352–3 (tr. Dawson, *The Mongol mission*, 229); and see n.58 above.

⁸⁷ Francis Woodman Cleaves, 'A Chinese source bearing on Marco Polo's departure from China and a Persian source on his arrival in Persia', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, xxxvi, 1976, 181–203. Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, ed. A. A. Alizade and tr. A. K. Arends, III (Baku, 1957), text 280 (and see 281), gives no date for the arrival of the embassy from China, though clearly placing it prior to the winter of 1293–4.

convincing job of linking their return from China with an episode that actually occurred. Even the detail supplied at one point elsewhere in Ramusio's text that Marco was in the plain of Hurmuz when the king of Kirmān headed an unsuccessful campaign to capture the city slots conveniently into the chronology of the return journey, since the expedition in question can safely be dated to the winter of the Hijrī year 691/early 1292.⁸⁸

But were the Polos part of this embassy to Persia, or did they merely sail in the same fleet? And what became of the mission with which Qubilai is now said to have charged them—to the pope and the kings of France and Spain, among others (I, 90)—but of which we hear nothing further? One problem here is the insistence of Chinese imperial etiquette that foreign merchants be treated as tribute missions from subject peoples,⁸⁹ while merchants were employed as official agents representing the commercial interests of the Mongol *qaghans*.⁹⁰ The distinction between commercial and diplomatic missions had long been difficult to make in the world of the steppe,⁹¹ and visiting traders themselves could accordingly be forgiven for concluding, in error, that their functions had been extended to embrace diplomacy. As we have seen, there is no evidence for the employment of Europeans on official diplomatic missions by the *qaghan*, although such evidence does exist for Mongol Persia.

The inclusion of the Polos in official embassies, however, looks suspiciously like part of a wider tendency to magnify their role in the east. Great stress is laid upon the affection in which the Polos were held. Qubilai is said to have loved them so much that he repeatedly withheld permission for their departure; and when he finally gave them leave, it was with great reluctance (I, 88, 89). So, too, Princess Kōkechin regarded each of the Polos as a father, and 'there was nothing she would not do for them'; she is supposed to have wept when they left Persia for Europe (I, 92–3). Stuff of this sort is of a piece with the emphasis on the high esteem which Marco especially, according to the Prologue, enjoyed at the *qaghan's* court and with his alleged capacity to draft more beguiling reports than anyone else (I, 85–7).⁹² But it should be noted that the more specific manifestations of the Polos' indispensability are less problematic: their participation, for instance, in the siege of Saianfu (Hsiangyang: I, 317–20), which is impossible, given the date (1273), when they could not have yet reached the Far East, and where Chinese sources ascribe their role instead to Muslim mangonel experts,⁹³ and Marco's appointment for three years as governor of Yangiu (Yang-chou; I, 316), which Pelliot sought to explain away with the proposal that the Venetian simply had charge of the government salt monopoly in the city.⁹⁴ That these—the two most implausible

⁸⁸ Jean Aubin, 'Les princes d'Ormuz du XIII^e au XV^e siècle', *Journal Asiatique*, CCXLI, 1953, 88.

⁸⁹ See generally John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese world order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968). On the attitudes of the Mongols' predecessors, the Sung emperors, see Herbert Franke, 'Sung embassies: some general observations', in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *China among equals: the Middle Kingdom and its neighbours, 10th–14th centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), 117; for the post-Yüan era, Henry Serruys, C.I.C.M., *Sino-Mongol relations during the Ming, II: The tribute system and diplomatic missions (1400–1600)* (Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques, xiv, Brussels, 1967), 19–21.

⁹⁰ For Qubilai's reign, see Elizabeth Endicott-West, 'Merchant associations in Yuan China: the *Ortoy*', *Asia Major*, 3rd series, II (1989), part 2, 127–54; for the pre-Qubilai era, Thomas T. Allsen, 'Mongolian princes and their merchant partners 1200–1260', *ibid.*, 83–126.

⁹¹ Denis Sinor, 'Diplomatic practices in medieval Inner Asia', in C.E. Bosworth *et al.* (ed.), *The Islamic world from Classical to modern times: Essays in honor of Bernard Lewis* (Princeton, 1989), 342–3.

⁹² Critchley, 38–41, suggests that Marco Polo was inflating his own capacities in a bid to secure a job with the French.

⁹³ Texts conveniently assembled in A. C. Moule, *Quinsai and other notes on Marco Polo* (Cambridge, 1957), 75–6.

