



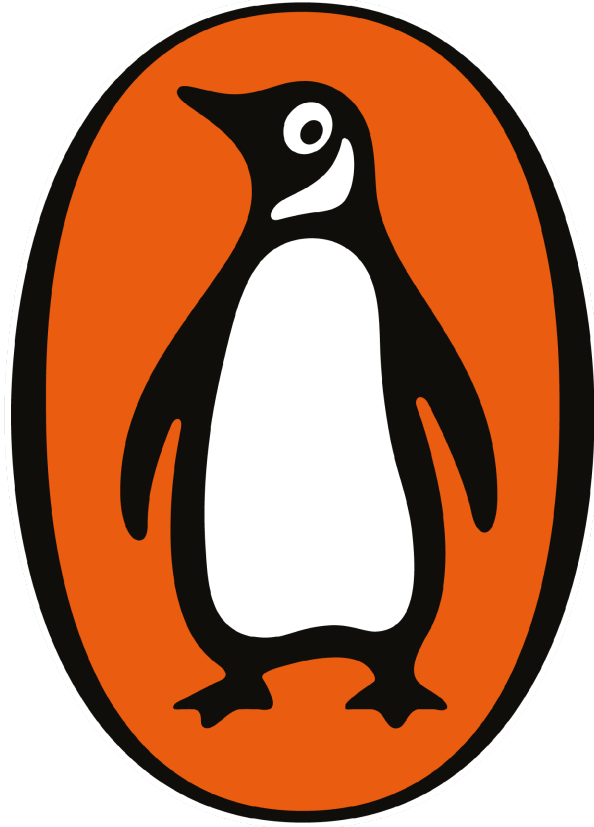
P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

MARCO POLO

The Travels



Marco Polo

THE TRAVELS

Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by

NIGEL CLIFF



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THE TRAVELS

MARCO POLO was born in 1254, the son of Niccolò Polo, a Venetian merchant. A few years later his father and uncle set out across the Black Sea on a business venture, only to find themselves caught up in a Mongol civil war and unable to return home. Eventually they joined an envoy headed to the Mongol ruler Khubilai Khan, who quizzed them and sent them as his emissaries to the pope. In 1269 they reached Venice and Niccolò was reunited with his fifteen-year-old son Marco, who joined them when they set out again for the East in 1271. The journey would last for twenty-four years. Marco quickly learned the Mongol Empire's languages and customs and by his own testimony became a favoured agent of Khubilai Khan, who sent him from his court at Beijing on long missions and enjoyed the detailed reports he made on his return. The purpose and exact route of these travels is still a matter of debate, but Marco almost certainly made at least one journey south-west as far as Burma, another south to modern-day Quanzhou, in China, and a third by sea to south and south-east Asia. In 1291 the Polos accompanied a Mongol diplomatic mission that sailed on a fleet of junks via Sumatra and India to the Persian Gulf. From there they made their way back to Venice, arriving in 1295. Shortly afterwards Marco was captured during a naval battle and imprisoned in Genoa, where he met a romance writer named Rustichello of Pisa. *The Travels*, the book they wrote together, is an eclectic mix of businesslike gazetteer, wide-eyed cultural reportage and colourful legends. Though widely disbelieved from the very beginning, its unprecedented scope and detail made it among the most influential of medieval books, and it continues to excite lively debate today. Marco Polo died in 1324 and was survived by his wife and three daughters.

NIGEL CLIFF is the author of *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007), which was a finalist for the

National Award for Arts Writing; *The Last Crusade: The Epic Voyages of Vasco da Gama* (2011), which was shortlisted for the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize; and *Moscow Nights* (2016). He has written widely for *The Times*, *The Economist* and *The New York Times* and has lectured at Oxford University, the British Library and the Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He lives in London with his wife, the ballerina Viviana Durante, and their son, Orlando.

Chronology

- 1254** Marco Polo is born in Venice to merchant Niccolò Polo and his first wife
- 1256** Hülegü, a grandson of Genghis (or Chinggis) Khan, founds the Mongol state known as the Ilkhanate in Persia
- 1257** Berke, another of Genghis Khan's grandsons, becomes khan of the Golden Horde or Western Mongols; a devout Muslim, he establishes Islam in a Mongol state for the first time
- 1258** Mongol forces under Hülegü sack Baghdad and execute the last caliph
- 1259** Death of Mengü, the fourth Great Khan of the Mongol Empire
- 1259** Hülegü's troops and their Crusader allies invade Muslim Syria
- 1260** Niccolò Polo and his brother Maffeo sail from Constantinople to the Crimean port of Sudak with a consignment of jewels; from Sudak they head to the court of Berke Khan at Sarai
- 1260** Battle of Ayn Jalut in Galilee; the Mongols suffer their first enduring defeat at the hands of the Mamluks of Egypt
- 1260** Khubilai is elected Great Khan; for four years he is embroiled in a war of succession with his brother Ariq Böke
- 1261** The Byzantines retake Constantinople, which Frankish Crusaders had sacked and seized in **1204** during the Fourth Crusade
- 1262** Berke declares war on his cousin Hülegü in retribution for his destruction of Baghdad, trapping Niccolò and Maffeo; they take refuge in Bukhara, staying there for three years
- 1264** Khubilai begins construction of a new city, called Khanbaliq or Daidu, near the ruins of the old North Chinese capital; the city is now Beijing
- 1265** Abagha succeeds his father Hülegü as ruler of the Ilkhanate
- 1266** Niccolò and Maffeo are invited to accompany an envoy en route to Khubilai's court; they leave Bukhara and travel east for a year
- 1266** Baraq becomes khan of the Chagatai Khanate of Central Asia and fights its de facto ruler Qaidu, Khubilai's nephew and rival; after a truce the territory is divided between the two
- 1266** Mengü-Temür succeeds Berke as khan of the Golden Horde
- 1267** After receiving Niccolò and Maffeo at court, Khubilai dispatches them as his emissaries to the pope
- 1268** The Principality of Antioch, one of the last Crusader states, falls to the Egyptian sultan Baibars
- 1268** Death of Pope Clement IV; a three-year-long papal election begins
- 1269** Niccolò and Maffeo reach Acre; on learning there is no pope they go on to Venice, where Niccolò discovers that his wife is dead and is reunited with his son Marco, now aged fifteen
- 1270** Baraq attacks the Ilkhanate and is defeated by Abagha; he dies soon afterwards
- 1271** Niccolò, Maffeo and Marco set out for Khubilai's court; shortly after leaving Acre they are briefly recalled by the newly elected Pope Gregory X
- 1271** Khubilai establishes the Yuan Dynasty and is proclaimed Emperor of China

- 1272 Khubilai officially names Daidu (Beijing) as his imperial capital
- 1273 By imperial decree banknotes become legal tender in Khubilai's empire
- 1273 The city of Xiangyang falls to Khubilai's troops after a five-year siege; the Polos are later claimed to have been instrumental in its capture
- 1274 First Mongol invasion of Japan ends in defeat
- 1275 Niccolò, Maffeo and Marco reach Khubilai's court at Shangdu (Xanadu); some time later Marco enters Khubilai's service and travels across his lands, returning to make detailed reports
- 1279 Fall of the Song Dynasty, which had ruled southern China (Manzi) for three centuries, to the Yuan armies; Khubilai is the first non-Chinese ruler to conquer all of China
- 1280 On Mengü-Temür's death Töde-Mengü succeeds him as khan of the Golden Horde; three years later he converts to Islam
- 1281 Second Mongol invasion of Japan ends in defeat after a storm destroys the attacking fleet
- 1282 Ahmed Tegüder (Ahmad Sultan) succeeds his brother Abagha as ruler of the Ilkhanate; a convert from Christianity to Islam, he turns the Ilkhanate into a sultanate
- 1284 Abagha's son Arghun, like his father a devout Buddhist, overthrows his uncle Tegüder and takes control of the Ilkhanate
- 1286 Death of Zhenjin, Khubilai's second son and Crown Prince
- 1287 Nayan's rebellion; he attempts to join forces with Qaidu but Khubilai defeats them and executes Nayan
- 1287 Töde-Mengü abdicates as khan of the Golden Horde in favour of his nephew Tele-Buqa
- 1287 The Pagan Kingdom of Myanmar falls to the Yuan Dynasty
- 1288 A Mongol invasion of Vietnam is defeated for the third time but its rulers become Yuan vassals
- 1291 Acre, the last remnant of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, falls to the Mamluks
- 1291 Gaykhatu succeeds Arghun as ruler of the Ilkhanate
- 1291 Mengü-Temür's son Toqta murders Tele-Buqa, with the powerful prince Noghai as kingmaker, and becomes khan of the Golden Horde
- 1291 After seventeen years at Khubilai's court Marco, Niccolò and Maffeo sail from the South China Sea to the Persian Gulf as part of a retinue escorting a new bride to Arghun
- 1293 Khubilai's invasion of Java ends in failure
- 1293 Toqta declares war on his former backer Noghai but is defeated
- 1293 The Polos' party reach Persia in the spring or summer to discover that Arghun is dead; they deliver the princess to his son Ghazan, and the Polos stay with his successor Gaykhatu for nine months before continuing home
- 1294 Khubilai Khan dies and is succeeded by his grandson Temür
- 1295 Marco, Niccolò and Maffeo return to Venice twenty-four years after they left
- 1298 Marco is taken captive by the Genoese during a sea battle; in prison he meets Rustichello of Pisa, a romance writer, and together they write *The Travels*
- 1299 Marco is released from prison and returns to Venice, where he lives for the rest of his life
- 1299 Toqta defeats Noghai, who is killed in battle
- 1300 Marco marries Donata Badoer; they will have three daughters
- 1324 Marco Polo dies in Venice

Introduction

The Travels of Marco Polo may be the most famous travel book ever written. That such a claim can confidently be made is remarkable for a work now well into its eighth century – and doubly so since strictly speaking it is not a travel book at all. It is undoubtedly rooted in a series of striking journeys – from Venice to the Beijing court of the Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan, around much of Asia, and back again – that began in 1271 and lasted for twenty-four years. But it is not *about* those journeys, in the expected sense of recounting where they led and what happened on them. Often it seems to be about anything and everything else, while so many questions concerning Marco’s personal experiences remain unanswered at the end that it has justly been called a great book of riddles. Perhaps then its traditional French title, *Le Livre de Merveilles*, is less of a misnomer? Marvels and miracles and whimsical tales certainly spill from every other page, but there is much, too, that is earnestly factual and – dare it be said – a little dull. Or what about its old Italian title, *Il Milione*, which was also the facetious nickname (‘Mr Million’) that stuck to the Venetian in his own city? As the name suggests, Marco positively revels in Eastern opulence and riches, but recent scholarship has done away with the canard that he habitually inflated everything he described. The oldest title of all, given in the earliest manuscripts – *Le divisament dou monde* (‘The Description of the World’) – best captures the narrative’s sheer geographical sweep as it moves from the mountains of Armenia to the Sea of Japan, the snowfields of Siberia to the spice forests of Sumatra, and onwards to Zanzibar and Ethiopia. But this elusive, astonishing book is not merely a compendium or gazetteer either. Swinging wildly between breathless reportage, hackneyed legends and businesslike facts, by turns enthralling and plodding, revelatory

and inscrutable, teacherly and schoolboy-crude, it gives us a vivid portrait not just of one man or many places but of the evolving medieval mind.

Behind the different faces of *The Travels* – as we must call it – lies the greatest riddle of all: who exactly wrote Marco Polo's book? Within three years of Marco's homecoming in 1295 – by then a middle-aged man who had not seen his birthplace since he was seventeen – he was captured in a sea battle with Genoa,¹ Venice's fiercest rival among the sharp-elbowed maritime republics of medieval Italy. The traveller was consigned to a Genoese prison, where he happened across or was introduced to a fellow inmate named Rustichello of Pisa. Rustichello, who had probably been languishing in jail since 1284, was a professional romance writer who specialized in Arthurian legends and may once have counted Edward I of England as a patron. We have no idea whether Marco – whose skill in his native language seems never to have been strong and was certainly rusty after more than half a lifetime lived far from home – had been waiting for an opportunity to set down his experiences, or whether Rustichello leapt at the chance to practise his craft. All we have to go on is the Prologue's mischievously laconic line that 'rather than idle away time', Marco took advantage of his enforced leisure to 'put together this book'. Whatever the impulse behind it, the manuscript that emerged from this unlikely encounter was worked up by Rustichello from the information Marco supplied.

It was an immediate success. Written in a hybrid Franco-Italian, it was eventually transcribed by hand into nearly every European language and dialect, including Catalan and Irish. Yet at some point that high demand led to the loss of the master copy or copies. Some 150 different manuscripts have come down to us, but each has been abridged or expanded, adapted or 'improved', to the point where all differ to some degree – sometimes startlingly so. When modern editors first tried to make sense of this muddle and tease out the original text, it was generally agreed that one version, known as the Paris manuscript, was closest in style to the original, though it appears to be an abridgement of a more complete earlier version. Some of the missing material has survived in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's famous sixteenth-century travel compendium *Navigazioni e Viaggi* and in a Latin

manuscript discovered in Toledo in 1932. For a while it was thought that the Paris version with its insistent but fitful evocation of a first-person speaker ('Let me tell you', 'You should know', 'I give you my word', and so on), its rhetorical questions ('What else shall I tell you?' or 'Why make a long story of it?'), its digressions ('But first I want to tell you one more thing that I left out') and its habitual anticipations and recapitulations represented a more or less direct transcription of Marco Polo's dictated words. But in the early twentieth century the Polan scholar Luigi Foscolo Benedetto demolished that theory by showing that Rustichello had used practically identical storyteller mannerisms in his previous works. In the first few pages alone the opening invocation to readers, the welcome staged for the travellers on their arrival at Khubilai's court and the emperor's approbation of young Marco are copied or lightly adapted from an Arthurian romance by Rustichello,² while the story has barely begun before a line handed down from the literature of knight-errantry – 'they went on their way and rode without meeting with any adventure worth mentioning' – gives a gallant ring to the summary of a trade mission.³ The upshot is that, while the Paris text is still believed to preserve the idiom of the original, that original is now believed to be heavily indebted to Rustichello.

The niceties of authorship are a modern concern, and Marco's early readers were much more interested in whether he could be believed. Doubts dogged him to the last day of his life in 1324: according to the Dominican friar Jacopo d'Acqui, several of the friends who surrounded his deathbed admonished him to recant his more far-fetched claims before it was too late. The problem was not the miracles and legends that enliven its earlier parts in particular – the Georgian fish that only appear at Lent, the Muslim caliph locked up to die with his treasure, the Christian shoemaker of Baghdad whose faith moved mountains, the three Magi of Persia, the levitating church column in Samarkand, the birds of prey that retrieve diamonds from Indian gorges, or the single-sex Male and Female Islands of the Arabian Sea. Stories like these appealed to the mystical medieval mind, and many had a much earlier provenance; it now seems likely that Rustichello had a large hand in them, or even inserted some to make an outlandish narrative

more palatable to his readers. Nothing could have been less controversial; what really seems to have shocked Marco's audience was his detailed depiction of entire civilizations that were completely unknown to them. This was a world where express messengers sped letters by foot, horse and dog-sled across thousands of miles in a matter of days, and where banknotes were legal tender when paper was barely known in the West; where palaces were built on the scale of cities, cities boasted thousands of bridges and pleasure lakes plied by boats carrying workers on dinner cruises, and rivers had been tamed and linked by canals that throbbed with commerce. To accept Marco's descriptions as even half true was to entertain the deeply troubling notion that Western Christendom, by contrast, was hopelessly backward.

If the deathbed doubters were expecting a last-minute confession, they were disappointed: 'I have not told one half,' Marco sharply retorted, 'of what I have really seen.' A moment's reflection suggests that if anything he understated the case: even a book as long as *The Travels* cannot contain twenty-five years' worth of life. Yet these were not the first sceptics and they were certainly not the last, for Marco Polo, like William Shakespeare, belongs to that exclusive band of authors whose work is sufficiently mould-breaking that their connection with it has been persistently disputed. In the seventeenth century critics mulled over his failure to mention the Great Wall of China; a century later, the notion surfaced that perhaps he had never been to China in the first place. This longest-brewing of academic controversies carried on fermenting until it fizzed into public view in the late twentieth century, notably with a 1995 book by Frances Wood entitled *Did Marco Polo go to China?* Dr Wood's thesis – that Marco went little further than Constantinople or the Crimea and cobbled together the writings of Persian travellers, hence explaining his failure to mention not just the Great Wall but such Chinese staples as tea, calligraphy and the binding of women's feet – made worldwide headlines and inspired a salvo of scholarly counterblasts with such pointed titles as 'Marco Polo Went to China', *Marco Polo's China* and *Marco Polo Was in China*.⁴ The happy result of all

this activity is that we are better equipped to follow Marco's travels and judge his veracity than at any time since his book appeared.

We can deal with the charges, as Marco might say, in due course and in their proper place. But the conclusion is clear. The Polos were not the very first Europeans to reach Khubilai's court; Chinese sources tell us that at least one group of 'Frankish' envoys preceded them. But Marco was the first known to have travelled widely across China, the first to set foot in Indochina and Sumatra and (since the classical age) in India and Sri Lanka, and the first to report the existence of Japan, Java and many islands of the Pacific and Indian oceans. He was the first to paint an almost overwhelming panorama of China in all its vastness, wealth and refinement, and to report the magnificent new court at Beijing of its conqueror Khubilai Khan. He was the first to disclose the full astonishing extent of the Mongol Empire, and the massed armies clashing on plains that foreshadowed its disintegration. And he was the first to unfold to Europe the bewildering variety of races, customs, religions and even wildlife to be found beyond its borders. No previous known traveller covered so much ground; certainly none left such a full account of what he saw.

The tremendous compass of that account is crucial. Marco Polo's true importance does not lie in the fact that he travelled to the East – so did many other merchants and missionaries of the Middle Ages – but that he came back and set down everything he could remember. The manuscript he wrote with Rustichello's help enlarged Westerners' geographical knowledge more than any single work before or since. It gripped their imagination, challenged cherished beliefs and expanded pinched horizons. It was still essential reading when Christopher Columbus sought a sea route to the East two centuries after it first appeared. Few books can truly be said to have changed the world; for all its naysayers, Marco Polo's *Travels* is one of them.

Columbus sought a sea route to the Indies in search of the most coveted commodities in the world: spices. As understood in the Middle Ages, spices included a range of substances used as medicines and perfumes as well as

flavourings – among them such exotica as ambergris, a fatty secretion of the intestines of sperm whales used to ward off the plague, and *tutty*, the scrapings from the chimneys of zinc-smelting furnaces, which Marco notes is ‘a very good salve for the eyes’. Exorbitantly expensive and impossible to produce in Europe, spices had been prized since the time of the Romans, who pursued them to India by sailing from the Red Sea coast of Egypt. According to Strabo’s *Geography*, by around 25 BC as many as 120 Roman freighters a year were crossing the Indian Ocean on the monsoon winds; the first-century AD sailing guide known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* describes a thriving trade conducted at ports along India’s western and southern shores. There the Romans reached their limit; as to all the gold that disappeared along the caravan routes of Central Asia to pay for that other essential luxury, Chinese silk, they only had the vaguest idea where it ended up. And when Roman power waned, even India became a hazy memory. By the third century AD Arab traders dominated the ocean routes, and when Islam roared out of the Arabian deserts in the seventh century, the West’s dismissal from the East was assured. Within a decade Arab armies had seized Roman Syria, Palestine and Egypt and wiped Rome’s old rival, the once-mighty Persian Empire, off the map; within a century the Abbasid caliphs ruled from Baghdad over most of West Asia and North Africa and were suzerains of lands stretching from Pakistan to Portugal. Only Constantinople, capital of the remaining eastern rump of the Roman Empire, survived as a Christian terminus of the spice and silk caravans. Behind its triple walls the merchants of Genoa, Pisa and Venice competed and frequently fought for the chance to ship the prized goods to the rest of Europe, at a hefty mark-up. Yet even when the search for profit drew them close to Muslim middlemen, they remained utterly in the dark about where their merchandise came from or how it was produced.

Cut off from first-hand knowledge of the outside world, Western Christendom re-imagined Asia in its own image. On its wheel-shaped maps Jerusalem was placed dead centre and the Garden of Eden at the top, corresponding to the Far East; a spring in the middle of the garden watered the Earth’s four great rivers, in the process washing down spices and

precious stones from the surrounding lands. Space was also found for other biblical locations, including the resting place of Noah's Ark, the land of the Dry Tree, the kingdom of the Magi and the countries of Gog and Magog, savage nations (or giants) whose defeat would herald the end times of the Earth; the last were usually placed north of the Caucasus, where in the fourth century BC Alexander the Great was said to have confined them behind a pair of colossal Iron Gates. Alexander's campaigns in India, embellished by the medieval imagination and recounted in the immensely popular *Alexander Romance*, were another source of intense speculation about the East. The legends identified several Monstrous Races that he encountered on his travels, including the Cynocephali or men with dogs' heads, the Blemmyae with faces in their chests, the one-legged Sciopods who used their single giant foot as a sunshade, and the Anthropophagi, or cannibals. They also described Alexander's voyage along the river Ganges under the towering walls of the Earthly Paradise, adding to a growing weight of opinion that India, which was made to stretch as far as the river Nile, was more or less synonymous with the East. This schema became so ingrained that scholars paid no heed to the masterworks of classical geography that eventually re-emerged from the libraries of Islamic Spain, or to contemporary writings by European Jews like the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who in the twelfth century returned from the Middle East with firm news of both India and China. It was barely shaken when the first Crusaders hacked their way into Jerusalem in 1098 and carved out a fragile necklace of Catholic states in the eastern Mediterranean. And after successive Crusades sallied forth and sputtered out and Islam rebuilt a wall of faith around the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, nothing less than a global upheaval seemed likely to re-open a door from Europe into the East.

Unsuspected by Christians and Muslims alike, that upheaval was already gathering force in the highlands north of China. In 1206 a *kurultai* or council of nomadic tribes set aside longstanding hostilities and acclaimed as their leader a young Mongol named Temüjin. Taking the title Genghis (or Chinggis) Khan, he marshalled the savage tribesmen with their expert

horsemanship, deadly archery, inhuman stamina and unmatched mobility into a fleet fighting machine that had no rival and knew no remorse. Beginning in North China, the Mongols annihilated the Xi Xia state of the Tangut, a Tibetan-speaking people who controlled the eastern stretch of the Silk Road. Crossing the Yellow River, they drove back the Jin Dynasty to its east. Turning further west, they overran the Kara-Khitai Khanate, a Mongolic state that ruled large parts of Central Asia, and brutally obliterated the Turkic Khwarezmian Dynasty, which had wrested control of Greater Persia just a few years earlier. Having erased these proud names from memory, the main army plundered its way back east while a detachment rode north into Christian Armenia, Georgia and Russia. In 1237 a larger force returned and devastated what remained of Russia before thundering into Central Europe and massacring half the population of Hungary. Only news of the death of Genghis Khan's son and successor Ögedei, which prompted the Mongols to withdraw in 1242, spared Vienna the same fate. By then aghast Western Europeans had seized on the similarity between Tatar, the name of one tribe in the Mongol confederation, and Tartarus, the hell of classical mythology, and christened the whole infernal horde Tartars.

Within three generations the Mongols had forged with their battle-axes, scimitars and bows the largest contiguous empire the world has seen, straddling the vast majority of the Eurasian landmass east of the river Danube as far as Korea. Not even a Mongol khan could singlehandedly hold the reins of such far-flung lands, and the empire was divided into four khanates ruled by descendants of Genghis. The Great Khans were nominally supreme but directly ruled only Mongolia and North China (known as Cathay after the Khitai, its Mongolic former rulers). The Golden Horde (Marco's 'Tartars of the West') corresponded roughly to European Russia. The Ilkhanate (Marco's 'Tartars of the Levant') stretched southwest from Afghanistan through Iran and Iraq and into the Caucasus and Anatolia. The fourth khanate, named after Genghis's son Chagatai, occupied the Central Asian lands that Marco calls Turkestan. In each quarter the destroyers of civilizations adopted the local culture, rebuilt on a

grand scale, and often proved unexpectedly capable governors. But to Western European eyes the Mongols now appeared as the whirlwind that had razed much of Islamic civilization to the ground while leaving Christians – not counting Russians who adhered to the schismatic Greek Church – miraculously untouched. Since the Mongols' faith was doubtless skin-deep, Rome envisaged the prospect of vastly enlarging the reach of Catholicism.⁵ And, for the first time in history, they made it possible for Europeans to travel in relative security across the full breadth of Asia, regardless of their religion or race.

In 1245 the papacy was first to test the new dispensation in the redoubtable form of John of Plano Carpini, a disciple of St Francis of Assisi who was in his sixties and by all accounts grossly overweight. With orders to protest the Mongols' invasion of Europe and gauge their strength, as well as the potential for converting or allying with them, the friar trekked across Russia and Mongolia, so ill he could barely ride and subsisting on millet and melted snow, only to find himself among 3,000 ambassadors heading to the *kurultai* that was camped near the Mongol capital at Karakorum to elect Güyük in succession to his father Ögedei. After witnessing the enthronement he obtained an audience with the new Great Khan, who declined the offer of baptism and ordered the pope and rulers of Western Europe to pay him homage, and Friar John turned for home in the dead of winter. Nothing daunted, in 1253 King Louis IX of France dispatched another Franciscan friar, the Fleming William of Rubruck, to Karakorum. The net result of his six-month stay was six baptisms, no alliance and a deliciously frank and detailed diary,⁶ which he presented to Louis on his return. Undeterred by a translator who was normally too drunk to be understood, William described a capital that was no match in appearance for the village of St Denis outside Paris and yet was remarkably cosmopolitan. Near the end of his visit Mengü, the new Great Khan, enlisted him in a grand debate with representatives of Buddhism and Islam, while among his acquaintances was a woman from Lorraine who cooked him dinner, a Parisian master goldsmith whose creations included a silver tree that dispensed wine, an Armenian priest who nearly killed the

goldsmith by prescribing rhubarb as an emetic, a hermit from Jerusalem, a Hungarian courtier, a Greek knight, an Englishman's son named Basil and numerous Nestorian Christians, including the grand secretary of the court.

The news that there were many Christians across the Mongol Empire, some holding high office, was not received with unalloyed joy in Rome. Back in the fifth century the Nestorians, followers of a patriarch of Constantinople who had emphasized the disunity of Christ's human and divine natures, had been condemned as heretics. Many had migrated to Persia, where they joined the existing Church of the East and continued to thrive after the Arab conquests, expanding deep into Central Asia and China and implanting the veneration of St Thomas the Apostle in India. The same fifth-century Christological disputes had also given rise to the Miaphysites (called Jacobites by Marco), who countered Nestorianism by emphasizing the unity of Christ's nature only to be ostracized in turn; they formed the churches of Mongol-dominated Armenia as well as Egypt and Ethiopia. Both groups were anathema to the Roman Church, but as interpreters who spoke Persian, Arabic, Mongolian and Latin they were vital to Western travellers – not only missionaries but also the merchants who soon followed, led by Marco Polo's father Niccolò and uncle Maffeo.

While Marco was still a young boy,⁷ Niccolò and Maffeo had sailed from Venice to Constantinople with a consignment of goods. This was an everyday undertaking in the half-century during which the Venetians ran the city, which had been seized from its Byzantine rulers during the disastrous Fourth Crusade of 1202–4. But in or around 1260⁸ they wound up their affairs, converted their wealth into portable jewels and sailed across the Black Sea to the Crimean port of Sudak. 'Trading on' with the aim of growing profits at each stop was regular merchant practice, and Sudak was an obvious port of call; we know from his will that another Marco Polo, the traveller's uncle, had a house there. The brothers' timing, though, was immaculate: within months Constantinople was retaken by its former rulers, with the aid of Venice's old rival Genoa. Unable to turn back, they headed several hundred miles to the north-east, following the route taken by

William of Rubruck to the court of Berke Khan, ruler of the Golden Horde. This was virgin territory for Western merchants, and Berke's readiness to do business promised great things when war broke out between him and Hülegü, the founder of the Ilkhanate. In a sign that Mongol unity was fracturing, for the first time religion had trumped blood: Berke was a convert to Islam, and in 1258 Hülegü had sacked Baghdad and murdered the last Abbasid caliph. Now doubly caught, the Polos made a long journey south-east to neutral Bukhara, a centre of Islam where, quite possibly, 'no Latins had ever been seen'. Probably they were hoping to continue clockwise around the Caspian Sea and return to Venice via the Anatolian port of Ayas. Instead they found themselves trapped for three years until an envoy passing through on a mission from the Ilkhan to the Great Khan Khubilai, who had succeeded his brother Mengü in 1260, decided to take them along as a curiosity. After travelling to a place at 'the end of the earth' – probably Khubilai's existing capital Shangdu, the famed Xanadu, but possibly the new city he was building to its south, which would be called Daidu and would become Beijing – they were presented to the Great Khan.

Though Marco was several thousand miles away and barely entering into his teens, this was the moment in which *The Travels* was born. To his father and uncle, the unsung heroes of his story, the great meeting was a dangerous gamble that offered the opportunity of a lifetime. They had been buffeted across Asia by events beyond their control; somehow, through chance and good judgement, they had unintentionally discovered that the Mongols had opened up the entire length of the Silk Road. To Khubilai, whose court was at least as cosmopolitan as those of his predecessors, two meandering merchants were hardly a remarkable sight; but Western Europeans were still sufficiently rare for him to interrogate them at length before dispatching them as emissaries to the pope with a request for a hundred Christian scholars and a vial of holy oil from Christ's sepulchre. Bearing letters written in Turkish and a gold *paiza* or tablet of authority, they trekked back across Asia through floods and snow and sailed from Ayas to the Crusader port of Acre in the eastern Mediterranean, arriving in April 1269. There they discovered that Pope Clement IV had been dead for

four months and the cardinal electors were still hopelessly deadlocked, and with no pope to hear their business the brothers went home to Venice, where they doubtless made a dramatic entrance and Niccolò was reunited with his son Marco, though not his wife, who had died.

Two years later there was still no sign of a new pope, an embarrassment that eventually provoked irate Italians to lock up the electors, reduce their rations to bread and water and reputedly remove the roof of the papal palace. Unwilling to lose the chance to do business with the world's most powerful man, the two brothers set out for China with the seventeen-year-old Marco in tow. Their first stop was Acre, where they enlisted the support of a prominent churchman named Tedaldo Visconti, and they had not gone much further when an envoy came after them with the news that Tedaldo himself had been elected pope. The newly anointed Gregory X provided them with full credentials, letters and gifts for the Great Khan, and a pair of friars in lieu of the hundred requested by Khubilai, though even those two reportedly took fright when they heard at Ayas that the Mongols and Mamluks of Egypt were fighting nearby⁹ and hastily turned back.

The Prologue is at its most frustratingly veiled when describing the three Polos' journey east. All we hear is that it took three and a half years to reach Khubilai's court, 'on account of the snow and rain and flooded rivers, and because they could not ride in winter as easily as in summer'. For anything more we must turn to the main narrative; but here we need to tread carefully. Though we set off in a generally easterly direction, the sequence of countries and cities is sometimes puzzlingly serpentine; and while some commentators have tried to put the Polos on the ground at every step, others have ridiculed any suggestion of a route that leads some 400 miles south of the main Silk Road through difficult and mountainous terrain. Even so, feeling our way between these two extremes and assuming that the elder Polos were keen to avoid getting caught up in another Mongol war, we can plot a likely route with no great difficulty. Heading east-north-east (Chapter 1) across Turkey and Greater Armenia, the travellers crossed from the Caucasus into Iran and proceeded south-east through Tabriz, Yazd and Kerman to the port-city of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. Doubling back to

Kerman and turning north-east, they entered northern Afghanistan (Chapter 2), heading east along the Wakhan Corridor and climbing high in the Pamir Mountains to the plains known as the Roof of the World. Crossing the high passes when the snows permitted and entering China from the north-west, they descended into the sandy Tarim Basin and initially headed for the city of Kashgar. From there the most direct onward route hugged the northern rim of the Taklamakan Desert, but the Polos took another branch of the Silk Road that skirted its southern rim and forced them to cross the smaller Desert of Lop. Arriving in Dunhuang (Marco's Shazhou), they headed along the oasis-rich Gansu Corridor that threads between the Tibetan Plateau and the Gobi Desert, passing through Jiuquan (Marco's Suzhou), Zhangye (Marco's Ganzhou, where we hear they spent a year about their business but not which business or year it was) and Wuwei (Marco's Erguiul), where they followed the northern loop of the Yellow River into Inner Mongolia and finally headed east to Shangdu.

Marco repeatedly digresses from this route to describe places he probably did not pass through, at least on this leg: Georgia, Mosul and Baghdad, 'Mulehet' or Assassin country, Kashmir and Samarkand, the cities north of the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts, the old Mongol capital at Karakorum, and northern Mongolia as far as the Pacific Ocean. Excepting these, the only puzzles are the detour to Hormuz, the decision to cross Afghanistan and the Pamirs, and the switch to the southern route around the Taklamakan. In these cases we have to resort to more or less informed guesses. If the Polos did visit Hormuz on their outward journey, it must have been in hopes of reaching China by sea. In that case, something – perhaps the 'deadly' Indian Ocean dhows, the length of the voyage, the need to wait for the monsoon to turn, or all three – clearly changed their mind. In some versions of the text we hear that Marco was ill for a year and headed into the mountains for a cure; another consideration behind the onward route from Iran may have been the news that Qaidu,¹⁰ the most powerful figure in the Chagatai Khanate and a constant thorn in the side of his uncle Khubilai, was fighting with his forces to the north. In 1275 we find Qaidu further east attacking Ürümqi, a major Silk Road hub, which

may also have diverted the Polos south round the Taklamakan. Or they may simply have changed their plans to join caravans that would take them part of the way; the reason is obvious when we read that Marco was nearly captured by robbers in Persia and that ‘many of his companions were taken captive and sold, and some were killed’. These suggestions remain speculative, but some such detours and delays are needed to explain why a journey that took William of Rubruck eight months lasted five times as long.

According to the Prologue Marco quickly became a court favourite of the Great Khan, who had meanwhile declared himself the first Yuan emperor of China. In 1279 Khubilai finally destroyed the Song Dynasty of southern China, which Marco knew as Manzi (‘Southern Barbarians’), and around then or a little earlier he sent the young Venetian on a long mission to the south. Marco had noted Khubilai’s exasperation when his envoys failed to satisfy his curiosity about the places they had visited, and he resolved to do better. On his return he gave an account of the business he had been sent on, then regaled the emperor with full descriptions of everything he had seen. By making himself indispensable he earned a privileged position, and for the remainder of his years in China he travelled on imperial business.

So, at least, we are told. In itself the involvement of a foreigner in the Mongol administration was nothing unusual. Mongol rulers habitually distrusted their conquered subjects, often with good cause, and relied heavily on outsiders and minorities; Khubilai’s policy was to prefer non-Chinese for government posts, particularly higher offices. Even so, Marco’s exalted status may well be an exaggeration. Contrary to what was once thought, there is no mention of a Polo in the Chinese histories. There is none, either, of other Western envoys and merchants,¹¹ but the book’s claim that Marco governed the city of Yangzhou ‘for three years by the Great Khan’s commission’ must be accounted untrue, since the histories record the governors’ names and nationalities. So must be the assertion that the Polos provided Khubilai with engineers who designed the trebuchets – giant catapults – that brought his long siege of Xiangyang to a successful conclusion. Chinese sources agree that foreigners were involved, but they

also state that the siege ended two years before Marco reached Khubilai's court. It is just possible that the engineers were part of the elder Polos' company on their first trip, and that a copyist 'corrected' the story out of confusion or to enhance Marco's role. Whoever was responsible, both of these highly dubious episodes are tellingly omitted from several important versions of the text.

Along with Marco's official status, his area of expertise has been the subject of much speculation. Recent suggestions range from a functionary in the imperial salt administration to the merchant partner of a Mongol noble (the *ortakh* system) and, perhaps most convincingly, a *keshikten* or knight in Khubilai's personal guard. This is a fun game, though since there is no evidence an inconclusive one; and it may equally be that Marco simply remained the Great Khan's personal observer or inspector, sent here and there as the need arose. Whatever his occupation, it undoubtedly enabled or required him to travel widely across Khubilai's empire. Almost all the places he mentions have now been identified, and though there are the usual digressions and wanderings off course, we can be fairly sure that the itineraries described correspond to actual journeys made. The first route (Chapter 4) leads south-west from Beijing through modern-day Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces, turning west to Tibet (or rather Eastern Tibet, long part of Sichuan) then regaining the main road as it heads into Yunnan province and on to Myanmar, from where it jumps east to North Vietnam before returning north-east to Beijing. Marco's earliest trip in this direction can be dated to before the death in 1280 of Manggala, whom he names as ruler of Chang'anfu (better known as Chang'an and now Xi'an); he may have retraced his footsteps and gone further after the Mongols completed their conquest of Myanmar in 1287. Since the stretch from Myanmar to Vietnam is muddled, he may also have made a separate trip into North Vietnam, which was repeatedly at war with the Mongols in the 1280s despite being nominally their tributary. The second itinerary (Chapter 5) starts outside Beijing and proceeds south, partly by land and partly by the 1,100-mile-long network of rivers, lakes, manmade waterways and locks known as the Grand Canal, to the former Southern Song capital

of Hangzhou (then Xingzai or more familiarly, following Marco himself, Quinsai or Kinsay), before continuing by an indirect route along several rivers and ending at the great port of Quanzhou (Marco's Zayton).

Marco's richly detailed description of Xingzai's canals and market squares, pleasure gardens and dinner cruises on a palace-fringed lake stands among the very finest portraits of a medieval city, suggesting he may have spent some time there or visited on several occasions. And other cities, such as Chengdufu (now Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province), are portrayed more briefly but scarcely less vividly. But between these set pieces there are long formulaic stretches that bring to mind the practical businessman's guide some commentators have seen in *The Travels* as a whole. Every town is large and splendid, every region well stocked with game. The reader is apt to tire of hearing that their inhabitants are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan who live by trade and crafts and use paper money. Yet if proof of Marco's reliability is wanted, it is found here in abundance. Recent analyses of Chinese sources have revealed that the immense wealth of information he provides is in the main strikingly accurate – outmatching the sum total of surviving accounts by other travellers. And not only does his account exactly fit the years during which he was present; it also predates the Chinese histories themselves by some years. No other witness gives nearly such a full report of the Grand Canal, a spectacular engineering feat that was still under construction when Marco was in China. (The last links permitting the shipment of grain from the fertile Yangtze valley to burgeoning Beijing – a milestone Marco notes – opened in 1288, three years before his departure.) He is the only visitor to explain how banknotes were manufactured from the bark of mulberry trees and to describe their appearance and denominations, and he accurately records the places where 'paper money' circulated and where it did not. The number of times the curfew bell rang in Beijing, the number of strokes dealt as punishment for crimes, the 3 per cent exchange fee for worn-out banknotes, the leading centres of salt production together with the values of their crops – all are present and correct, and they reveal Marco to be a far more reliable guide to medieval China than was previously thought. In this light the blatant

exaggerations – the 6,000 bridges of Suzhou, 15,000 boats at Zhenzhou and armies of 460,000 dismissed as ‘a mere handful’ – can best be explained by the medieval enthusiasm for impressive numbers; while the obvious errors of fact – from Marco’s confused list of Great Khans to his miscount of the arches supporting the Pulisanghin Bridge¹² – suggest slips of memory, if not of a scribe’s pen, rather than fakery or plagiarism (which in any case would merely suggest that his sources were equally incorrect). Given the volume of information, the reliance on ‘dependable and trustworthy men’ who may nevertheless have been imperfectly informed themselves, and the years that passed before the book was written, the slip-ups are surprisingly few.

Altogether these journeys must have taken up a good deal of Marco’s time in China, though probably not the full seventeen years. The Prologue tells us that his final trip for Khubilai was a voyage ‘over strange seas’ to India – in other words, to south and south-east Asia. Chinese sources record seven Yuan embassies to southern India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) between 1280 and 1290, generally to strengthen trade relations, and Peter Jackson’s suggestion that Khubilai may have mainly employed Marco on such overseas missions¹³ is supported by the emphasis on his familiarity with the Indies (Chapter 5) and the wealth of information that follows (Chapters 6 and 7). As to how Niccolò and Maffeo were occupied all this while, there is no word. They may have been housed by the court, perhaps in one of the visitors’ hostels that Marco describes; they may have continued to trade on their own account; or they may have accompanied Marco on his trips – though the book places them together just once, at Fuzhou, and then only in one version of the text. A limited sphere of action may explain why they eventually grew restless to go home and leapt at an opportunity to join a fleet that was setting sail for Persia to deliver the princess Kökechin to her intended lord Arghun. Marco’s account of the mission is corroborated in both Chinese and Persian sources, including the names he gives of the three envoys of Arghun¹⁴ who left China and the one who arrived in Persia. The Polos do not feature in either source, and it seems highly improbable that, as we hear, Khubilai entrusted the royal bride to their personal care. But the evidence indubitably puts them on the fleet of junks that sailed in 1291

from Quanzhou, through the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, and into the Indian Ocean. Recent scholarship has convincingly shown that Marco was in Sumatra,¹⁵ which he describes in some detail; and that being the case, there are no longer grounds for doubt that he visited the ports of Sri Lanka and the east and west coasts of India. Evidently he did not visit Japan in person; though his long account of Khubilai's failed invasion of 1281 is more accurate than some critics have claimed,¹⁶ the distance he gives from China is an overestimate by a factor of three – a mistake that may have encouraged Christopher Columbus in his scheme to reach the East by sailing west. Nor can he have got to Java, which he reports from sailors' talk to be the biggest island in the world; and the confused geography of Arabia and West Africa is not the account of an eyewitness. But so much is clear from the Prologue's statement that, after a nine-month stay in Persia, the Polos made their way home via the Black Sea and Constantinople, which was once again open to its former masters.