⁹⁴ Pelliot, *Notes*, II, 876.

claims the book makes for the Polos—are not found in certain important groups of MSS, namely Z, those based on a fourteenth-century Latin text, and some of those in Venetian dialect, is often forgotten; they may well represent interpolations of a later date.⁹⁵ It is a curious coincidence that a Venetian merchant family is known to have been domiciled in Yang-chou by 1342, when one of them was commemorated with an impressive Latin tombstone.⁹⁶

It is not implausible that the Polos, like other Westerners (this time, Muslims and Central Asian Turks) we read of in the Chinese and Persian sources for Qubilai's reign,⁹⁷ were genuinely employed by the *qaghan* on commercial business and accompanied diplomatic missions. Rather, it is, at the very least, their role as ambassadors which is a fabrication. Despite Olschki's determination to accept that they served Qubilai in this capacity,⁹⁸ they may well have belonged to a species with which the Mongol empire had for some decades been familiar. A generation or so earlier, the Franciscan William of Rubruck had assured Louis IX of France that bogus envoys 'scurry about all over the world'. Rubruck told the story of one such impostor called Theodolus who obtained permission to travel to the Papal Curia (at some point prior to 1254). He was initially accompanied by a Mongol envoy, who fell ill, however, and died at Nicaea when the party was detained by the emperor John Vatatzes; Theodolus was thrown into prison.⁹⁹ That there were still attractions in Polo's era in passing oneself off as an official envoy emerges from a letter written to Edward I of England by two ambassadors from Mongol Persia in 1276. The ambassadors warn the king against a couple of Catalans (probably merchants) who, in company with a Nestorian Christian, had been sent by the *Īl-khān* Abaqa to purchase gerfalcons in Norway; instead they were travelling further south and pretending to be Abaqa's envoys to the various courts of Catholic Europe (the purpose, of course, would have been to obtain free gerfalcons as gifts and to pocket the *Īl-khān's* money).¹⁰⁰ It was only natural, moreover, for expatriate Westerners to inflate their own consequence when they could safely do so hundreds of miles away. The Pisan Isolo carries off the prize in this context, because he seemingly managed to exaggerate his standing at two completely different courts. He convinced the Ilkhanid statesman and chronicler, Rashīd al-Dīn, that he was one of the rulers of Pisa, so that he was described in just those terms when Rashīd al-Dīn came to write the section of his great historical encyclopedia entitled 'History of the Franks';¹⁰¹ and when at the Papal Curia in 1301 Isolo claimed to be Ghazan's 'vicar' for Syria and the Holy Land, which the *Īl-khān* had recently (and briefly) conquered, although it is more likely that he was merely deputed to superintend the resettlement of Western colonists in the region.¹⁰² We cannot discount the

⁹⁵ A point made by Ronald Latham in his introduction to the Penguin translation (1958), 14, n. These passages, however, do appear in abbreviated form in the Tuscan version (Ruggieri, 230–1).

⁹⁶ Francis A. Rouleau, S. J., 'The Yangchow Latin tombstone as a landmark of medieval Christianity in China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, xvii, 1954, 346–65.

⁹⁷ Igor de Rachewiltz, 'Turks in China under the Mongols: a preliminary investigation of Turco-Mongol relations in the 13th and 14th centuries', in Rossabi (ed.), *China among equals*, 281–310. Rossabi, 'The Muslims in the early Yüan dynasty'.

⁹⁸ Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, 121–4.

⁹⁹ Rubruck, 'Itinerarium', xxix, 7–13, in Van den Wyngaert, 253–6; (tr.) Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 173, London, 1990), 184–7.

¹⁰⁰ Ch. Kohler and C. V. Langlois (ed.), 'Lettres inédites concernant les croisades (1275–1307)', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, lxx (1891), 57.

¹⁰¹ Karl Jahn (ed.), *Die Frankengeschichte des Rašīd ad-Dīn* (2nd ed., Vienna, 1977), Persian text, Tafel 45, German transl., 53.

¹⁰² Richard, 'Isol le Pisan', 188–90. For Ghazan's brief reoccupation of Syria and Palestine, see Sylvia Schein, 'Gesta Dei per Mongolos 1300: the genesis of a non-event', *English Historical Review*, xciv, 1979, 805–19 (especially 815 ff.).

probability that the Polos had embarked on a similar—but, in literary terms, a more successful—imposture.

Conclusion

The book associated with Marco Polo's name is a description of the known world rather than the memoirs or itinerary of the traveller himself; and this, together with an extremely complex and obscure MS tradition, means that we need not attach too much significance to matters that are omitted. As regards the areas the Venetians visited, the book itself makes claims that are not particularly extraordinary, and demonstrates, moreover, a readiness to distance itself from the outrageous. On several matters, such as the diplomatic and commercial contacts between Yüan China and southern Asia, the Polo texts are so well informed that it is difficult to see how Rusticello might have come by the information without an Italian who had spent time in the Far East. Marco Polo may not have travelled extensively in China, and seems to have been employed at least as much on commissions that entailed lengthy journeys by sea between China and peninsular India. In any case, apart from the two itineraries within China which bear the stamp of personal experience, the book is in large measure only loosely arranged around places which it assures us Marco or all three Polos visited; and that the Venetians were not in all the places mentioned is made quite explicit. We have, lastly, to distinguish where the book says the Polos went from the claims it makes (or some MS traditions make) for their credentials, and to confine our scepticism to the latter. The fact that Marco Polo or his co-author or later copyists exaggerated his importance while in China or on the voyage from China to Persia has long been suspected and can hardly be in doubt. But it does not in itself demonstrate that he was never in China or, worse still, never east of the Crimea.