Ramusio, in his sixteenth-century compendium, gives a famous story of the travellers' return to Venice in 1295, which he claims to have heard as a youngster from an old senator who had it from his grandfather. They showed up, he says, dressed in Mongol rags, barely able to speak Venetian and with 'a certain indescribable smack of the Tartar both in air and accent', and were high-handedly disowned by their own relatives. But when they threw a banquet at which they appeared in increasingly splendid oriental garb before slashing at their travelling outfits until rubies, sapphires, carbuncles, diamonds and emeralds came tumbling out, the assembled kinsmen quickly ate their words. Marco was so often called on to repeat his stories of the fabulous wealth of the East, Ramusio adds, that he was given the nickname *Il Milione*. Scholarly diligence has spoiled a good yarn by demonstrating that the name was already claimed by another branch of the family – that of the Marco Polo who owned a house in Sudak – and was probably transferred to the traveller out of some confusion.

Not much is known of Marco after his return from prison in Genoa, probably following a peace treaty signed in July 1299. The following year he married Donata Badoer, a merchant's daughter, and they had three

daughters. In his businesslike will he made some handsome but not extravagant bequests and tied up some family business, the value of which suggests he was well off rather than rich. He freed a Mongol slave named Peter – whose existence, otherwise unrecorded, is another hint of how much is missing from *The Travels* – and left his daughters equal shares of his possessions, among them a gold tablet of authority from the Great Khan, a ‘Tartar knight’s belt’ and the headdress of a Mongolian wife. The fate of his precious manuscript is not mentioned at all.

The book that remains with us today is a strange, particoloured beast, by turns as magical as a unicorn and as prosaic as its real-life counterpart, which Marco makes known as the ungainly rhinoceros. As I suggested earlier, that multifacetedness is partly the product of the very different personalities that went into its making. The relationship between the two Genoese prisoners must have been as combustible as it was rewarding. Inevitably it evolved as the months passed, and the book evolved with it. At the beginning, when Marco was recalling places he had last visited as a teenager and had probably not seen any reason to set down in writing, Rustichello may have had the upper hand. Here he spiced up the geographical sequence with Christian legends and romantic stories of the Middle East that presumably circulated via visitors to the Holy Land; among the latter we may count the elaborate tale of the Old Man of the Mountain who gave his drugged followers a glimpse of Paradise before dispatching them on murder missions – a colourful take on the Nizari Ismailis, a renegade band of Shia fanatics who terrorized Crusaders and mainstream Muslims alike until the Mongols crushed them in 1256. But when the talk moved on towards China and Marco’s notes arrived from Venice – an old Ramusio tradition, but the only way to account for the remarkable depth of detail – the scales turned. Apart from a few formulaic battle scenes – Khubilai’s epic fight with his uncle Nayan or his ‘very fine battle’ with the king of Myanmar and Bengal – which were evidently a Rustichellan speciality, the romancer could do little beside give the sheaves

of material a rough literary shape. And here, far beyond Rustichello's imaginative reach, we find ourselves in Marco's world.

Aside from some poetic forays into travellers' lore such as the waylaying spirits of the Desert of Lop, that world is above all a world of facts. And many of those facts, especially concerning places that Marco probably only passed through, seem addressed to commercial travellers. Whether or not Marco was directly involved in trade, as the son and nephew of merchants the subject naturally fascinated him. The book brims with lists of merchandise: primarily high-value, low-weight goods such as silks and gold fabrics, precious stones and spices that could be profitably transported across long distances, but also commodities like the sturgeon of the Caspian Sea, the horses of Persia, the dried melons of Sheberghan or the coal of Cathay that were merely interesting in themselves. Marco is irresistibly drawn to the sheer volume of shipping on China's rivers and canals; the quantity and value of precious wares carried on the Yangtze alone, he exults, 'exceeds that of all the rivers of Christendom put together, and all the seas to boot'. And he provides detailed descriptions of the business models and practical processes of industries from pearl fishing to indigo and porcelain. His sense of geography, though no less developed than that of his contemporaries, is likewise geared to the needs of travelling merchants: he gives directions from one city to the next and distances in terms of the number of days required, adding notes where necessary on how much food to pack or what kind of terrain to expect.

But Marco was not just a merchant, and his book is not just a guide to business opportunities in the East. He is equally obsessed with exotic plants, beasts and birds; recent scholarship by Stephen G. Haw and others has demonstrated his meticulousness as a natural historian,¹⁷ especially given the difficulty of fitting new species into a European frame of reference. He is alive to the raw beauty of plains and escarpments, rivers and deserts, mountains and oceans. He betrays more than a passing interest in systems of government and justice and a relentless curiosity about local customs, the more outrageous the better. And he has an eye for vivid details. Along the way we hear that the 20,000 prostitutes of Daidu are

organized like an army, 1,000 cartloads of silk arrive daily in the city and 5,000 astrologers are maintained at Khubilai's expense. We learn how to trap a lion with a small dog and how to scare one off with a length of bamboo, how elephants mate and what happens when they go into battle drunk, how to hunt crocodiles and whales and extract musk from deer. We glimpse the full-body tattoos of Jiaozhi Guo, the state orphanages run by the king of Manzi, and the hot-blooded men of that country who at the slightest affront hang themselves outside their tormentor's door to shame him into giving them a lavish funeral.

These passages reveal a man whose preoccupations went a good way beyond what we would expect of a medieval European merchant. If they were really intended for Khubilai's ears, it is easy to imagine the emperor listening with relish to his observant young envoy's reports. And since many of the things that fascinated Marco – drink, sex, hunting, size, power and taxation – seem also to have dominated Mongol court culture, it is tempting to go further and say that Marco's years in the East left him heavily Mongolized. A Chinese sage once advised Genghis Khan to sleep alone now and then if he wanted to see old age; Marco likewise has a Mongol-sized appetite for tales about husbands who rent their wives to travellers (a story so good he tells it twice, in Kumul and Jiandu) and women whose marriageability rises in line with their sexual prowess. The latter are found in Tibet; possibly speaking from personal experience, he slyly notes that 'for young gentlemen between sixteen and twenty-four years of age a visit to this country is highly recommended'. And though he admires Chinese women for being 'incomparably chaste' – and pruriently details the process, involving a pigeon egg, for testing their virginity – it is by no means clear that he does not prefer Mongol women, who 'do not trouble themselves with such niceties' and are, moreover, faithful, uncomplaining and excellent housekeepers. As for drinking – which killed off several of Genghis's successors – there is a good deal about the palatability and efficiency as intoxicants of local brews; while when Marco manages to combine lewdness and alcohol, riotous scenes ensue. Surely the book's most outrageous image is that of the Russian wife who squats on her

way home from an all-day drinking binge only to find herself stuck to the icy grass, a situation not made less compromising when her husband bends down to help and freezes his beard to her hairy thighs. Marco's earlier commentators preferred to pass discreetly over these ribald traveller's tales – some of which were omitted from early versions of the book – but they are as much a part of his picture of the Mongol world as are his lovingly detailed tallies of game stocks or the excise duties exacted from the Great Khan's ports.

If the things Marco put in his book square with Mongol culture, the things he left out – those much-trumpeted omissions that have led critics to question whether he was ever in China – were probably of little interest to the Mongols. Tea drinking and foot binding were long-standing though not ubiquitous Chinese customs; Marco briefly mentions the 'dainty step' of Chinese girls, but as recently conquered subjects of the Mongols the Chinese were second-class citizens and too close an interest in their personal habits would have likely been beneath an employee of Khubilai Khan. By the same token, though he must have seen Chinese calligraphy and printed books, his failure to learn written Chinese is no surprise. Mongolian was the language of the court, while Persian was the lingua franca among the many foreigners in Khubilai's empire, including those in the emperor's employ, with Turkish a second tongue. The fact that Marco sometimes gives the Persian or Turkish versions of proper names does not prove that he cribbed the whole lot from a guidebook, but merely that he learned to speak those languages with the people he mixed with. As for the hoary complaint that he fails to mention the Great Wall, the mystery is easily solved: at the time of his visit it was little more than a series of broken earthen ramparts, and it would not be fortified into its familiar form for another 200 years.

There is one more subject that is strikingly understated in Marco's account of the Mongol world: Christianity. The Venetians had never been a pious people: '*Siamo Veneziani, poi Cristiani,*' the saying went; 'First Venetians, then Christians.' Even so, Marco's attitude to religion betrays the relatively broad mind of a young man who came into his majority in the

East, not the censoriousness of a William of Rubruck – or the limited horizon of an armchair traveller who had never left the West. He is admittedly not free of the usual late medieval Christian’s abhorrence of Islam, which he caricatures as a licence to sin against people of other faiths while claiming every Muslim victim as a martyr; perhaps a few such denunciations were politically expedient in a book written for Western readers, because for every crude denunciation of Muslim ‘dogs’ there is an individual Muslim, like his ‘learned’ companion in Fuzhou, whom he speaks of with respect. Nor does he distinguish between Buddhists and shamans – such as the ‘magicians’ who treat patients by telling them how to propitiate the spirit world – and the Hindus we meet in India; in his book all are idolaters. And he dutifully declares that Khubilai holds Christianity to be the truest and best faith; if the pope had only accommodated his wishes and sent them back with a hundred Christian scholars, he says, grinding a family axe, things might have turned out very differently. Yet for all that, he seems quite at home amidst the Mongols’ inclusive belief system, with its syncretism of animism and more conventional religions. He makes a point of quoting at length Khubilai’s elegantly reasoned if expedient explanation for preferring the miracle-working Buddhists over the Christians of his parts, who ‘are so ignorant that they make nothing of themselves and have no power’. He credits the humanitarian teachings of Buddhism with inspiring the emperor’s generous welfare policy – if Gautama Buddha had been a Christian, he declares, he would have been a ‘great saint’ – and he personally vouches for the efficacy of the lost property idols. ‘And in this way I, Marco, found a ring that I had lost,’ he avows, speaking directly for once as if determined to make the point – ‘not, mind you,’ he carefully if speciously adds, ‘that I made any offering to the idols or paid homage to them.’ As for the Tibetan lamas who were prominent at Khubilai’s court – we first hear of them as the Bakhshi who drive away bad weather, make cups float over to Khubilai’s table and dine on executed felons, in sharp contrast to the ascetic Sienseng, who eat nothing but bran – Marco may accuse them of concealing black magic behind a godly front, but he never suggests that their enchantments are tricks. ‘Their marvels are without end,’

he notes, ‘but it is best not to speak of them in our book, or people might be too shaken up.’

Of all the Christian precepts that Marco cuts down to size, the greatest is the legend of Prester John. For a century Europe had been gripped by stories of a mighty Eastern priest-king who was descended from one of the Three Magi and ruled over a lost Christian realm of unimaginable wealth. Rumours and forgeries had made it known that Prester John commanded any number of marvels, including a fountain of youth and an all-seeing mirror, was served at an emerald table by seven kings while entertaining 30,000 guests, and could put a million men in the field. Here was an ally who could revive Rome’s flagging dream of a universal Church – if only he could be found. Marco naturally claims to have done just that; and yet in stark contrast to the gilded figure of Western fantasy, his Prester John is an arrogant and vengeful Mongolian warlord whose refusal to give his daughter in marriage to Genghis Khan brings upon him defeat and death. There is only one figure in *The Travels* who possesses all the stature of the legendary king: Marco’s patron Khubilai Khan. Where Marco’s Prester John is foolhardy and vainglorious, his Khubilai is circumspect and judicious. He is the most powerful man since Adam, ‘the greatest lord who lives or ever lived’ and ‘the wisest and most universally gifted’ of all the Mongols. Marco is not afraid to point out how violently the Chinese hated their conqueror – so much so that he was forced to run his cities as virtual police states and his country as a vast armed camp, the cost of which ate up most of his revenues. But that, he implies, is the price of greatness. And what greatness we are shown; what power and wealth and chivalry, in an age that set great store by extravagant display. We see Khubilai riding magnificently through his palace park ‘with a leopard on the crupper of his horse’, hawking with 10,000 falconers from a gold-lined cabin mounted on elephants’ backs, and holding court between palaces in giant tents lined with ermine and sable. We watch as he presides over banquets so vast that 40,000 are left to eat outside, or feast days that feature 100,000 white horses, 5,000 elephants carrying his treasures and 12,000 lords dressed in gem-encrusted golden robes that are changed thirteen times a year. Here is

the true emperor of the East in his full glory, and here is the true hero of *The Travels*; Prester John is nothing more than his unprepossessing foil. Given Rustichello's evident preference for fantastical legends of a strongly Christian bent, this switching of narrative roles suggests that Marco did, after all, come to play a large part in the literary scheme of his *Travels*.

Marco Polo has been described as a man who looked at everything and saw nothing,¹⁸ a dazzling dilettante with the voluble excitability of a merchant in a bazaar and about the same depth of knowledge. There is something in the charge. But his single most commendable characteristic – beyond even the obvious courage that saw him fend off cannibals, pirates, robbers, extortionists, wild beasts and evil spirits without so much as a word about the dangers he endured – is surely his capacity for observing cultures utterly alien to him without moralizing. In that he stands apart from more experienced travellers who went east armed with a rigid set of beliefs and a censorious attitude to anything that failed to fit in with them. We might regret that Marco's age had not developed the leisure to appreciate travel for travel's sake, and wish he had told us more about his personal journey. We might miss the instinct or insight – rare perhaps in someone who left home so young – to draw broad conclusions from the eye-opening scenes he witnessed. But would we really rather he had filtered his portrait of the Mongol world through the distorting lens of medieval Catholicism and European values? If he had, would we still be reading his book today?

By the time the two men in the Genoese prison started on the home straight, they had perhaps reached an understanding. For all Rustichello's eagerness to account everything a marvel, he had discovered that fact was undoubtedly stranger than fiction; while Marco, who happily was not immune to the medieval hunger for magic and wonder, must have become aware of the romancer's ability to transmute his sometimes leaden words into gold. When the narrative reached India, the locus of so many European fantasies, Marco gamely recounted some stories he had picked up (the miracle of St Thomas and the Male and Female Islands), watered down several legends (the gryphon, the methods of retrieving diamonds and the

Monstrous Races, who survive only in a brief mention of men with dogs' heads) and debunked others (mummified pygmies, which he explains are small monkeys laboriously worked into human form). But these stories pale next to his vivid account of India's culture. In rapid bursts, we hear about fantastically bejewelled kings, ritual suicide, the monsoon winds, suttee, cow worship, naked warriors, circles drawn round debtors, the use of the left hand to wipe the anus, the habit of chewing paan, the production of spices, the business acumen of Indian boys, and probationer monks whose fitness for office was tested by bringing in a squad of temple girls to tempt them into a state of arousal. Here, too, Marco refrains from easy judgements. He speaks admiringly of the monogamous and abstinent Brahmins who are incapable of telling a lie, the Yogi who live to an advanced age by subsisting on rice and milk supplemented with sulphur and mercury (a deadly recipe his readers hopefully did not try), and the still more extreme ascetics who go stark naked and shudder at killing a louse. He has nothing sanctimonious to say about the pervasive superstition that sees business deals regulated by the position of tarantulas or the length of shadows, journeys by sneezes, funerals by the need to move the deceased in an auspicious direction, if necessary by knocking a hole in the wall, and voyages by sending up an 'idiot or a drunkard' in a hurdle during a gale. Even when he reaches the geographical limits of Mongol influence, he relays the more barbaric forms of shamanism without dismissing them out of hand. Describing the Sumatran custom of smothering, cooking and eating every scrap of relatives whom magicians have pronounced terminally ill – to prevent worms from breeding in their corpses and causing them eternal torment when the worms die for lack of food – he conspicuously fails to comment on the greater concern for invertebrates than people. It takes something truly unjustifiable and perhaps personally threatening to draw his condemnation, such as the Sumatrans' habit of capturing foreigners and eating them if they cannot pay a ransom: 'Now this is a very evil practice and a bad custom,' he frowns. The comically deadpan tone can seem like a literary device; more likely, it simply reflects the almost numbing avalanche of revelations upon revelations that Marco unpacked

before his readers. Small wonder that they shook their heads in amazement and found it hard to believe new facts over old myths.

In the very last section of the book, with its blow-by-blow accounts of Mongol battles tricked out in chivalric prose as cumbersome as plate armour, it is tempting to see Rustichello's revenge. If so, to the modern ear the victory rings hollow. The repetitive rallying cries of rival khans and the formulaic attempts to elevate mass slaughter come across as false and trite after everything else we have read. Yet they tell us a great deal about what the romancer thought his readers wanted: a fitting capstone to an account of the notoriously bloodthirsty Mongols. If Marco had ever written a book on his own, it would no doubt have been less puzzling, more factual and almost certainly more boring. The book the two men negotiated together is more interesting and revealing. It reaches beyond description and experience into the realms of imagination and myth. In the process it encompasses a larger reality: that of the medieval European mind, half tradition-bound, half boldly outreaching, on the cusp of the modern age.

More merchants and missionaries would follow Marco to China and India. The Franciscan John of Montecorvino reached Beijing in 1291 and within a few years built a church with a bell tower and a Chinese boy choir to sing hymns to the Great Khan. In 1318 another friar, Odoric of Pordenone, embarked on a decade of Eastern travels and visited many of the same places as Marco – though some would not see another Westerner for six centuries more. In India Odoric stopped to disinter the bones of four martyred Franciscans, three Italians and one Georgian; in the interval since Marco's arrival the subcontinent had already become more accessible, if unexpectedly dangerous. By then Italian businessmen had settled along the Silk Road and in China itself, and around 1340 a Florentine merchant named Francesco Pegolotti compiled a guide for newcomers, the *Pratica della Mercatura*, which assured its readers that the road from the Crimea to Beijing was 'perfectly safe whether by day or night'. Pegolotti, though, never set foot in Asia himself, and even as he was writing, travel to the East was once again becoming dangerous. With the conversion of most Mongols to Islam a gulf of faith once again separated the two continents, and it was

left to the Muslim globetrotter Ibn Battuta to trounce the Europeans by travelling three times the distance covered by Marco. In the mid-fourteenth century the Black Death devastated the Mongol lands and Europe alike, killing millions and severing more commercial ties. The last Yuan emperor, faced with hyperinflation and Chinese revolts, fled to Mongolia in 1368, and the victorious Ming rulers expelled all foreigners from China. By the turn of the century the ravages of Tamerlane, who made it his murderous mission to revive Genghis Khan's empire as an Islamic entity, had all but wiped out the once-influential Nestorian Christians. Only daredevil Westerners would venture into the East until the Portuguese, after more than a half-century of preparations, sent Vasco da Gama by sea to the land of spices more than 200 years after Marco Polo returned home.

As a historical document, *The Travels* stands as the book that revealed the East to the West and formed Europe's idea of Asia. As a record of a remarkable odyssey lived once on the ground and again in its writing, its unruly, overflowing abundance explains why, uniquely among medieval travellers, Marco Polo continues to grip the Western imagination. Few names from the Middle Ages – not those of monarchs or Crusaders, popes or saints – have more resonance or currency. Despite all the enigmas surrounding him he ranks with the greatest of explorers, a byword for grand adventure spiced with exotic flavours, and still capable of making headlines after more than 700 years. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, centuries of scepticism may be the mark of true originality.

NOTES

1. *sea battle with Genoa*: A tradition beginning with Ramusio holds that Marco was captured at the Battle of Curzola (Korčula) while commanding a war galley. But the battle took place on 9 September 1298, leaving precious little time to write the book, which is dated to that year. The Battle of Ayas or Laiazzo, an earlier suggestion by Jacopo d'Acqui, seems impossible since it was fought in 1294 while Marco was returning from his travels. As A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot suggest, he

may simply have been captured in a minor skirmish between armed merchantmen.

2. *Arthurian romance by Rustichello*: Rustichello's romance of Guiron le courtois is also written in the same Franco-Italian as the Paris manuscript, which appears to settle in its favour the question of which was original language of *The Travels*. Barbara Wehr, however, has suggested that the prison collaboration between the two men was a fiction devised by Rustichello, who translated Marco's more coherent Venetian MS and dressed it up in chivalric garb – a thesis that requires us to believe that the traveller was more capable of writing a 'pure' text than the professional romancer. Conversely, Ramusio entirely excluded Rustichello from the transaction; he says Marco became a celebrity in Genoa and wrote his book with a Genoese gentleman – in Latin, he loyally adds, because the Genoese dialect was too barbaric for the written word.
3. *summary of a trade mission*: In the manuscript's Old French, 'se mistrent en chemin et chevauchen tant qu'il ne trevent aventure que amentovoit face'.
4. *scholarly counterblasts*: Igor de Rachewiltz, 'Marco Polo Went to China', *Zentralasiatische Studien* 27 (1997), pp. 34–92; Stephen G. Haw, *Marco Polo's China: A Venetian in the Realm of Kubilai Khan* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). In fact, two leading Chinese historians of the Yuan period, Yang Zhijiu and Cai Meibiao, had already anticipated and rebutted the charges in works published in 1982 and 1993 respectively.
5. *enlarging the reach of Catholicism*: Peter Jackson, in *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410* (Harlow: Longman, 2005), argues that the popes and rulers of Christian Europe had a better understanding of the limitations of the Crusaders and the rapacious imperialism of the Mongols than do latter-day historians who accuse them of missing a golden opportunity for a Mongol-Christian alliance against Islam.

6. *frank and detailed diary*: See *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Mengü, 1253–1255*, translated by Peter Jackson with introduction, notes and appendices by Peter Jackson with David Morgan (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990).
7. *Marco was still a young boy*: Nearly all that we know about the Polos comes from Marco's Prologue, but the differences between versions makes it impossible to be definitive. We think Marco was born in 1254 because we are told he was fifteen when his father returned in 1269, though other texts give the date as 1260, 1270 or 1272.
8. *In or around 1260*: Most texts give the year of the elder Polos' presence in Constantinople as 1250, widely regarded as a slip for 1260.
9. *Mongols and Mamluks of Egypt were fighting nearby*: Skirmishes between the Mongols and Egyptians took place in Syria late in 1271, but contrary to what Marco says the Egyptians did not devastate Armenia that year. There seems no very well-founded cause for the friars' alarm, and the whole episode of Gregory's commission (which is not recorded elsewhere) may have been exaggerated to give the Polos 'official' status.
10. *Qaidu*: Leader of the house of Ögedei, which had been sidelined in the succession disputes between Genghis Khan's grandsons. Around 1269 he was forced into a truce with the Chagatai khan Baraq, who had Khubilai's backing, but he retained much of his territory and gained the whole khanate when he helped Baraq to launch a suicidal attack on Abagha Khan, Hülegü's son and successor to the Ilkhanate. Marco deals with these matters at length in Chapters 3 and 9.
11. *other Western envoys and merchants*: For instance Giovanni de Marignolli, an important papal envoy who arrived at the Yuan court in 1342 with a thirty-two-man retinue, is not mentioned in any Chinese sources.
12. *Pulisanghin Bridge*: Marco's error has not, though, prevented it becoming known as the Marco Polo Bridge. He may have confused it with a longer bridge on the same road.

13. *overseas missions*: Peter Jackson, 'Marco Polo and his "Travels" ', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61 (1998), pp. 92–4.
14. *three envoys of Arghun*: Marco gives their names, in order of seniority, as Oulatai, Apusca and Coja (corresponding to Ulaatai, Abishqa and Qoja), and tells us that only Coja survived the voyage. A Chinese document dated 21 September 1290, discovered by Yang Zhijiu, refers to an early directive issued by Khubilai that 'Wuludai, Abishihe and Huozhe be sent to the domain of the Prince of the Blood Argun by way of Ma'bar' (south-east India) before adding that provisions for seventy of the 160 'co-travellers' who did not belong to the official mission should not be purchased with government money. And a passage in the *Collection of Histories* (c.1307) by the Persian historian Rashid al-Din records the arrival in the spring or early summer of 1293 of 'Xoja' and a party of envoys with the royal bride, adding that since Arghun had died his son Ghazan took her as his wife. Marco's earlier account not only gives the same information but also explains why Qoja alone is mentioned in the Persian source.
15. *Marco was in Sumatra*: See J. Jensen, 'The World's Most Diligent Observer', *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 51.3 (1997), pp. 719–26.
16. *more accurate than some critics have claimed*: The account is not, as has been suggested, a conflation of the failed invasion of 1281 with the earlier attempt of 1274. The very fact that Marco knew about a country whose existence seems to have been unsuspected west of Central Asia and would not be revealed in another European text for three centuries speaks for itself.
17. *meticulousness as a natural historian*: Haw, *Marco Polo's China*, pp. 124–46.
18. *a man who looked at everything and saw nothing*: The line is Khubilai Khan's, in Eugene O'Neill's play *Marco Millions*, but several commentators have made the same criticism.

A Note on the Text

Few books have had as turbulent an infancy as Marco Polo's *Travels*. In its authors' lifetime it had already been translated into Tuscan, Venetian, German, Latin and Court French, and perhaps added to by Marco or figures unknown. From the early days translators and copyists took a free hand, imposing their own corrections (which were as often as not errors) and 'improving' the text by cutting one part, fleshing out another and refashioning the style to suit their readers. One influential early version, a translation from Venetian to Latin made between 1310 and 1317 by the Dominican friar Francesco Pipino on the orders of his superiors, removed the chivalric rhetoric and conversational style and introduced damning judgements on non-Christians – as expected in a book aimed at a learned audience of clerics and designed to inspire missionaries to head out East. Modern scruples about authorship did not exercise these writers or their readers, and the book's very popularity gave it the status of a kind of encyclopaedia or treasury of information that could be updated as knowledge evolved, ensuring its existence in numerous forms but also the destruction of the original. The task of modern editors and translators has been to decide which text, or combination of texts, best represents the one written in the Genoese prison – while not neglecting the fact that the most commonly read versions, whether less or more authentic, have their own historical weight and interest.

In 1928 the Polan scholar Luigi Foscolo Benedetto classified the various texts according to a scheme that has become more or less standard. Professor Benedetto divided all the manuscripts and early printed versions that we possess into two groups, A and B. Group A is much the larger of the two and is headed by the text known as the Paris manuscript or, for short, F

(Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. fr. 1116). Written in Italy in the early fourteenth century, this is the longest surviving manuscript and the only one to retain the original Franco-Italian language. Several lost relatives of F also survive in translation into Court French (subgroup FG), Tuscan (TA), Venetian (VA) and Pipino's Latin (P); each subgroup is further divided into groupings of similar manuscripts. The B texts are fewer in number but derive from a lost version that preserved much more of the content, though not the style, of the original (or rather, since there are some errors and omissions common to all the extant texts, an imperfect copy of the original, also lost); they include the sixteenth-century text printed by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (R) and the early fifteenth-century Latin manuscript discovered in Toledo in 1932, which was once owned by Cardinal Francisco Xavier de Zelada (Z). Though the early parts of Z are heavily abridged, the later parts closely match F except for some 200 additional passages. About two-fifths of these are not preserved elsewhere, including the chapter on Uyghuristan and its capital Kara-Khoja, the 'Christians' (or Manichaeans) of Fuzhou and most of the material about Russia, including its stovehouses and drinking clubs. The other three-fifths are also found in R, thus corroborating some parts of Ramusio's text whose authenticity had long been doubted and lending credence to further passages that are still only found in R, including the murder of Ahmad and the description of the palace at Xingzai.

A second body of opinion sees the two groups as representing two distinct versions of the book: A, written in the Genoese prison, and B, a revised version produced by Marco after his return to Venice, perhaps for a small circle of patrons and presumably with the aid of yet another collaborator. Either way, few scholars doubt that F and Z (plus parts of R) represent two stages of the Polo manuscript in an authentic form. The present translation is an attempt to provide a composite reader's text based on F but containing all the supplemental passages from Z and some from R, together with brief additions or corrections from other 'good' texts. Except in minor instances, the additions to F are listed in the Appendix. My aim has been to produce a fluent, readable modern translation that avoids

unnecessary archaisms and stays as close as possible to the substance and style of the original – not always a straightforward task, since F, Z and R are all in different languages and the idiom of F itself runs the gamut from monotonous to swashbuckling. As well as letting these contrasts speak for themselves, I have retained F’s quasi-conversational asides, repetitions and recapitulations; these flourishes are likely Rustichello’s and are important indicators of his contribution to the book. I have, though, untangled some particularly tortuous passages of prose, and I have not denied myself the resources of modern English or attempted to reproduce word-for-word the limited vocabulary of the early texts. Readers interested in a more literal translation are recommended to consult the invaluable 1938 Moule–Pelliot edition.

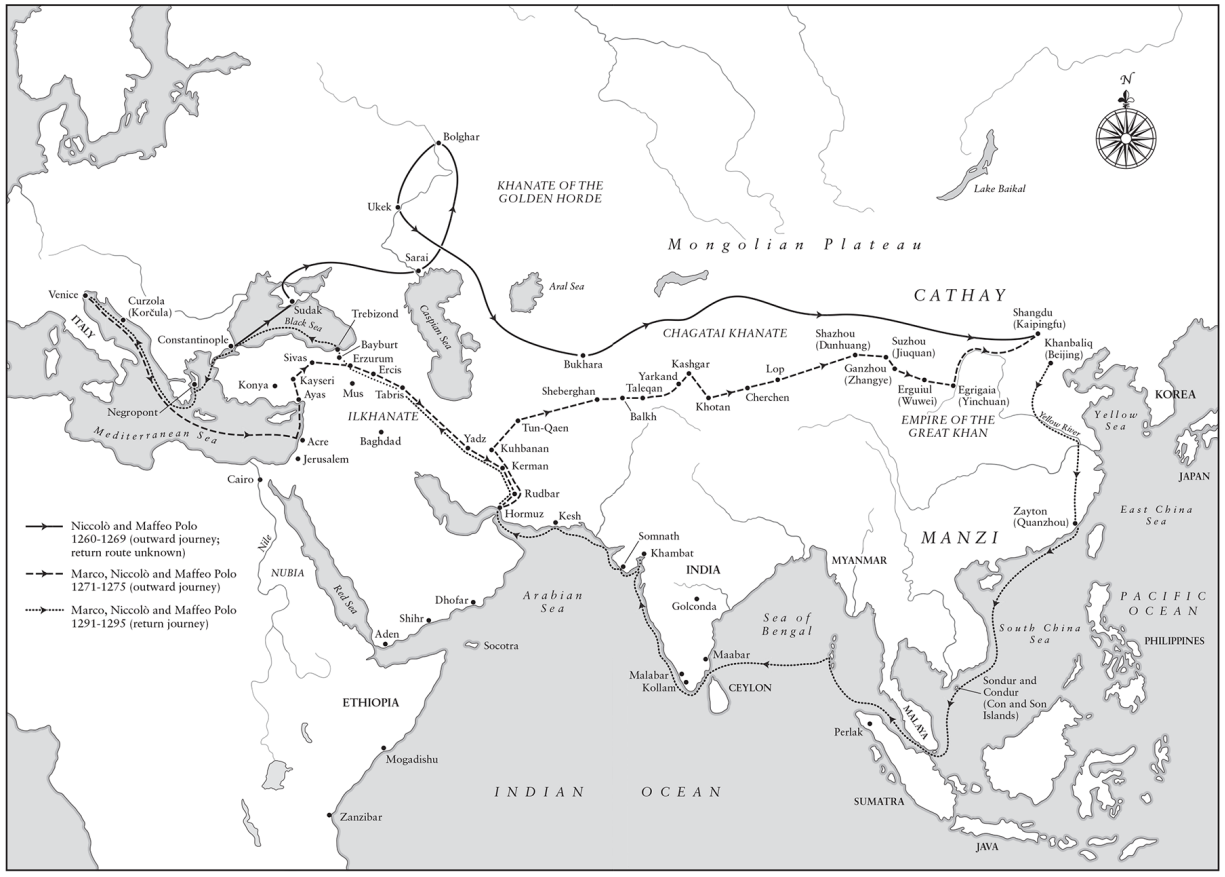
The spelling and transliteration of proper names is a particular problem in a book that crosses so many linguistic borders, as is the question of whether to stay close to the forms given in the texts or use the modern equivalent. Since the same names appear in different versions – and within the same version, and often within the same chapter – in a wide range of sometimes drastically different spellings, I have seen no great advantage in giving one or another manuscript form in the translation itself. The question of which matches Marco’s intention is important in establishing his accuracy and the text’s authenticity, but has to be weighed against the benefit to the general reader of using more recognizable names. On the other hand, too ruthless a pruning of the unfamiliar or superseded tends to produce strange growths such as the use of Xanadu (as popularized by Samuel Taylor Coleridge) in place of Marco’s own more accurate version of Shangdu, as well as more obvious anachronisms such as Istanbul for Constantinople, Mongols for Tartars or Muslims for Saracens that would substitute modern names for those known to Marco. My rule of thumb has been to give modern versions of names where they are clearly descended from those given by Marco, but standardized versions of the historical names where they have changed significantly since his time. So I give Marco’s Mien as Myanmar rather than Burma and, conversely, his Seilan as Ceylon not Sri Lanka; and I give his Taidu and Cambaluc as Daidu and Khanbaliq instead of replacing both with

Beijing. Occasionally the interplay between thirteenth- and twenty-first-century terms produces strange resonances, and here and there I have broken my rule in the interest of clarity. Personal names are given according to the established usage in the language in question; an exception has been made for Genghis Khan, since Chinggis, the phonetically more accurate spelling, is a good deal further away from the popular version of his name than Khubilai is from Kublai. In general the intention is to present the state of the world as Marco saw and represented it, while giving some aid to readers who find themselves navigating through unfamiliar and sometimes treacherous terrain.

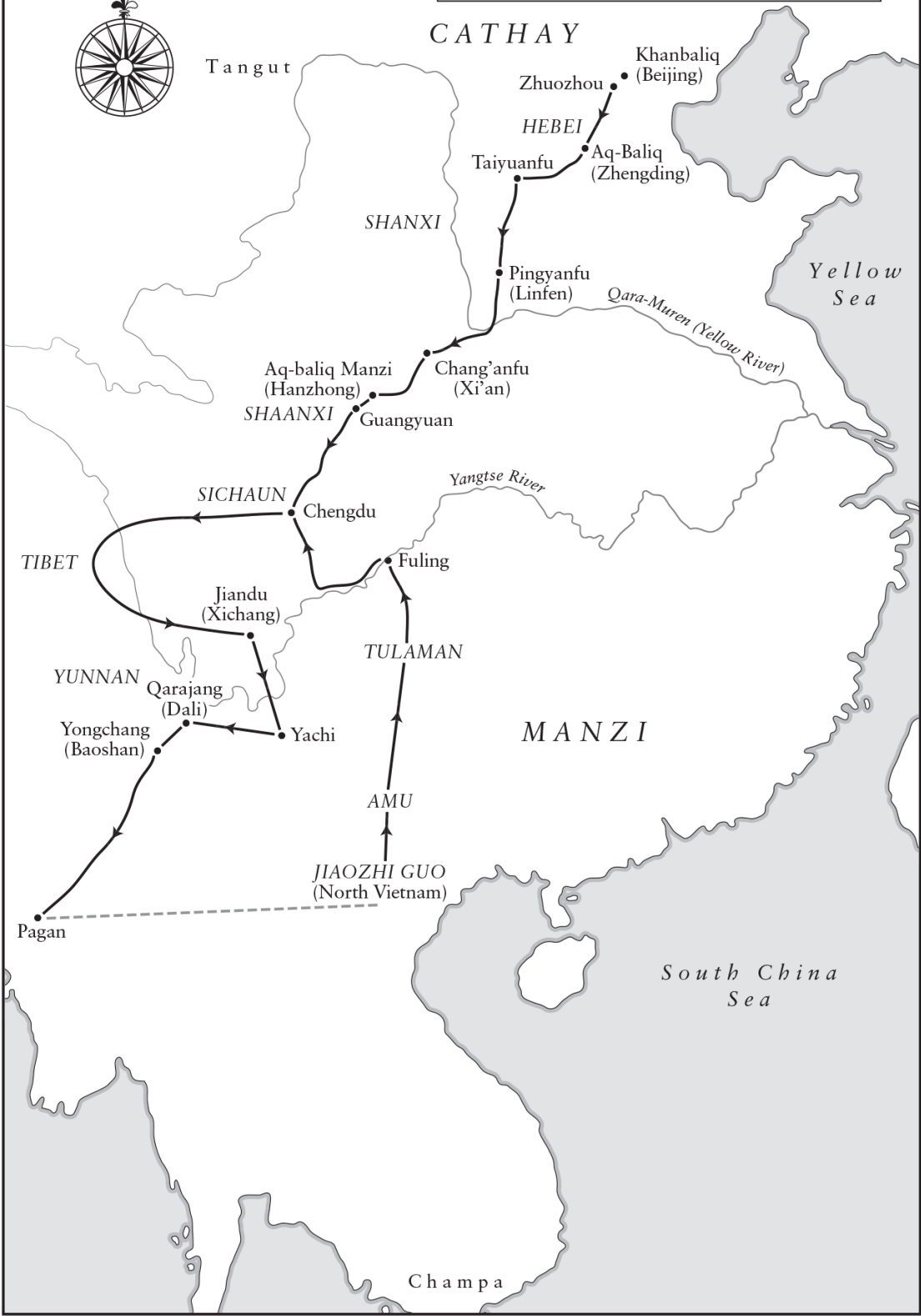
For Chinese names I have adopted the pinyin system wherever possible; hence the old name for Hangzhou is given as Xingzai even though Kinsay, derived from Marco's own Quinsai, is the more familiar spelling. For languages such as Mongolian for which no authoritative system of transliteration exists, I have used the most widely accepted modern form, while aiming for a reasonable degree of consistency. (I have preferred to use 'q' rather than 'k' in transliterating Mongolian, but have made exceptions in the case of familiar forms such as khan or, indeed, Khubilai.) I have avoided diacritics in the translation, since as well as increasing readability for experts at the expense of general readers they give an odd impression of the state of linguistics in Marco's time, but have used them where appropriate in the editorial material. In the very few instances where the names Marco gives are untraceable, I have lightly updated his spellings to bring them into line with the forms given elsewhere. Readers interested in gauging Marco's accuracy will find manuscript versions in the Notes; these are based on the careful reconstructions given in the Moule–Pelliot edition, as exhaustively explained in Professor Pelliot's later volumes of notes. In general, when the range of languages Marco used and the changes in pronunciation since his time are taken into account, they are sufficiently accurate to give further proof of what, for the time and given the process of composition, is a remarkable degree of attention to detail. I am indebted to Dr Christopher Atwood for scrutinizing the manuscript and pulling me back from several linguistic and factual brinks; many of his suggestions are

incorporated in the text and Notes. I also owe a considerable debt to previous translators and editors of *The Travels* whose work mine builds on, especially L. F. Benedetto, A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, and Ronald Latham, as well as to the other authors mentioned. The errors that doubtless remain after my forays down Marco's many rabbit holes are of course my responsibility alone.

The convenient division of the text into a Prologue and nine chapters has been retained from the 1958 Penguin edition, but line spaces have been added to signal the 232-odd chapters – some lasting a few lines, some several pages – into which F and other early versions were divided.



Marco Polo: from Beijing to Bengal
1275-1291





Prologue

Honoured emperors and kings, dukes and marquesses, counts, knights and townspeople, and all who want to know about the various races of mankind and the peculiarities of the various regions of the world, take this book and have it read to you! Here you will find all the greatest wonders and chief curiosities of Greater Armenia and Persia, of the Tartars¹ and India, and of many other lands. Our book will lay them out for you in the proper order as related by Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, who has seen them with his own eyes. There are also some things in here that he has not seen; but those he has heard from dependable and trustworthy men. We will set forth the things seen as seen and the things heard as heard, to ensure that our book is accurate and truthful and free of falsehoods. And everyone who reads this book or hears it read should place his trust in it, because everything in it is true. For let me tell you that from the day the Lord our God moulded our first father Adam with His hands until this very hour, there has never been a man, neither Christian nor pagan, Tartar nor Indian, nor of any other race, who has explored and discovered the truth about so many disparate parts of the world and its great wonders as has this Messer Marco Polo. And for this reason he thought it would be a great pity if he did not have all the great marvels he had seen and heard about from trustworthy sources set down in writing, so that others who have not seen them and do not know of them can learn about them from this book.

Let me also tell you that to amass this knowledge he spent a good twenty-six years in these different countries and lands. And afterwards, when he was in prison in Genoa, rather than idle away time he decided to put together this book for the entertainment of readers. So he had all these things written up by Messer Rustichello of Pisa, who was in the same

prison; this was in the year 1298 from the birth of Jesus Christ. But what he recounted was only the small fraction that he was able to remember.²

At the time when Baldwin was emperor of Constantinople³ – the year was 1260⁴ – it so happened that Messer Niccolò Polo, who was Messer Marco's father, and Messer Maffeo Polo, who was Niccolò's brother, were in that city, having come there from Venice with their merchandise. Without doubt they were noble, wise and far-sighted men. After talking things over they decided to head across the Black Sea in the hope of gaining new business and turning a profit. So they bought a large stock of dazzling and valuable jewels and set out from Constantinople, taking ship to Sudak.⁵

When they had stayed in Sudak for a while, they resolved to press on still further. What else shall I tell you? Leaving Sudak, they went on their way and rode without meeting with any adventure worth mentioning until they came to the court of Berke Khan,⁶ lord of part of Tartary, who was then living at Bolghar⁷ and Sarai.⁸ This Berke received Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo with great honour and was highly delighted by their arrival. The two brothers gave him all the jewels they had brought; Berke accepted them very willingly and was immensely pleased with them, and in return he gave the brothers goods worth at least twice their value. He conveyed them to many places to sell these goods, and they fetched excellent prices.

When the brothers had stayed a year in Berke's land war broke out between him and Hulegu,⁹ the lord of the Tartars of the Levant. They marched against one another with all their forces and joined battle. The loss of life on both sides was terrible, but in the end the victory fell to Hulegu. And because of this battle and this war, no one could travel along the roads without being abducted. Or rather no one could travel in the direction from which the brothers had come; if they went on ahead they could travel freely. So they said to one another: 'Since we cannot return to Constantinople with our goods, let us carry on towards the east. Then we can make our way home by a roundabout route.' They got themselves ready and, leaving Berke, made their way to a city called Ukek¹⁰ that marked the limit of the

Western Khan's lands. And from Ukek they crossed the river Tigris¹¹ and for seventeen days journeyed through a desert where they found no towns or villages but only Tartars with their tents, living off their beasts.

When they had crossed this desert they approached a very large and splendid city called Bukhara.¹² The province was likewise called Bukhara, and its ruler's name was Baraq.¹³ It was the finest city in all of Persia. By the time the two brothers reached the city both the route ahead and the way they had come were impassable, and so they stayed there for three years.

While they were living there an envoy sent by Hulegu, the lord of the Levant, stopped off on his way to the Great Khan of all the Tartars, who was named Khubilai¹⁴ and lived at the [end of the earth](#) in an east-north-easterly direction. And when the envoy saw Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo he was astonished, because no Latins¹⁵ had ever been seen in that part of the world. 'Sirs,' he said to the two brothers, 'if you will trust me, you will find it greatly conducive to your profit and honour.' The two brothers said that they would readily trust him in any undertaking that lay within their power. The envoy replied: 'Sirs, I can tell you that the great lord of the Tartars has never seen any Latins¹⁶ and is exceedingly eager to meet one. So if you will accompany me until we reach him, I assure you he will be very glad to see you and will treat you with great honour and liberality. And with me you will be able to travel safely and without any hindrance.'

When the two brothers had heard what the envoy had to say, they got themselves ready and declared that they would willingly accompany him. So they set out with this envoy and travelled towards the north and north-east for a year until they reached their destination. Along the way they encountered great wonders and various things that we will not go into here because Messer Marco, Messer Niccolò's son, who also saw all these things, will tell you about them in full further on in this book.

When Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo arrived at the court, the Great Khan received them courteously and held lavish revels and festivities in their honour. He was thoroughly delighted that they had come. He asked them many questions: first as to the emperors, how they maintained authority and justice in their lands, went to battle and acted in every way; and then about the other kings, princes and other nobles.

Afterwards he asked them about the Lord Pope, all the practices of the Roman Church, and all the customs of the Latins. And in each case Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo gave him a full and truthful account, speaking well and sagely like the wise men they were, and with a firm grasp of the Tartar language.

When the great lord called Khubilai Khan – lord of all the Tartars in the world and all the provinces, kingdoms and regions of this vast part of the earth – had heard all about the Latins in the well-chosen words of the two brothers, he was exceedingly pleased. He made up his mind to send emissaries to the pope, and he asked the two brothers to undertake this embassy along with one of his barons. They replied that they would carry out all his commands as those of their liege lord. Then the Great Khan summoned to his presence a baron named Kogatal and told him that he wished him to go with the brothers to the pope. Kogatal answered: ‘Sire, I am your servant, and I am ready to do all you command me to the utmost of my power.’ So the Great Khan had letters written in Turkish to the pope and entrusted them to the two brothers and his baron, giving them instructions as to what they should say on his behalf to the pope. And you should know that the purport of his letters and the purpose of the mission was this: he told the pope to send him as many as a hundred men learned in the Christian religion, well versed in the seven arts,¹⁷ and sufficiently skilled in disputation to demonstrate plainly to idolaters and those of other persuasions that their religion was utterly false and that all the household idols they worshipped were things of the Devil; men able to prove by clear reasoning that the Christian religion was superior to these others. The Great

Khan further directed the brothers to bring him some oil from the lamp that burns above the sepulchre of God in Jerusalem. As you have heard, then, this was the gist of the embassy sent by the Great Khan to the pope by means of the two brothers.

When the Great Khan had entrusted the two brothers and his baron in full with the message he was sending to the pope, he gave them a gold tablet inscribed with instructions that the three emissaries, wherever they went, were to be provided with all the accommodation they required, together with horses and men to escort them from one place to another. And when Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo and the other envoy had been handsomely equipped with everything they needed they took leave of the mighty lord, mounted their horses and started on the road.

When they had ridden some way the Tartar baron who was with the brothers was taken ill and, being unable to carry on, stopped in a city. And when Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo saw that he was ill, they left him and went on their way. And I assure you that they were served and obeyed everywhere they went in everything they chose to command. What else shall I tell you? They rode on day after day until they came to Ayas.¹⁸ And I assure you they were hard pressed to make the journey in three years. This was because they could not ride all the time but were held up by bad weather, snow and swollen rivers.

From Ayas they went on to Acre,¹⁹ which they reached in the month of April in the year 1269²⁰ from the incarnation of Jesus Christ only to discover that the Lord Pope was dead. And when Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo found that the pope (whose name was Clement) was dead, they went to a learned clerk who was the legate of the Roman Church for the whole kingdom of Egypt. His name was Theobald of Piacenza²¹ and he was a man of great authority. They told him about the mission on which the Great Khan of the Tartars had sent them to the pope. When the legate had heard what the two brothers had to say he was filled with wonder, and it seemed to him that this development could be greatly to the profit and

honour of Christendom. He said to the two brothers: ‘Sirs, you see that the pope is dead, and so the proper course is for you to wait until there is a new pope. And when there is a pope you will be able to fulfil your mission.’ The two brothers, who saw clearly that the legate spoke the truth, declared that pending the election of a pope they would go to Venice to see their families. And so they left Acre and went to Negropont.²² And at Negropont they boarded a ship and sailed to Venice. There Messer Niccolò learned that his wife was dead and had left him a fifteen-year-old son, whose name was Marco. And this was the Marco who this book is about. Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo stayed in Venice for about two years, waiting for a pope to take office.

When the two brothers had waited as long as you have heard and there was no sign of a pope being made, they decided that if they delayed any longer it might be too late for them to return to the Great Khan. So they set out from Venice, taking Marco, Niccolò’s son, with them, and headed straight for Acre, where they met the legate I told you about before. They discussed the affair with him at length and asked his permission to go to Jerusalem to obtain some of the oil from the lamp at Christ’s sepulchre²³ that the Great Khan had requested. The legate gave them permission to go. So the two brothers set out from Acre and went to Jerusalem, where they took some oil from the lamp of Christ’s sepulchre. They returned to the legate at Acre and said to him: ‘Sir, since we see there is no pope, we wish to go back to the Great Khan, because we have delayed too long.’ And the lord legate, who was one of the greatest lords of the whole Roman Church, replied: ‘Since you wish to go back to the Great Khan, so be it.’ Then he composed letters and a message to be sent to the Great Khan, testifying that Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo had come to fulfil their mission but that, since there was no pope, they had been unable to complete it.

With the legate’s letters in their possession the two brothers left Acre and set out on their return journey to the Great Khan. They travelled until they reached Ayas, where they had barely arrived when the legate himself was

elected pope and took the name Pope Gregory of Piacenza.²⁴ The two brothers were delighted by the news, and before any time had passed an envoy arrived in Ayas with a message from the legate who had been elected pope, directing Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo, if they had not already gone on,²⁵ to turn back to him. The two brothers were overjoyed and replied that they would gladly do so. What else shall I tell you? The king of Armenia fitted out a galley for the two brothers and conveyed them with all honour to the legate.

When they reached Acre they went to the Lord Pope and made him a humble obeisance. The Lord Pope received them courteously, gave them his blessing, and held revels and festivities in their honour. Then he provided Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo with two Dominican friars, who were undoubtedly the most learned then to be found in that whole province. One was named Brother Nicholas of Vicenza, the other Brother William of Tripoli. The pope gave the friars privileges that granted them plenary authority to ordain priests and bishops and to grant or withhold absolution as fully as he could himself. He entrusted them with letters in which, among other things, he petitioned the Great Khan's brother Abagha,²⁶ lord of the Tartars of the Levant, to grant the Christians his aid and favour so that they could visit the lands beyond the sea. He charged them with delivering his greetings to the Great Khan, along with many fine crystal vessels and other gifts that he gave them.²⁷ And when Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo and the two friars had received the privileges and the letters and the message from the Lord Pope, they asked for his blessing. Then all four set off on their journey, taking Marco, Messer Niccolò's son, with them.

They headed directly for Ayas, but no sooner had they arrived than Bunduqdari,²⁸ the Egyptian sultan, invaded Armenia with a huge army and devastated the country. The emissaries' lives were in danger, and when the two friars understood this they were terrified at the prospect of carrying on. So they declared that they would go no further.²⁹ They gave Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo all their privileges and letters, took leave of them, and went off with the Grand Master of the Templars.

Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Niccolò's son Marco set out on their journey and rode on through winter and summer until they came to the Great Khan, who was then at a large and wealthy city called Kaipingfu.³⁰ We will not go into what they saw along the way because we will tell you about it further on in our book, all in due order. But you should know that they were hard pressed to make the journey in three and a half years, on account of the snow and rain and flooded rivers,³¹ and because they could not ride in winter as easily as in summer. And I give you my word³² that when the Great Khan heard that Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo were approaching, he sent his couriers no less than the distance of a forty-day journey to meet them. And they were very well served and attended in every regard.

What else shall I tell you? When Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Marco arrived at this great city they went to the chief palace, where they found the Great Khan and a tremendous assembly of barons. They knelt before him and made obeisance with the utmost humility. The Great Khan told them to rise and received them courteously, with great celebrations and festivities in their honour. And he asked many questions about their circumstances and how they had fared since their departure. The two brothers replied that things had turned out very well, seeing that they found him healthy and flourishing. Then they presented the privileges and letters that the pope had sent, which greatly pleased him. Next they handed him the holy oil, which he received with joy and prized very highly.

When the Great Khan saw Marco, who was a mere stripling, he asked who he was.

'Sire,' said Messer Niccolò, 'he is my son, and your servant. **I have brought him** at great risk and trouble from those faraway lands to present him to you as your slave.'

'He is welcome,' said the Great Khan. **And he held him** in great favour and had his name inscribed alongside those of the other honoured members of his household, as a result of which he was greatly esteemed and valued by everyone by court.

But why make a long story of it? You may depend on it that the Great Khan and his whole court welcomed the envoys with tremendous revelry and festivities. And they were very well served and attended in every regard. They stayed at court and had a place of honour above the other barons.

Now it happened that Marco, the son of Messer Niccolò, acquired a remarkable knowledge of the Tartars' customs, languages and letters. I give you my word that before he had been very long at the Great Khan's court he had mastered four languages, including their alphabets and written forms. He was a man of exceptional astuteness and foresight, and the Great Khan wished him nothing but the best because of the goodness and great worth he discerned in him. And when the Great Khan observed the depth of Marco's wisdom, he sent him as his emissary to a country called Qarajang, which it took him a good six months to reach. The lad successfully completed his assignment and showed excellent judgement. He had often seen emissaries return from the different regions to which the Great Khan had sent them unable to make any report of the countries they had visited beyond the facts of their mission; he had heard their master call them dolts and dunces and declare he was more interested in receiving news of these strange countries and their customs and manners than in the business on which he had sent them. Being well aware of this, Marco took care on his own mission to pay close attention to every novelty and curiosity that came his way, so that he might describe them to the Great Khan.

When Marco returned from his mission, he presented himself before the Great Khan and began by giving a full account of the business on which he had been sent, which had gone very well. Then he recounted all the novelties and sights he had seen along the way, so ably and knowingly that the Great Khan and all those who heard him were amazed and said to one another: 'If this youth lives to manhood, he cannot fail to prove himself a man of sound judgement and true worth.' What else shall I tell you? From this time onward the youth was called Messer Marco Polo; and this is what

he will be called from now on in our book. And with good reason, for he was a wise and accomplished man.

Why should we make a long story of it? You may depend on it that Messer Marco stayed with the Great Khan for a good seventeen years, and in all that time he never ceased to travel on assignments. For the Great Khan, seeing that Messer Marco brought him so much news from each country he was sent to and conducted his business so successfully, entrusted him with every mission of particular importance or to distant lands. He carried out his commissions with great success and brought back word of many novelties and curiosities. And the Great Khan was so well satisfied with Messer Marco's handling of his affairs that he held him in high esteem, showed him great favour, and kept him close by his side, so much so that the other lords became very resentful. This, then, is why Messer Marco knows more about this part of the world than any other man: because he explored more of these outlandish regions than any man who was ever born, and also because he bent his mind more fully to understanding them.

When Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco had stayed as long as you have heard with the Great Khan, they said among themselves that they would like to go home to their own country.³³ They repeatedly asked the Great Khan for permission to leave, entreating him in the gentlest terms; but the Great Khan loved them so much and was so fond of their company that nothing in the world would induce him to part with them.

At this time it happened that Queen Bulughan³⁴ died. She was the wife of Arghun, lord of the Levant,³⁵ and she stipulated in her will that only a lady of her lineage should be allowed to sit on her throne and marry Arghun. So Arghun selected three of his barons, whose names were like this: the first Ulaatai, the second Abishqa, and the third Qoja.³⁶ He sent them to the Great Khan with a splendid retinue, to ask him to send a lady of the lineage of Bulughan, his late queen. And when these three barons came before the Great Khan, they told him why they had come. The Great Khan received them courteously and held revels and festivities in their honour. Then he sent for a lady named Kokechin,³⁷ who was of Queen Bulughan's lineage

and was a very comely and good-natured girl of seventeen years of age. He told the three barons that this was the lady they had come for, and they replied that they were well satisfied. **And when everything was prepared** and a large cortège was ready to escort this new bride with due pomp to King Arghun, the envoys took leave of the Great Khan and set out on horseback to make the journey of eight months along the road by which they had come. Along the way they found that the path was blocked because of a war that had recently broken out between certain Tartar kings; and being unable to go ahead they were obliged against their will to turn back to the court of the Great Khan, to whom they related everything that had happened to them.

At this point Messer Marco returned from India after a voyage over strange seas and reported many novel things about that country. And the three barons, when they realized that Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco were Latins, said among themselves that they would like these men to make the journey with them by sea. So they went to the Great Khan and asked him as a favour to send them by sea and have the three Latins accompany them.³⁸ The Great Khan, who loved these three as much as I have told you, granted this favour with great reluctance and gave the three Latins permission to accompany the three barons and the lady.

When the Great Khan saw that Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco were ready to leave, he summoned all three to his presence and gave them two tablets decreeing their right to travel freely throughout his lands and to receive provisions for themselves and their attendants wherever they went. He entrusted them with messages for the pope, for the kings of France³⁹ and Spain, and for the other kings of Christendom. Then he fitted out a fleet of fourteen ships, each of which had four masts and often sailed with twelve sails. I could easily give you more details, but as it would take some time I will not go into it at this point. **Of these ships**, at least four or five carried crews of 250 to 260 seamen.

When the ships were ready, the three barons, the lady, Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco took leave of the Great Khan and

embarked with a very large company. And the Khan supplied them with provisions to last two years.⁴⁰ What else shall I tell you? They put to sea and sailed for three straight months until they came to an island called Java⁴¹ lying towards the south; this island is full of wonderful things that I will tell you about in this book. Then they left the island, and I assure you they sailed the Indian Ocean for a good eighteen months before they reached their destination. And they encountered many great marvels, which we will also recount to you in this book. And I can tell you without any doubt that when they embarked there were at least 600 people on board, not counting the sailors. And all died, save just eighteen. Of the three envoys only Qoja survived; of the women and girls in the party only one died.⁴²

When they arrived they discovered that Arghun was dead and a certain Gaykhatu⁴³ was governing the kingdom. **They decided the proper course** was to send him a message telling him that, having brought the queen on Arghun's orders, they would do whatever he thought was right. He sent back word that they should give her to Arghun's young son Ghazan,⁴⁴ who was then in the region of the Dry Tree on the border of Persia, commanding 60,000 troops who were guarding the passes to prevent hostile nations from invading and ravaging the country. And they did as they were instructed. And when Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco had done all their duties as regards the lady and the missions the Great Khan had entrusted them with, **they returned to Gaykhatu** as their road lay in that direction. They stayed with him for nine months, then took their leave and set out on their way. You should also be aware of the fact that Gaykhatu gave these three emissaries of the Great Khan – namely Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco – four gold tablets of authority, **each a cubit long** and five fingers wide, and each weighing three or four marks.⁴⁵ Two bore the sign of the gerfalcon, one of the lion, and one was plain. On each it was inscribed that by virtue of the Everlasting God the name of the Great Khan was to be honoured and praised for ever, and that anyone who disobeyed his commands would be put to death and have his goods confiscated. Underneath it was written that these three envoys were to be honoured and served throughout his lands like his own person and furnished

with horses and all necessary provisions and escorts. And this, to be sure, is what happened; for across his lands they were freely supplied with horses, provisions and everything they needed. I give you my word that time after time they were provided with 200 horsemen, or a larger or smaller number as was required to escort them and ensure their safe passage from one district to another. And this was quite essential, because Gaykhatu was not a legitimate ruler⁴⁶ and so the inhabitants did not restrain themselves from breaking the law as they would have done if they were subject to a lord to whom they owed allegiance.⁴⁷

Let me tell you one more thing that is worth mentioning as it attests to the honour of these three emissaries. For I give you my word that Messer Maffeo, Messer Niccolò and Messer Marco were as eminent as I will describe to you. You should know that the Great Khan had such faith in them and was so fond of them that he entrusted to their care not only the princess Kokechin but also the daughter of the king of Manzi,⁴⁸ both of whom they were to escort to Arghun, lord of all the Levant. And so they did; for they conducted them across the sea, as I told you above, with all their retinue and all their provisions. Let me tell you, moreover, that these two great ladies were under the personal care of these three envoys; for they watched over them and guarded them as if they were their own daughters, and the ladies, who were very young and beautiful, looked on them and obeyed them as their fathers. And the three men handed them over to the care of their lord. And I assure you in all honesty that Queen Kokechin, the wife of Ghazan (who is now the reigning ruler), had grown so deeply attached⁴⁹ to the three men – indeed both she and her husband Ghazan had – that there is nothing she would not have done for them as readily as for her own father. For you should know that, when these three envoys left her to go back to their own country, she wept for grief at their parting.

Now I have told you something well worth repeating: that two such ladies were entrusted to these three envoys, to be conducted to their lord from such a far-off place. So we will leave it at that and carry on with your story. What else shall I tell you? After the three emissaries had left Gaykhatu, they set out on their journey and rode every day until they

reached Trebizond;⁵⁰ and from Trebizond they sailed to Constantinople, from Constantinople to Negropont, and from Negropont to Venice. This was in the year 1295 from the incarnation of Christ.

And now that I have related to you all the contents of the prologue, just as you have heard, I will begin the book.



ONE

The Middle East

The fact is that there are two Armenias, the Greater and the Lesser. The lord of [Lesser Armenia](#)¹ is a king who rules his country with wisdom and justice and is subject to the Tartars.² There are many towns and villages, and all manner of things are available in great abundance. The land also offers fine sport with wild game of all sorts, both beasts and birds. Even so, I tell you it is not a wholesome place; on the contrary, it is exceedingly unhealthy. Once upon a time its nobles were brave and skilled soldiers, but now they are low and wretched and good at nothing except getting drunk, which they are very good at.

On the coast lies the town of Ayas, which is a bustling centre of trade; for you may depend on it that all the spices and cloths and all the other valuable things from the interior are carried to this town. And merchants come here from Venice³ and Genoa and all over to buy them. And every merchant and traveller who is headed for the interior starts his journey in this town.

Lesser Armenia shares a border to the south with the Promised Land, which is in the hands of the Saracens.⁴ To the north are the Turkmen people known as the Karamanids;⁵ to the east and north-east are Turkey and the cities of Kayseri,⁶ Sivas⁷ and many others that are all subject to the Tartars; while to the west is the sea by which one sails to the lands of the Christians.

We have now told you about Lesser Armenia, and next we will tell you about Turkey.

There are three races of people in Turkey. There are the Turkmens, who worship Muhammad⁸ and observe his law; they are an uneducated people who speak a barbarous language. They live in the mountains and on the plains, wherever they know they can find good pasture, because their livelihood depends entirely on their flocks.⁹ And I can tell you they breed fine Turkmen horses and mules that fetch a high price. The other races are the Armenians and Greeks, who live among the Turkmens in towns and villages and make their living from trade and crafts. For you should know that the finest and most beautiful carpets in the world are woven here, as well as gorgeous and luxurious cloths of crimson silk and other colours, and many other things besides. Their most celebrated cities are Konya,¹⁰ Kayseri and Sivas; there are also many other cities and towns that I will pass over because it would take too long to list them all. They are subject to the Tartar lord of the Levant, who appoints governors to rule over them.¹¹

Now let us leave [this province](#) and turn to Greater Armenia.¹²

Greater Armenia is a very large province. It begins at a city called Erzincan,¹³ where they make the best buckram in the world and practise countless other crafts. Here are found the most beautiful baths fed by the best spring water on earth. The people are Armenians and are vassals of the Tartars. There are many towns and cities. The noblest of all is Erzincan, which is the seat of an archbishop. Among the others are Erzurum¹⁴ and Ercis.¹⁵ [And in a village](#) called Bayburt,¹⁶ which lies on the road from Trebizond to Tabriz, there is a great silver mine.

It is a vast province, and I can tell you that all the armies of the Tartars of the Levant spend their summers here, because it provides excellent summer pasturage for their animals. So here the Tartars stay with their beasts during the summer, but they do not winter here, because then the snow falls in such unmeasurable quantities and brings such freezing temperatures that it would be impossible for the beasts to survive. And so the Tartars leave as winter

arrives, heading for warmer regions where they can find lush grass and good pasture for their animals.

Let me also tell you that in the middle of Greater Armenia there is a large mountain, **very high and shaped like a cube**, upon which Noah's Ark is said to have rested; hence it is called the Mountain of Noah's Ark. It is so broad and long that it takes more than two days to go round it, and all year round the snow lies so deep on the summit that no one can climb it; the old snow never entirely melts, **and new snow** is constantly falling on top, so it grows taller all the time. But the lower slopes are watered by the melting snow and are so richly verdant that all the flocks from far around are brought here to graze in the summer and never run out of pasture. These streams of melted snow also deposit thick mud on the hillsides.¹⁷

To the south-east Greater Armenia borders on the kingdom of Mosul;¹⁸ its people are Christians, namely Nestorians¹⁹ and Jacobites,²⁰ of whom I will tell you more later on. To the north is Georgia, which I will also return to later on. On the frontier with Georgia there is a spring that gushes oil at such a rate that a hundred ships²¹ can load at once. It is not good to eat, but it burns well and is good for salving scabies on men and animals alike and for treating itching and mange on camels. Men come from far off to fetch this oil, and in all the lands around they burn no other oil but this.

Now let us leave Greater Armenia and speak of the province of Georgia.

In Georgia there is a king who is always known as David *Malik*, or in our language King David. He is subject to the Tartars. Long ago all the kings of this province were born with the mark of an eagle on their right shoulder. They are a handsome people of brave warriors and good archers, and they fight well in battle. They are Christians and observe the rule of the Greek Church,²² and they wear their hair cropped in clerical fashion. This is the province through which Alexander was unable to pass when he wanted to head west,²³ because the road is narrow and dangerous. For on one side is the sea, and on the other is a great mountain that cannot be crossed on horseback. The road between the mountain and the sea is very narrow, and this narrow road stretches for over four leagues, so that a handful of men

could hold the pass against the whole world. This was why Alexander could not advance. And I can tell you that Alexander had a tower and fortress built there, to hold back these people and prevent them from attacking him; and it was called the Iron Gate. This is the place referred to in the *Alexander Book*, when it tells how he hemmed in the Tartars between two mountains. In truth they were not Tartars, but a people called Cumans²⁴ and various other races besides, because there were no Tartars at that time.

There are numerous towns and villages. They have a great deal of silk and weave the most gorgeous cloths of silk and gold that have ever been seen. They also have the best goshawks in the world. All things are available in great abundance, and the people live by trade and industry. The province is replete with great mountains and narrow, secure passes, which I can tell you means that the Tartars have never entirely been able to enforce their authority over it. [In these fastnesses](#) among the mountains there are entire forests that consist only of box-trees.

There is a monastery here called St Leonard's, where the miraculous occurrence I will now describe to you takes place. You should know that there is a large lake that collects the water from a mountain near the church of St Leonard's, and in all this water that flows from this mountain not a single fish, either little or big, is to be found all year round – with the sole exception that on the first day of Lent they begin to arrive, and they keep coming every day of Lent until Holy Saturday or Easter Eve, after which they vanish again. Throughout this period there are plenty of fish, but at every other time of year there is not one to be found.

This province looks out over two seas, one of which, the Black Sea,²⁵ lies to the north. And I can also tell you that the other sea that I have mentioned – the sea that comes up to the mountain towards the east – is called the Sea of Ghel or Ghelan, [or the Sea of Baku](#), and is 2,800 miles in circumference;²⁶ it is really a lake because it has no communication with any other seas, the nearest of which is a twelve-day journey away. The Euphrates, [the Tigris](#), [the Gihon](#)²⁷ and many other rivers flow into it, and it is completely surrounded by mountains and land. [It contains many well-populated islands](#) with fine cities. And these islands were settled by

refugees who fled before the Great Tartar when he embarked on a campaign of conquest across the kingdom or province of Persia, whose cities and lands were previously governed by the commonalty. And these people fled to these islands and to the mountains in the hope of finding refuge; and so the islands were settled. The sea is also well stocked with fish, especially sturgeon, salmon and other big fish. In recent years Genoese merchants have begun launching ships here and sailing on this sea. And this is the source of the silk known as *ghilan*.

Near this province there is a very large and fine city called Tbilisi,²⁸ which is surrounded by many dependent towns and villages. Its inhabitants are Christians, namely Armenians and Georgians, together with some Saracens and Jews, though they are few in number. Silks and many other fabrics are woven here. The men live by their crafts and are subject to the Great Khan of the Tartars.

You should understand that we have only spoken of the two or three principal cities of each province; though there are many others, it would be a tedious business to list them all without some striking feature to set them apart. But some that we have passed over, which are located in the places mentioned above, will be described in more detail below.

We have now told you about Armenia's neighbours to the north. Next we want to tell you about the lands lying to the south and east.

Mosul is a large kingdom inhabited by the various ethnic groups I will now describe to you. There is a race known as Arabs, who worship Muhammad. There is also a race of people who observe the law of Christ but not the rule of the Roman Church, for they are misguided in many points. They are called Nestorians and Jacobites. They have a patriarch whom they call Catholicus;²⁹ and this patriarch makes archbishops, bishops, abbots and prelates of every degree and sends them in all directions – to India and Cathay³⁰ and Baghdad – just like the Roman pope. I should add that all the Christians you will meet in all the places I mention are Nestorians and Jacobites.

The cloths of silk and gold known as *mosulin*³¹ are all made here. And I can tell you that this same kingdom is home to the renowned merchants, also known as Mosulin, who export all sorts of precious spices in vast quantities. And in the mountains of this realm there lives a race called the Kurds; some of them are Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, while the rest are Saracens who worship Muhammad. They are a bold and wicked people, very fond of robbing merchants.

Next to this province is another named Mus and Mardin,³² where cotton grows in immense quantities and buckram and many other wares are manufactured on a grand scale. There are many merchants and artisans, and they are subject to the king of the Tartars.

Now let us leave the kingdom of Mosul and speak of the great city of Baghdad.

Baghdad is a huge city where the caliph of all the Saracens in the world has his seat, just as the head of all the world's Christians has his seat at Rome. A great river flows through the middle of the city; this river will take you directly to the Indian Ocean, and merchants are constantly coming and going with their wares. You should know that it takes at least eighteen days to travel downriver from Baghdad to the Indian Ocean; merchants who are headed for India descend the river as far as a city named Kish,³³ from which they enter the Indian Ocean. And let me also tell you that a great city called Basra stands on this river between Baghdad and Kish. And all around this city are groves where the finest dates in the world are grown.

Many kinds of gold and silk fabrics are woven in Baghdad: *nasich* and *nakh* and cramoisy of various types, elaborately worked with figures of animals and birds. And most of the pearls that are exported from India to Christendom are pierced in Baghdad. And in Baghdad they study the law of Muhammad, necromancy, physics, astronomy, geomancy and physiognomy. It is the largest and most magnificent city in all these parts. Moreover, you may depend on it that the Caliph of Baghdad possessed the greatest hoard of treasure in gold, silver and precious stones that ever belonged to any man. And I will tell you how this came about.

The fact is that around the year 1255³⁴ after the birth of Christ, the great Tartar lord called Hulegu assembled a huge army and marched on Baghdad. **Hulegu was one of four** brothers who were Tartar lords; the eldest, Mengu,³⁵ was the Great Khan. By then the brothers had already subjugated Cathay and other adjoining countries with their overwhelming force, but far from being content with these conquests, their ambitions were so great that they made up their minds to conquer the whole world. And to that end they divided it into four parts. One of the brothers was to go east to make new conquests, another south, and the others to the two remaining quarters. The south fell by lot to Hulegu. He set out before the others and embarked on a bold campaign of conquest in those regions until he came to Baghdad. Being well aware of the city's great strength – a consequence of its immense population – he resolved to capture it by cunning rather than by force. He had at his command at least 100,000 cavalry,³⁶ not counting the infantry, but his plan was to give the impression to the caliph and his people inside the city that they were few in number. So before he approached the city, he concealed one part of his forces to one side and another to the other side, among the woods. With the rest he galloped up to the gates. The caliph, seeing such a small force and setting no store by it, vowed to annihilate it without depending on anything but the banner of Muhammad, and he immediately charged out of the city at the head of his people. As soon as Hulegu saw this, he pretended to flee and drew the caliph out beyond the woods where his men lay in ambush. Having surrounded them, he crushed them, and the caliph was captured along with the city.

When Hulegu had taken the city, he discovered a tower belonging to the caliph that was crammed with gold, silver and other treasures, more than has ever been seen at one time or in one place. When he cast his eyes over this astonishing treasure, Hulegu was amazed and had the caliph brought before him. 'Caliph,' he said to him, 'why did you hoard so much treasure? What did you intend to do with it? And were you not aware that I was your enemy and that I was coming against you with a huge army to dispossess you? When you realized this, why did you not take your treasure and give it to knights and mercenaries to defend you and your city?' The caliph gave

no answer, because he did not know what to say. And then Hulegu said to him: 'Caliph, since I can see how dearly you love treasure, I will give you your own to eat.' Then he had the caliph taken and put in the treasure tower, and he ordered that nothing be given to him to eat or drink. 'Now, Caliph,' he then said, 'eat your fill of treasure, since you are so fond of it, because you will never eat anything else again.' After this the caliph was left in the tower, where after four days he died. So it would have been better for him if he had given away his treasure to defend his land and his people, rather than die despoiled with all his people. And since this time there has never been another caliph.

Next we will tell you about Tabriz.³⁷ It has to be said that there is plenty I could have told you about the affairs and customs of the people of Baghdad, but as it would take too long I have cut short my account. So instead we will tell you about a great miracle,³⁸ as you will hear.

The miracle that we want to tell you about took place between Baghdad and Mosul. The fact is that in the year 1225³⁹ from the incarnation of Christ there was a caliph in Baghdad who had a violent ill will against Christians. Day and night he plotted to make all the Christians in his realm convert to Islam, or, failing that, have them all put to death. Every day he discussed the matter with his monks and priests, for they all wanted to do the Christians great harm. For it is a plain fact that all the Saracens in the world wish great ill to all the Christians in the world. Now it chanced at last that the caliph and his counsellors hit upon a point of Scripture, which I will tell you about. They found it written in one of the Gospels⁴⁰ that a Christian whose faith was as great as a grain of mustard seed could, by praying to the Lord his God, make two mountains join together. And when they found this, they were filled with joy; here, they said, was the very thing to make the Christians convert to Islam, or else to have them killed en masse. The caliph straight away sent for all the Nestorian and Jacobite Christians in his country, a very large number in total. And when they came before him, he showed them the Gospel and had it read to them. And when they had heard it, he asked whether it spoke the truth. The Christians replied that it was

indeed true. ‘Then,’ said the caliph, ‘you maintain that a Christian whose faith is as great as a grain of mustard seed can, by praying to his God, make two mountains join together?’ ‘Certainly,’ replied the Christians, ‘this is what we say.’ ‘Here then,’ the caliph said, ‘is the choice I lay before you. Since there are so many of you, there must surely be one among you who has a little faith. So I say to you, either you will make that mountain which you see standing there move’ – and he pointed to a nearby mountain – ‘or I will put you all to death in a horrible fashion. For if you do not make it move, then you will show that you have no faith at all. In that case I shall have you all killed, unless you profess the good law that our prophet Muhammad gave us; in which case you will have faith and will be saved. You have ten days from now to do this, and if by that time you have not done it, I will have you all put to death.’ With this the caliph fell silent and gave the Christians leave to depart.

When the Christians had listened to the caliph’s words they were very deeply angered and very afraid of death. Nonetheless they had high hopes that their Creator would save them from their great peril. The wise men who were the Christians’ leaders – for there were many bishops, archbishops and priests – conferred together and could find no recourse other than to pray to the Lord their God that in His pity and mercy He might guide them in this business and deliver them from the cruel death that the caliph would inflict on them if they did not do as he ordered. What else shall I tell you? You may be certain that the Christians prayed day and night; they devoutly beseeched the Saviour, God of heaven and earth, that He out of His pity would deliver them from the great peril in which they found themselves.

For eight days and eight nights the Christians – men and women, young and old – kept up their ardent supplication and prayer. Now it happened that, while they were praying, an angel bringing a message from God appeared in a vision to a bishop of very holy character. ‘O bishop,’ he said, ‘go in the morning to a shoemaker who has one eye, and tell him to pray that the mountain be moved, and the mountain will be moved at once.’

Now let me tell you what sort of man this shoemaker was and what kind of life he led. You may depend on it that he was a very honourable and chaste man; he fasted and committed no sins; he went every day to church and to Mass. Every day, for God's sake, he gave away some of his bread. He was such a virtuous man and led such a holy life that you would not find a better man anywhere, near or far. And I will tell you about one thing he did that established his reputation as a good man of good faith who led a good life. The fact is, he had often listened to the passage of the Holy Gospel that says that if your eye causes you to sin, you should pluck it out of your head or blind it so it cannot lead you into sin. One day it chanced that a beautiful woman came to the house of this shoemaker to buy shoes. The master of the shop asked to see her leg and foot, in order to tell which shoes would fit her. So he asked her to show her leg and foot, and the woman showed them at once. And without doubt her leg and foot were so comely that you could not ask for anything more beautiful. And when the master, who was as virtuous as I have told you, saw the woman's leg and foot he was consumed with temptation by them, because his eyes were drawn to them. He let the woman go and refused to sell her the shoes. And when she had left, the master said to himself: 'Ha! Faithless traitor, what are you thinking? I must wreak vengeance on my eyes which have caused me to commit this offence.' Then he grasped a little awl and sharpened it to a point and thrust it into the middle of one of his eyes, so that his eyeball burst inside his head and he never saw with it again. In this way, as you have heard, the shoemaker destroyed one of the eyes of his head; truly he was indeed a most holy and virtuous man.

So now let us return to our subject.

Now you may be sure that when this vision had appeared several times to the bishop, telling him to send for the shoemaker who through his prayer would summon God's power to move the mountain, the bishop gave a full account of this recurring visitation to his fellow Christians. And the Christians were all in favour of summoning the shoemaker before them; and so they made him come. And when he arrived, they told him that they

wished him to pray to the Lord God to make the mountain move. And when the shoemaker heard what the bishop and the other Christians said to him, he said that he was not such a good man that the Lord God would perform such a great deed in answer to his prayer. But the Christians implored him very coaxingly to offer this prayer to God. What else shall I tell you? They begged him so insistently that he agreed to do as they asked and offer up the prayer to his Creator.

When the last of the allotted days arrived, the Christians – men and women, young and old – rose early in the morning and went to church to sing the holy Mass. When they had sung and performed all the service of our Lord God, they set out together on the road that led to the plain at the foot of the mountain, carrying the cross of the Saviour before them. And when all the Christians, who were at least a hundred thousand in number, came onto the plain, they arrayed themselves before the Cross of our Lord. The caliph was there with such a huge crowd of Saracens that it was a marvel to behold; they had come to kill the Christians, since they did not believe for a moment that the mountain would be moved. All the Christians, young and old, were seized with terror and doubt, but still they put their hope in their Creator. And when all these people, Christians and Saracens, were gathered in the plain, the shoemaker fell on his knees before the Cross and spread his palms to the sky, praying to his Saviour to make the mountain move so that the great number of Christians who were there would be saved from a dreadful death. And when he had finished his prayer, he cried: **‘In the name of the Father** and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, I command thee, mountain, to leave this place and move to that place there by the power of the Holy Ghost.’ Scarcely a moment passed before the mountain began to crumble **from its summit** and move **a mile nearer to the plain**. And when the caliph and the Saracens saw this they were awestruck; and many turned Christian as a result. And the caliph himself secretly became a Christian; when he died, a cross was found hanging around his neck. For that reason the Saracens did not bury him among the tombs of the other caliphs, but instead interred him elsewhere.

This is the way this miracle unfolded, just as you have heard. **Ever since, out of reverence** for the shoemaker and the grace that was then received, the Christians, both Nestorians and Jacobites, have solemnly celebrated the anniversary of this miracle, always observing a fast on the eve of the feast. Bear in mind, though, that the Armenian, Nestorian and Jacobite Christians differ in some of the articles of faith; in fact because of this they repudiate one another and keep to themselves.

Tabriz is a large city in a province called Iraq. There are many more cities and towns besides, but since Tabriz is the most noble city in the province I will describe it to you.

The fact is that the inhabitants of Tabriz live by trade and crafts, for a great deal of gold and silver fabric of high value is woven there. The city is so favourably situated that merchandise is brought here from India and Baghdad, Mosul and Hormuz⁴¹ and many other places, and many Latin merchants travel here to buy these goods that arrive from foreign lands. Precious stones and pearls are also traded here and are found in enormous quantities. Travelling merchants make great profits in this city.

The people are a very mixed lot and amount to very little. There are Armenians and Nestorians, Jacobites, Georgians and Persians, along with those who worship Muhammad, who are the natives of the city and are called Tabrizis. The city is entirely surrounded by beautiful and luscious orchards bursting with many choice varieties of fruit.

The Saracens of Tabriz are wicked and treacherous. For the law that the Prophet Muhammad gave them lays down that they can do as much harm as they like to anyone who does not share their faith, and steal as much as they can from them, without falling into sin. **And if they are killed** or harmed in any way by Christians, they are considered by their fellow Saracens to be martyrs. For this reason they would be great wrongdoers if it were not for the government. And all the other Saracens in the world comport themselves in the same manner. For when they are on the point of death their priest comes to them asking whether they believe that Muhammad was the true messenger of God, and they say they believe it, and so they are

saved. **This is why** they are converting the Tartars and many other nations to their law, because they are given great licence to sin and according to their law no sin is forbidden.

Within the city limits of Tabriz there is a most holy monastery named after the Blessed St Barsamo. It has an abbot and many monks, who wear a habit similar to that of the Carmelites. And to keep themselves from falling into idleness they are constantly weaving woollen girdles, which they lay on the altar of the Blessed Barsamo when they celebrate Mass. When they go begging through the province (like the Brothers of the Holy Ghost), they hand out some of the girdles to their friends and to noblemen, because anyone who suffers from bodily pains finds relief in these girdles and so everyone devoutly wishes to have one.

Now let us leave Tabriz and turn to Persia, **which is a twelve-day journey distant**.

Persia is a very great province that was once very noble and powerful but has now been smashed and ruined by the Tartars. In Persia is the city called Saveh⁴² from which the three Magi set out when they went to worship Jesus Christ. It is said, moreover, that the three Magi are buried here in three huge and resplendent sepulchres. Above each sepulchre is a square structure, topped with a dome, of superb workmanship. Each lies next to the other, and their bodies are uncorrupted and have hair and beards. One was named Balthasar, the second Gaspar, and the third Melchior. Messer Marco questioned many of the city's inhabitants about the lives of the three Magi, but no one was able to tell him anything except that they were three kings who were buried there long ago. But he was eventually able to find out what I will now tell you.

Three days further on he came across a town called Kala Atashparastan, or in our language Town of the Fire-worshippers.⁴³ And that is a statement of fact, because the men of this town do worship fire. And I will tell you why they worship it. The men of this town say that far back in time the three kings of their country went to worship a newborn prophet, taking with them three offerings, namely gold, frankincense and myrrh, in order to

establish whether that prophet was God, an earthly king or a physician. For they said: 'If he takes the gold, he is an earthly king; if he takes the frankincense, he is God; and if he takes the myrrh, he is a healer.' And when the Magi came to the place where the infant was born, the youngest of the three kings set off on his own to see him. He found that the infant resembled himself, for he seemed to be of the same age and appearance, and he came out filled with wonder. Then the second, a man of middle age, took his place, and in the same way the infant seemed to him, as he had to the other, to be of his own appearance and age. He, too, came away quite amazed. Then the third and oldest went in, and just the same thing happened to him as to the other two. And he emerged deep in thought. When all three kings were together they told one another what they had seen and, marvelling greatly, decided they would all go in together. So all three went together before the infant, and they found him with his own features and looking his real age, which is to say just thirteen days old. Then they worshipped him and offered him the gold, frankincense and myrrh. The infant took all three offerings, and in return he gave them a closed casket. And upon receiving it the three kings set out to return to their own country.

After they had ridden for some days, they resolved to take a look at what the infant had given them. So they opened the casket, and inside they found a stone. They were greatly puzzled as to what it might be. The infant had given it to them to signify that they should be firm as rocks in the faith they had embarked upon. For when the three kings had seen the infant take all three of their gifts, they had said that he was at once God, an earthly king and a physician. And because the infant knew that the three kings had this faith, he gave them the stone as a sign that they should be firm and constant in their belief. But the three kings, not understanding why they had been given the stone, took it and tossed it into a well. The stone had barely fallen into the well when a burning flame descended from heaven and directly struck the well into which they had thrown the stone. And when the three kings saw this miracle, they were greatly dismayed and repented the act of

throwing away the stone, for they saw clearly that it was a great and beneficent portent. They immediately gathered some of the fire and carried it to their country, where they placed it in one of their churches, a magnificent and ornate building. They keep it perpetually burning and worship it as God. And every time they make a sacrifice or holocaust, they roast it in this fire. If it ever happens that the fire goes out, they pay a visit to others who share their faith and who also worship the fire, obtain from them some of the fire that burns in their church, and go back to rekindle their fire. On no account would they take it unless it came from the fire I have told you about. And often they make a journey of ten days to procure this fire.

Now I have told you the reasons why the people of this country worship fire. And I assure you there are a great many of them. And the people of the town related and explained all these things to Messer Marco, and they are all true. I can also tell you that one of the three Magi came from Saveh, one from Hawah, and the third from Kashan.

Having given you a full report on this matter, I will proceed to tell you about many other cities of Persia and their affairs and customs.

Now you should know that Persia, being a very large province, consists of eight kingdoms. And so I will name them all for you. The first kingdom as you enter is called Qazvin; the second, which lies towards the south, is called Kurdistan; the third is called Lorestan; the fourth, Shulistan; the fifth, Isfahan; the sixth, Shiraz; the seventh, Shabankara; the eighth, Tun-Qaen,⁴⁴ which is found on the far side of Persia. All these kingdoms lie towards the south, excepting only Tun-Qaen, which is near the land of the Solitary Tree.

Fine horses are bred in large numbers in these kingdoms, and many are sent for sale in India. And you should know that these horses are very valuable, for the great majority sell for at least 200 *livres tournois*⁴⁵ apiece. There are also the most beautiful asses in the world; these are well worth thirty silver marks apiece, because they are swift coursers and steady amblers. **They sell for much more** than the horses because they eat little, carry heavy burdens, and cover a great distance in a single day; neither

horses nor mules could endure so much toil. For when the merchants of these parts travel from one region to another, they have to cross vast deserts, which is to say dry, barren, sandy regions that yield no grass or fodder suitable for horses; on top of which, the wells and freshwater springs are so far apart that long marches need to be undertaken in order for their beasts to be watered. Since no horse could endure this, the merchants only use these asses, and so they fetch a better price than the horses. [They also use camels](#), which likewise carry heavy loads and cost little to keep, though they are not as swift as the asses.

The people of these kingdoms take the horses I have mentioned as far as Kish and Hormuz, two cities on the shores of the Indian Ocean. There they find dealers who buy them and transport them to India, where they are sold for prices as high as I have said. [It should be noted](#) that in India the heat is so intense that it is impossible to keep or breed horses there; if one is born, it is born monstrous, which is to say it is defective in the limbs and deformed and so of no value or strength.

These kingdoms are full of brutal and bloodthirsty people. They are forever slaughtering one another, and if they were not checked by fear of the authorities, which is to say the Tartar lord of the Levant, they would do great harm to travelling merchants. [For the lord of the Levant](#) inflicts severe punishments upon them, and he has decreed that the people who live along all the most perilous routes must supply, at the merchants' request, diligent and capable guides to protect them and escort them safely from one district to another, in return for a payment for each loaded beast of two or three groats,⁴⁶ depending on the length of the journey. Yet try as the government might, it cannot stop them from committing frequent outrages; for if the merchants are not well armed with weapons and bows they kill them and mistreat them dreadfully. And I can assure you that they all observe the law of Muhammad their prophet.

In the cities there are many merchants and artisans who live by trade and industry, for they make gold and silk fabrics of every kind. Much cotton grows there. They have plenty of wheat, barley, millet, panic grass and every variety of grain, as well as wine and all kinds of fruits. [Someone may](#)

[object](#) that Saracens do not drink wine because their law forbids it. My answer to this is that they gloss the text of their law to the effect that, if the wine is simmered over a fire until it is partly reduced and turns sweet, they are free to drink it without breaking their commandments or laws; for then they no longer call it wine, but rather change its name along with its taste.

Let us now leave these kingdoms and tell you about the great city of Yazd⁴⁷ with all its affairs and customs.

Yazd is also in Persia. It is a very fine and splendid city and a busy trading centre. A silk fabric called *yazdi* is manufactured here in large quantities and profitably exported by merchants to many parts. The people worship Muhammad.

The traveller who leaves this land to journey onwards rides for seven days across a plain that has no lodging houses except in three places. There are many beautiful groves of date palms that make for pleasant riding. Wild game is abundant and there are plenty of partridges and quail, providing great sport to the merchants who ride along this route. There are also very beautiful wild asses. And at the end of this seven-day journey lies a kingdom called Kerman.⁴⁸

Kerman is a kingdom of Persia [that lies on its eastern border](#). In former times it had a hereditary monarch, but ever since the Tartars conquered it, governors chosen and posted there by the Tartar overlord have replaced the hereditary rulers. The stones called turquoises are produced in this kingdom and are found in great abundance in the mountains, where they are dug out of the rock. There are also plentiful seams of steel and *ondanique*. The people are skilled craftsmen who make the full range of equipment for mounted soldiers: bridles, saddles and spurs, swords, bows and quivers, and every sort of armour used in these parts. And the gentlewomen and their daughters are superb needleworkers, embroidering animals and birds and many other figures on silks of every hue. The curtains they embroider for nobles and great men are so finely and intricately worked that they make a

spectacular sight. And they also make exquisite quilts, cushions and pillows.

The best and swiftest falcons in the world are bred in the mountains hereabouts. They are smaller than peregrine falcons, with red feathers on their breasts and under the tail between the thighs. And I can tell you that no bird can outfly them, such is their incredible speed.

Leaving the city of Kerman, the traveller rides across a plain for seven days during which he constantly comes across cities, towns and homesteads. Here, too, the riding is good and there is much to enjoy, for there is plenty of game and an abundance of partridges. And when he has ridden across this plain for seven days he comes to a great escarpment, from which the road slopes steadily downhill for two days through orchards heavy with many varieties of fruit. Long ago there were houses here, but now they have all gone; the only inhabitants are nomads grazing their flocks. And from the city of Kerman as far as this escarpment, the winters are so bitterly cold that they can barely be endured even by piling on layer upon layer of clothes and furs.

[Here is an account](#) of an experiment that was tried in the kingdom of Kerman. Now the people of Kerman are good, plain, humble, peaceable folk, and they do one another good turns as often as they can. In this spirit, their king said to his counsellors when they were in his presence: ‘Gentlemen, there is something that I have been puzzling over a great deal without being able to find the answer. In the kingdoms of Persia that are our very close neighbours, there are people who are so wicked and evil that they constantly kill one another; and yet among us, though we are all but the same as them, crime and vengeance are almost unknown.’ The wise men replied that the answer lay in the land itself. So the king sent a mission to Persia, and in particular to the aforementioned Isfahan, whose inhabitants outdid the rest in their thoroughgoing villainy. There, on the advice of his wise men, he had seven ships loaded with earth and brought back to his kingdom. And when the earth arrived he had it spread like pitch on the floors of several halls and then covered with carpets, so that those who entered would not be dirtied by the soft surface. And when his people sat

down to a banquet in those halls, they had scarcely eaten before they began to turn on one another with insulting words and actions that soon led to blows. After this the king declared that the roots of such behaviour really did lie in the soil.

At the end of the two-day descent that I mentioned the traveller finds himself on a vast plain; and on the verge of this plain stands a city called Kamadin.⁴⁹ Once a large city of astonishing splendour, it is now neither so big nor so fine, for it has been repeatedly ravaged by Tartar invasions. And I can tell you that it is scorchingly hot on this plain.

The province we are now describing is called Rudbar.⁵⁰ It produces wheat and other grains, and its fruits, which grow on the slopes of the mountains surrounding the plain, include dates, pomegranates, lemons, apples of paradise, pistachios and many others that cannot grow in our cold climate. Countless turtledoves flock here because of the many kinds of berries they find to feed on; there really is no end to their numbers, and the Saracens never eat a single one because they find them revolting. Pheasants and many other birds are also found here. This plain is also home to a kind of bird that is known as a francolin even though it is different from the francolins of other countries, having mottled black and white plumage and red feet and beaks. The animals are also different. And I will tell you first about the oxen. The oxen are enormous and entirely white like snow. Their hair is short and smooth; this is a product of the torrid climate. Their horns are short and thick and not pointed. Between the shoulders they have a round hump no less than two palms high. They are the most beautiful sight in the world. When you want to load them they lie down just like camels, and when you have loaded them they get up and carry their loads with ease, because they are surpassingly strong. There are also sheep as big as asses, with tails so thick and plump that they weigh a good thirty pounds. They are very beautiful and fat and make excellent eating.

Many towns and villages across this plain have tall, thick earthen ramparts to protect them against the bands of marauders known as Qaraunas who infest these parts. And why are they called Qaraunas, which means

‘mongrels’ in our language? Because they are the offspring of Indian mothers and Tartar fathers. When these people set out to rob and pillage the land, they cast diabolical spells that turn daylight to darkness until it is virtually impossible to see anything. And they spread this darkness over an area that takes seven days to cross. They know the lie of the land inside out, so when they have summoned the darkness they ride side by side – sometimes as many as 10,000 at once, sometimes more, sometimes less – and commandeer the plain they mean to rob so utterly that no one in their path can escape them and everything, man, beast and object, is liable to be seized. And when they have captured the men, they kill all the elderly and cart off the young to sell them as serfs and slaves. Their king is called Neguder.⁵¹ And this Neguder went with a good 10,000 of his own men to the court of Chagatai,⁵² a brother of the Great Khan, and stayed with him, because Chagatai was his uncle and a mighty lord. While he stayed with him Neguder planned and executed a dastardly crime, and I will tell you what he did. He took his 10,000 followers, villains and cut-throats to a man, and leaving his uncle Chagatai in Greater Armenia he passed through Badakhshan⁵³ and through a province called Pashai⁵⁴ and another province named Kashmir,⁵⁵ where he lost many of his men and beasts because the roads were narrow and bad. And when they had swept across all these provinces, they crossed the border into India and entered a province called Dilivar.⁵⁶ They captured a noble city that is also called Dilivar, and Neguder based himself there and went on to conquer the whole kingdom from a very powerful and rich king named Asidin Sultan.⁵⁷ And Neguder stayed in this city with his people, afraid of no one and making war on all the other Tartars in neighbouring kingdoms. **Sometimes they rode out** for thirty or forty days – usually towards Rudbar, because in the winter **all the merchants who come** to do business in Hormuz, during the interval before news arrives that the fleets from India are approaching, send their mules and camels, which have grown thin from the long journey, to the plains of Rudbar because they are guaranteed to fatten there on the lush pasture. And these Qaraunas, who are lying in wait for them, carry off everything –

including the men, whom they sell unless they can ransom them, in which case they let them go.

Now I have told you about this plain and the people who summon the darkness in order to plunder. I will tell you, too, that Messer Marco himself was on the point of being captured by these people in this darkness; he escaped to a town called Kamasal, but many of his companions were taken captive and sold, and some were killed.

Let us now move on and tell you about other things.

The fact is that this plain stretches south the space of a five-day journey. At the end of this five-day journey is another slope, where the road drops steadily for twenty miles. It is a dreadful road, and dangerous too from the robbers who plague it. When the traveller reaches the bottom of this slope, he finds another spectacular plain called the plain of Hormuz that extends the length of a two-day journey. There are beautiful rivers and many date palms and birds, including francolins and parrots and others that are quite unlike ours.

After riding for two days the traveller reaches the Ocean Sea.⁵⁸ Here on the coast is a city called Hormuz, which has a harbour. And I can tell you that merchants come here by ship from every part of India, bringing all sorts of spices, precious stones and pearls, silk and gold fabrics, elephants' tusks, and many other products. In this city they sell these goods to other merchants, who then distribute them throughout the world, selling them to others in turn. It is a very important trading centre. Many other cities and towns are subject to it, for it is the capital of the kingdom. Its king is named Ruknuddin Ahmad.⁵⁹ The climate is torrid, owing to the scorching heat of the sun, and it is an insalubrious place. And if a foreign merchant dies here, the king confiscates all his possessions.

In this country they make date wine flavoured with many spices, and very good it is, too. When it is drunk by men who are not used to it, it loosens the bowels and purges them violently; but afterwards it does them good and puts some flesh on them. The people do not eat the same food as we do, because if they eat wheat bread and meat they are taken ill. To stay

healthy they eat dates and salt fish, specifically tuna, and also onions. And to keep well they eat these foods I have told you about.

Their ships are very bad, and many of them founder because they are not fastened with iron nails but sewn together with thread made from coconut husks. They soak the husk until it becomes like horsehair; then they make it into thread and stitch their ships with it. It does not rot in the salt water of the sea but lasts remarkably well. The ships have one mast, one sail, one rudder, and no deck. Instead, when the cargo has been loaded it is covered with skins, and when it has been protected in this way, the horses that are sent for sale in India are put on top. They have no iron to make nails,⁶⁰ so they resort to wooden pegs and sewing with thread. This makes sailing in these ships a deadly endeavour, and I can tell you that many of them sink because the Indian Ocean often whips up into great storms.

The people of this country are black and worship Muhammad. And in summer they do not stay in the cities, where the heat is so fierce that they would all die; instead they head out to their gardens, where there are plenty of rivers and lakes. [Here they build latticework](#) platforms over the water, with one end secured to the bank and the other to piles driven into the river bed, and overhead a canopy of leaves to ward off the sun. But even this would not be enough to save them, were it not for another thing I will tell you about. The fact is that in the summer there often blows, from the direction of the sandy desert that surrounds this plain, a wind so scorchingly hot that it would kill them all if they did not plunge neck-deep into the water as soon as they felt it coming; and in this way they survive this hot wind. And [to prove just how hot](#) this wind can be, Messer Marco reported that he was in these parts when the following calamity took place. When the king of Kerman did not receive his tribute from the ruler of Hormuz, he resolved to take his revenge during the time the men of Hormuz were staying outside the city in the open. So he mustered 1,600 horse and 5,000 foot soldiers and sent them across the plain of Rudbar to make a surprise attack. One day, being badly guided, they were unable to reach their destination before nightfall, so they camped in a wood not very far from Hormuz. And when they tried to set off again in the morning this wind

assailed them and suffocated them all, so that not one survived to carry the news to their lord. When the men of Hormuz heard this they set out to bury the corpses to prevent them from spreading infection. And when they took them by the arms to drag them to the pits, they found them so desiccated from the intense heat that the arms came clean off the trunks. So they had no choice but to dig the pits next to the bodies and throw them in.

Let me further tell you that these people sow their wheat and barley and other grains in the month of November and get all their harvests in by the end of March. The same is true of all the fruits, for they are ripe and over by March. After that no plants are found growing on the land except for date palms, which last till the middle of the month of May. This is due to the great heat, which dries up everything.

Concerning their ships, let me also tell you that they are not caulked with pitch but rather greased with fish oil.

I can tell you, too, that when their men die, or their women, they are fulsomely mourned. In fact I assure you that widows bewail their husbands for four whole years after their death, at least once a day. For they get together with their relatives and neighbours and give themselves up to loud wailing and keening and lamenting the dead. [And since they are dying](#) all the time there is never any let up from this mourning. There are even women here who are highly trained in the art of wailing and can be hired to weep for other people's dead on any day you name.

Now let us move on from this city. We will not deal with India at this point as I will be sure to tell you about it further on in our book, at the proper time and place. Instead I will turn back to the north to tell you about the provinces there. We will return by another road to the city I told you about called Kerman, because the only way into the countries I want to tell you about is through that city. And let me tell you that King Ruknuddin Ahmad, whom we have just left, is a vassal of the king of Kerman.

The return journey from Hormuz to Kerman passes through a glorious plain overflowing with things to eat. There are many hot baths. Partridges are plentiful and very cheap. Fruits and dates are widely available. The wheat bread here is so bitter that no one can eat it unless he is used to it;

this is due to the bitterness of the water. The baths I mentioned above are fed by very hot spring water and are highly effective against many diseases, including skin complaints.

Now I want to begin telling you about the countries towards the north. I will name them to you in my book, so let us start.

When the traveller leaves Kerman he rides for seven days along a very arduous road, and I will tell you how it goes. For three days there is no water to be found, or as good as none; the little there is is brackish and green as meadow grass and so bitter that no one could bear to drink it. If you did drink it, a single drop would make you void your bowels more than ten times over. The same goes for the salt that is made from it: eat one tiny grain, and you will have a violent attack of diarrhoea. So the men who pass this way carry water with them to drink. Animals struggle to drink the brackish water when driven by extreme thirst, and I can tell you it gives them a shocking case of the runs. And throughout this three-day journey there is no habitation; the entire route is barren and quite arid. There are no animals, because there is nothing for them to eat.

On the [fourth day the traveller reaches](#) a freshwater river that flows underground. In several places the river can be seen running through caverns carved out and unearthed by the action of the water, but then it vanishes beneath the surface. Even so, there is plenty of water to be had. And hereabouts the travellers, worn out by the hardships of the desert behind them, rest and refresh themselves and their beasts.

Then begins another stretch of arid desert and bitter water that continues for four days. There are no trees, and no animals except asses. And after this four-day-long trek we leave the kingdom of Kerman and arrive at the city of Kuhbanan.⁶¹

Kuhbanan is a great city. Its inhabitants worship Muhammad. Iron, steel and *ondanique* are abundant, and beautiful large mirrors are fashioned here from steel. They also produce *tutty*, which is a very good salve for the eyes, and *spodium*. I will tell you how they are made. They extract a suitable vein

of earth and pile it into a blazing furnace, above which is an iron grating. The smoke and vapour given off by the earth cling to the grating and form *tutty*, while the residue of the earth that remains in the fire is *spodium*.

Now let us leave this city and move onwards.

On leaving this city of Kuhbanan the traveller passes for eight full days through a very arid desert where there are no fruits or trees and the water is as bitter and bad as before. He must bring with him all the food and drink he might need, except for the bitter water which the parched animals drink, [mixed with flour to tempt them](#), at the cost of great suffering.

At the end of this eight-day journey he reaches a province called Tun-Qaen, where there are many cities and towns. It lies on the northern border of Persia and encompasses a vast plain in which stands the Solitary Tree, which the Christians call the Dry Tree. I will tell you what it is like. It is of great height and girth, and its leaves are green on one side and white on the other. It produces husks like those of the chestnut, except that these have nothing inside them. Its wood is hard and yellow like boxwood. There are no other trees for more than a hundred miles around, except in one direction where there are trees ten miles away. It was here, the people of this country say, that the battle was fought between Alexander and Darius.⁶² The towns and villages are very well provided with everything wholesome and agreeable, for the country enjoys a well-tempered climate, neither too hot nor too cold. The people all worship Muhammad. They are a handsome race, and the women in particular are inestimably beautiful.

Now we will move ahead and tell you about a country called Mulehet,⁶³ the former home of the Old Man of the Mountain.

Mulehet is the country where the Old Man of the Mountain lived long ago. According to Islamic law, this [country used to be populated by heretics](#). For in the Saracens' language the name Mulehet means 'a [place where heretics live](#)'. I will now tell you the full story of this Old Man just as I, Messer Marco, have heard it told by many people.

In their language the Old Man was called Alauddin.⁶⁴ At his behest the biggest and most beautiful garden that has ever been seen had been laid out in a valley between two mountains. It was filled with all the choicest fruits in the world. And in this garden he had ordered the construction of the most exquisite houses and palaces that were ever seen, for they were gilded and decorated with scenes depicting all the loveliest things in the world. He had also had conduits installed there, some of which flowed with wine, some with milk, some with honey, and some with water. The most bewitching women and girls in the world were brought to live there, and they were more accomplished at playing every kind of instrument and at singing and dancing than any other women. And the Old Man gave his men to understand that this garden was Paradise. He had had it made in this fashion because Muhammad assured the Saracens that those who go to Paradise will have as many beautiful women as they could desire at their beck and call, and that they will find there rivers of wine and milk and honey and water. So the Old Man had had the garden laid out after the Paradise of which Muhammad had spoken to the Saracens. And the Saracens of that country really believed that the garden was Paradise.

No one ever entered this garden except those whom he wished to make Assassins. Guarding its entrance was a fortress so strong that he did not fear any man in the world, and there was no other way into the garden but this. The Old Man kept with him at his court all the young men of the country from twelve years old to twenty who seemed fit to be men-at-arms. These youths had often heard that their prophet Muhammad had spoken of Paradise as taking the form I have told you, and so they believed it to be true.

What else shall I tell you? The Old Man used to put some of these youths in this Paradise, four or ten or twenty at a time as it suited his purpose. This is how he did it. He had a potion given them that lulled them straight to sleep. Then he had them taken and put in the garden and woken up.

When the youths awoke and found themselves in that place, they saw all the things I have described to you and really believed they were in Paradise.

And the women and girls stayed with them all day long, playing music and singing and giving them great delight, and these youths had their way with them as they pleased, so that they had everything they could wish for and would never have left this place of their own accord.

Now the Old Man kept court with great pomp and finery and lived in great splendour; he persuaded the simple mountain folk round about that he was a prophet, and they steadfastly believed this. And when the Old Man wanted to send some of these youths to a certain place to kill a certain man, he had the potion administered to as many as he pleased, and while they slept he had them brought into his palace. And when these youths awoke to find themselves in the castle within the palace they were astonished and by no means glad, for they would never willingly have left the Paradise they had come from. They went without delay to the Old Man, humbling themselves before him as befitted men who believed he was a great prophet. The Old Man asked them where they had come from, and they replied that they had come from Paradise. They swore that this was the Paradise that Muhammad had described to their ancestors, recounting to their listeners all the things they had found there. And the others who heard this and had not been there were filled with a great longing to go to Paradise, and, hoping for death so that they might be able to go there, they yearned for the day of their going.

When the Old Man wanted to have a powerful noble murdered, he first put his Assassins to the test to find out which were the best. He sent some of them on a brief sortie into the surrounding area with orders to kill a certain man. They went off at once and carried out their lord's command. When they had killed the man some were captured and executed, but those who escaped returned to the court. The survivors came before their lord and told him that they had faithfully executed their task, and the Old Man held lavish revels and festivities in their honour. And he knew very well which of them had shown the greatest zeal, because he had sent a party of his men to shadow each of them and report back as to which was the most fearless and the best hand at murder. So when the Old Man wanted to murder any lord or other man, he selected some of these Assassins of his and sent them

where he desired, telling them that he intended to send them to Paradise and that they would go directly there if they died while killing the chosen man. Those who received such orders from the Old Man carried them out with great enthusiasm, more than they would have had for any other task, and they went and did everything the Old Man commanded. And so no man escaped with his life once he had been selected for murder by the Old Man of the Mountain. And I can tell you for a fact that many kings and noblemen paid him tribute and kept on good terms with him for fear that he might have them killed. **This happened because** at the time the population was not united in one polity but divided by conflicting loyalties and interests.

I have told you about the Old Man of the Mountain and his Assassins. Let me now tell you how he was vanquished, and by whom. But first I want to tell you one more thing about him that I left out. So I will tell you that this Old Man had appointed two deputies who were his subordinates and faithfully followed his practices and customs. He dispatched one to the neighbourhood of Damascus and the other to Kurdistan. Now let us move on and turn to his downfall. It happened about the year 1262 since Christ's birth that Hulegu, the lord of the Tartars of the Levant, knowing all about the evil deeds of the Old Man, made up his mind to have him destroyed. So he chose some of his barons and sent them against the Old Man's castle with a large army. They besieged the castle for no less than three years without being able to take it. And they would never have taken it so long as the defenders had anything to eat; but at the end of three years they ran out of food. So they were taken, and the Old Man who was called Alauddin was killed with all his men. And from the time of this Old Man until the present day there have been no more Old Men or their Assassins; for with him passed away all the diabolical powers that had once been wielded by the Old Men of the Mountain.

Now let us change the subject and move on.



TWO

The Road to Cathay

When the traveller leaves this castle,¹ he rides through beautiful plains and valleys and hills covered with lush grass that provide fine pasture, plenty of fruit and all things in great abundance. Armies are fond of camping here on account of the bountiful supplies. This country continues through six full days' riding, and there are towns and villages whose inhabitants worship Muhammad. Now and then you come to deserts that stretch for fifty or sixty miles and are devoid of water, so travellers have to carry it with them. Their animals go without drinking until they have crossed the desert and arrive at a watering place.

After riding for the six days I have mentioned, you reach a city called Sheberghan. This city is richly provided with all things. I can tell you that they have prodigious quantities of the best melons in the world, which they dry in this manner: they cut them all the way round into slices like strips of leather, then leave them out in the sun to dry until they become sweeter than honey. I can tell you, too, that they produce them as an article of trade and go selling them in great numbers throughout the country. There is also an incalculable quantity of game, both beasts and birds.

We will now leave this city and tell you about another, which is called Balkh.

Balkh is a large and noble city. It used to be even bigger and nobler, but the Tartars and other races have ravaged and ruined it. For I can tell you that it once boasted many beautiful palaces and mansions built of marble; they can still be seen, though they are now rubble and ruins. I can tell you, too, that in this city Alexander took the daughter of Darius for his wife, according to local report. The people worship Muhammad. You should know, too, that the lands of the lord of the Tartars of the Levant come to an end at this city, which stands on the east-north-easterly frontier of Persia.

Now let us leave this city and move on to tell you about another region, which is called Taleqan.

When the traveller leaves this city that I have been telling you about, he rides for as many as twelve days towards the east-north-east without seeing a single dwelling, because the people have all fled to mountain fastnesses to escape the bandits and invaders who used to wreak havoc on them. There is plenty of water and game, and there are also some lions. No food is to be had during this whole twelve-day journey, so anyone who passes this way has to carry food with them, both for themselves and for their horses.

At the end of these twelve days the traveller comes to a village called Taleqan where there is a great grain market. It is surrounded by very beautiful countryside, with huge mountains to the south that are made entirely of salt. People come from all round, travelling for as long as thirty days, to fetch this salt, which is the best in the world. It is so hard that it can only be extracted with a great iron pick; and I assure you there is so much of it that it could supply the entire world until the end of time. [There are also mountains](#) covered in almonds and pistachios, and a huge market in them is held here.

Leaving this city, the traveller continues for three days towards the east-north-east, passing through beautiful countryside with plenty of dwellings and a profusion of fruits, grain and vines. The people worship Muhammad. They are wicked and murderous. They spend a lot of their time getting drunk, which is one of their favourite occupations, for they have a good deal of excellent boiled wine. They wear nothing on their heads except a

cord ten palms long, which they wind round their scalp. They are excellent hunters and take plenty of game, and they dress in nothing but the skins of the animals they catch. They tan their skins and fashion them into clothes and boots, and each one of them knows how to tan the skins of the animals he catches.

At the end of this three-day journey lies a city called Iskashim,² which is ruled by a count; his other cities and towns are in the mountains. A sizeable river flows through the centre of the city. Many porcupines are found here. When hunters have them in their sights and set their dogs on them, they curl up in a ball and shoot out the quills that cover their backs and sides and wound the dogs all over.

Iskashim is situated in a large province that has its own language. The countryfolk live in the mountains, where they tend their flocks; they make themselves fine, spacious homes there by digging out caves, which they can easily do because the mountains are made of earth.

When the traveller leaves this city that I have just told you about, he continues for three days during which he finds neither houses nor food and drink; he must take what he needs with him, [though there is enough grass for horses](#). And at the end of this three-day journey he reaches the province of Badakhshan, which I will describe to you.

Badakhshan is a province whose people worship Muhammad and have their own language. It is a large kingdom, at least twelve days' journey long, and is ruled by hereditary kings. The royal line descends from King Alexander and the daughter of King Darius, the great lord of Persia. In honour of Alexander the Great, all of its kings still bear the title Zulkarnain, which is the equivalent in the Saracens' language of our Alexander.

The precious stones known as balas rubies are produced in this province; they are exquisite and priceless and are formed in the rocks of the mountains. And I can tell you that the people dig great caves in the mountains and tunnel far underground like miners working veins of silver; this is in one particular mountain, which is called Sighinan. You should also know that the king has them mined on his behalf; no one else could go to

the mountain and dig for any of these balas rubies without being killed on the spot. Moreover, he has decreed that anyone who tries to take any of them out of his kingdom will lose his head and his possessions; for the king sends them by his ambassadors to other kings, princes and great lords, either as tribute or as tokens of friendship, or else barter some of them for gold and silver. The king does this so that his balas rubies retain their current desirability and high value. For if he let other men dig them up and export them throughout the world, so many of them would be spread around that they would no longer be so prized or so valuable. And this is why he has fixed such a heavy penalty to prevent anyone taking any of them away without his permission.

You should also know for a fact that another mountain³ in this same country yields up the stones from which lapis lazuli is made. It is the finest and best lapis lazuli in the world. And the rock I have mentioned, from which lapis lazuli is extracted, is a vein that occurs in mountains just like other veins. What is more, I can tell you that there are also mountains that contain veins from which great quantities of silver, [copper and lead](#) are extracted.

It is very cold in this country and province. And you should also know that excellent horses are bred there; they are great runners and are never shod with iron and are in constant use in the mountains. [There used to be horses](#) in this province that were descended from Alexander's horse Bucephalus by mares that had conceived from him; like him, they were all born with a horn on their foreheads. The breed belonged exclusively to one of the king's uncles, and when he refused to let the king have any of them he was executed by royal order. To avenge her husband's death his widow destroyed the whole breed, and so it is extinct. Superb, swift saker falcons are also bred in these mountains, along with lanner falcons. There are abundant stocks of game, both beasts and birds, [and of wild sheep](#). The sheep sometimes roam in flocks of four hundred, five hundred or six hundred; however many are taken, their numbers are never depleted. They have good wheat and barley without a husk. They have no olive oil, but they make oil from sesame seeds and nuts.

This kingdom has many narrow passes and natural strongholds, so the people have no fear of invaders breaking through and assaulting them. And their cities and towns are built in secure fastnesses on great mountains. **These mountains have** the unusual advantage of being so tall that a man starting from the bottom at dawn has to climb until dusk before he reaches the summit. Moreover, at the top there are broad plateaux where grass and trees grow thickly and great springs of the purest water that gush like rivers over the rocks and into the valley below. **These streams are well** stocked with trout and other choice fish. **On the mountaintops** the air is so pure and so wholesome that if a man living in a city or house in the adjoining valleys falls ill with a fever, whether tertian, quartan or hectic, he has only to head up into the mountains and **two or three days'** rest will banish the sickness and restore him to good health. **And Messer Marco** vouches for this from his own experience. **For while he was in these parts** he contracted an illness that lasted for about a year, but as soon as he took the advice he was given to go up into these mountains he was cured. **There are also two** or three mountains made largely of sulphur, and the water that flows from them is always sulphurous.

The people are good archers and hunters, and most of them dress in animal skins because they are very short of cloth. However, the noblewomen and gentlewomen wear trousers in the following fashion. To make one pair of trousers or breeches, some of these ladies use as much as sixty, eighty or a hundred ells of cotton cloth folded in pleats. This is to give the impression that they have big hips, because their men are besotted with fat women.

Now we have told you about this kingdom, so we will move on and tell you about another people who live ten days' journey to the south of this province.

The fact is that ten days' journey south of Badakhshan is a province called Pashai, which has its own language. The people are idolaters who worship idols and are dark-skinned. They are well versed in sorcery and the diabolical arts. The men wear earrings and brooches encrusted with gold,

silver, pearls and precious stones. They are a spiteful lot, cruel and cunning, and clever in their own way. The climate is very hot. Their diet consists of meat and rice.

Now let us move on and tell you about another province. It lies seven days' journey to the south-east and is called Kashmir.

The people of Kashmir are also idolaters and have their own language. Their knowledge of devilish enchantments is astonishing; for they make their idols speak. They cast spells that change the weather and summon up a deep darkness. They perform such marvels by sorcery and sagacity that no one would believe them without seeing them. Indeed let me tell you that they are foremost among the idolaters and that idolatry was born among them.

From this place you can reach the Indian Ocean. The people are dark and slender; the women are very beautiful, as dark women go. They eat milk and rice. It is a temperate land where the climate is neither too hot nor too cold. There are plenty of cities and towns, together with woods and deserts and so many strong passes that they are not afraid of anyone. And they maintain their independence, for their own kings are the upholders of justice. They have hermits, after their own manner, who confine themselves to their hermitages and observe strict abstinence from food and drink; they are quite untainted by debauchery and go to any lengths to avoid committing any sin that goes against their faith. They are considered very holy by their fellow countrymen, and I assure you they live to a great age. And they abjure sin so steadfastly for love of their idols. They also have many abbeys and monasteries of their own faith, [where the brethren lead](#) an austere life and wear their hair tonsured like Dominican and Franciscan friars. Moreover, the men of this country do not kill animals or shed blood; but some of the Saracens who live among them kill their animals for them to provide them with food. And the coral that is exported from our parts fetches more in this province than anywhere else.

Now let us move on from this province and this region. We will not go any further⁴ because if we were to carry on we would cross into India,

which I do not want to do at this point; we will tell you everything about India in the proper place when we come to our return journey. And so we will retrace our steps as far as the province of Badakhshan, because there is no other direction in which we are able to go.

When the traveller leaves Badakhshan, he heads for twelve days towards the east-north-east up a river valley that belongs to the brother of the lord of Badakhshan. There are plenty of towns and dwellings inhabited by a stout-hearted people who worship Muhammad. And at the end of this twelve-day journey he reaches a province of no great size, for it can be crossed in any direction in three days; it is called Wakhan. The people worship Muhammad and have their own language, and they are tried and tested warriors. They have no lord except one whom they call None, which is the equivalent of our count, and are subject to the lord of Badakhshan. They have plenty of wild beasts and game and hunting of all kinds.

Leaving this place, the traveller heads for three days towards the north-east across a series of mountains, climbing so high that it is said this is the most elevated place in the world. When he reaches these heights, he finds a plain between two mountains with a great lake that feeds a very fine river. This plain provides the best pasture in the world; a lean beast will grow fat here in ten days. Every kind of wild beast is found here in huge numbers. There are vast flocks of wild sheep of prodigious size, with horns a good six palms in length, or at a minimum three or four, from which the shepherds make large vessels that serve as eating bowls. They also use them to make stockades to keep in their flocks. [The country is also rife](#) with wolves that kill and devour many of these sheep. [So many horns and bones](#) are scattered all around that the people pile some of those found near the roads into huge cairns to mark the way for travellers when the ground is covered with snow.

It takes a good twelve days to cross this plain, which is called Pamir. During all this time there is no house or inn to be found, and travellers need to carry their food with them. Birds do not fly here on account of the great altitude and cold. I can tell you, too, that because of this great cold fires

burn less brightly and with a different hue than in other places, and food does not cook well.

Now let us move on and tell you what else is to be found further to the north-east and east. After journeying for twelve days as I have told you, the traveller must ride east-north-east for forty more days through mountains, hills and valleys, crossing many rivers and deserts. Throughout this journey there is not a single house or inn, and he needs to carry his food with him. This country is called Bolor.⁵ The inhabitants live very high up in the mountains; they are idolaters and complete savages who live entirely from hunting and dress in animal skins. They are mightily bad people.

Now let us move on from this country and tell you about the province of Kashgar.⁶

Kashgar was once a kingdom, but nowadays it is subject to the Great Khan. The people worship Muhammad. There are many towns and cities, of which the largest and finest is Kashgar. The country lies to the east-north-east. The people live by trade and crafts, especially cotton weaving. They have splendid orchards and vineyards and fine farms. The land is fertile and produces all kinds of staple crops, including an abundance of cotton. Many merchants set out from this country and market their wares throughout the world. They are great misers and live mean lives, with nothing good to eat or drink. There are some Turks living among the Saracens in this country who are Nestorian Christians; they have their own churches and keep their liturgy. And the inhabitants of this country have their own language. The province⁷ extends the space of a five-day journey.

Now let us move on from this country and tell you about Samarkand.⁸

Samarkand is a very large and splendid city populated by Christians and Saracens. They are subject to the nephew of the Great Khan,⁹ who is no friend of his but is often at strife with him. It lies towards the north-west. And I will tell you about a great miracle that occurred in this city.

The fact is that not long ago Chagatai, a brother of the Great Khan and the ruler of this country and many more besides, became a Christian. When

the Christians of Samarkand saw that their lord was a Christian, they were so overjoyed that they built a great church dedicated to St John the Baptist in the city, and the church was named after him. To form the base of a column that stood in the centre of the church and held up the roof, they took a remarkably beautiful block of stone that was the property of the Saracens. Now, it so happened that Chagatai died. And when the Saracens saw that he was dead they resolved to take back this stone by force, because they had always been and still were furious about the fact that it stood in a Christian church. And they could easily have done so, for they were ten times stronger in number than the Christians. So some of the leading Saracens went to the church of St John and told the Christians who were there that they wanted this stone, which had once belonged to them. The Christians said that they would willingly give them everything they desired if they would leave the stone, because its removal would do irreparable damage to the church. The Saracens declared that they did not want gold or treasure but would have their stone at any cost. Shall I tell you what happened? The lordship had now passed to the Great Khan's nephew, and he ordered the Christians to restore the stone to the Saracens within two days. When they received this order, the Christians were very distressed and did not know what to do. And then the miracle happened, as I will tell you. You should know that when the morning of the day arrived on which the stone was to be handed over, the column above the stone lifted itself from its base by the will of our Lord Jesus Christ; it rose by a good three palms and stayed there as securely as if the stone was supporting it. And ever since that day the column has stayed in this position, and it is still there today. And this was held and is still held to be one of the greatest miracles to have happened in the world.

Now let us leave this subject and move on to tell you about a province called Yarkand.¹⁰

The province of Yarkand is five days' journey in extent. The people follow the faith of Muhammad, and there are also some Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the same nephew of the Great Khan whom I told you about

above. They have all manner of things in great plenty, especially cotton, and are skilled craftsmen. Most of the people who live in this province have one very large foot and one small foot, and yet they can walk perfectly well. They also have swollen legs and goitres on their throats, which are brought on by the quality of their drinking water.¹¹ But since there is nothing else worth mentioning in our book, let us move on and tell you about Khotan.¹²

The province of Khotan lies towards the east-north-east and is eight days' journey in extent. It is subject to the Great Khan. The people all worship Muhammad, and there are plenty of cities and towns. The finest city, which is also the capital of the province, is called Khotan, which is also the name of the province. It is well provided with all things, and cotton grows plentifully [along with flax, hemp and grain](#). There are many vineyards, farms and orchards. The people live by trade and crafts and are not at all warlike.

Now we will move on and tell you about another province, which is called Pem.¹³

The province of Pem is five days' journey in extent and lies to the east-north-east. The people worship Muhammad and are subject to the Great Khan. There are many cities and towns; the finest, and the capital of the province, is called Pem. There is a river in which large quantities of stones called jasper and chalcedony are found. The inhabitants are well provided with all things, and cotton grows plentifully. They live by trade and crafts. And I can tell you they have a particular custom, which I will describe to you. When a woman's husband leaves her to go on a journey of more than twenty days, she takes another husband as soon as he sets off. She is perfectly within her rights to do this according to their ways. And the men, wherever they go, take new wives as well.

You should also know that all the provinces I have described, from Kashgar to Pem, and some way beyond, belong to Turkestan.

Now let us move on and tell you about a province called Cherchen.¹⁴

Cherchen is a province of Turkestan that lies to the east-north-east. **It was once a proud** and fertile land, but the Tartars have badly ravaged it. The people worship Muhammad. There are many cities and towns; the chief city of the kingdom is called Cherchen. There are rivers carrying jasper and chalcedony, which are exported for sale in Cathay and being plentiful and of good quality bring a handsome profit.

The whole province is a tract of sand, as is the land from Khotan to Pem and from Pem to here. Much of the water is bad and bitter, though in several places it is sweet and good. And if an army passes through the country, assuming it is an enemy force, the men flee with their wives and children and their animals, heading into the sands for two or three days until they reach places where they know they can find water and survive with their flocks. And I assure you that no one can tell which way they have gone, because the wind covers their tracks with sand until it is impossible to trace their steps and it appears as if no man or beast had ever gone that way. And this is how they escape from their enemies, as I have told you. But if it happens that a friendly army passes this way, they merely drive off their flocks so that they are not stolen from them and eaten, because armies never pay for the things they take. **You should also know** that when these people harvest their grain, for fear of the armies they store it far from their dwellings in a series of caves out in the sands, and month by month they bring back home as much as they need.

When the traveller leaves Cherchen, he journeys for five full days through sandy wastes where the water is bitter and bad, except in a few places where it is good and sweet. And there is nothing worth recording in our book. After this five-day journey he reaches a city that stands on the edge of the Great Desert. Here men stock up on provisions before crossing the desert. So let us move on and tell you more about it.

Lop¹⁵ is a large city to the east-north-east that stands at the entry point to the Great Desert, which is known as the Desert of Lop. This city belongs to the Great Khan and its people worship Muhammad. And I can tell you that travellers who intend to cross the desert stay in this city for a week to

refresh themselves and their animals. At the end of the week they stock up with a month's worth of food for themselves and their beasts. Then they set out from this city and enter the desert. And I can tell you that this desert is said to be so long that it would take a year to cross it from end to end, and at its narrowest point you would be hard pressed to cross it in a month. It is all mountains and sand and valleys, and there is nothing whatsoever to eat. But I can tell you that after travelling a day and a night you find drinking water; not enough to supply a large company, but sufficient for fifty or a hundred men and their beasts. And throughout the desert you always have to go a day and a night before you find water. Moreover, I can tell you that while in three or four places the water is bitter and brackish, elsewhere – in about twenty-eight places – it is good. There are no beasts or birds, because they find nothing to eat here. And yet I can tell you that something extraordinary is found here, as I will explain to you.

The fact is that when a man is riding at night through this desert and by some chance gets left behind or separated from his companions – whether because he drops asleep or for some other reason – and afterwards he tries to rejoin them, he begins to hear spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes they call him by name; often they entice him to follow their voices and stray from the path, and he is never seen or heard of again. Many people have become lost and have died in this way. And I can tell you, moreover, that men hear these spirit voices even during the daytime, and it often sounds as if they are accompanied by the strains of many musical instruments, especially drums, [and the clash of arms](#).

[Sometimes, during the night](#), they hear what sounds like a horde of people rushing away from them and, thinking their company is on the move, they follow the sound of the cavalcade. But when day comes they realize the spirits have tricked them in this and other ways; and in this manner many people, being unaware of these spirits, meet a horrible end. At other times the spirits take on the form of a company of men and appear by day to a traveller who has fallen behind; he goes off after them, and then they leave him to wander alone in the desert and die. Still other travellers have seen the spirits charging towards them in the form of an army and, thinking

themselves under attack by robbers, have fled only to find themselves far from the beaten track in the vast open stretches of desert where, not knowing how to find their way back, they have died miserably of hunger. **For this reason** bands of travellers have learned to stay very close together and to set up a sign pointing in the direction of travel before they go to sleep. They also fasten bells around the necks of all their beasts, in the hope that the sound will keep them from straying off the path.

So this is how they cross this desert, with all these great trials I have described. Now we will move on from the desert, since I have told you everything there is to know about it, and tell you about the provinces you find when you emerge from the desert.

When the traveller has ridden across the desert for the thirty days I have told you about he comes to a city called Shazhou,¹⁶ which is subject to the Great Khan. The province is called Tangut.¹⁷ The people are all idolaters, though it is true that there are some **Turks who are** Nestorian Christians and also some Saracens. The idolaters have their own language. The city lies to the east-north-east. They are not a trading people but live off the profit on the grain they harvest from the land. They have many abbeys and monasteries, all filled with various kinds of idols to which they make great sacrifices and do great honour and reverence. And you should know that all the men who have children have a sheep fattened in honour of the idols; and on New Year's Day, or on the feast day of their chosen idol, those who have fattened a sheep bring it with their children before the idol, and both fathers and children perform a solemn act of devotion. When they have finished they have the sheep cooked whole. Then, very reverently, they bring it before the idol again and leave it there until they have recited their offices and said their prayers to the idol to save their children; and they say that the idols eat the substance of the flesh.¹⁸ When they have done this, they take the flesh that has lain before the idols and carry it to their home or wherever else they choose; then they send for their relatives and eat it with great reverence and festivity. And when they have eaten the meat, they collect the

bones and store them very carefully in a chest. [The priests of the idols](#), though, take the head, feet, entrails and skin, as well as some of the meat.

You should know, too, that all the idolaters in the world are cremated when they die. And I can further tell you that when one of these idolaters comes to be carried from his house to the place of cremation, his relatives will have erected a wooden house draped with cloths of silk and gold at some point along the route. And when the corpse arrives in front of the house that has been decorated in this way, the cortège halts and the mourners spread wine and food before the dead man. They do this because they say he will be received with like honour in the next world. And when the corpse reaches the place of cremation the relatives take images of men cut out of sheets of paper – as well as of horses, camels, sheep and coins as large as bezants – and burn them all with the body, saying that in the next world the deceased will have as many slaves and beasts and sheep as they have burned in paper. I can tell you, too, that when a body is being taken for cremation all the instruments in the land go before it making music. [And all this is done](#) in line with the rank of the deceased and the requirements of his station.

Let me tell you another thing, too. When one of these idolaters dies, they send for the astrologer and tell him the nativity of the deceased – in other words the month, day and hour when he was born. And when the astrologer has listened to this, he uses his infernal arts to make a divination. When he has performed his magic, he pronounces the day on which the body must be burned. And let me tell you that sometimes he orders a delay of a week, sometimes a month, and sometimes six months before the body is burned. And throughout these periods that I have mentioned, it is the duty of the dead man's family to keep the corpse in their house; for they would never think of burning it until the diviners tell them the time is auspicious. While the body remains in their house awaiting cremation, they preserve it in the following manner. I can tell you that they take a coffin made of boards of a palm's thickness, well joined together and splendidly painted all over, and put the body inside embalmed with camphor and other spices and wrapped in silk shrouds. Then [they seal the joints with pitch and lime](#). The result is

that the people who live in the house cannot detect the slightest stench. I can also tell you that the relatives of the deceased – that is, those who live in the house – lay a table for him and set out food and drink every day that the body remains there, just as if he were alive. And they place it in front of the coffin containing the corpse, leaving it long enough for the meal to be finished; they say that his soul eats the food. They keep the body in this way until the day arrives for the cremation. And let me further tell you about another thing they do. These diviners often say to the dead man's relatives that it is not good for them to take the corpse out by the front door, on the grounds that some star or other influence is adversely aligned with this door. So the relatives have it taken out by another door or, as happens frequently, they have the wall knocked through and the body carried out that way. **If they acted differently** they say the spirits of the dead would be offended with the people of the house and would plague them. And if it happens that any member of the household meets with some misfortune or dies, the astrologers immediately say that the spirit of the deceased has done this because he was not carried out when the planet under which he was born was in the ascendant, or when it was adversely aligned, or when it was on the wrong side of the house from where it should have been. And all the idolaters in the world proceed in the manner I have described to you.

Now let us move on from this subject and tell you about some other cities that lie towards the north-west, near the edge of this desert.

Kumul is a province that was once a kingdom. There are many towns and villages; the chief town is called Kumul.¹⁹ The province lies between two deserts, for on one side is the Great Desert and on the other is a little desert three days' journey in extent. The people are all idolaters and have their own language. They live on the fruits of the earth, for they have plenty of things to eat and drink and sell them to travellers who pass that way. They are given over to good living, for they desire nothing else but to play instruments and sing and dance and indulge in carnal pleasures. And I can tell you that if a stranger approaches a house seeking a place to stay, the man of the house is perfectly delighted. He orders his wife to grant the

guest's every wish, then leaves his house and goes about his business, staying away for two or three days. **While he is away** he sends over everything the guest needs – for which, however, he is paid – and he never goes home while the stranger is still there. Meanwhile the stranger stays in his house with his wife and does as he pleases, lying in bed with her just as if she were his own wife; and so they carry on in a state of bliss. All the men of this city and province are cuckolded by their wives in this way, but I assure you they are not in the least ashamed of it. As for the women, they are beautiful, vivacious and loose.

Now it happened when Mengu Khan, lord of the Tartars, was reigning that he was informed of the manner in which the men of Kumul made their wives commit adultery with strangers. And this Mengu issued orders prohibiting them under heavy penalties from giving lodging to strangers. When the men of Kumul received this command they were deeply unhappy, **but for three years** they reluctantly obeyed the king's edict. Finally, seeing that their lands no longer yielded the usual fruits and that their households were struck with one misfortune after another, they held a council and agreed what to do. I will tell you what it was. They chose a substantial gift and sent it to Mengu, begging him to let them use their wives according to the traditions their ancestors had bequeathed them; for their ancestors, they added, used to say that the idols looked very favourably on them for affording strangers such pleasure with their wives and possessions, and that the yield of their crops and their labour on the land had multiplied greatly as a result. When Mengu Khan heard this, he said: 'Since you desire your own shame, you may have it. **Go and live** according to your customs, and make of your wives charitable gifts for travellers.' And so he let them have their way. **The whole population** received this news with the greatest joy, and from that time to the present they have always upheld this custom.

Now let us move on from Kumul and tell you about the other places that lie between the north and north-west. And you should know that this region belongs to the Great Khan.

Uyghuristan²⁰ is a large province and is subject to the Great Khan. It contains many cities and towns; the chief city is called Kara-Khoja, which has many subsidiary cities and towns. The people worship idols, but there are many Christians who follow the Nestorian rule. There are also some Saracens. The Christians often intermarry with the idolaters. They say that their first king did not come into the world by human birth but was sprung from a type of fungus that grows out of the sap of trees, which we call *esca*; from him, all the others descended. The idolaters are very learned in their own laws and traditions and are keen students of the liberal arts. The land produces grain and excellent wine, but in the winter the cold is more intense than is known in any other part of the world.

Gingin Talas²¹ is a province that also lies on the edge of the desert towards the north-north-east. It extends the length of a sixteen-day journey. It belongs to the Great Khan, and there are plenty of cities and towns. There are three kinds of people: some, the majority, are idolaters; some worship Muhammad; and some are Turks who follow the Nestorian Christian rule.

On the northern border of this province there is a mountain with a rich vein of steel and *ondanique*. And in the same mountain there is a vein from which salamander²² is produced. For you should know that salamander is not an animal, as people say; rather it is a substance of a type I will now describe. You are well aware of the fact that, by the laws of nature, no beast or any animal can live in fire, because each animal is made of the four elements. And because people did not have reliable information about the salamander, they said, and still say, that the salamander is an animal; yet this is not true. The truth is as I will now tell you. For let me tell you that I had a companion named Zulfiqar, a very astute Turk, who had spent three years in that province in the Great Khan's service, supervising the extraction of the salamander, *ondanique*, steel and other things. The Great Khan always sends a lord to the province for three years, to govern and to oversee the salamander industry. And my companion told me the facts, which I also witnessed myself. For let me tell you that when the stuff found in this vein of which you have heard has been dug out of the mountains and has been torn and broken up, it remains twisted together, forming fibres like

wool. So when it has been extracted, it is dried, then pounded in a great copper mortar, and then washed. What is left behind is the fibrous material I have mentioned; the earth, which has no value, falls off it. Then this wool-like fibre is carefully spun and made into cloths. I will tell you that when the cloths are made, they are far from completely white; but when they are put in the fire and left there for a while, they turn white as snow. And whenever these salamander cloths become soiled or stained, they are put in the fire and left there for a while, and they become as white as snow. What I have told you is the truth about the salamander; all the other things that are said about it are lies and fabrications. I will tell you, too, that one of these cloths is now at Rome; it was sent to the pope by the Great Khan as a precious gift, and for this reason the holy shroud of our Lord Jesus Christ was wrapped in it.²³

Now let us move on from this province and tell you about the other provinces towards the east-north-east.

On leaving this province of which I have spoken, the traveller journeys for ten days to the east-north-east. And all along the way there is no habitation, or very little, and nothing worth mentioning in our book. And at the end of this ten-day journey he reaches a province called Suzhou, where there are plenty of cities and towns; the principal city is also called Suzhou.²⁴ The people are Christians and idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. And the greater province of which this and the two others of which I have just told you form part is called Tangut. Rhubarb grows in great profusion over all their mountains; merchants buy it here and then export it across the world. **It is a fact that travellers** who pass this way do not dare cross these mountains with any animals except those native to the area, **for a poisonous herb** grows on them that makes beasts lose their hoofs if they eat it; but the animals born in this country recognize the herb and avoid feeding on it. The people live off the fruits of the land and their flocks; they do nothing in the way of trade. **The whole province** is healthful, and the people are brown-skinned.

We will now move on and tell you about a city called Ganzhou.²⁵

Ganzhou is a very large and noble city in Tangut itself; it is the capital and administrative centre of the whole province. The people are idolaters; there are also some who worship Muhammad. There are Christians, too, who have three fine large churches in the city. The idolaters have many monasteries and abbeys after their own manner, and they have enormous numbers of idols. I assure you, too, that some of these are ten paces long. Some are made of wood, some of clay, and others of stone; all are covered with gold and are finely wrought. These great idols are recumbent; small idols surround them, as if humbly paying them homage. And since I have not described to you all the ways of the idolaters, I want to tell you about them now.

First, you should know that those idolaters who follow a religious rule live more virtuous lives than the others; they avoid lechery, though they do not regard it as a great sin. [This is how they see it](#): if a woman invites them to make love, they can lie with her without sin; but if they make the first move, then they count the act a sin. Even so, let me tell you that if they find out that any man has had unnatural intercourse with a woman, they condemn him to death. [They hold festivals](#) for their idols at various times, just as we do for our saints, and they have a kind of calendar on which the feasts of the idols are marked on the assigned days. Let me add that they have a lunar calendar, just as we have months. And in certain lunar cycles all the idolaters in the world abstain from killing beasts and birds for five days and from eating the flesh of animals killed during those five days. And for these five days they live more virtuously than they do the rest of the time. [For the sake of piety](#) and devotion, some of them – the monks – abstain from meat all their lives, but the laymen eat it regardless.

The men take up to thirty wives, more or less according to their wealth and their ability to keep them. And they give their wives cattle, slaves and money as a dowry, each in line with his means. But you should also know that they afford the first wife the highest status. And let me tell you, too, that if a man decides that any of his wives is no good or fails to please him, he is free to turn her out and do as he likes. They marry their cousins and their fathers' widows, [so long as they are not their own mothers](#). Many

things that we regard as grave sins are not sins at all in their eyes, for they live like beasts.

So then let us stop speaking of these people and tell you about other lands towards the north. I will tell you, besides, that Messer Niccolò, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco spent a year in this city about their business, which it is not necessary to go into. Therefore we will leave this place and head north on a journey of sixty days.

When the traveller leaves this city of Ganzhou, he rides for twelve days until he comes to a city called Ejina,²⁶ which stands at the head of the sandy desert towards the north and is part of the province of Tangut. The people are idolaters. They have camels and cattle in large numbers. The country breeds many lanner and saker falcons; and very fine they are, too. The inhabitants live off the fruits of the land and their flocks; they are not a trading people.

In this city the traveller must stock up with food for a journey of forty days; for you should know that upon leaving this city of Ejina he rides north for forty days through a desert where there are no houses or inns and where nobody stays except among the valleys and mountains in summer. More than enough wild beasts are found here, along with many wild asses. There are many pinewoods and [sheets of water](#) full of pike and other fish. And when the traveller has ridden across this desert for forty days he reaches a province in the north; and you will hear which it is.

Karakorum is a city three miles in circumference and enclosed by a strong rampart, which is [made of earth](#) since there is no source of stone.²⁷ It was the first seat of the Tartars after they emerged from their homeland. And I will tell you about the deeds of the Tartars and all their customs, about how they gained power and how they spread across the world.

The fact is that the Tartars used to live to the north, in the region of Manchuria.²⁸ This is a country of vast plains that had no habitations such as cities or towns. Yet it had fine pasture, wide rivers and no lack of water. They had no lord, although it is true that they paid taxes to Prester John,²⁹

who is known in their tongue as Ong Khan³⁰ or, in our language, ‘Great Lord’. This was the Prester John whose great majesty is the talk of the whole world. The Tartars paid him a tribute of one beast out of every ten.

Now it happened that their population multiplied greatly. And when Prester John saw that they were so numerous a people, he realized that they might be a danger to him and resolved to disperse them across several countries.³¹ So he sent some of his barons to their lands to carry this out. And when the Tartars heard what Prester John meant to do with them, they were so disturbed that they all set out together and travelled northward through desert regions until Prester John could no longer do them harm. And they rebelled against him, and paid him no taxes. And so they continued for some time.

Now it happened in the year 1187 that the Tartars chose a king to reign over them whose name in their language was Genghis Khan. He was a man of great courage, great wisdom and great prowess. Moreover, let me tell you that when this man was chosen as king³² all the Tartars in the world, scattered though they were through various foreign countries, came to him and acknowledged him as their lord. And this Genghis Khan exercised power capably and honourably. What else shall I tell you? Such vast numbers of Tartars rallied to him that it was beyond belief. And when Genghis Khan saw how many followers he had, he equipped them with bows and other weapons and went conquering through other lands. And I assure you they conquered no fewer than eight provinces. He did not harm the inhabitants or despoil them of their belongings, but led them away with him to conquer new peoples. And this was how he conquered the great multitudes of which you have heard. And when the people saw how well he governed and how very benevolent he was, they were only too willing to go with him. And when Genghis Khan had amassed such a multitude of followers that they covered the face of the earth, he made up his mind to conquer a great part of the world.³³

So, in the year 1200 after Christ’s birth, he sent his envoys to Prester John with the message that he wished to marry his daughter. And when

Prester John heard Genghis Khan's request for his daughter's hand, he reacted with utter scorn. 'How can Genghis Khan be so shameless,' he said, 'as to ask for my daughter in marriage? Does he not know that he is my vassal and my slave? Go back to him and tell him that I would sooner have my daughter burned alive than give her to him as his wife. And tell him that my message to him is that I ought to put him to death for the disloyal traitor to his lord that he is.' Then he ordered the messengers to remove themselves immediately from his presence and never return. Upon hearing this the messengers set out without delay. They rode until they came to their lord, whereupon they told him everything that Prester John had conveyed, word for word and without a single mistake.

When Genghis Khan heard the contemptuous message that Prester John had sent him, his heart swelled so much that it nearly burst within his breast. For I assure you that he had too powerfully commanding a nature to suffer it. After a brief silence he proclaimed, in a voice so loud that everyone nearby could hear, that he would never consent to remain king unless Prester John paid more dearly for the great insult he had sent him than any man had ever paid for any insult. He would soon show him, he added, whether he was his slave. And with that he summoned all his people and made the greatest preparations for war that have ever been seen or heard. He gave Prester John fair warning to defend himself as best he could, because he was coming against him with all his might. And when Prester John knew for certain that Genghis Khan was advancing upon him with such a great force, he made light of it and dismissed it as a trifle, declaring that they were not true soldiers. But all the same he inwardly resolved to do his utmost, because if Genghis Khan did come he wanted to seize him and put him to a terrible death. So he sent orders to many far-flung regions to have his men summoned and equipped. And in truth the army he mustered was so huge that a bigger one has scarcely ever been heard of.

So these two peoples were both mobilized in the way you have heard. And why make a long tale of it? You may be sure that Genghis Khan advanced with all his people across a vast and beautiful plain called

Tenduk, which belonged to Prester John, and made camp there. And I assure you there were such vast multitudes of people that it was impossible to know their number. And there he had word that Prester John was approaching. And he was delighted, because it was a fine plain and wide enough to mount a sweeping battle. So he waited there, eagerly anticipating his arrival so the fight could begin. But at this point the story ceases to speak of Genghis Khan and his men, so we will return to Prester John and his men.

Now the story goes that when Prester John knew that Genghis Khan was coming against him with all his people, he went against him with all his own forces. They marched until they came to this plain of Tenduk and pitched camp there, twenty miles from Genghis Khan's camp. And both sides rested, so as to be fresh and fit on the day of battle.

So the two vast armies came to this plain of Tenduk in the way you have heard. And one day Genghis Khan summoned Christian and Saracen astrologers before him and ordered them to tell him who would win the battle between him and Prester John. The astrologers looked into the matter with their arts. The Saracens did not have the skill to tell him the truth, but the Christians revealed it plainly to him. They set a cane before him and split it in two lengthways; then they put one half to one side and the other half to the other side, with no one holding them. To one half they gave the name Genghis Khan, to the other Prester John. Then they said to Genghis Khan: 'Sir, observe these canes and note that this bears your name and the other that of Prester John; now then, when we have performed our enchantment the one whose cane gains the upper hand will win the battle.' Genghis Khan replied that he would certainly like to see this, and he told the astrologers to make their demonstration as fast as they could. So the Christian astrologers took up the Psalter, read certain psalms, and performed their incantations. At that point the cane bearing the name of Genghis Khan, without anyone touching it, moved to join that of Prester John and jumped on top of it; and this was seen by all those present. When he saw this Genghis Khan was overjoyed; and finding that the Christians

spoke the truth, from that day forward he always showed great honour to Christians and held them, then and ever after, to be honest and trustworthy men.

Two days later both forces took up arms and met in fierce combat; it was the greatest battle that was ever seen. There were heavy losses on both sides, but in the end Genghis Khan carried the day. Prester John was killed in battle,³⁴ and henceforth his land was lost, for Genghis Khan never stopped until he had conquered it all. Let me tell you, moreover, that Genghis Khan reigned for six years after this battle³⁵ and conquered many fortresses and provinces. But at the end of this time, while attacking a castle named Hochou, he was struck in the knee by an arrow and died of the wound. This was a great misfortune, for he was a wise and judicious man.

Now that I have described to you how the Tartars gained their first lord, namely Genghis Khan, and also how in their early days they defeated Prester John, I want to tell you about their manners and customs.

You may take my word for it that after Genghis Khan the next ruler was Guyuk Khan, the third Batu Khan, the fourth Altun Khan, the fifth Mengu Khan and the sixth Khubilai Khan,³⁶ who is greater and more powerful than any of the others. For all the other five put together would not have had such power as belongs to Khubilai. And I will make a still bolder assertion: that all the emperors in the world and all the kings, both Christians and Saracens combined, could not match this Khubilai, the Great Khan, in the extent of their power or their ability to enforce their will. And I will prove this to you beyond doubt in our book.

You should know that all the great lords descended from the line of Genghis Khan are taken for burial to a great mountain called Altai. And wherever the great Tartar lords die, even if they are a hundred days' journey away from the mountain, they must be carried there for burial. I will tell you another extraordinary thing, too: when the bodies of these Great Khans are being borne to this mountain, whether they are forty days' journey away or more or less, all the people who are encountered along the route by

which the corpse is conveyed are put to the sword by those who accompany the body, with the words: 'Go and serve your lord in the next world.' For they truly believe that all those whom they kill must go to serve the lord in the next world. And they do the same with the horses. For when the lord dies they kill all the best horses that belonged to him. They have them killed so that the lord may have them in the next world. And let me tell you that when Mengu Khan died, more than 20,000 men who encountered his body when it was being taken for burial were put to death.

And since we have begun speaking of the Tartars, I will tell you many more things about them.

During the winter, the Tartars live on the steppes and in warm regions where there is grass and good pasture for their animals; in the summer they live in cool places in the mountains and valleys, where they find water and woodland and pasture for their animals. [An added reason](#) is that in cooler regions there are no flies, gnats or similar pests to annoy them and their animals. For two or three months they climb steadily higher, grazing as they go, for they would not have enough grass to feed their vast herds if they stayed in one place.

They have round houses made of wood and covered with felt, which they carry with them [on four-wheeled wagons](#) wherever they go. For the wooden rods from which they are made are so well bound together and so neatly constructed that they can easily be transported. And whenever they unfold a house and set it up, they always put the door facing due south. They have beautiful two-wheeled carts, so well covered with black felt that nothing inside would get wet even if it rained all day long. They have them drawn by oxen and camels and carry their wives and children on them, along with all their food and essentials. And I can tell you that the women do the buying and selling and all the necessary work, both for their husbands and for their households. For the men trouble themselves with nothing but hunting, fighting and falconry. They live on meat and milk and game, and they also eat Pharaoh's rats,³⁷ which are ubiquitous throughout the steppes. They even eat the flesh of horses and dogs and drink mare's milk. In fact they eat flesh of any sort.

They would not touch another man's wife for anything in the world, for they believe such an act to be a wicked and reprehensible thing. The women are true and loyal to their husbands and look after their households very well. **Even if there are ten** or twenty of them, they live together in peace and infinite harmony and are never heard to utter a bad word. They all apply themselves diligently and intently to the business of trade and to the tasks that belong to them, namely the upkeep of the house and care of the family and children, who are held in common between them.

They arrange their marriages in this way: each man can take as many wives as he likes, up to a hundred if he has the wherewithal to maintain them; he gives dowries to his mothers-in-law, but the wives bring nothing to their husbands. But you should know, too, that they consider the first wife to be the best and most legitimate. Because they have so many wives, as I have told you, they have more children than other men. They marry their cousins, and if a father dies, his eldest son marries his widow, so long as she is not his own mother. If their brothers die, they marry their wives too. Each time they take a wife they hold a lavish wedding.

Let me tell you about their religion. **They say that there** is a high god, supreme and heavenly, whom they worship every day with incense burned in censers, asking only to be sound of mind and strong in health. Among their own gods there is one whom they call Nachigai; they say he is an earthly god who watches over their children, their cattle and their crops. They pay him great reverence and honour, for they all keep him in their houses. They make this god from felt and cloth and keep him at home, and they also make the god's wife and children. They set his wife at his left hand and his children in front and treat them with due honour. And when they sit down to eat, they take some of the fat from the meat and daub it on the god's mouth and on the mouths of his wife and children; then they take some cooking broth and sprinkle it outside their front door **as an offering to the other spirits**. And when they have done this, they say that their god and his family have had their share. After this they eat and drink. You should know that they drink mare's milk, but let me add that they prepare it in such

a way that it resembles white wine; it is a delicious drink, and they call it *koumiss*.

As to their clothes, the wealthy wear cloths of gold and silk and rich furs of sable, ermine, vair and fox, all in the most luxurious style; indeed all their accoutrements are exquisite and precious. For weapons they have bows, swords and clubs, but they mainly use their bows, for they are supremely good archers. On their torsos they wear armour made of buffalo hides or other boiled hides, which are very tough. They are dependable in battle, and mightily brave. And I will tell you how it is that they can endure more than any other men. For when necessary, as it often is, and whether they are on the march or stationed in one place, they will go for a month without any food except for the milk of a mare and whatever game they can catch. And their horses likewise graze on the grass they find, so they do not need to carry barley or straw. They are very obedient to their lords, and I assure you that when necessary they will stay on horseback all night long, the men fully armed and their horses steadily cropping the grass. Of all the men in the world they are the best able to endure fatigue and hardship and the least costly to maintain, and therefore the best adapted for conquering lands and kingdoms.

Their armies are marshalled in the manner I will now describe. You should know that when a Tartar lord goes to war, he takes with him 100,000 horsemen. He orders his affairs as you will hear. He puts an officer in charge of every group of ten, a hundred, a thousand and ten thousand, so that he never needs to consult with more than ten men, and the officer of 10,000 only has to deal with ten, and the officer of 1,000 only has to deal with ten, and likewise the officer of a hundred only has to deal with ten. In this way that you have heard, each of these officers is answerable to his superior. And when the lord of 100,000 wishes to send a force on some operation, he orders a commander of 10,000 to find him 1,000 men; and the commander of 10,000 orders the commanders of 1,000, and the commanders of 1,000 order the commanders of a hundred, and the commanders of a hundred order the commanders of ten, each to furnish their share of the thousand men required. So they all have their orders in a

flash and deliver the requisite numbers. For they all obey their orders more readily than any other people in the world. And you should know that the unit of 100,000 is called a *tuq*,³⁸ that of 10,000 a *toman*,³⁹ and there are corresponding terms for thousands, hundreds and tens.

When the army is on the march for any reason, whether on the plains or among the mountains, they send 200 men two days' journey ahead as scouts, and as many behind and on the flanks, making four directions in all. And they do this so that the army cannot be the target of a surprise attack.

When they are going on a long campaign, they carry no baggage with them. Each man takes two leather flasks to hold the milk he drinks and a small earthenware pot for cooking meat. **If he lacks this**, he will find and kill an animal, take out and empty its belly, and fill it with water; having cut the meat he wishes to cook into pieces he will put it inside this water-filled belly, then hang it over a fire and let it cook; when it is ready he will eat the meal, pot and all. Each man also takes a small tent to shelter him from the rain. I will tell you another thing, too: when necessary, they will ride for as long as ten days without eating or making a fire and living only on the blood of their horses,⁴⁰ each piercing one of his horses' veins and drinking the blood. They also have dried milk, which is solid like a paste. **It is dried like this**: they boil the milk and skim the cream off the top, putting it in another vessel to make butter, because the milk cannot be dried while it floats on top. Then the milk is put out in the sun to dry. And when they go to war they each carry about ten pounds of this milk. In the mornings they each take half a pound of the milk and mix it with water in a little leather flask shaped like a bottle, which they keep with them as they ride until the milk has been shaken up and has dissolved into a syrup. Then they drink it for breakfast.

When they join battle with their enemies, they defeat them in this way. They pull back from them, not out of a shameful desire to flee but so they can dart around them, shooting now from here, now from there. They have trained their horses to wheel this way or that as nimbly as a dog. If they are put to the chase and retreat at full tilt, they fight as adroitly and as fearlessly as when they are face to face with the enemy. For even as they speed away,

they twist round to face backwards with their bows at the ready and unleash great volleys of arrows, killing many of the enemy's horses as well as the men. If the enemy believes he has unnerved and defeated them, then he has lost, because his horses will be killed along with many of his men. And as soon as the Tartars see that they have killed some of the horses and men, they wheel round and renew the attack, displaying such skill and courage that the enemy is scattered and crushed. And in this way they have already won many battles and conquered many nations.

Everything I have told you applies to the ways and customs of the true Tartars. But I must add that they are now greatly debased, for those who live in Cathay have adopted the habits, manners and customs of the idolaters and have abandoned their own faith, while those who live in the Levant have adopted the ways of the Saracens.

I will now describe to you the Tartars' system of justice.⁴¹ For a petty theft not amounting to a capital offence, the culprit receives seven, seventeen, twenty-seven, thirty-seven or forty-seven strokes of the rod, and so on up to 107, always increasing by ten, with the number proportionate to the value of what he has stolen. And many die of this beating. If a man steals a horse or something else that incurs the death penalty, he is cut in two with a sword. However, if the thief can afford to pay nine times the value of the stolen goods, upon payment the sentence is remitted.

Every lord or other owner of herds or flocks, including horses, mares, camels, oxen, cows and other large beasts, has them branded with his own mark; then they are let loose to graze on the plains and hillsides without a herder to watch them. If they get mixed up, each animal is duly returned to the owner whose mark it bears. Rams, sheep and goats, though, are tended by shepherds. Their cattle are all very big and fat and exceptionally fine.

I will also tell you about another peculiar custom they have, which I had forgotten to write about. You may depend on it that when there are two men, one of whom had a son who died at the age of four or when you will, and the other of whom had a daughter who also died, they arrange a marriage between them. For they give the dead girl to the dead boy as his wife and have a marriage contract drawn up. Then they burn the contract,

and as the smoke rises into the air they say it goes to their children in the next world, who recognize it and hold themselves to be husband and wife. Afterwards they lay on a lavish wedding feast and scatter some of the food here and there, saying that it goes to their children in the next world. And they do another thing, too: they have the likenesses of slaves and of horses, cloths, coins and furniture painted and drawn on paper, and then they have these burned, saying that their children will have all these things they have portrayed and burned in the next world. And when all this is over, they consider themselves to be kinsfolk and keep up their relations as well as if their children were alive.

I have now set out and clearly described for you the ways and customs of the Tartars. Not that I have told you about the wonderful accomplishments of the Great Khan, the high lord of all the Tartars, and his mighty imperial court; but I will tell you about them at the proper time and place in this book, for they are truly wonderful things to set down in writing. Meanwhile let us return to our story and to the great plain where we were when we began to talk about the affairs of the Tartars.

When the traveller leaves Karakorum and Altai (the place I described to you before where the Tartars bury their dead), his onward journey leads northward through a region called the plain of Barghu that takes no less than forty days to cross. The people, who are called the Merkit,⁴² are a savage race; they live on animals, mainly reindeer. And I can tell you that they also ride these deer. **They also live on birds**, for there are many lakes, ponds and marshes and to the north the plain borders on the Ocean Sea; the birds flock around these waters during the moulting season, which lasts for most of the summer, and when they are completely bald and cannot fly the locals take as many as they want. They also live on fish. They have the same habits and customs as the Tartars, and they are subject to the Great Khan. They have neither grain nor wine. In summer they have plenty of game for hunting, both beasts and birds, but in winter neither beast nor bird stays here because of the great cold.

After journeying for forty days the traveller reaches the Ocean Sea. There is a mountain here where peregrine falcons make their nests. For you should understand that there are no men or women or animals or birds here, except for one species of bird called *bagherlac*⁴³ on which the falcons prey. They are the size of partridges and have feet like parrots and tails like swallows. They are very swift fliers. And when the Great Khan wants some peregrine falcon nestlings, he has them fetched all the way from here. Gerfalcons also breed on the nearby islands in the ocean. I will tell you, too, that this place is so far north that the Pole Star is left behind to the south. And let me add that the gerfalcons that breed on the islands I mentioned above are so plentiful that the Great Khan takes as many of them as he wishes. So you must not suppose that the men who export them from Christian lands to the Tartars send them to the Great Khan; they actually take them to the Levant, to Arghun and the lords of the Levant.

We have now given you a clear account of everything concerning the northern provinces as far as the Ocean Sea. From now on, in the coming pages, we will tell you about the other provinces that will take us all the way to the Great Khan. So we will return to a province about which we have already written in our book, namely Ganzhou.

When the traveller leaves this aforementioned province of Ganzhou, he journeys eastward for five days through a country infested with spirits who can be heard talking, especially at night. And at the end of this five-day journey he finds a kingdom called Erguiul.⁴⁴ It belongs to the Great Khan and is part of the great province of Tangut, which encompasses several kingdoms. The people are variously Nestorian Christians, idolaters and worshippers of Muhammad. There are plenty of cities, and the capital is called Erguiul. The countries of Cathay lie within reach of this city to the south-east, and following this south-easterly road towards the countries of Cathay the traveller comes to a city called Xiningzhou.⁴⁵ The province is also called Xiningzhou and has plenty of towns and cities; it is likewise part of Tangut and is subject to the Great Khan. The people are idolaters and worshippers of Muhammad, and there are some Christians. There are huge

numbers of wild oxen, as big as elephants and a beautiful sight, for they are covered with hair everywhere except on their backs and are white and black. Their hair is three palms long.⁴⁶ They are so beautiful that they are a wonder to behold. The people have also domesticated many of these oxen, for some have been captured in the wild and their numbers have been greatly multiplied by breeding. They are used as beasts of burden and to draw ploughs, and I assure you that they plough twice as much and are twice as strong as an ordinary ox.

This country produces the choicest and finest musk in the world. And you should know that musk is obtained in the manner I will describe. You can take my word for it that there is a little animal, the size of a gazelle but formed in the following fashion. It has very thick hair like a deer, the feet and tail of a gazelle but not its horns, and four slender teeth, two below and two above, which are a good three fingers long, with two growing upwards and two growing downwards. It is a very beautiful animal. The musk is obtained in this way. When a hunter catches one, he finds a little sac of blood between the skin and the flesh under its belly, near the navel. He cuts it out with the skin attached and removes it. And this blood is the musk that gives off such a pungent perfume.⁴⁷ And you should know that they are found in huge numbers in this region, and the musk is as good as I have told you.

The people live by trade and crafts, and they have a great deal of grain. The province extends as far as you can travel in twenty-five days. There are pheasants twice as big as those of our country, for they are the size of peacocks, or hardly less. The biggest have tails ten palms long, and there are many with tails nine, eight or at least seven palms long. There are also pheasants that, in size and appearance, are like those of our country. There are many other varieties of birds, too, with very beautiful and colourful plumage.

These people are idolaters. They are fat and have small noses and black hair. They are beardless, except for a sprinkling of hair on the chin. The women have no hair anywhere on their bodies except on their heads. They are very white, with a most delicate complexion, and all their limbs are very

well formed in every respect. And let me tell you that the men are inordinately fond of erotic pleasure and take many wives, because neither their faith nor their custom forbids it but rather allows them to take as many as they wish and have the wherewithal to keep. I can tell you, too, that if a woman is beautiful but of lowly birth, a great baron or magnate will still marry her for her beauty and will give her mother a large sum of money for her in line with their agreement.

Now we will leave this place and tell you about another province towards the east.

When the traveller leaves Erguiul and journeys eastward for eight days he comes to a province called Egrigaia⁴⁸ where there are many cities and towns; it is part of Tangut. The capital is called Alashan.⁴⁹ The people are idolaters, but there are three churches of Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the Great Khan. In this city they make the finest and most beautiful camelhair camlets in the world; they also make white camlets from white wool, which are very fine and beautiful and are produced in great quantities. From here merchants export them to many points across the world, especially Cathay.

Now let us leave this province and continue eastward to a province called Tenduk,⁵⁰ where we will enter the dominion of Prester John.

Tenduk is an easterly province containing many cities and towns. The people are subject to the Great Khan, for the descendants of Prester John are also subjects of the Great Khan. The capital is called Tenduk. The province is ruled by a king of the lineage of Prester John who is himself called Prester John, though his name is George.⁵¹ He holds the land on behalf of the Great Khan – not all the land that Prester John held, but only part of it. But I can also tell you that the Great Khans have always given their daughters or other female relatives in marriage to the reigning kings of the lineage of Prester John.

The stones from which lapis lazuli is made are found in this province; it is plentiful here and of good quality. There are excellent camelhair camlets.

The people live on their flocks and the fruits of the soil; there is also a certain amount of trade and industry. The rulers, as I have said, are Christians, but there are also plenty of idolaters and worshippers of Muhammad. There is also a class of people called Argon, which in our language means 'half-castes'; that is to say they are born of the two races native to Tenduk, those who worship idols and those who worship Muhammad. They are more handsome, more intelligent and better at business than the other natives.

You should also know that the principal seat of Prester John was in this province, at the time when he ruled the Tartars and all the surrounding provinces and kingdoms; his descendants still live there. And the George I mentioned to you is of the lineage of Prester John, as I have told you in the story, and is the sixth king to rule after him. This is the place that in our country we call Gog and Magog, though the people who live there call it Ung and Mungul.⁵² And each of these provinces was home to a different race: the Gogs were in Ung and the Tartars lived in Mungul.⁵³

If the traveller rides for seven days across this province, eastward towards Cathay, he will find many cities and villages inhabited by Saracens, idolaters and some Nestorian Christians. They live by trade and crafts, for they weave fine golden fabrics called *nasich* and *nakh* as well as silks of many types. Just as we have many different kinds of woollen cloths, so they have many different kinds of cloths of gold and silk. They are subject to the Great Khan. There is a city called Xuandezhou⁵⁴ where many kinds of crafts are practised and the equipment needed by an army is made. And in the mountains of this province there is a place called Ydifu,⁵⁵ where there is a very rich silver mine that produces great quantities of silver. There is also plenty of wild game, both beasts and birds.

Now we will leave this province and city and continue for three days, after which we will come to a city called Chagan Nur,⁵⁶ or '[White Lake](#)' in our language, where there is a great palace belonging to the Great Khan. For you should know that the Great Khan enjoys staying at his palace in this city, because there are plenty of lakes and rivers that are well stocked with swans. There are also beautiful plains teeming with cranes, pheasants,

partridges and many other kinds of wild fowl. The Great Khan is very fond of staying here to take advantage of the excellent hawking that is to be had. For he hawks with gerfalcons and falcons and catches countless birds with great delight and festivity.

There are five kinds of cranes, which I will describe to you. The first kind is entirely black, like a raven, and very large. The second is entirely white. Its wings are very beautiful, for the feathers are emblazoned all over with round eyes like those of a peacock, though these are the colour of burnished gold. It has a scarlet and black head and a white neck and is much larger than any of the others. The third kind is like ours, and the fourth is small and sports long, beautiful feathers coloured scarlet and black by its ears. The fifth kind is very large and all grey except for a shapely head coloured scarlet and black.

Near this city there is a valley where the Great Khan keeps a vast flock of *cators*, which we call 'great partridges'. [And to feed them](#), each summer he has millet, panic grass, and other favourite foods of these birds sown across the hillsides, and in order that they may eat their fill he forbids anyone to reap them. He sets many guards to watch these birds, [to prevent anyone](#) from taking them. [And in winter](#) the keepers scatter millet seeds for them, and they are so used to food being scattered on the ground for them that their feeder only has to whistle and wherever they are they flock to him. The Great Khan has had many huts built to shelter them at night, and there are so many of them that they are a spectacular sight. So when he visits this country he has a plentiful supply of these birds, as many as he wants. And in winter, when they are nice and plump, since he does not stay here on account of the bitter cold he has camel-loads of them brought to him wherever he may be.

And from here we will set out and journey north-north-east for three days.

When the traveller sets out from the city I have just told you about and journeys for three days, he comes to a city called Shangdu⁵⁷ that was built by the Great Khan who now reigns, whose name is Khubilai Khan. And in

this city Khubilai Khan had a vast palace built of marble and other ornamental stones. Its halls and rooms are covered with gilded [images of birds and animals](#), trees and flowers and many other things, so skilfully and ingeniously worked that it is a delight and wonder to see. The whole building is richly decorated and quite astonishingly beautiful. [It extends from the centre](#) of the city to the city walls. Here, facing the palace, another wall runs out from one side of the palace abutting the city walls and goes round to join the other side, enclosing a good sixteen miles of land replete with springs, rivers and lawns [in such a way](#) that the park can only be entered by going through the palace. Here the Great Khan keeps all kinds of animals, such as harts, stags and roebucks, to provide food for the gerfalcons and falcons that he keeps in mew here; the gerfalcons alone amount to more than 200. Once a week he comes in person to see them in mew. And often the Great Khan rides round this walled park with a leopard on the crupper of his horse; when the fancy takes him he lets it go to catch a hart or stag or roebuck, which he has given to the gerfalcons that he keeps in mew. And he does this for recreation and to entertain himself.

You should also know that in the middle of this walled park, where there is a beautiful grove, the Great Khan has built another large palace, constructed entirely of canes but all gilt inside and decorated with exquisitely worked images of beasts and birds. [It stands on beautiful](#) gilded and varnished pillars, atop each of which is a gilt dragon with its tail coiled round the pillar and its head and outstretched arms holding up the ceiling. The roof is also made entirely of canes and is so well protected by a thick layer of varnish that no amount of water can damage it. And I will tell you how it is made from canes. You may depend on it that these canes are more than three palms in girth and from ten to fifteen paces long. They are sliced in two from one knot to the next, making two tiles. And these canes are so thick and large that they are used not just to roof a house but also to build it from scratch, [though for protection](#) against the wind each cane tile is fixed in place with nails. In this way the palace I have just told you about was constructed solely from canes. Furthermore, the Great Khan had it designed

so that it can be moved wherever he pleases, for it is held in place by more than 200 silk cords.

I can tell you, too, that the Great Khan stays here for three months of the year, in June, July and August. He stays here during this season to escape from the heat and to enjoy its delights. During these three months the Great Khan keeps the palace of canes standing; for the rest of the year it is dismantled and stored. And he had it designed so that he could erect and dismantle it at pleasure.

Every year, on the twenty-eighth day of August, the Great Khan leaves this city and this palace. And I will tell you why. The fact is that he has a stud of stallions and mares, all as white as snow and without any other markings, and so vast in number that there are more than 10,000 mares alone. And no one is permitted to drink the milk of these white mares unless he belongs to the imperial lineage, in other words to the lineage of the Great Khan. That said, it is true that another race of people called Horiat are allowed to drink the milk; Genghis Khan gave them this privilege to commemorate a victory they helped him win long ago. I can tell you, too, that these white horses are held in such reverence that a great lord who came across them while they were grazing would never ride through their midst; instead he would wait for them to pass or take a long detour until he had left them behind. And the astrologers and idolaters have told the Great Khan that he must douse the air and ground with this milk on the twenty-eighth day of August each year, so that the spirits and idols may drink their share and extend their protection to all that belongs to him, the men and women, beasts, birds, grain, and everything else. And so the Great Khan departs for this place in order to [perform this sacrifice of milk with his own hands](#).

But rather than follow him I will tell you about another marvel that I had forgotten. Now you should know that when the Great Khan was staying in his palace and the weather was rainy, cloudy or otherwise dismal, he had his wise astrologers and sorcerers use their lore and incantations to drive away all the clouds and bad weather from above the palace, with the result that the skies above the palace were clear even as the bad weather continued all

around. These wise men that perform this deed are called Tibetans and Kashmiris, these being the names of two races of idolaters. They know more of the diabolical arts and enchantments than any other men, and they perform all their acts by means of the Devil's arts while convincing others that they perform them through great holiness and with the help of God. **To this end they go about** all filthy and grimy, with no regard for their own honour or for those who see them; they leave mud on their faces, never wash or comb their hair, and keep themselves in a permanently squalid state. And these men I have told you about have a peculiar custom, which I will describe to you. For I assure you that when a man is condemned to death and is executed by the authorities, they take him and have him cooked and eat him; yet if a man dies of natural causes, they never think of eating him.

In addition to the names I have mentioned these enchanters are also known as Bakhshi, which means to say they belong to a particular sect or order like our Brothers Preachers or Friars Minor;⁵⁸ they are so deeply versed in this magical or devilish art that they can do almost anything they wish. And you may depend on it that these Bakhshi I have just told you about, who know so many enchantments, perform the following marvellous feat. Let me tell you that when the Great Khan is seated in his high hall at his table, which is raised more than eight cubits above the floor, and the drinking vessels filled with wine, milk and other choice drinks are set on the floor of the hall a good ten paces away, then these wise sorcerers I have told you about above, who are called Bakhshi, work their enchantments and their arts until these full cups lift themselves off the floor where they were and take themselves before the Great Khan without anyone touching them. **And when he has finished** drinking the cups take themselves back to their starting point. And they do this in the sight of 10,000 men; this is no lie but the honest truth. Indeed we may add that those who are learned in necromancy will confirm that it is perfectly feasible.

I can tell you, too, that when the feast days of their idols come around, these Bakhshi go to the Great Khan and say to him: 'Sir, the feast of such-and-such an idol is approaching' – and they name their idol of choice, then

continue – ‘You know, gracious Lord, that this idol has the ability to bring bad weather and destroy our property, cattle and crops unless it has been propitiated with offerings and burned sacrifices. And therefore we beg you, gracious Lord, to furnish us with so many black-faced sheep, so much incense, so much aloeswood, and so much of this and that, in order that we may offer great reverence and sacrifice to our idols and that they may save us, our bodies, cattle and crops.’ And these Bakhshi say these things to the barons around the Great Khan and to those in authority, who in turn repeat them to the Great Khan. And so the Bakhshi get everything they request in order to celebrate the feast of their idols. And when they have all the things they have asked for, they take them and worship their idols amid much singing and festivity. For they perfume the idols with sweet-smelling incense from the various spices; and they cook the meat and set it before them, sprinkling some of the cooking broth here and there and saying that the idols will take as much of it as they want. This is how they honour their idols on their feast days; for you may rest assured that all the idols have feast days named after them, just like our saints.

They have huge monasteries and abbeys; indeed, let me tell you there are monasteries as big as small cities inhabited by more than 2,000 of their equivalents of monks, who dress more decently than the rest of the people. They shave their beards and the crown of their heads. They lay on magnificent feasts for their idols, with the most wonderful singing and the most wonderful illuminations ever seen. And I can tell you, too, that some of these Bakhshi are permitted by their order to take wives – which they do, marrying them and having many children.

I can further tell you that there is another order of devotees known as Sienseng. They practise extreme abstinence in the manner prescribed by their customs and lead a life of great austerity, which I will describe to you. You may depend on it that as long as they live they eat nothing but bran, that is to say the husks left over from making wheat flour. For they take grains of wheat and immerse them in hot water, leaving them to soak for some time [until the husk](#) has separated from the rest of the kernel; then they eat the washed bran, which tastes of nothing. They fast many times during

the year and eat absolutely nothing but this bran I have told you about. They have many huge idols, and sometimes they worship fire. And I can tell you that the other monks say that those who live lives of such great abstinence are heretics, because they do not worship the idols after their own fashion. For there is a world of difference between the two – that is, between the one rule and the other. These men would not marry for anything in the world, though they shave the crowns of their heads; they wear black and blue clothes made of sackcloth, and if they happened to be made of silk they would still wear the colours I have said. They sleep on mats made of rods. They lead harder lives than any other men in the world.

Their monasteries and their idols are all feminine; that is to say they all have women's names.

Now we will move on from this subject and tell you about the wonderful feats and marvels of the most high lord of lords of all the Tartars, the most noble Great Khan who is called Khubilai.



THREE

Khubilai Khan

At this point in our book I want to begin telling you about all the tremendous achievements and astonishing deeds of the reigning Great Khan, whose name is Khubilai Khan. In our language Khan means ‘Great Lord of Lords’, and indeed his right to this title is beyond doubt, for everyone knows well that this Great Khan is the most powerful man, whether measured in subjects, lands or treasure, who exists in the world or ever did exist from the time of our first father Adam down to the present moment. And in our book I will show you very clearly that this is the truth, so that everyone will be convinced that he is the greatest lord who lives or ever lived; and I will explain why.

First, you can take it for a fact that he is directly descended in the imperial line from Genghis Khan; for the lord of all the Tartars is required to be of that lineage. This Khubilai Khan is the sixth Great Khan,¹ which means to say he is the sixth Great Lord of all the Tartars. And you should know that he gained the throne in the 1,256th year since Christ’s birth and began his reign that year. You should also know that he gained the throne by virtue of his valour and prowess and great wisdom; for his kinsfolk and brothers stood in the way of his succession. But he gained it by great prowess, and

you should know that it was properly his by right. At the present moment, in the year 1298, he is in the forty-second year of his reign. By now he must be at least eighty-five years old. And before he became Lord he was almost constantly going to war and was keen to be involved in every campaign; for besides being an accomplished soldier, valiant and hardy in hand-to-hand fighting, he had earned a reputation as a fine leader, the wisest and boldest in counsel and strategy the Tartars ever had. But since becoming Lord he has sent his sons and captains on campaign and has only gone to war once. That was in the year 1286, and I will tell you the cause.

The fact is that a certain Nayan, who was Khubilai Khan's uncle, found himself while still a young man the lord and master of many lands and provinces, so that he could easily raise a force of 400,000 horsemen. Like his ancestors before him, he was a vassal of the Great Khan. But as I have told you, he was a young man, and at thirty years of age he found himself such a great lord that he could easily put 400,000 horsemen in the field. He declared that he would no longer be the Great Khan's vassal, and he vowed to depose him if he ever had the chance. So this Nayan sent envoys to Qaidu, who was a great and powerful lord and nephew to the Great Khan but had rebelled against him and was his bitter enemy. He sent him word that he should attack the Great Khan from one quarter, while he himself would advance against him from the opposite quarter, so that they could dispossess him of his lands and his throne. And Qaidu replied that he welcomed the proposal, and he promised to have his forces ready for action at the time they had fixed and to march against the Great Khan. And let me tell you that this man was quite powerful enough to muster and put in the field 100,000 horsemen. What else shall I tell you? These two barons, Nayan and Qaidu, made their preparations and mustered an enormous force of cavalry and foot soldiers to attack the Great Khan.

When the Great Khan learned of this plot, he was not remotely perturbed; instead, like the wise and valiant man he was, he prepared himself and his men, vowing that he would never again wear his crown or hold his land if he failed to put these two traitors and renegades to a terrible death. And let

me tell you that the Great Khan made all his preparations within twenty-two days, in such secrecy that none but his councillors knew anything about it. He assembled no fewer than 360,000 horsemen and 100,000 foot soldiers, the reason for this small number being that he only took them from those of his armies that were nearby. His other armies, twelve in all and vast in strength, were so far away on campaigns of conquest in far-flung lands that he could not have got them where he needed them in time. For if he had assembled all his forces, he would have had as many horsemen as he could possibly desire; a host so vast, that it would be inconceivable and incomprehensible. And the 360,000 horsemen and 100,000 foot soldiers whom he actually levied were members of his personal bodyguard, mainly his falconers and other household retainers, who were mobilized in twenty days. If he had summoned the armies that he kept permanently on guard over the provinces of Cathay, it would have taken them thirty or forty days to march to him, his preparations would have been discovered, and Qaidu and Nayan would have joined forces and occupied strong positions of their own choosing. Instead he intended through speed (which is the helpmate of victory) to thwart Nayan's plans and catch him alone, which would make him easier to defeat than if he combined with his ally.

And since this is a fitting place to say something about the armies of the Great Khan, it must be understood that there are many treacherous and disloyal people across the provinces of Cathay and Manzi and all the rest of his dominions who would rebel against their lord given the chance, and therefore armies have to be maintained in every province where there are large cities and substantial populations. They are stationed in the open country, four or five miles outside the cities, which cannot have gates or walls that could prevent them from entering at will. And the Great Khan changes these armies every two years, along with the captains who command them; and with this curb the people stay quiet and cannot rise up or disturb the status quo. Besides the pay that the Great Khan regularly gives them from the revenues of the provinces, these armies live on the immense herds of cattle that belong to them and on the milk that they send for sale in the cities, which pays for the provisions they need. And the

various places where they are stationed are as much as thirty, forty or sixty days' journey apart.

When the Great Khan had mustered the mere handful of men I mentioned above, he called on his astrologers to divine whether he would defeat his enemies and emerge victorious. **He did this in the presence** of the entire army; indeed, it was his usual practice to put on these shows of divination to rouse his armies. And the astrologers told him that he would deal with his enemies as he pleased. So the Great Khan set out with all his men and advanced until after twenty days he reached a great plain where Nayan was encamped with all his forces, amounting to at least 400,000 horsemen. They arrived early in the morning and caught the enemy completely unawares, for the Great Khan had had all the roads blocked so that anyone who tried to come or go was captured. And this was why the enemy did not suspect their approach. And I will tell you that when they arrived Nayan was in his tent, in bed with his wife and taking his pleasure with her, for he had a great passion for her.

What else shall I tell you? When the day of the battle dawned, the Great Khan appeared on a mound that rose from the plain where Nayan's forces were encamped. They felt perfectly secure, for they did not have the shadow of a suspicion that anyone might be approaching to do them harm. And this was why they were so sure of their safety and had not posted guards around their camp or sent scouts either ahead or to their rear.

The Great Khan was on the mound I have mentioned, in a wooden tower **packed with crossbowmen** and archers that was supported by four elephants wearing tough armour of boiled leather draped with silk and gold cloths. His royal banner, bearing the emblem of the sun and moon, flew so high above his head that it was clearly visible from every quarter. **He had his troops** drawn up in thirty squadrons of 10,000 mounted archers each, grouped into three divisions, and he ordered those on either wing to extend their lines until in no time they encircled Nayan's camp. In front of every squadron of cavalry were 500 foot soldiers with short pikes and swords. They were trained to leap onto the horses' cruppers every time the cavalry

beat a retreat and so flee with them; then, when a halt was called, they would dismount and slaughter the enemies' horses with their pikes. So this is how the Great Khan and his forces were drawn up, as you have heard, with the squadrons surrounding Nayan's camp in readiness for the battle.

When Nayan and his men saw the troops of the Great Khan surrounding their camp, they were completely taken by surprise. They rushed to take up arms, hastily arrayed themselves, and formed their ranks in the proper order.

When both sides were lined up and nothing remained but to join battle, the air was filled with the sound of countless horns, numerous fifes and other instruments, and full-throated singing. For let me tell you that this is the Tartars' way. When they are drawn up in squadrons and ready to fight, they never think of rushing into battle but wait for the drums to start beating; the drums, that is, of their commanders. And while the Tartars are waiting for the beat of the drums, nearly all of them play their instruments² and sing; this is why there was so much playing and singing on both sides alike.

When all the troops were in readiness on both sides, the big drums of the Great Khan began to beat. And the moment the drums began to beat there was no more delay; the two armies charged at one another with bows and swords and clubs. Only a few had lances, but the foot soldiers had crossbows and other weapons in plenty. What else shall I tell you? They plunged into a very cruel and savage battle. Now you might see arrows fly like pelting rain, for the whole sky was filled with them. Now you might see knights and horses tumble dead to the ground. The clamour and the uproar were so great that God's thunder would have gone unheard. [The sheer number of men](#) and above all horses lying dead piled one on top of the other was so great that the opposing armies could not make their way through them to the other side. And you should know that Nayan was a baptized Christian³ and in this battle he bore the cross of Christ on his standard.

But why make a long story of it? You may be certain that this was the deadliest and most horrifying battle ever seen. Never in our time have so

many men engaged on a single field of battle, especially so many horsemen. So many died there, on both sides, that it was astonishing to see. The battle raged from daybreak till noon, [because Nayan's generosity](#) had earned him such goodwill that his men doggedly chose to die for love of him rather than turn their backs. But in the end the victory fell to the Great Khan. When Nayan and his men saw they could not hold out any longer they took to flight. But it did them no good; for Nayan was taken prisoner, and all his barons and men surrendered themselves and their weapons to the Great Khan.

When the Great Khan heard that Nayan had been captured, he ordered him to be put to death. And I will tell you the manner in which he was killed. He was rolled up in a carpet and was dragged all over the place with such violence that he died. And the Great Khan saw to it that he died in this way because he did not wish the blood of the emperor's lineage to be spilt on the ground or seen by the sun or the air.

When the Great Khan had won this battle in the way you have heard, Nayan's men and barons all came to pay homage and swear fealty to him. They came from four provinces, which I will name. The first was Manchuria, the second was Korea, the third was Barkol, and the fourth was Sikintinjiu.⁴

And when the Great Khan had done this and had won this victory, the various races of men who were there – Saracens, idolaters and Jews, together with many others who did not believe in God – mocked the cross that Nayan had borne on his banner. They jeered at the Christians who were among them, saying: 'See how the cross of your God has helped Nayan, who was a Christian!' The derision and taunting grew so strident that it reached the ears of the Great Khan. And when the Great Khan heard this, he angrily rebuked those who mocked the cross in his presence. Then he summoned many of the Christians who were there and set out to comfort them,⁵ saying: 'If the cross of your God has not helped Nayan it has acted very properly, because it is good and should not do anything that is not good and just. Nayan, who came against his lord, was disloyal and

treacherous and richly deserved his fate; and the cross of your God did the right thing by not helping him to traduce justice, for it is a thing of goodness and should not do anything lacking in virtue.’ The Christians answered the Great Khan: ‘Most mighty lord, what you say is indeed true. For the cross would not commit evil or treachery like Nayan, who was a traitor and disloyal to his lord. And he has indeed met with the end he deserved.’ These were the words that passed between the Great Khan and the Christians about the cross that Nayan had borne on his standard.

When the Great Khan had defeated Nayan in the way you have heard, he returned to Khanbaliq,⁶ his capital. And there he stayed, amusing himself greatly amid lavish festivities. As for the other baron – the king named Qaidu – when he heard that Nayan had been defeated and killed he was deeply shaken and abandoned his campaign in the grip of a terrible fear that he might receive the same treatment.

It was in the month of November that the Great Khan returned to Khanbaliq. He stayed there as late as February and March, the season of our Easter; and learning that this was one of our principal feasts, he summoned all the Christians and asked them to bring him the book containing the four Gospels. He had it censed many times with great ceremony, kissed it devoutly, and directed all his barons and lords who were present to follow suit. And this is always his custom on the principal Christian feasts, such as Easter and Christmas. He acts likewise on the principal feasts of the Saracens, Jews and idolaters. When he was asked why he did this, he replied: ‘There are four prophets who are revered and worshipped by the whole world. The Christians say their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens Muhammad, the Jews Moses, and the idolaters Sakyamuni Burkhan,⁷ who was the first to be made a god in the form of an idol. And I honour and worship all four, and through them he who is the truest and greatest in heaven, and I pray to him to help me.’ But on the Great Khan’s own showing he holds the Christian faith to be the truest and best, because he says that it commands nothing that is not full of goodness and holiness. And

on no account will he allow the Christians to bear the cross before them, because such a great man as Christ was scourged and died on it.

Someone might well ask why, since he holds the faith of Christ to be the best, he does not embrace it and become a Christian. The reason can be found in what he told Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo, who repeatedly tried to talk to him about the faith of Christ, when he sent them as ambassadors to the pope. He said to them: 'On what grounds do you wish me to make myself a Christian? You see that the Christians who live in these parts are so ignorant that they make nothing of themselves and have no power; you see, too, that these idolaters do anything they please, and when I sit at table the cups in the middle of the hall come to me full of wine or other beverages without anyone touching them, and I drink from them. They drive stormy weather in whichever direction they choose and do many marvellous things, and as you know their idols speak to them and tell them everything they wish to know about the future. But if I converted to the faith of Christ and became a Christian, then my barons and the rest of my people who do not follow the faith of Christ would say to me: "What has induced you to be baptized and to adopt the faith of Christ? What powers or miracles have you seen delivered by his hand?" For these idolaters say that everything they do is done through the holiness and powers of their idols. Then I would not know how to answer them, and there would be terrible confusion among them, and these idolaters who work such wonders with their arts and sciences would easily be able to bring about my death. But take yourselves to your pontiff, and pray him on our behalf to send me a hundred wise men of your faith, men who can show these idolaters the error of their ways and tell them that they too have the knowledge and power to perform such things but abjure them as the work of the Devil and of evil spirits, and who can curb them to the extent that they lose the power to work their wonders in their presence. Then, when we see this, we will repudiate them and their faith, and I will be baptized, and when I am baptized all my barons and lords will be baptized, and their subjects will receive baptism in turn, and so there will be more Christians here than there are in your part of the world.' And as we said at the beginning, if men

qualified to preach our faith to him had actually been sent by the pope, the Great Khan would undoubtedly have become a Christian, because it is a known fact that he had an ardent desire to be converted.

Now you have heard that this was the only time the Great Khan went to war in person. He sent his sons and barons to prosecute all his other wars and affairs, but this once he would not countenance anyone going but himself alone, so boldfaced and dastardly did he consider the effrontery of this baron.

Let us now move on from this subject and return to our account of the wonderful deeds of the Great Khan. We have told you about his lineage and his age. Now we will tell you how he dealt with those barons who acquitted themselves well in battle and how he dealt with those who were ignoble and cowardly.

[You must know that](#) the Great Khan has twelve wise barons who are charged with observing and examining the actions of the captains and soldiers, especially in the expeditions and battles they take part in, and making a report to the Great Khan. With regard to the men who acquit themselves well, he promotes those who had command of a hundred to the command of a thousand, and those who had command of a thousand to the command of ten thousand; and he gives them lavish gifts of silver plate and tablets of authority, each according to his rank. So a commander of a hundred has a silver tablet, a commander of a thousand has a tablet of gold, or rather of silver gilt, and a commander of ten thousand has a gold tablet bearing a lion's head. And I will tell you the weight of these tablets. Those of the commanders of a hundred or a thousand weigh 120 *saggi*,⁸ and those with the lion's head weigh 220 *saggi*. And all these tablets are inscribed with a command in these words: 'By the might of the great God and of the great grace he has granted to our emperor, blessed be the name of the Khan, and death and destruction to all those who do not obey him.' And I will tell you, too, that everyone who has one of these tablets also has a warrant setting forth in writing all the powers vested in him by his rank.

We have now told you about these things. And now we will tell you more of them. For I can assure you that if a man has a great command of 100,000

or leads a great army, he has a gold tablet weighing 300 *saggi*, inscribed just as I have told you above. And at the foot of the tablet is the portrait of the lion, and above that are images of the sun and the moon. And he, too, has a warrant setting out his great rank and great powers. And whenever the bearer of this paramount tablet goes riding, he is also under orders to carry an umbrella above his head as a token of his exalted rank. And every time he sits down, he must sit on a silver chair. The Great Khan furthermore gives men of this rank a tablet with the sign of the gerfalcon; he gives this tablet to the foremost barons so that they may wield full authority equivalent to his own. **Those who possess** this tablet may commandeer the whole army of any great prince for their bodyguard. And when they wish to dispatch envoys or other representatives, they are authorized to requisition a king's horses at their pleasure. And when I say a king's horses, you understand that this means he can take any man's horses.

Now we will move on from this subject and tell you about the personal appearance and manners of the Great Khan.

The Great Lord of Lords whose name is Khubilai Khan looks like this. He is well proportioned, neither small nor large but of medium height. His frame is beautifully fleshed out, and all his limbs are admirably formed. His face is white and red like a rose; the eyes are black and beautiful, the nose shapely and well set.

He has four consorts, all of whom he holds to be his lawful wives; and the eldest of his sons by these four women is the rightful heir to the empire when the Great Khan dies. They are called empresses, each by her own name. And each of these ladies holds her own court; not one of them has fewer than 300 ladies-in-waiting of great beauty and charm. They have numerous eunuchs and many more servants, both male and female, so that each of these ladies has at least 10,000 people in her court. And whenever he desires to sleep with any one of these four women he summons her to his chamber, or on occasion he goes to his wife's chamber.

He also has many concubines, and I will tell you how he goes about this. The fact is that there is a province inhabited by a race of Tartars called

Onggirat.⁹ They are a very handsome and fair-skinned people. Every two years or so, according to his pleasure, the Great Khan sends envoys to this province to pick out for him the most beautiful girls according to the standard of beauty he lays down for them; they choose 400 or 500, or more or less as they deem fit. And the girls' beauty is appraised in this way. When the envoys arrive, they summon all the girls of the province to them. And there are judges, deputed for this purpose, who peruse and examine every part of each girl in turn – such as the hair, the face, the eyebrows, the mouth, the lips and the limbs – to determine whether they are well balanced and in proportion to the whole body, and award some a value of sixteen carats, others seventeen, eighteen, nineteen or twenty, or more or less according to the degree of their beauty. And if the Great Khan has ordered them to select those appraised at twenty carats, or perhaps twenty-one, they bring them to him in the required numbers. And when the girls come before him, he has them assessed again by new valuers, and the thirty or forty of the whole group who are valued most highly are selected for his own chamber. Each girl is then allotted to a wife of one of his barons, who takes her into her own bed and observes carefully to make sure that she is a virgin and in perfect health in every regard, that she sleeps peacefully without snoring, that her breath smells pleasant and sweet, and that there is no unpleasant odour emanating from any part of her body. When they have undergone this careful scrutiny, they are sent to wait on the Great Khan in the way I will tell you. The fact is that six of these girls stay in the lord's chamber for three days and three nights, waiting on him in bed and ministering to all his needs. And the Great Khan does with them as he pleases. After three days and nights, six more take their place; and so they continue all year round, rotating every three days and nights until they have all had their turn, at which point they start over again. Things are so arranged that while one group is serving the lord in his chamber, the others wait in a nearby room. And if the lord is in need of anything from outside, such as food or drink or anything else, the girls inside his chamber tell those in the next room what to prepare, and they get it ready at once. In this way the lord is served by no one except these girls. As for the other girls, the

ones who were rated at a lower value, they live in the palace with the rest of the lord's women, who teach them needlework, glovemaking and other polite accomplishments. And when some nobleman is looking for a wife, the Great Khan gives him one of them together with a huge dowry. And in this way he marries them all off to eligible husbands.

But you might ask: 'Do the men of this province not resent the Great Khan for taking away their daughters?' Certainly not. In fact they account it a great favour and honour, and those who have pretty daughters rejoice if he deigns to accept them. For they say: 'If my daughter was born under a good planet and happy auspices, the lord will be better able to satisfy her and marry her well than I would have been able to do.' And if the daughter does not behave well or has bad fortune, then the father says: 'This has happened to her because her planet was not propitious.'

You should know, too, that the Great Khan has twenty-two sons by his four wives. The eldest was called Genghis,¹⁰ for the love of old Genghis Khan. He was to have succeeded as Great Khan and lord of the whole empire; **indeed he had already** been confirmed as Crown Prince while his father was alive. Now it happened that he died, but he left a son named Temür. This Temür is now in line to be Great Khan and lord, as is proper since he is the son of the eldest son of the Great Khan. I can tell you, moreover, that this Temür is wise and able and has already proved his valour many times in battle.

You should also know that the Great Khan has a further twenty-five sons by his concubines; they are skilled and courageous warriors, and each is a great baron.

I can tell you besides that of his sons by his four wives, seven are kings of vast provinces and kingdoms and all rule their lands well, for they are wise and able men. Which is not surprising, because I assure you that their father the Great Khan is the wisest and most universally gifted man, the greatest ruler of people and empire, and the most valiant of all those who have ever belonged to any of the Tartar races.

Now I have told you about the Great Khan and his sons, and I will go on to tell you about his customs and how he holds court.

You may depend on it that for three months of the year, namely December, January and February, the Great Khan stays in the capital city of Cathay, which is called Khanbaliq. In this city he has his great palace, and I will describe it to you.¹¹

First there is a great square wall, a mile long on each side, making four miles all round. It is very thick and at least ten paces high, completely white and battlemented. At the four corners of this wall rise large palaces of great beauty and opulence in which the Great Khan's military equipment is stored. More palaces like those at the corners rise at the centre points of each side of the wall, so that all round there are eight palaces in total, all filled with the Great Khan's munitions. And let me tell you that each is reserved for a particular type of equipment: [bridles](#), [saddles](#), [stirrups](#) and other kinds of harness for horses are kept in one; bows, bowstrings, quivers, arrows, and the other trappings of archery in another; in a third cuirasses, corselets and similar armour made from boiled leather; and so on with the rest.

This wall has five gates in its southern face. In the middle is a large gate that is never opened except when the Great Khan comes in or out. Flanking this great gate are two small gates that are used by all the other people. And besides these, there are two very large gates near each corner of the wall, which are also used by the other people.

Within this wall is another wall, somewhat greater in length than in breadth. There are eight more palaces around this wall, following the same plan as the others and likewise used to store the Great Khan's munitions. Again there are five gates on the southern side, corresponding to those on the outer wall. The other sides, like those of the other wall I have described to you, have a single gate. And at the centre of these walls rises the palace of the Great Khan, which takes the form I will now describe.

It is the largest palace ever seen. [Towards the north](#) it abuts on the last mentioned wall, and to the south there is an open space where the barons

and soldiers parade. It has no upper storey, but the floor is raised ten palms above the level of the surrounding ground, and the roof is extraordinarily high. [A marble wall](#) two paces thick runs all the way round on a level with the floor; the palace is built within it in such a way that this entire external wall forms a sort of terrace by means of which people can stroll all the way round and survey the outer areas. And on the outer edges of the wall there is an exquisite pillared balustrade where people can gather. On each face of the palace a great flight of marble steps leads up from the ground to the top of this marble wall, and these steps give admittance to the palace.

The walls of the rooms and chambers are completely covered with gold and silver and decorated in relief with pictures of dragons, birds, knights, scenes of battle and various kinds of beasts. The ceiling is likewise fashioned in such a way that nothing but gold and pictures can be seen anywhere. The hall is so vast and so wide that more than 6,000 men could easily eat there. The number of rooms is quite bewildering. The whole building is at once so immense and so finely wrought that there is not a man on earth who could imagine improving on its design or construction, even if he had the power to do so. The roofs are a blaze of scarlet and green and blue and yellow and every other colour; they are so splendidly and skilfully varnished that they shimmer like crystal and their gleam can be seen all around the palace from far away. And let me tell you that the roof is so strong and so sturdily built that it lasts for many years.

[To the rear of the palace](#) there are large houses, rooms and halls in which the personal belongings of the Khan are kept – that is, all his treasure, gold, silver, precious stones and pearls, and his gold and silver vessels – and where his ladies and concubines live; everything is arranged for his comfort and convenience, and outsiders are not admitted.

Between the inner and outer walls I told you about is an expanse of attractively wooded parkland that is home to many kinds of exotic beasts. There are white stags, the animals that make musk, roe deer, fallow deer, squirrels and many other beautiful animals. The whole area between the walls is full of these beautiful beasts, with the sole exception of the roads along which people pass. [The meadows are lush](#) with grass, because all the

roads are paved and raised a good two cubits above the ground, so that mud never collects on them and rainwater is not trapped there, but rather runs off into the meadows and nourishes the soil, making the grass grow thickly.

Below the Great Khan's palace, a crossbowshot to the north but still within the walls, there is a manmade mound of earth a good 100 paces high and more than a mile in circumference. It is thickly planted with trees that never lose their leaves and are always green. And I can tell you that whenever someone mentions a beautiful tree to the Great Khan, he orders it pulled up with all its roots and a quantity of earth and transported by elephants to this mound. However big the tree might be, he still has it dealt with in this way. Consequently he has the most beautiful trees in the world, and they are always green. I can also tell you that the Great Khan has had the whole of this hill covered with lapis lazuli, which is a deep green, so that the trees are all green and the hill is all green, too. Nothing is seen except green things, and therefore it is called the Green Hill. And on top of the hill, in the middle of its summit, there is a large and handsome palace, and it is entirely green as well. And let me tell you that this hill and the trees and the palace form such a beautiful sight that everyone who sees them takes great pleasure and delight in them. And this is why the Great Khan has had them erected, for the sake of the beautiful view and the comfort and enjoyment it gives him.

In the north-western corner of the grounds there is a large [pit, very deep](#) and wide and neatly made, the earth from which formed the aforementioned mound. A modest sized river fills the pit, making a kind of fishpond where animals come to drink. This river then flows out of it, passing through a conduit near the said mound, and fills another huge, deep pit that lies between the palace of the Great Khan and that of his son Genghis,¹² the earth from which was also added to the mound. These pits or ponds contain many varieties of fish, for the Great Khan has had them stocked with many different species; and whenever he wants some of these fish he helps himself. The river flows out of the other side of the pit and runs on its course, but it has been planned and constructed in such a way that there are

iron and brass meshes at the entrance and exit to stop the fish from escaping. There are also swans and other waterfowl.

I can also tell you that the Great Khan has had another palace built near this one, just like his own down to the last detail. It was built for the use of his son when he succeeded him as ruler. Consequently it was constructed in just the same manner and on the same scale and with as many walls as the Great Khan's, which I have told you about above. Temür the son of Genghis, whom I named to you earlier as he who is destined to be lord, lives there; and he observes and upholds all the manners, customs and deeds of the Great Khan, because he has been chosen to take the throne as soon as the Great Khan dies. He already possesses the bull and seal of empire, though so long as the Great Khan is alive they do not confer his full authority. [And to get from one](#) palace to the other you cross a bridge built over this lake.

I have now told you about the palaces and described them to you. Next I will tell you about [the great town of Daidu](#)¹³ where these palaces are found, and why and how it came to be built.

The fact is that there was an ancient city¹⁴ of great size and splendour on this spot that was called Khanbaliq, which in our language means 'The Lord's City'. Now the Great Khan learned from his astrologers that this city was destined to revolt and to mount a great challenge to the empire. And for this reason the Great Khan had this new city built next to the old one, with only a river between them. And he had all the inhabitants of the old city moved to the new town he had founded, which is called Daidu, leaving only those whom he did not suspect of harbouring rebellious intentions, for the new city was not big enough to house all those who lived in the old, which was very large. Even so, I will tell you just how big Daidu is.

It measures twenty-four miles around the perimeter and is square, with no side longer than another. It is enclosed by earthen walls, ten paces thick at the base and twenty paces high. But let me tell you that they are not as thick higher up as they are lower down, because as they rise from their foundations they taper inwards, until at the top they are about three paces

thick. They are battlemented and whitewashed all round. There are twelve gates, and over each gate rises a very large and handsome palace; altogether there are three gates and five palaces on each side of the wall, because there is yet another palace at each corner. These palaces contain vast halls in which the armies that guard the city are quartered.

Let me tell you besides that the whole city is laid out on a grid; for the main streets are so straight and broad from one end to the other that if anyone climbs on the wall at one gate and looks straight ahead, he can see all the way through to the gate on the opposite side. All the main streets are lined on both sides with stalls and shops of every description. And there are many beautiful palaces, and many beautiful inns, and many beautiful houses. Throughout the city, all the plots of land on which houses are built are square and measured by the rule, and all are occupied by large and airy palaces with their own courtyards and gardens. These plots are given to heads of households, so that one belongs to so-and-so from such-and-such a family, and another to so-and-so from another family, and so on from person to person. And each of these square plots is bordered by fine public roads. In this way the whole city inside the walls is laid out in squares, just like a chessboard, and it is so beautiful and so skilfully planned that no description can do it justice.

In the centre of the city there stands a vast palace with a great clock, or rather a bell, which rings at night to signal that no one is allowed to go about town after the third peal. For once the bell has sounded the prescribed number of times, no one dares venture outside except to tend to women in labour or the sick, and those who go around for these reasons must carry lights. Every night guards ride through the city, in parties of thirty or forty, searching the streets and looking for anyone who might be going about the city at an irregular hour, which is to say after the third peal of the bell. And if anyone is found, he is promptly arrested and thrown in prison. And the following morning he is examined by officials appointed for the purpose, and if he is found guilty of any offence he is punished, according to its gravity, with a certain number of strokes of the rod, which sometimes results in death. And they punish men in this way in order to avoid

bloodshed, because their Bakhshi, that is, their learned astrologers, tell them it is wrong to shed human blood.

I can also tell you that it is decreed that each gate must be guarded by 1,000 men. But you must not suppose that they mount this guard for fear of attack; rather they do so as a tribute to the Great Khan who lives within the walls, and also because they do not want robbers to make trouble in the city. That said, owing to the pronouncements of the astrologers they do harbour certain suspicions of the people of Cathay.

So much for the structure of the city of Daidu. Now we will relate how, on one occasion, the Cathayans did in fact plan an uprising in the city.

It is a fact, as will be explained below, that twelve men are appointed with full powers to dispose of territories, governorships and everything else as they see fit. Among them was a Saracen named Ahmad,¹⁵ a shrewd and strong-willed man who had great influence and authority with the Great Khan, more so than any of the others. The emperor was so fond of him that he gave him every prerogative. For, as was discovered after his death, this Ahmad had used his sorcery to cast a powerful spell over the emperor, who gave him his undivided attention and reposed perfect faith in his every word; and so Ahmad had a free hand to do everything he desired. All the governorships and offices of state were in his gift, and he was in charge of punishing all offenders. And whenever he wished to bring about the death of anyone he hated, whether justly or unjustly, he would go to the emperor and say to him: 'So-and-so deserves to die, because he has offended against your Majesty in such-and-such a way.' 'Do as you think best,' the emperor would reply, and Ahmad would have the man put to death forthwith. And so, seeing that he had complete freedom of action and shrinking from speaking up against one in whose words the emperor placed such perfect trust, even the greatest and most powerful men lived in fear of him. If anyone was denounced by him to the emperor on a capital charge and tried to defend himself, he was unable to state his case and refute the charge because there was no one who would take his side and speak against this Ahmad. And in this way he had many innocent people put to death.

Moreover, there was no good-looking woman whom he desired and did not have his way with, either by taking her as a wife if she was unmarried or else by forcing her to submit. When he heard that someone had a pretty daughter, he would have his ruffians go to the girl's father and say: 'What do you aspire to? Here is this daughter of yours. Marry her to the Bailo' – that is to Ahmad, for he was known by the title Bailo or Deputy – 'and we will see to it that he gives you such-and-such a governorship or office for a term of three years.' And so the man would give him his daughter. And then Ahmad would say to the emperor: 'Such-and-such a post is vacant, or will fall vacant on such-and-such a date; so-and-so is the right man for the job.' And the emperor would reply: 'Do as you think best.' And Ahmad would promptly grant him the governorship in question. In this way, by playing partly on men's ambitions for governorships and offices, partly on their fears, Ahmad either took all the most attractive women as his wives or otherwise had them at his pleasure. He also had sons, some twenty-five of them, who occupied the highest offices; and some of them, under cover of their father's name, committed adultery like him and did many other unspeakable and wicked things. This Ahmad had also amassed an immense fortune, because anyone who aspired to a governorship or office sent him a handsome gift.

So this man ruled the roost for twenty-two years. At last the men of the land, that is the Cathayans, seeing no end to the incalculable injuries and unspeakable crimes that he had inflicted on their wives as well as on themselves, and quite unable to endure it any longer, made up their minds to assassinate him and rise up against the city authorities. And among their number was a Cathayan named Qianhu,¹⁶ a commander of 1,000 men, whose mother, daughter and wife had all been violated by Ahmad. Filled with indignation, he plotted the destruction of this man with another Cathayan named Wanhu,¹⁷ a commander of 10,000. They planned to do the deed after the Great Khan had reached the end of his three-month stay in Khanbaliq and had left for the city of Shangdu, where he used to spend another three months, and after his son Genghis had likewise set out for his regular resorts. At such times Ahmad would stay behind to keep guard over

the city, and when any emergency arose he would send word to the Great Khan at Shangdu, who would send back word of his wishes.

When they had agreed their strategy, Wanhu and Qianhu set out to spread the word to the leading Cathayans of the land. By common consent they informed their friends in many other cities of the plan, which was that, on the day appointed for the deed, as soon as they saw a signal fire, they were to kill any man wearing a beard and light a beacon to tell the other cities to follow suit. The reason for this decision to massacre men with beards was that the Cathayans are naturally beardless, whereas the Tartars, Saracens and Christians wear beards. And you must understand that all the Cathayans detested the Great Khan's rule, because he set Tartar overlords – mainly Saracens – above them, and they could not support it because it made them feel like slaves. Indeed the Great Khan had no legal title to rule the province of Cathay, which he had taken by force, and so distrusting the people he handed the government of the lands to Tartars, Saracens and Christians, all of whom were attached to his household and loyal to him, and none of whom were natives of Cathay.

Now the aforementioned Wanhu and Qianhu, on the appointed date, entered the palace by night. Wanhu seated himself on a throne and had many candles lit before him. He sent one of his messengers to Ahmad, who lived in the old city, saying that Genghis, the Great Khan's son, had just arrived during the night and that he was to wait upon him without delay. And when Ahmad heard this, he was thrown into confusion and set off immediately, because he had a deep-seated fear of Genghis. On his way in through the city gate he met a Tartar named Kogatai, who kept constant watch over the city with the 12,000 men under his command.

'Where are you going at this late hour?' Kogatai asked him.

'To Genghis,' he replied, 'who has just this moment arrived.'

'How is it possible,' asked Kogatai, 'that he can have arrived so secretly that I have heard nothing of it?'

And he followed him with a detachment of his men. Now these Cathayans had said among themselves: 'If only we can kill Ahmad, we have nothing to fear from anyone else.' As soon as Ahmad entered the

palace and was confronted with a blaze of candlelight he knelt down before Wanhu, thinking he was Genghis; and Qianhu, who was there with a sword at the ready, cut off his head.

Kogatai, meanwhile, had halted at the entrance to the palace. When he saw what had happened, he cried 'Treason!' and in a flash shot an arrow at Wanhu, killing him where he sat on the throne. Summoning his men, he arrested Qianhu and issued a proclamation throughout the city that anyone who was found out of doors would be killed on the spot. Seeing that the Tartars had uncovered their plot and that with one of the rebel pair killed and the other captured they were leaderless, the Cathayans hid away in their houses and so were unable to send any signals to the other cities to rise up as planned.

Kogatai immediately sent his messengers to the Great Khan with a full account of everything that had happened. The Great Khan sent back word that he should conduct a thorough investigation and punish the guilty according to their deserts. When morning came, Kogatai interrogated all the Cathayans and destroyed and killed many whom he identified as ringleaders of the conspiracy; and the same thing happened in the other cities when it was discovered that they had been parties to the crime.

When the Great Khan returned to Khanbaliq, he resolved to get to the root of this debacle; and so he found out that this accursed Ahmad and his sons had committed any number of abominations of such enormity as we have described above. And it was discovered that he and seven of his sons (for not all of them were bad) had between them taken countless women as wives, not to mention those they had taken by force. Then the Great Khan had all the treasure that Ahmad had hoarded carried from the old city to the new city, where it was put away with his own treasure; and it was found to be beyond all reckoning. That done, he ordered Ahmad's body to be dug up from its grave and flung in the street to be torn to pieces by dogs. As for Ahmad's sons, he had those who had taken up his evil ways flayed alive. And when his thoughts turned to the accursed sect of the Saracens, whose laws sanction them to commit every sin including the murder of anyone who does not share their creed, and he saw that this was why the accursed

Ahmad and his sons had not counted anything they did a sin, he deeply despised it and held it in abomination. He summoned the Saracens to his presence and forbade them to do many things that their law commanded. In particular, he ordered them to take their wives according to the laws of the Tartars and to cease cutting the throats of animals, which was their practice before eating their flesh, and instead to slit their bellies. And at the time all this happened, Messer Marco happened to be in this place.

I have now told you about the city. Next we will tell you about the Great Khan's manner of holding court and about his other deeds.

Now you should know that the Great Khan has a ceremonial guard of 12,000 horsemen called *Keshikten*, which in our language means 'knights and liegemen of the lord'. He keeps them not out of fear of any man but as a mark of his majesty. These 12,000 men have four captains, one for every 3,000; and 3,000 of them remain on guard in the Great Khan's palace for three days and nights, eating and drinking there. And when these 3,000 have mounted guard for three days and nights they move out, and another 3,000 take their place and remain on guard for three days and three nights, and so on until they have all been on guard, after which they begin again from the beginning; and so it goes on all year round. During daytime, naturally, the other 9,000 do not leave the palace, unless one of them goes off on the Great Khan's business or on some urgent errand of his own, so long as it is sanctioned and he has his captain's leave. Even if one of them were to face a serious misfortune such as the impending death of his father or brother or another relative, or if he had suffered some heavy loss that would prevent him from returning quickly, he would still need to ask leave of the Khan. But at night the 9,000 are free to go home.

When the Great Khan is holding court, the seating at banquets is arranged as follows. The emperor's table is much higher than the others. He sits at the north end of the hall, so that he faces south, and his principal wife sits next to him on the left. On the right, but rather lower, sit his sons, his grandsons and his other kinsfolk who belong to the imperial line; so low, in fact, that their heads are on the same level as the emperor's feet, though his

eldest son Genghis is placed somewhat higher than the other sons. Then come the other barons, sitting at other tables lower still. And the same is true of the women: all the wives of the emperor's sons, grandsons and kinsfolk sit on the left, also at a lower level, and then come the wives of the barons and knights, lower down still. And they all know their proper place in the emperor's hierarchy. The tables are arranged in such a fashion that the emperor can see everything, and there are a great many of them. But you must not imagine that everyone sits at table; on the contrary, the majority of the knights and barons in the hall take their meals seated on carpets for want of tables. And more than 40,000 eat outside the hall. For many men come here bringing many costly gifts: men from foreign parts bearing exotic objects, or others who once governed a territory and aspire to do so again. And such men always come on the days when the Great Khan is holding court or celebrating a wedding.

In the middle of the hall where the emperor has his table stands [the most beautiful piece](#) of furniture, very large and richly decorated and constructed like a square chest, three paces long on each side and skilfully worked with exquisite gilded carvings of animals. The inside is hollow and contains a splendid and valuable vessel in the form of a huge pitcher made from pure gold, which holds quite as much wine as a large butt. And round this pitcher, in other words at each corner of the chest, are smaller vessels with the capacity of a firkin, one containing mare's milk, another camel's milk, and so on with the others, according to the different kinds of drinks they have. And all the emperor's cups, in which he is served drinks, stand on this chest. The wine or other precious beverage is drawn off into great golden lacquered bowls, which are easily big enough that they can hold sufficient wine to satisfy eight or ten men. Then they are set on the table, one between every two men, and each of these two men has a gold cup with a handle, and with this cup he takes wine from the great golden lacquer bowl. And every pair of ladies likewise has one of the large bowls and two cups, just as the men have. And you should know that these bowls and other items are very valuable; and let me tell you that the emperor has such vast stores of

gold and silver vessels that no one who had not seen it with their own eyes could ever credit it.

You should know that the waiters who serve food and drink to the Great Khan are all barons; and let me tell you that they have their mouths and noses masked with fine napkins of silk and gold, lest their breath or body odour contaminate the emperor's food or drink. [Certain barons are also](#) charged with looking after newcomers who are unfamiliar with court etiquette and ushering them to their proper and allotted places; these barons continually pass through the hall asking the guests if they need anything, and if anyone asks for wine, milk, meat or anything else they have servants promptly bring it to them.

At all the doors to the hall or any other place where the emperor may be two huge giant-like men are stationed, one on either side, with staves in their hands. This is because no one is permitted to touch the threshold of the door; rather, everyone must step over it. And if anyone accidentally touches it, these guards take away his clothes and he has to pay a fine to redeem them; or if they do not strip him, they administer the allotted number of blows. But if they are newcomers who are ignorant of this rule, certain barons are assigned to introduce them and warn them of the rule. And this is done because touching the threshold is looked upon as a bad omen. But on leaving the hall, since some of the guests are so overcome with drink that they are in no state to control themselves, no such edict is enforced.

There are huge numbers of musical instruments of every variety in the hall, and when the emperor is about to drink they all strike up. As soon as the cup-bearer has handed him the cup he steps back three paces and kneels down, and all the barons and the rest of those present fall to their knees and make a show of great humility. Then the emperor drinks. When he has had his fill the music stops and the people rise to their feet. And every time he drinks they do as you have heard.

Of the food I say nothing, because it goes without saying that it is laid on in great plenty.

I will add that no baron or knight eats there without bringing his wife to dine with the other ladies. And when they have eaten and the tables have

been taken away, a huge troupe of jugglers and acrobats and other entertainers pile into the hall before the emperor and the assembled guests and perform remarkable feats of various kinds. They all put on the most enjoyable and entertaining show in the emperor's presence, and the guests are delighted and laugh and have great fun. And when everything is finished the guests leave, each going back to his lodging or house.

You should know that the Tartars all make festivals of their birthdays. The Great Khan was born on the twenty-eighth day of the lunar cycle in the month of September. And on this day he holds the greatest feast of the year, excepting only the New Year festival of which I will tell you later. Now let me tell you that on his birthday he dresses in magnificent robes of beaten gold. And no fewer than 12,000 barons and knights are dressed with him in a similar colour and style; naturally their clothes are not so costly, but they are all of the same colour and of silk and gold fabrics, and they all have great golden belts. And the emperor gives them these robes. I can tell you, moreover, that the value of some of these robes, which are adorned with precious stones and pearls, amounts to more than 10,000 gold bezants. And there are many of this value. You should know that the Great Khan gives rich robes to these 12,000 barons and knights thirteen times a year, so that they are all dressed in robes matching his own and of great value. And you can see for yourselves that this is a wonderful thing, for there is no other lord in the world besides him who could bring this off or keep it up.

You should know, too, that on his birthday all the Tartar peoples in the world and all the provinces and regions subject to him give him lavish gifts, in keeping with the rank of the giver and the established practice. And rich presents are also brought by other men who wish to petition him for some office of state. The emperor has appointed twelve barons to award offices to such men, according to their deserts. And on this day all the idolaters and all the Christians and all the Saracens and all the races of people offer solemn prayers to their idols and gods, with much singing of hymns and burning of incense and lighting of lamps, that he may save their lord and

give him long life and joy and health. In this manner that I have described to you, this day passes in rejoicing and celebration of his birthday. Now that we have told you all about this, let us move on and tell you about another great feast that is celebrated at the beginning of their year and is called the White Feast.

The fact is that their new year begins in the month of February. And the emperor and all his subjects celebrate it as I will tell you.

According to custom the Great Khan and all his subjects, both men and women, dress themselves in white robes if they can afford to do so. They do this because they believe white clothes are lucky and wholesome, and so they wear them at New Year in the hope of enjoying good fortune and happiness throughout the year. And on this day all the peoples and all the provinces and regions and kingdoms where men hold land or high office in his name bring him splendid gifts of gold and silver and pearls and precious stones and fine white cloth in great quantities. And they do this so that throughout the year their emperor may have plenty of treasure and live in joy and happiness. And let me tell you, too, that the barons and knights and all the people exchange gifts of white things and embrace one another with joy and jubilation, [saying to one another](#) just as we do: 'Good luck to you this year and may everything you do turn out well.' And they do this so that they may enjoy good fortune and prosperity throughout the year.

You should also know for a fact that on this day more than 100,000 white horses of great beauty and fine pedigree are given to the Great Khan. [And if they are not pure white](#), they are at the least mainly white; for great numbers of white horses are found in these parts. It is also their custom that all the provinces that give presents to the Great Khan must, if they have the means, follow the rule that they give nine times nine of every present; so if a province sends horses, it gives nine times nine horses, which is to say eighty-one; if it presents gold, it gives nine times nine pieces; if cloths, nine times nine pieces; and so on for all the other things.

On this day there is also a procession of his elephants, which number at least 5,000, all covered in fine cloths embroidered with beasts and birds.

Each of them bears on its back two magnificent and richly wrought strongboxes filled with the emperor's plate and the finery of the White Court. With them come countless camels, also draped with cloths and loaded with the things needed for the feast. They all file past the emperor, and it is the most beautiful sight that ever was seen.

I can tell you, too, that on the morning of this feast, before the tables are set, all the kings and all the dukes and marquesses and counts, barons, knights, astrologers, physicians, falconers and many other officials and rulers of people and territories and armies gather in the great hall before the emperor; those who cannot get in stay outside the palace, in a place where the emperor can clearly see them. And I will tell you how they are drawn up. At the front are his sons and grandsons and those of his imperial line. Next come the kings, then the dukes, and then all the other ranks, one behind another in their proper order. And when they are all seated in their rightful places, a high priest stands up and says in a loud voice: 'Bow down and worship!' And no sooner have these words left his lips than they all bow down, touching their foreheads to the ground, directing a prayer to the emperor and worshipping him for all the world as if he were God. **Then the priest proclaims:** 'God save our lord and long preserve him in gladness and joy!' And all answer: 'God do so!' And the priest returns: 'God increase and multiply his empire from good to better, and keep all his subjects in tranquil peace and goodwill, and in all his lands may all things continue to prosper!' And all answer: 'God do so!' And in this manner they worship him four times. Then they proceed to a handsomely dressed altar, on which is set a red tablet inscribed with the name of the Great Khan and a beautiful censer. And they cense the tablet and the altar with great reverence. Then they go back to their places. And when they have all done this, they give the gifts I have told you about, which are of such enormous value and such opulence. And when all the presents have been given and the emperor has viewed them all, the tables are set out. And when they have been laid, the guests sit down in due order as I have described to you before. So the emperor sits at his high table with his first wife on his left and no one else. Then all the others sit in the manner and order I have described, and all the

ladies sit on the empress's side just as I have described. And he keeps table in the manner I have described to you before. And when they have finished eating, the jugglers come in and entertain the court just as you have heard before. When everything is over, they all return to their lodgings or houses.

I have now told you about the White Feast that marks the start of the New Year. At this point I will return to a most noble custom of the emperor's: his decree that individual barons are to wear specific robes when they attend his appointed feasts.

Now you may take it for a fact that the emperor has ordained thirteen solemn feasts, one for each of the thirteen lunar months, which the 12,000 barons called *Keshikten*, which is to say the emperor's personal guard, are required to attend. To each of them he has given thirteen robes of stupendous value, all of different colours and all splendidly adorned with pearls and gems and other opulent things. He has also given each of the 12,000 barons a gold belt of great beauty and value as well as shoes of fine leather, very skilfully embroidered with silver thread, which are very beautiful and costly. They are all so nobly and splendidly attired that when they are fully robed any one of them might pass for a king. And each of these robes is designated for wearing at one of the thirteen feasts. [These garments are always](#) kept at the ready, although they are not made anew every year but on the contrary last about ten years. And the emperor himself has thirteen robes similar to those of his barons – similar, that is, in colour, but more splendid and more valuable and more richly adorned. So on every occasion he is dressed in the robes that match those of his barons.

I have now told you about the thirteen robes that the 12,000 barons receive from their lord, amounting in total to 156,000 robes of the costliness and great value I have mentioned, and which together represent an almost incalculable quantity of treasure, to say nothing of the belts and shoes, which are themselves worth a great deal. And the emperor does all this in order to lend more splendour and dignity to his feasts.

I will tell you another thing, too, which is very remarkable and not unworthy of mention in our book. For you should know that a great lion is led into the emperor's presence, and as soon as it sees him it flings itself

down prostrate before him, making signs of deep humility and seemingly recognizing him as lord. There it stays without a chain, and it is undoubtedly a thing to marvel at.

Now we will move on from this subject and tell you about the great hunting parties that the emperor arranges, as you will hear.

Now the fact of the matter is that during the three months the emperor spends in the city of Khanbaliq, namely December, January and February, he has decreed that everyone within a radius of sixty days' journey from where he is staying must hunt and fowl. And the order goes out to every governor of peoples and territories to send him all the large animals such as wild boar, stags, bucks, roe deer, bears and the like, or at any rate the majority of them. [This is how they catch](#) them: each provincial governor gathers round him all the huntsmen from his lands, and they all set out for wherever the animals are to be found, hemming them in from every side and killing them with dogs or most often with arrows. And this is how all the people I have mentioned hunt. The animals they wish to send to the emperor are first disembowelled, then loaded on carts and dispatched. This applies to those within thirty days' journey, and their combined bag is enormous. Those who are between thirty and sixty days' journey distant do not send him the flesh, because it would not travel so far, but instead send all the hides already dressed and tanned, so that the emperor can use them to manufacture the equipment necessary for his wars and armies.

Now I have told you about the arrangements for the hunt, and next we will tell you about the wild animals that the emperor keeps.

You should also know that the emperor has a ready supply of leopards skilled in hunting game. He also has huge numbers of lynxes, all trained to catch game and all excellent hunters. He has many enormous lions, much bigger than those of Egypt. They have gorgeous, richly coloured fur marked with longitudinal stripes of black, red and white. They are trained to hunt wild boar, wild oxen, bears, wild asses, stags, roebucks and other animals. And I can tell you it is an impressive sight to watch these fierce creatures

fall prey to the lions. When the lions are led out to the chase they are transported in cages on carts, with a little dog to keep each company. [The reason they are caged](#) is that otherwise they would be too ferocious and too hungry for the chase, and there would be no restraining them. They also have to be led upwind; for if their prey caught wind of their scent, they would not stay put until they arrived but would bolt at once. He also has a great many eagles trained to catch wolves, foxes, bucks and roe deer, and they take them in large numbers. Those that are trained to take wolves are enormously large and strong, for you may be certain that there is no wolf big enough to escape capture by these eagles.

Now I have told you about this, and you have heard what I have to say. Next I want to tell you about the huge pack of fine hounds that the emperor keeps.

The fact is that the emperor has two barons who are actual brothers, one named Bayan and the other Mingan. They bear the title *kuyukchi*, which means 'keepers of the mastiffs'. Each of these brothers has 10,000 men under him, and each 10,000 wear livery of the same colour, namely red for one group and blue for the other. And every time they go hunting with the emperor, they wear these liveries that I have told you about. Out of each 10,000 there are 2,000 who each have charge of one, two or more great mastiffs, so that the total number is immense. And when the emperor goes hunting, one of these brothers accompanies him on one side with his 10,000 men and at least 5,000 dogs, while the other brother goes on the other side with his own 10,000 men and their dogs. They all move forward abreast of one another, spaced out so that the line extends the length of a day's march. No wild beast in their path escapes capture. It is too beautiful for words to watch the hunt and the actions of the hounds and hunters. Picture if you will the emperor riding out hawking with his barons across the open country, and packs of these hounds chasing after bears and stags and other beasts on both sides; it is a glorious sight to see. [And these two brothers](#) are bound by covenant to provide the Great Khan's court, every day from October to the end of March, with a thousand head of game, both beasts and birds but

excluding quail, and also as many fish as they can, with the quantity of fish that would make a square meal for three people counting as one head.

So I have now told you about the men who keep the hounds. Now we will tell you how the emperor spends the other three months.

When the emperor has passed the three months of December, January and February in the city I have referred to above, he leaves in the month of March and travels south for two days until he reaches the Ocean Sea. He takes with him no fewer than 10,000 falconers and at least 500 gerfalcons, as well as peregrine falcons and saker falcons in huge numbers, and many goshawks for catching waterfowl on the rivers. You must not suppose, however, that he keeps the whole company with him in one place; rather he distributes them here and there, in groups of a hundred or two hundred or more. And they hunt birds and bring the greater part of their catch to the emperor. But let me tell you that when the emperor himself goes hawking with his gerfalcons and other birds, he takes with him all 10,000 men, split up into pairs; they are known as *toscaor*, which in our language means 'men who stand and watch'. And so they do, for they stand here and there in pairs so that they have full command of a wide expanse of country; and each has a call and a hood so they can call in the hawks and hold them. So when the emperor orders his hawks to be cast, there is no need for the casters to go after them, because the men I mentioned who are stationed all around keep such a close watch that wherever the hawks go, they go too; and if the birds are in need of help, they help them in a flash.

All the emperor's falcons, as well as those of the barons, have attached to their feet a little silver tablet inscribed with the names of their owner and keeper. And by this means the birds are identified as soon as they are taken and are returned to their owners. And if the finder does not know the owner, he takes it to a baron who is called *bularguchi*, which means 'keeper of lost property'. For let me tell you that if anyone finds a horse or a sword or a bird or anything else and cannot determine its owner, it is immediately brought to this baron and he takes it for safekeeping. And if the finder does not hand it over promptly he is held to be a thief. Anyone who has lost

anything applies to this baron, and if their property has been handed in, he has it returned to them on the spot. And this baron always sets himself up at the highest point of the camp, with his banner flying, so that he can immediately be seen by anyone who has lost something. In this way nothing can be lost without its being found and restored to its owner.

When the emperor takes this road I have mentioned towards the Ocean Sea, the way becomes a spectacle of fine displays of huntsmanship and falconry. There is no amusement in the world to compare with it. When he goes hawking [the emperor always rides](#) on one or two elephants, because of the narrowness of the passes in certain places which makes them more accessible to one or two elephants than to many; otherwise he always travels on four elephants. On their backs he has a magnificent wooden cabin all lined inside with cloth of beaten gold and covered outside with lion skins. [The Great Khan always](#) keeps to this cabin when he goes hawking because he is troubled with the gout, and he always has twelve of his best gerfalcons with him. Several barons¹⁸ also stay with him, to entertain him and keep him company. I can tell you, too, that when the emperor is travelling in this cabin on the elephants and some of the other barons riding alongside him call out, 'Sire, there are cranes passing', and ordering the cabin roof thrown open he sees the cranes, he chooses some of the gerfalcons and has them released. And these gerfalcons often take the cranes after a long fight. He watches the whole time from his couch, and it gives him enormous pleasure and delight. Meanwhile the other barons and knights ride all round him. And let me tell you that there never was, nor do I believe there is now, any man on earth who enjoys such fine sport and such sheer pleasure as he does, nor any with the wherewithal to do so.

When he has travelled far enough to reach a place called Cachar Modun, he finds his tents already pitched there along with those of his sons and his barons and concubines; altogether there are more than 10,000, all very beautiful and opulent. And I will tell you how his pavilion is made.

It is quite enormous. The tent where he holds court is big enough to accommodate 1,000 knights; its entrance faces south, and it serves as a hall for the barons and other retainers. Communicating with this tent is another

facing west where the emperor resides; when he wants to speak to someone he summons him inside. And to the rear of the great hall there is a fine and spacious chamber where the emperor sleeps. There are also other rooms and other tents, but they are not linked to the great tent. You may take my word for it that the two halls and the chamber that I have mentioned take the form I will describe to you. Each hall has three columns skilfully carved from spice wood. On the outside they are all covered with magnificent lion skins striped black, white and orange. They are so well designed that neither wind nor rain can spoil them or do any damage. Inside they are entirely lined with ermine and sable, these being the most beautiful, the most luxurious and the most valuable furs of all. In fact the finest sable pelts, in sufficient quantity to make a man's cloak, are worth at least 2,000 golden bezants, with the regular grade worth 1,000 bezants; the Tartars call it the king of furs. The sable is about the size of a weasel. And these two great imperial halls are so artfully lined and embellished with these two kinds of fur that it is a truly astonishing sight. The room where the emperor sleeps adjoining the two halls is also covered with lion skins outside and sable and ermine pelts inside and is magnificent in design and workmanship. And the ropes that hold up the halls and rooms are of pure silk. So great is the value and cost of these three tents that no minor king could afford them.

Surrounding these tents are all the other tents, all well designed and appointed.

The emperor's concubines also have lavish pavilions. And there are also vast numbers of tents for the gerfalcons and falcons and other birds and animals. What else shall I tell you? You may take my word for it that the sheer number of people in this camp almost passes belief; you could easily imagine that the Great Khan was in the finest city he possessed, teeming as it is with people from all parts. For when he travels he takes his entire household staff with him, along with his physicians, astrologers, falconers and many other officials, and everything runs as smoothly as it does in his capital.

You should know that he stays in this place till spring, which in these parts falls about our Easter Day. During all this time he never ceases to go

hawking on the lakes and rivers, catching plenty of cranes, swans and other birds. And his followers, who are dispersed throughout the surrounding area, bring him plenty of venison and game. All this time he indulges in the finest sport and the most exquisite pleasures in the world, so much so that there is not a man in the world who would believe it unless he saw it; such is the extent to which his magnificence and his state and his pleasures surpass any description of mine.

I will tell you another thing, too: no merchant or artisan or peasant dares keep any falcons or birds of prey or hunting dogs¹⁹ throughout the whole of the Great Khan's dominions. And no baron or knight or nobleman of any degree dares to hunt or fowl near the place where the Great Khan stays, in some cases to a distance of five days' journey, in others ten or even fifteen days' journey, unless he is entered in the rolls of the captain of the falconers or has a special privilege in this regard. But beyond the limit of twenty days' journey, in every other province and part of his dominions they are perfectly free to hunt and keep hawks and hounds as they please. And moreover, you should know for a fact that throughout all the lands where the emperor holds sway no king, baron or any other man dares to take or hunt hares or fallow deer or roe deer or stags or any similar animals during the breeding season that lasts from the month of March until October; this is so that they are able to increase and multiply. Anyone who contravened this order would be made to repent it bitterly, because the emperor himself has decreed it; and rest assured that his command is obeyed so fully that the hares and the deer and the other animals I have named to you often come right up to people, and they do not touch them or do them any harm.

The emperor stays here till about Easter Day, spending his time in the way you have heard. And when he has stayed here for as long as you have heard, he sets out with all his people and returns directly to the city of Khanbaliq, taking the same road by which he came and hunting and hawking all the way with great pleasure and joy.

When he arrives at his capital city²⁰ of Khanbaliq he stays in his principal palace for three days and no more. He holds a great court, throws lavish

banquets, and enjoys and entertains himself no end with his wives. And I assure you it is a wonderful thing to see the great pomp displayed by the emperor during these three days.

I will tell you, moreover, that in this city there are such vast numbers of houses and residents, inside the walls and without, that no one could count their number. For you should know that there are as many suburbs outside the city gates as there are gates, which is to say twelve; they are so large that the suburb around each gate touches the suburbs of the gates on either side, stretching to a distance of three or four miles. There are, in fact, many more people in the suburbs than there are in the city. And in each of these suburbs, extending perhaps a mile from the city, there are numerous fine factories that provide lodging for merchants and travelling foreigners – large numbers of whom come from all parts to bring gifts to the Great Khan and to sell their wares to the court – as well as for all the other men who come here on business. They arrive in huge numbers, both those who come from every direction and for countless reasons to the Khan whenever he holds court, and those merchants and other men who come here for their business because the town affords such a good market. And a particular factory is reserved for each kind of visitor, in the same way that we might say there was one for the Lombards, one for the Germans, and another for the French. I will tell you, moreover, that the houses and palaces in the suburbs are just as beautiful as those in the city, excepting those of the Great Khan.

You should know, too, that no one who dies in the city is buried there. If he is an idolater, his body is carried to the place prescribed for cremations, which is beyond all the suburbs. And the other dead are dealt with in the same way: they, too, are buried beyond all the suburbs in a prescribed place, so that the land around the city is healthier and more valuable as a result. Similarly, no sentences are carried out in the city but only beyond the suburbs.

I will tell you another thing, too. No sinful women – that is to say women of the world who perform services for men in return for money – dare to live within the city, unless they do so in secret; I can tell you that they live

in the suburbs. And you should know that there is such an extraordinary number of them that no man would credit it; for I assure you there are at least 20,000 of them, all servicing men for money. And I assure you they are all needed to satisfy the vast numbers of merchants and foreigners who come and go here every day. They have a captain general, and a chief for every hundred and thousand, all reporting to the captain. And the reason why these women have a captain is that, whenever ambassadors come to the Great Khan on his business and are accommodated at his expense and in the most gracious manner, this captain is duty bound to provide each of the ambassadors and each of his retinue with one prostitute per night; they are changed nightly, and they receive no payment, because this is the tax they pay to the Great Khan. Now you can judge for yourself whether there are vast multitudes of people in Khanbaliq, since the number of worldly women there is as great as I have told you.

You may be certain that more precious and valuable goods arrive in Khanbaliq than in any other city in the world. I will tell you what they are. First of all, let me tell you that all the treasures that come from India – precious stones, pearls and all the other rarities – are brought to this city. Then, all the choicest and costliest things from the province of Cathay and from every other province are brought here as well. And this is on account of the Great Khan himself, who lives here, and of the ladies and lords and the vast multitudes of soldiers in his armies, as well as of the other people who come to attend the court that the Great Khan holds here. And for this reason that I have given you, more precious things of greater value come in greater quantities to this city than to any other city in the world, and more goods are sold and bought here. For you may depend on it that every day more than a thousand carts loaded with silk enter the city, for a great deal of cloth of gold and silk is woven here. Moreover, this city is surrounded by more than 200 other cities, near and far, whose traders come here to buy many items; they find the things they need here and make their living mainly by selling goods that are in demand when the court is in residence. And so it is not surprising that as many goods as I have described to you pour into this city.

Since I have given you a full and clear account of this phenomenon, I will now tell you about the workings of the mint and the money that is manufactured in this same city of Khanbaliq. And we will clearly show you how it is that the emperor can do a great deal more – and spend more – than I have related or will relate to you in this book.

The fact is that the emperor's mint is in this city of Khanbaliq; and it is set up in such a way that you might well say he has mastered the art of alchemy, as I will now prove to you.

Now you should know that he has money made for him in the following way. He has the bark stripped from trees – to be precise, from the mulberry trees whose leaves are eaten by silkworms. Then the thin layer of bast between the bark and the wood of the tree is removed. After being ground and pounded it is pressed with the aid of glue into sheets like those of cotton paper, which are completely black. And when these sheets are ready they are cut up into pieces of different sizes, rectangular in shape and of greater length than breadth. The smallest one is worth half a small tornesel; the next, one small tornesel; the next, half a silver groat; the next, a whole silver groat equal in value to a silver groat of Venice; the next, two groats; the next, five groats; the next, ten groats; the next, one gold bezant; the next, three gold bezants; and so on up to ten bezants. All these sheets of paper are stamped with the emperor's seal. **And they are made** with as much authority and solemnity as if they were cast from pure gold or silver; for several specially appointed officials write their names on each piece of money, each setting his own stamp, and when everything has been done correctly the chief of the officials deputed by the emperor dips the seal entrusted to him in cinnabar and stamps it on the piece of money, so that the imprint of the seal dipped in the cinnabar remains impressed upon it; and then the money is legal tender. And if anyone were to counterfeit it, he would be punished with the ultimate penalty.

The Great Khan has such a huge quantity of this money made that with it he could buy all the treasure in the world. And when these sheets of paper have been finished in the way I have described to you, he has all his

payments made with them and has them distributed through all the provinces and kingdoms and lands where his rule holds; no one dares refuse them on pain of losing his life. Besides, let me tell you that all the races and regions of men under his rule are perfectly willing to accept these sheets in payment, since wherever they go they use them to make all their payments, whether for merchandise or pearls or precious stones or gold or silver; with these sheets that I have told you about they can buy anything and pay for anything. And you can take my word for it that the sheet worth ten bezants does not weigh even one.

Let me tell you, too, that several times a year large parties of merchants arrive with pearls and precious stones and gold and silver and other things, such as gold and silk cloths; and these merchants give all these things to the emperor. The emperor then summons twelve experts who are appointed to head up this task and are highly proficient at it, and orders them to examine the things the merchants have brought and see to it that what they judge to be fair value is paid for them. So these twelve experts cast their eyes over the goods and see to it that what they deem fair value is paid in the form of these sheets of paper I have told you about. And the merchants accept them willingly, because afterwards they spend them on all the things they buy throughout the emperor's lands. Moreover, I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that the merchants bring so many things so often during the year that they are easily worth 400,000 bezants, and the emperor has them all paid with these sheets.

Let me further tell you that several times a year a proclamation is issued across the city to the effect that all those who have gems and pearls and gold and silver must bring them to the emperor's mint. And they do so, bringing them in such huge quantities that it is past all reckoning; and they are all paid with these sheets of paper. In this way the emperor accumulates all the gold and the silver and the pearls and the precious stones from all his lands.

I will tell you another thing worth repeating. When these sheets have been so long in circulation that they are torn and defaced, they are brought to the mint and exchanged for fresh new ones in return for surrendering

three out of every hundred. And let me tell you a curious fact well worth recording in our book: if a man wants to buy gold or silver to make his service of plate or his belts or other finery, he goes to the emperor's mint with some of those sheets and pays with them for the gold and silver he buys from the master of the mint. [All the armies](#) are likewise paid with this kind of money.

So now you know how and why the emperor has and cannot but have more treasure than any other man on earth. I will go still further and say that all the kings in the world put together do not possess such riches as belong to the Great Khan alone. Now I have told you and explained in detail how the emperor makes money of paper; next I will tell you about the great officers of state who wield authority from Khanbaliq on the emperor's behalf.

Now you should be aware of the fact that the emperor (as already mentioned) has chosen twelve mighty [and powerful barons](#) to oversee all matters concerning the armies, such as redeploying them from their current location, making changes to the high command, or dispatching troops to the places they think expedient and deciding how many are required, whether more or less according to the importance of the war. They are also charged with sorting out the staunch and fearless warriors from those who are weak and spineless, promoting the former to a higher rank while demoting the others who are worthless and cowardly. And if anyone is captain of a thousand and has disgraced himself in any action, these barons, deeming him unworthy of his station, downgrade his rank and demote him to the command of a hundred. But if he has borne himself gallantly and boldly, they judge him worthy of a higher rank and make him captain of 10,000, always acting, though, with the emperor's full knowledge. For when they wish to demote anyone they say to the emperor, 'So-and-so is unworthy of such an office', and he answers, 'Let him be demoted to a lower rank', and so it is done. But if they wish to promote someone in recognition of his merits they say, 'Such-and-such a captain of a thousand is fit and worthy to be captain of ten thousand'; in this case the emperor confirms the appointment and gives him the appropriate tablet of authority, as previously

described, and then has presents of great value given to him so as to rouse the others to similar acts of valour. This council of twelve barons is called *Tai*,²¹ which means 'Higher Court', because they have no lord above them except the Great Khan himself.

Besides these barons, there are twelve more in whom the Great Khan has vested authority over all the affairs of thirty-four provinces; and I will tell you how they are organized.

First of all, let me tell you that these twelve barons live in the city of Khanbaliq, in a huge and beautiful palace with many halls and residences. Each province has its own judge and staff of clerks who stay in the palace, each in his own house. And the judge and his clerks execute all the business of the province to which they are assigned, acting on the wishes and orders of the twelve barons I have told you about.

Furthermore, you should have no doubt about the authority of these twelve barons, which extends as far as I will tell you. For they appoint the governors of all those provinces that I mentioned above. When they have chosen a man whom they consider able and qualified they recommend him to the emperor; the emperor then confirms the appointment and has the relevant gold tablet conferred on him. **And these barons also supervise** the collection of taxes and revenues, together with their administration and disbursement, as well as all the rest of the Great Khan's affairs in the provinces I mentioned above, with the sole exception of military matters. They are called *Sheng*, **which means 'Second Highest Court'**, because there is no court above them but only the emperor himself. The palace where they live is also called *Sheng*. And in the whole of the emperor's court there is assuredly no higher authority, for they truly have the power to confer great benefits on whomsoever they will.

So neither of these courts, the *Sheng* or the *Tai*, has any overlord except the Great Khan; nevertheless membership of *Tai*, or the court appointed to oversee the armies, is held to confer more status and dignity than any other office.

I will not tell you the names of the provinces at this point, because I will give you a full account of them in the course of our book. So we will move

on and tell you how the emperor dispatches his messengers²² and how their horses are kept at the ready.

Now you may take my word for it that many roads lead from this city of Khanbaliq through many provinces; or, rather, one road leads to one province while another leads to another. And each road is named after the province to which it leads. This is a very wise thing. And you should know that when one of the emperor's messengers leaves Khanbaliq by any of these roads that I have mentioned and rides for twenty-five miles, he comes to a posting station, which is called a *yamb* in their language and signifies 'horse-post' in ours. At every post the messengers find a large and splendid palace where any of the emperor's envoys may lodge; these lodgings are equipped with sumptuous beds draped with luxurious silk sheets and provided with everything fitting for emissaries of high rank. **All this is furnished** by the neighbouring towns and villages, or in some cases the court. If a king were to go there, he would be well lodged. And I can also tell you that at these posts the messengers find at least 400 horses, stabled there on the emperor's orders and always kept in readiness for his messengers when he sends them on a mission, **in order that they may** dismount there and exchange their tired horses for fresh ones. You should know, moreover, that posts such as these are to be found along all the main roads leading to the provinces I mentioned above, at intervals of twenty-five or thirty miles. And at each of these posts the messengers find 300 or 400 horses kept in full readiness to meet their requirements. They also find palaces as fine as I have described, where they lodge as luxuriously as I have told you above. And this is the case throughout all the emperor's provinces and realms.

When the messengers have to go off road through mountainous terrain where there are no homes or inns, they find that the emperor has had posts established even in these remote places, complete with palaces and every amenity provided by the other posts, including horses and harness. But here the stages are longer, for the posts are placed at intervals of thirty-five or in some cases more than forty miles. **The emperor sends people** to live in these

places, to work the land and serve the posts, and sizeable villages grow around them.

In this way, just as you have heard, the Great Khan's messengers travel in every direction [through all the provinces](#) and kingdoms and other lands under his rule with great convenience and ease, and lodgings and horses await them at every day's stage. This is without doubt the greatest glory and the greatest distinction that any emperor has or could ever have, never mind any king or other mortal. For you may take my word for it that more than 200,000 horses are stationed at these posts across all his provinces, purely for the use of his messengers. And let me also tell you that there are more than 10,000 palaces, all furnished as lavishly as I have described. The whole thing is so stupendous and so exorbitantly expensive that it is scarcely possible to speak or write about it in a way that does it justice.

[If anyone is wondering](#) how there could be enough people to perform so many duties, or what they live on, the answer is that all the idolaters, and likewise the Saracens, take six, eight or ten wives each, so long as they can bear the expense, and beget innumerable children; many a man will have more than thirty sons, all of whom follow him armed, and this is all because they have so many wives. But with us a man has just one wife, and if she is barren he will end his days with her and beget no sons; and for this reason we do not have such a large population as they do. With regard to food, they have plenty, because they mainly eat rice, panic or millet, particularly the Tartars, the Cathayans and the people of the province of Manzi. And in their countries the yield of these grains is a hundred times the volume of seed sown. The people do not eat bread, but simply boil these three kinds of grain with milk or meat and eat them. Wheat does not give such a great yield in their country; but what they reap they eat only as lasagne and other pasta dishes. No land of theirs that can be ploughed lies fallow; their animals increase and multiply without end, and when they go campaigning there is not one who does not take with him six, eight or more horses for his own use. So it is not hard to understand why the populations in these parts are so vast and the means of life so abundant.

And now I will tell you about something that slipped my mind but relates to the matter I have just told you about. The fact is that between one post and the next, at intervals of three miles, there are villages consisting of as many as forty houses occupied by unmounted couriers who also play a part in the emperor's postal service. I will tell you how. They wear large belts covered all round with bells, so that when they are on the move they can be heard a long way off. They always run at full tilt, and never for more than three miles. And the other couriers who are waiting three miles down the road clearly hear them while they are still some way off and stand at the ready. As soon as the first courier arrives, the second takes what he is carrying, along with a little ticket given to him by the clerk, and sets off to run the second leg of three miles, at the end of which the handover is repeated. And you can take my word for it that by means of these couriers the emperor gets news from places ten days' journey away in a day and a night. For you should know that these runners cover the distance of a ten-day journey in a day and a night, and in two days and nights they bring news from places twenty days' journey away; and so in ten days and nights the emperor would have news from places a hundred days' journey away. Let me tell you, too, that these men often deliver fruit to the emperor, bringing it from places ten days' journey away in a day and night. [And when the fruit](#) is in season it is often gathered in the city of Khanbaliq in the morning and delivered the next day, towards evening, to the Great Khan in the city of Shangdu, which is ten days' journey distant. Each of these three-mile stations has a clerk whose task is to note the day and hour when one runner arrives and the day and hour when the next runner leaves; and this is the practice at every station. And there are men who are charged with doing the rounds of all the stations every month, examining them to check whether any of the runners have been lagging and, if necessary, meting out punishments. The emperor levies no taxes on these couriers or the station attendants but provides for them handsomely out of his own purse.

As for the horses I have mentioned that are kept in such numbers at the posts to carry the messengers, I will tell you exactly how the emperor has arranged for them to be there. He asks himself: 'Which of my people are

nearest to such-and-such a post?’ And he answers: ‘The people of such-and-such a city.’ **On his orders** the civic authorities ascertain, with the help of local experts, how many horses the city can maintain in the neighbouring post for the use of the messengers. If the answer is a hundred, they are ordered to place a hundred horses at the post. Next he finds out how many horses each of the nearby towns and villages can maintain, and they are ordered to keep as many as they can at the post. All the posts are supplied with horses in this way at no cost to the emperor, the only exception being that he contributes some horses to the posts in out-of-the-way places, **though the nearby cities**, castles and towns also keep some there. The cities cooperate with each other, because between one post and the next there is sometimes another city that contributes its share along with the others. And these cities maintain the horses out of the taxes due to the Great Khan; for example, if a man is assessed for taxation at a figure that would keep one and a half horses, he is ordered to make corresponding provision at the local post. But you must understand that the cities do not keep 400 horses continuously at each post; rather, they keep 200 there a month to bear the burden of the work, while the other 200 are fattening. At the end of the month the fattened horses are transferred to the post and the others are taken away to graze; and so they keep on revolving them. If at any point there happens to be a river or lake that the runners and mounted couriers need to cross, the nearby cities keep three or four boats ready for them. And if there is a desert that takes many days to cross and is unable to support any habitation, the city nearest the desert is obliged to supply the emperor’s envoys with horses, provisions and an escort to see them across. But the emperor furnishes aid to such cities.

I can also tell you that when the need arises for mounted couriers to travel fast to give the emperor news of the rebellion of some country or baron or anything else vital to his interests, they ride no less than 200 miles in a day, or even 250. And I will tell you how. When a messenger wishes to travel fast and cover as many miles in a day as I have said, he carries the tablet with the sign of the gerfalcon as a token that he wishes to go post-haste. If there are two of them, they set out from the place where they are

on two good, strong and swift horses. They bind up their torsos and swathe their heads and gallop off with all the speed they can muster till they reach the next post twenty-five miles away. **As they approach** they sound a sort of horn that can be heard from far away as a signal to prepare the horses, and when they arrive they find two swift horses fresh and rested and waiting. They mount in a trice without a moment's respite and are no sooner in the saddle than they are off again, pushing their horses to the limit and never slowing from a gallop till they reach the next post, where they find two more horses at the ready, mount just as quickly and regain the road. And they keep going like this till evening. In this way that I have described to you, these messengers cover a good 250 miles a day to bring news to the emperor; and if necessary they can manage no less than 300 miles. **In cases of extreme urgency** they also ride by night, and if there is no moon the men of the post run in front of them with torches as far as the next post. Even so, these messengers cannot cover so much ground by night as by day, because the men who run on foot with torches could not keep pace. And messengers who can endure the fatigue of such a ride as this are highly prized.

Now let us move on from the subject of these messengers, since we have certainly given you a clear picture of it. Instead I will tell you about a great kindness that the emperor does his subjects twice a year.

Now you should also be aware of the fact that the emperor sends his messengers throughout his lands and realms and provinces to learn whether any of his people have suffered a failure of their crops, whether as a result of bad weather or plagues of locusts or other pests. And if it turns out that any have lost their harvest, he not only exempts them from that year's taxes but also gives them some of his own grain, to ensure that they have enough to sow and eat. And this is truly great generosity on the emperor's part. This is done in summer, and in winter he does the same for those who have lost cattle. For if he finds any man whose cattle have perished from an outbreak of plague, he gives him some of his own animals from the tithe he receives from other provinces and to help him further exempts him from paying tax for the year.

His sole purpose and main concern in this is to help his subjects so that they may live, work and prosper. But we also want to tell you about another idiosyncrasy of the emperor's. If by some stroke of ill luck lightning strikes a flock of sheep or a herd of any other animals, whether it belongs to one or more people and no matter how big it may be, the Great Khan forgoes his tithe for three years. And similarly, if lightning chances to strike a ship carrying a full cargo, he waives any dues or share of the goods, because he takes it to be a bad omen when lightning strikes any man's possessions. For he reasons: 'God hated this man, and so He struck him with lightning.' And he has no desire that goods struck by the wrath of God should end up in his treasury.

In these ways that you have heard the emperor helps and supports his men. Since I have told you about this subject, I will now tell you about another matter.

Now you may depend on it that the emperor has ordered trees to be planted at intervals of two paces by the waysides of the main roads travelled by his messengers and by merchants and others. And I can tell you that they are big enough to be seen from a long way off. The Great Khan did this so that anyone would be able to make out the roads and not lose his way. For you will find these trees lining deserted roads where they are a great comfort to merchants and other travellers. And they are found throughout every province and every kingdom, wherever the soil is suitable for planting. [Where the roads cross](#) sandy deserts and rocky mountains and trees cannot be planted, he has had other landmarks set up in the form of cairns or pillars to show the way. And there are certain barons who are responsible for ensuring that they are always well maintained. Besides the reasons given above, the Great Khan is all the more willing to have these trees planted because his soothsayers and astrologers have told him that he who plants trees lives a long life.

Now I have told you about the roadside trees, and next I will tell you something else.

You should also know that most of the inhabitants of the province of Cathay drink wine of a kind I will describe to you. They make a beverage of rice mixed with many choice spices, prepared in such a manner and with such expertise that it tastes better than any wine. It is crystal clear and delicious, and it makes a man drunk more quickly than any other wine because it is very fiery.

Now we will move on and tell you how stones are burned like logs.

The fact is that throughout the province of Cathay there is a kind of black stone that is dug from seams in the mountains and burns like logs. These stones keep a fire going better than wood. Moreover I assure you that if you put them on the fire in the evening and make sure they are well lit, they will keep burning all night and you will still find them glowing in the morning. Like charcoal they do not produce flames, except for a little when they are first kindled, but by remaining red-hot they give off a powerful heat. And you should know that they are burned throughout the province of Cathay. It is true that they have plenty of firewood, but the population is so vast and there are so many bathhouses and baths in need of constant heating that the wood would soon run out. For there is no one who does not go to the bathhouse and have himself bathed at least three times a week, and every day in winter if he can manage it; on top of which every nobleman and wealthy man has his own bathroom at home and takes a bath there. So there could never be enough wood for so many fires, and instead they burn large quantities of these stones, which being very plentiful and relatively cheap allow them to conserve a great deal of wood.

Since I have told you about this subject we will now tell you about another, namely how the emperor ensures that the price of grain is kept down.

Now you may take my word for it that when the emperor sees that a bumper crop of certain grains is cheaply available he has immense stocks of them gathered and stored in huge granaries, where they are so well tended that they remain unspoilt for three or four years. You will gather that he builds

up public stocks of every kind of grain – wheat, barley, millet, rice, panic and more – and has vast quantities stored away. And when it happens that the crops fail and there is a serious shortage, the emperor draws on these stocks, which are as immense as I have told you. If the market price is one bezant a measure – here I am talking about wheat – he supplies four measures for the same sum. And he releases so much that there is plenty to go round and everyone is overflowing with grain. In this way the emperor ensures that his people do not go hungry. And this is his practice throughout all the lands under his rule.

Now I have told you about this. Next we will tell you about another matter, namely the emperor's charity work.

Since I have told you how the emperor builds up public reserves for his people, I will now tell you how he shows great charity to the poor of the city of Khanbaliq.

The fact is that he takes special care of many of the poor and hungry families of Khanbaliq. These families may consist of six people, or eight, or ten, or more or fewer. The emperor has them provided with wheat and other staples so they have enough to eat. And he gives this aid to very large numbers of people.

When he hears that a worthy and respectable family has fallen on hard times through some misfortune or cannot work because of illness and so has no means of earning its daily bread, he sees to it that this family and others like it are given enough money to cover their expenses for the whole year. These families apply at the established time to the officials whose job it is to oversee all the Great Khan's expenditure and who live in a palace assigned to their office. They each produce a record showing the subsistence payments they have received over the past year, and the aid is renewed at the same level for the coming year. They are also provided with clothes, because the Great Khan receives a tithe of all the wool, silk and hemp used for making clothes. He has these materials woven into cloths in a designated building, where they are also stored. And because each craft is duty bound to devote one day a week to working on his behalf, the Great

Khan has these stuffs made into garments which he has distributed to the aforementioned poor families, in both winter and summer as the need arises. He also provides clothing for his armies by having woollen cloth woven in every city, paid for out of its tithes.

It should be understood that the Tartars' earliest customs, which predated their knowledge of the idolaters' law, had no truck with giving alms. If a poor man approached them they drove him away with abuse, saying to him: 'Go with God's curse upon you! For if he had loved you as he loves me, he would have shown you his favour.' But when the idolaters' wise men, in particular the aforementioned Bakhshi, told the Great Khan that it would be virtuous in him to provide for the poor and that it would greatly please their idols, he began to provide for the poor in the manner I have described.

Let me also tell you that no one who goes to the emperor's court to ask for bread is turned away empty handed; all who apply are given a portion. And you should know that more than 30,000 supplicants turn up daily, **and not a day goes by** without the appointed officials doling out 20,000 bowls of rice, millet and panic free of charge. This goes on all year round and is a hugely generous act on the part of an emperor who takes pity on the poor. **For this astonishing and staggering munificence**, all the people are so fond of him that they revere him as a god.

Now I have told you about this, and next we will tell you about another matter.

There are also about 5,000 astrologers and soothsayers in the city of Khanbaliq, counting the Christians, Saracens and Cathayans, and every year the Great Khan has them provided with food and clothing just like the poor we have spoken of. They are constantly practising their arts in the city. They have a kind of almanac in which the movements of the planets through the zodiac, hour by hour and minute by minute throughout the year, are written. And every year these aforesaid Christian, Saracen and Cathayan astrologers, each sect independently of the others, follow in this almanac the course and shape of the whole year and of each successive moon. For they look up and work out what sort of weather each moon will bring

during the year, according to the natural path and alignments of the planets and signs of the zodiac and their influences. So they will say that in such a moon there will be thunder and tempests; in another, an earthquake; in another, thunder and lightning and torrential rain; in another, diseases and plagues and wars and endless discord; and so on with each moon, depending on what they find. And they will declare that this is how things will unfold according to the ways and principles of nature, but that God has the power to do more or less according to his will. And so they produce many little pamphlets in which they set down everything that will happen in the course of the year, month by month. These pamphlets are called *tacuim* and are sold for one groat to anyone who wishes to buy one in order to know what will happen that year. And those who prove to be most accurate in their predictions are held to be more perfect masters of the art and gain the greater honour.

Moreover, if anyone proposes to embark on some important enterprise or to set out for some far-off place on a trading venture or on any other business, or indeed if he plans to do anything at all and wishes to know beforehand how it will turn out, he will consult the astrologers. [He will go to find one](#) of them and will say to him: 'Look into your books and tell me how the heavens are aligned at present, because I would like to embark on such-and-such a business or trading venture.' [And he tells him](#) the year, month, day, hour and minute of his birth; for the first thing every newborn child is taught is about his birth. And this is the convention they follow. The Tartars count their years in twelves, and each of the twelve years has its own sign; so the first has the sign of the lion, the second an ox, the third a dragon, the fourth a dog, and so on in the same way up to the twelfth year. So when someone is asked when he was born, he answers: 'During the year of the lion, on such-and-such a day or night, hour and minute of such-and-such a moon', or whatever the time and year-sign he was born under may be, which will have been carefully noted in a book by his father. And when the years have run their course and the twelfth sign has come round, they start again from the first sign, always proceeding in the same order. And so when a man asks an astrologer or soothsayer to foretell the outcome of his

enterprise, having first told him the day, hour and minute of the moon of his birth and in which year it fell, then the soothsayer, after consulting the zodiac and finding the planet under which he was born, will predict in due order everything that will happen to him on that journey, and how his proposed enterprise will fare in every regard, whether well or badly. So, if he is a merchant, he may be warned that the planet which will then be in the ascendant will be hostile to his trade, and therefore he should wait until one more auspicious is in the ascendant; or that the sign directly facing the gate by which he intends to leave the city will be adverse to his own sign, and therefore he will be obliged to leave by another gate or else wait until the sign has passed; or that in such a place and at such a time he will encounter robbers, in another he will be assailed by rain and tempests, in another his horse will break a leg, in another he will make a loss on his wares, in another he will make profit; and so on, the soothsayer making a prediction about every element of his journey, by turns favourable and adverse according to whether the signs are auspicious or hostile to him, until his return home.

As we have said above, the Cathayans are all idolaters. In worshipping their gods they observe the following practices. Every family has a statue hung on a wall at home that represents the high god of heaven, or at least a tablet inscribed with the name of the god. And every day they worship him before it, burning incense in a thurible and lifting up their hands; then gnashing their teeth three times they ask the god to grant them a long, happy life, a sound mind and good health, and they never ask anything else of him. On the ground they have another statue representing Nachigai, the god of earthly things, whose sole concern is for the things that grow on earth; he is always accompanied by his wife and children. [They worship him](#) in the same manner, with the thurible and the gnashing of the teeth and uplifted hands, and they ask him for good weather and harvests, for children, and other such things.

[They have absolutely](#) no concern for the health of their souls, but are purely devoted to nurturing their bodies and satisfying their appetites. [Regarding the soul](#), they hold it to be immortal in this sense. [They believe](#)

that when a man dies he enters immediately into another body, and depending on whether he has behaved well or badly in life, he passes from good to better or from bad to worse. That is to say, if he is a poor man and has behaved well and virtuously in life, he will be reborn after death from the womb of a gentlewoman and will be a gentleman, and thereafter from the womb of a lady and will be a lord; or if he is the son of a knight and has conducted himself well in life, after death he will be reborn from the womb of a countess, and when he dies again he will be reborn from the womb of a princess; and so on, ever upwards, until he is taken into God. But if, on the other hand, he has behaved badly, the son of a gentleman will be reborn as the son of a peasant, from a peasant he will be turned into a dog, and so he will go, always descending to a lower form of life.

All in all, Messer Marco found the people of Cathay to be possessed of more refined and courteous manners than any other people; for they are always intent on their studies and on scholarly pursuits. He did, though, find one horrible custom that the Great Khan had roundly banned.

They have a very attractive and clear manner of speaking, they greet you courteously with cheerful, smiling faces, their table manners are dignified and hygienic, and in all other ways their behaviour follows the same pattern.

They revere their fathers and mothers. If it happens that a son does anything to displease his parents, or fails to help them in their need, there is an office of state whose sole function is to pass severe sentences on ungrateful sons who are proved to have behaved with ingratitude towards their parents.

Wrongdoers who have been convicted and imprisoned for a range of crimes are set free every three years when the date fixed by the Great Khan for the release of prisoners comes round, assuming they have not already served out their sentences; but they are branded on the cheek with a mark that ensures they can be recognized.

The present Great Khan has banned all gambling and swindling, which used to be more widespread among them than anywhere else in the world;

and to cure them of the habit he told them: 'I have conquered you by force of arms, and all that you possess is mine, so if you gamble you gamble with what is mine.' He did not, however, use this as a pretext to take anything from them.

I do not want to neglect to mention how the Great Khan's people and barons conduct themselves when they go into his presence. To begin with, for half a mile around the place where the Great Khan happens to be at that time, all the people remain deferential, quiet, and peaceful out of reverence for his majesty, so that not a sound or noise is heard, nor the voice of anyone shouting or talking loudly. Then, every baron or nobleman carries a beautiful little vessel with him at all times, and when he is in the audience hall he spits into it, because no one would dare spit on the floor; and when he has spat, he covers it and keeps it. They also carry beautiful white leather slippers with them, and when they arrive at court, if the emperor asks for them and they want to enter the hall, they put on these white slippers and hand their shoes to the attendants, so as not to soil the beautiful and intricately worked carpets of gold and multicoloured silk.

And now that we have finished speaking about the government and administration of the province of Cathay and the city of Khanbaliq and the magnificence of the Great Khan, we will leave Khanbaliq and tell you about the other regions that Messer Marco visited in the service of the Great Khan's government. Let us journey into Cathay and speak about the marvels and treasures that are found there.



FOUR

From Beijing to Bengal

Now you should know that the emperor sent Messer Marco himself as an envoy into the west. So he set out from Khanbaliq and headed west on a journey of no less than four months; and we will tell you everything he saw along the way, both going and coming.

Ten miles outside the city of Khanbaliq, the traveller comes to a large river called the Pulisanghin¹ that flows into the Ocean Sea. Many merchants sail it carrying large cargoes. This river is spanned by a magnificent stone bridge. In fact you should know that there are few bridges in the world that compare to it or match it in beauty. And I will tell you why.

I assure you that it is no less than 300 paces long and eight wide, for ten horsemen can easily ride across it abreast. It has twenty-four arches and twenty-four piers in the water and is constructed entirely of grey marble, finely worked and well seated. Running along each side is a parapet of marble slabs and columns, which is constructed in the following manner. [The approach to the bridge](#) narrows somewhat as it ascends, but once you reach the top it is all one width from one end to the other, as if it had been drawn with a ruler. And at the top of the approach, [resting on a marble tortoise](#), stands an imposing column with a marble lion at its foot and another surmounting it, both of great beauty and size and fine

workmanship; and a pace and a half beyond this column stands another, formed in exactly the same way with two lions. The space between the two columns is closed off by a grey marble slab, decorated all over with different sculptures and inset into the columns, to prevent people from falling into the water; and this scheme is repeated all along the bridge, with each pillar a pace and a half from the next, so that altogether it is quite a beautiful thing to see. And the descent follows the same pattern as the approach.

Now we have told you about this beautiful bridge, so we will move on to new things.

After crossing this bridge the traveller continues for thirty miles towards the west, finding splendid inns and vineyards and fertile fields all the way, until he reaches a large and handsome city called Zhuozhou.² There are many of the idolaters' abbeys here. The people live by trade and crafts. They make fabrics of silk and gold and very fine sendal. There are also many inns frequented by travellers.

A mile beyond this city the road forks, with one branch going westward through Cathay and the other south-eastward towards the great province of Manzi. And you may be quite certain that a traveller headed west will ride across the province of Cathay for a good ten days before he comes to the kingdom of Taiyuanfu.³ All along the way he passes through many beautiful cities and towns bustling with trade and industry, as well as beautiful fields and vineyards. The people are all settled because there is a concentration of cities at short intervals; the roads are permanently thronged with travellers carrying large volumes of merchandise back and forth between the cities, and fairs are held in each one.

Five days into the ten-day journey we mentioned above, there is a city called Aq-baliq⁴ that is reputed to be larger and more splendid than the others; it marks the western limits of the emperor's hunting grounds, within which no one dares hunt except the emperor, his retinue and those who are enrolled under the captain of the falconers. But beyond this boundary others can hunt, provided they are of noble birth. The Great Khan, though, hardly

ever went hunting in these parts, with the result that the wild animals, especially the hares, increased and multiplied to such an extent that they destroyed the crops of the whole province. And when the Great Khan was apprised of this fact he went there with all his court, and animals were caught in incalculable numbers.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we shall tell you nothing about it. So we will move on from this matter and tell you about the kingdom called Taiyuanfu.

After leaving Zhuozhou and riding for ten days, the traveller reaches a kingdom called Taiyuanfu. And the capital of the province, or realm, is the city we have now arrived at, which is also called Taiyuanfu. It is very large and beautiful and is a great centre of trade and industry. For this city supplies a huge proportion of the equipment needed by the emperor's armies. There are many beautiful vineyards that produce copious quantities of wine. In all the province of Cathay this is the only place where wine is produced, and from here it is exported throughout the whole province. There is also no end of silk, for they have a profusion of mulberry trees and silkworms.

On leaving Taiyuanfu the traveller rides west for seven days through glorious countryside, coming across plenty of towns and villages where trade and handicrafts are thriving and many merchants take to the road in every direction to turn a profit. And at the end of this seven-day ride he comes to a city called Pingyangfu,⁵ which is exceptionally large and extremely wealthy and is home to many merchants. The people live by trade and crafts. Silk is produced here in great quantities.

Now we will move on and tell you about a very great city called Hezhongfu.⁶ But first of all, we will tell you about a noble castle called Xiezhou.

Two days' journey to the west of Pingyangfu there stands a beautiful castle called Xiezhou,⁷ which was built in times past by a king known as the Golden King. Inside this castle there is a wonderful palace, and within the

palace there is a huge hall where all the kings of this province who lived in former times are portrayed in marvellous paintings, so that it is a glorious sight to see. And this was all the work of the kings who reigned in this kingdom that I have told you about.

[This Golden King](#) was a great and powerful lord, and all the time he lived in this land he was exclusively attended by gorgeous young women, of whom he kept a huge number at court. When he drove around the castle for his amusement in a little carriage it was these girls who pulled it, with little effort since it was only small; and they ministered in every way to his comfort and pleasure. And he exercised his power royally and conducted himself very nobly and justly.

Now I will tell you a pleasant story concerning this Golden King and Prester John, as recounted by the people of these parts. As they tell it, the fact is that there was a war between these two kings. [The Golden King was subject](#) to Ong Khan, who as we said above is called Prester John, and in his arrogance and pride he rebelled against him. Such was the strength of his position – for his castle was immeasurably strong – that Prester John could not get the better of him or do him any harm, which sent him into a violent rage. So it was that seven of Prester John's henchmen went to him and declared that they had the courage to deliver him the Golden King alive. And Prester John replied that this would be most welcome and he would be in their debt if they succeeded. When the seven henchmen had taken their leave of Prester John, they set out together with a goodly company of squires and went straight to the Golden King. And they told him that they had come from a distant country to serve him. The king replied that they were very welcome and that he would see to their honour and comfort.

In this way that you have heard the seven henchmen of Prester John entered into the Golden King's service. And by the time they had been there about two years they had become much loved by the king for their loyal service. What else shall I tell you? The king felt as safe with them as if all seven had been his own sons. Now you will hear what these wicked henchmen did; and it came about because no one can guard himself against

treachery and disloyalty. The fact is that this Golden King went out on an excursion one day with a few men, and these seven wicked henchmen were among them. When they had crossed a river a mile from the castle I have mentioned, the seven henchmen found themselves alone with the king and, seeing that he had no one to defend him, resolved to do the deed they had come for. So they drew their swords and told the king to go with them or else they would put him to death.

When the king saw this he was completely taken aback and asked: 'What is the meaning of this, my good sons? Where is it that you would have me go?'

'You shall come,' they replied, 'to our master Prester John.'

When the king heard this he was so maddened that he almost died from grief. He said to them: 'Show some mercy, my good sons. Have I not treated you with honour in my own home? And yet you want to deliver me into the clutches of my enemy. If you go ahead, it will undoubtedly be a great wrong and a great betrayal.' They replied that this was the way it had to be, and they led him to Prester John.

When Prester John laid eyes on him he was overjoyed. He told him that he had made himself anything but welcome. The king did not answer, because he was lost for words. Then Prester John ordered this Golden King to be taken outside and made to watch over cattle. So the Golden King was put to work as a cowherd. And Prester John had this done out of contempt for him, to humiliate him and show him he was nothing.

When he had herded animals for two years, always heavily guarded to prevent him escaping, he was summoned to appear before Prester John. And Prester John had him dressed in rich robes and received him honourably. Then he said to him: 'Sir King, you can see plainly now that you are not a man with the power to make war on me.'

'Assuredly, Sire,' replied the king, 'I know well, and have always known, that there is no man who can stand against you.'

'Since you have admitted as much,' said Prester John, 'I ask nothing more of you, King. In future I will do you service and honour.'

Then Prester John had the Golden King furnished with horses and harnesses and gave him a splendid retinue and set him free. And the Golden King went on his way and returned to his kingdom, and from that hour forward he remained Prester John's faithful friend and vassal.

Now let us move on from this matter and tell you about something else.

When the traveller sets out from this castle and rides west for about twenty miles, he comes to a river called the Qara-Muren⁸ that is so big it cannot be spanned by a bridge; for it is very wide and deep. It flows into the Ocean Sea. And on its banks there are many cities and towns filled with merchants carrying on a thriving trade. The country bordering on the river produces ginger, as well as a great deal of silk. The sheer number of birds is astonishing. Three pheasants can be bought here for one Venetian groat, or rather for one *asper*,⁹ which is scarcely worth any more. [Huge canes](#), a foot or a foot and a half thick, also grow by this river; the people put them to good use in numerous ways.

Two days' journey to the west of this river stands a splendid city called Hezhongfu. The people are all idolaters. And you should further know that all the people of the province of Cathay are idolaters. It is a thriving centre of trade and industry. They have a great deal of silk, together with ginger, galangal, spikenard and many other kinds of spices that never find their way to our part of the world. Gold and silk fabrics of every kind are made here in quantity. As there is nothing else worth mentioning we will set out from here; and continuing on our way, we will tell you about a noble city that is the capital of a kingdom called Chang'anfu.¹⁰

After leaving the city of Hezhongfu that I have told you about above, the traveller rides westward for eight days, passing through many towns and cities where trade and industry thrive, as well as many beautiful gardens and lush fields. And I can tell you, too, that the whole region is full of mulberry trees, whose leaves are the food of the worms that make silk. The people are all idolaters, [apart from a few Turkish](#) Nestorian Christians and a

few Saracens. There is plenty of wild game, both beasts and birds, of many kinds.

After riding for eight days as I have told you, you reach this great and noble city of Chang'anfu, which is splendidly built on a grand scale. It is also the capital of the kingdom of Chang'anfu, which in former times was a noble realm of great wealth and power ruled by many worthy and valiant kings. But its current lord and king is a son of the Great Khan named Manggala,¹¹ for his father gave him the kingdom and crowned him its king. The city is a thriving centre of trade and industry and has a great deal of silk. Gold and silk fabrics of every kind are woven here. All kinds of military equipment are manufactured here, and all the necessities of life are available in great plenty and at little cost. The city lies to the west, and the people are idolaters. [There are some Turkish Nestorian Christians and Saracens.](#)

Outside the city stands the palace of King Manggala, which is every bit as beautiful as I will describe. It is situated in a great plain plentifully watered by rivers and lakes and pools and springs. To begin with, it is enclosed for five miles round by a very thick, high wall topped with battlements and sturdily built. A magnificent park stocked with wild animals and game birds lies within the wall. And in the middle rises the palace, which is so large and handsome that no one could improve on it. It has many beautiful halls and many beautiful rooms all decorated and figured in beaten gold, [along with the finest azures and countless marbles.](#) This Manggala rules his kingdom well, with great justice and great probity, and is much loved by his people. His armies are quartered around the palace, where the game animals provide them with fine sport.

Now we will leave this kingdom without telling you more about it, and we will tell you about a very mountainous province called Guangyuan.¹²

On leaving Manggala's palace the traveller heads west for three days across a glorious plain, passing through many villages and towns whose inhabitants live by trade and industry and have plentiful supplies of silk. And after three days he comes to the high mountains and deep valleys that

belong to the province of Guangyuan. There are cities and towns across the mountains and throughout the valleys. The people are idolaters. **There are also some Christian** Turks who follow the Nestorian creed, as well as some Saracens. They live by farming the land, by forestry and by hunting. For you should know that there are many woods teeming with wild beasts – lions and bears and lynxes, fallow deer and roe deer and stags, and other animals besides – in such huge numbers that the people of the region take them at will and make a handsome living from them. And the journey continues in this way for twenty days; that is to say, through mountains and valleys and forests where towns and villages can always be found with fine inns where travellers are comfortably lodged.

Now we will leave this land and tell you about another province, as you will be able to hear below.

After riding for twenty days through the mountains of Guangyuan that I have told you about above, you come to a province called Aq-baliq Manzi¹³ that consists of one great plain. There are plenty of cities and towns towards the west. The people are idolaters. They live by trade and crafts. Moreover, let me tell you that ginger grows so abundantly in this province that it is exported throughout the greater province of Cathay, and the people of this province reap great profits and great benefit from it. They have bountiful supplies of wheat and rice and other grains at a very low price; all in all it is a land overflowing with every good thing. The capital is called Aq-baliq Manzi, which means ‘the white city on the borders of Manzi’.

This plain takes two days to cross, and taking in the large number of cities and towns the journey is as beautiful as I have told you. At the end of these two days you enter a region of high mountains and deep valleys and vast forests, and proceeding west for twenty days you find plenty of towns and villages. The people are idolaters. They live off the fruits of the land, the wild game and their herds of cattle. There are lions and bears and lynxes, fallow deer, roe deer and stags, as well as enormous numbers of the little creatures that make musk.

We will now leave this country and tell you about some other places, all clearly and in the proper order as you will be able to hear.

After heading west for twenty days across these mountains that I have told you about, the traveller comes to a plain and a province called Chengdufu that also lies on the borders of Manzi. The capital, which is likewise called Chengdufu,¹⁴ used to be a very great and noble city. In olden times it was the seat of hugely powerful and wealthy kings. And the city is a good twenty miles in circuit. But now it is divided in the manner I will tell you. The fact is that one of the kings of this province died leaving three sons. And so this great city was divided into three parts. Each of these three parts has its own wall, but all three are within the walls of the whole city. And I can tell you that all three of this king's sons were kings, and each had extensive lands and substantial wealth, for their father was very powerful and rich. But the Great Khan conquered this kingdom and disinherited these three kings, taking the realm for himself.

Now you should know that several large rivers run through this city, carrying the fresh water [that flows down from the distant mountains](#) and providing excellent fishing. [These rivers encircle the city](#) and branch across it in various directions. They range in width from half a mile to 200 paces, 150 paces, or more or less, but they are all very deep; and spanning them are countless stone bridges, all very large and splendid, each eight paces wide and varying in length according to the width of the rivers. These bridges¹⁵ are flanked along either side by fine marble columns that support the roof; for let me tell you that all these bridges are protected by magnificent wooden roofs, marvellously decorated and painted in red and topped with tiles. From one end to the other these bridges are lined with exquisite little booths and stalls where all manner of trades and crafts are practised; and yet I can tell you that they are made from poles which are delivered in the morning and taken away every evening. Then there is the emperor's customs house where his dues are collected, namely the duty on the goods that are sold on the bridge. And I assure you that the duty taken on these bridges amounts to no less than 1,000 gold bezants.¹⁶

As these rivers flow out of the city, they join together to form a vast river named Yangtze¹⁷ that runs on for eighty or a hundred days' journey all the way to the Ocean Sea; we will speak about it further on in this book. There are countless cities and towns along its banks. There are ships so huge¹⁸ – that is, in such huge numbers – that no man who had not seen them with his own eyes would ever credit it. It is so vast, this swarm of river traffic, together with the great profusion of rich merchandise that merchants carry up and down this river, that there is not a man in the world who would believe it without seeing it. The river itself is so broad that it is not so much like a river as a sea.

The people of the city and province of Chengdufu are all idolaters. And when you leave this city you ride for five days through plains and valleys, passing plenty of towns, villages and hamlets. The people live on their earnings from the land. There are many wild animals, including lions, bears and other beasts. They also live by industry, for some fine sendal and other fabrics are woven here. They, too, belong to Chengdufu province.

At the end of this five-day journey that I mentioned above you reach a badly ravaged province called Tibet;¹⁹ and we will describe it for you below.

After this five-day journey that I have told you about you cross into this devastated province, which was laid waste by Mengu Khan's armies. There are many towns and villages and hamlets, all lying ruined and desolate.

Canes of remarkable size and girth grow in this country; indeed I assure you their girth is so great that they are at least three palms in circumference, and they are a good fifteen paces long. The distance from one knot to the next measures at least three palms. I will tell you, moreover, that the merchants and other travellers who pass through this country by night gather some of these canes and make a fire with them, because once they are alight they make such loud crackling and popping sounds that the lions and bears and other fierce beasts take off as fast as they can go from sheer terror; and nothing in the world would induce them to approach the fire. So the travellers make fires of this sort to protect their animals from the savage

beasts that infest the whole area and the whole province. I will further tell you – because it is worth telling – how it is that the popping of these canes can be heard far away, how this creates such terror, and what comes of it. Now you should know that the canes are taken when quite green and thrown onto a sizeable log fire. And when the canes have been in this roaring fire for a while they begin to warp and burst in two, and then they let off such a bang that it can be heard at night a good ten miles away. And I assure you that anyone who is not accustomed to the noise is scared out of his wits, so terrible is it to hear.²⁰ I can also tell you that horses that have never heard it before go so berserk that they snap their halters and all the ropes that tether them and bolt. This has happened to many a traveller. So when they have horses that they know have never heard this noise, they bandage their eyes and fetter all four of their ankles with iron shackles so that when they hear the great bang of the canes, try as they might they are unable to cut loose. And so, in the manner I have described, travellers keep themselves safe at night, and their animals too, from the lions and lynxes and other savage beasts that plague these parts.

As he crosses this country the traveller finds no shelter or food for at least twenty days, **or at best finds** a place to replenish his supplies every third or fourth day, and so has to carry enough food to last himself and his animals the whole twenty days. And all the way he is beset by utterly cruel and savage wild beasts that are highly dangerous and rightly feared. But at the end of this twenty-day journey he comes to a region with many villages and hamlets and **towns perched on precipitous crags**. And in these parts they have a certain custom when it comes to taking wives that I will tell you about.

The fact is that nothing on earth would induce a man to marry a virgin; for they say that a woman is worthless unless she has been intimately acquainted with many men. **They reason that a woman** or girl who has not been had by a man has offended the gods, because if she enjoyed the idols' favour men would desire and love her; and so such women are shunned and despised. This, then, is how they go about getting married. You may take my word for it that whenever foreigners pass through this region and pitch

their tents to make camp, the old women from the villages and hamlets turn up with their daughters, twenty or forty at a time, and thrust them at the men, begging them to have their way with them and sleep with them. **And the chosen girls** stay with the travellers, while the rest ruefully return home. The men are free to take their pleasure with them for as long as they remain, but they are not allowed to carry them off anywhere else. And when they have had their fill and are ready to leave, it is customary for each to give a jewel or other token to the woman he has slept with, so that she can prove she has had a lover when she comes to marry. Custom dictates, too, that before a girl can think of marrying she needs to have more than twenty of these tokens hung round her neck as proof that she has had many lovers and has slept with many men; **so when a girl** wins one of these tokens she immediately displays it on her breast. And the more tokens she possesses, and so the more lovers and sexual partners she can prove to have had, the more she is esteemed and prized as a wife, for they say she is more blessed by the gods than the rest. **If she has become pregnant** by one of these travellers, her husband brings up the child with the same rights as his own children. For once they have taken wives in this way they become very attached to them; they consider it a heinous offence if one man touches another's wife, and this is something they all scrupulously avoid.

Now I have told you about this mode of marriage, which is well worth relating. And for young gentlemen between sixteen and twenty-four years of age a visit to this country is highly recommended.

The people are idolaters and are completely depraved. They deem it no sin to commit robberies and other crimes and are the greatest rascals and thieves in the world. They live by hunting, by breeding cattle and by the fruits of the earth. And I give you my word that this country abounds with animals that produce musk, which in their language are called *gudderi*. **They are so ubiquitous** that their scent hangs over the whole land, for they discharge musk once every moon. As I have said before, a tumour-like sac filled with blood grows by the animal's navel, and it is this blood that is the musk. But this sac becomes engorged with blood and discharges the excess once every moon. And because there are so many of these animals in these

parts, they discharge their musk all over the place, so that the whole province reeks of it. These wicked people keep large numbers of fine hounds that catch these animals in droves, so they have no end of musk. They have no coinage and do not use the Great Khan's paper money but instead use salt as a currency. They dress very badly, for their clothes are made from animal skins and canvas and buckram. They have their own language, and they call themselves Tibetans.

This Tibet is a vast province, and I will briefly describe it to you, as you will be able to hear.

Tibet is a very large province that borders on Manzi and many other provinces. The people have their own language and are idolaters. Many of them are notorious thieves. It is such a vast province that it contains eight kingdoms and a plethora of cities and towns. In many places there are rivers and lakes and mountains in which large quantities of gold dust are found. Cinnamon grows there in great abundance. And in this province amber and coral are traded at a very high price, for the men hang it around the necks of their wives and their idols, considering it to be a precious jewel. I can tell you, too, that this province produces large quantities of camlets, as well as other cloths of gold, silk and fustian. And many spices grow here that have never been seen in our parts. I can also tell you that they have the most skilled enchanters and the best astrologers, after their own fashion, in all this part of the world. For through their diabolical arts they perform the most singular enchantments and the greatest wonders that have been seen or heard. [They summon up tempests](#), lightning and thunder, starting and stopping them at will. Their marvels are without end, but it is best not to speak of them in our book, or people might be too shaken up.

These people have beastly habits. They have enormous mastiffs, as big as donkeys and very good at catching wild animals, [especially the huge](#) and fierce wild oxen called *beyamini* that are found here in great numbers. They also have various different types of hunting dogs, besides excellent lanner and saker falcons that are good fliers and are excellent for hawking.

Now that we have given you a good overview of the facts concerning the province of Tibet, we will move on and tell you about a province called Jiandu.²¹ But as for Tibet, you should understand that it belongs to the Great Khan. And all the other kingdoms and provinces and regions described in this book likewise belong to the Great Khan, excepting only those provinces mentioned at the beginning of our book which belong to the son of Arghun, just as I have told you. But excluding those provinces, all the others mentioned in this book belong to the Great Khan. So even if you do not find the provinces described in this way, you can take what I have told you to be the case.

So now we will move on from this matter and tell you about the province of Jiandu.

The province of Jiandu lies towards the west – **though you should not take** this talk of ‘the west’ to mean that these countries are in the western part of the world; we describe them as lying to the west because we have set out from regions in the east and north-east and are travelling in a westerly direction. Jiandu was formerly ruled by its own king, but after the Great Khan subjected it to his rule he sent his own governors there. The people are idolaters and are subjects of the emperor. There are plenty of cities and towns. The capital, which is also called Jiandu, stands near the entrance to the province. There is a great salt lake that yields many pearls; **they are pure white but not round**, being rather knobbly as if four, five, six or more were clumped together. But the Great Khan absolutely forbids anyone to harvest them; for if they were harvested in the quantities that would be found here, so many would be gathered that they would be very cheap and would lose all their value. Naturally, when the emperor wants some he has them gathered for his own personal use. But no one else could take any of them without losing his life. I can further tell you that there is also a mountain in which a kind of stone called turquoise – these are very beautiful stones – can be found in prodigious quantities. But the emperor does not permit them to be taken except on his orders.

I can also tell you that in this province the following custom²² prevails as regards the womenfolk. The fact is that no man considers it an outrage if a foreigner or some other man dishonours him with his wife, or his daughter, or his sister, or any woman he may have under his roof. On the contrary, they regard it as a positive boon when anyone beds them, for they believe that their gods and idols reward them for the deed by lavishing worldly goods on them. And for this reason they offer their wives to strangers on such remarkably generous terms as I will describe to you. For you should know that when a man of this country sees a foreigner approaching his house with a view to staying there, or about to enter his house even if he has no intention of staying, he immediately leaves the house and orders his wife to fulfil the stranger's every desire. That done, he heads off to his fields or vineyards and does not return so long as the stranger remains in his house. I assure you that many a time the stranger will stay there for three days, lying in bed with the poor dolt's wife. And as a sign that he is in the house the stranger hangs out his hat or some other token, signalling that he is still inside. As long as the wretched husband sees this sign outside his house he stays well away. And this is the practice throughout the province. [The Great Khan has outlawed](#) the custom, but this has not dissuaded them from observing it; since they are all willing parties to it, there is no one to point the finger at another.

In the villages and homesteads near the roads that cross the craggy mountains, there are men with beautiful wives who offer them freely to passing merchants, who reward the women with a piece of fine cloth, say half an ell²³ or so, or with some other trinket of trifling value. After taking his pleasure, the passer-by mounts his horse and rides off. And then the husband and wife mockingly holler after him: 'Hey you, where are you off to? Show us what of ours you're taking away with you! Prove to us, you rascal, what you have gained! See what you've left us that you have forgotten' – and they show him the bit of cloth they have earned from him – 'we have this of yours, you poor dolt, and you have left empty handed!' And so they scoff at him; and they always act in the same manner.

I will also tell you what kind of money they have. You should know that they have gold bars, weighed in *saggi* and valued according to their weight, but no coins stamped with a die. As to small change, let me tell you what they use. They take salt water and boil it in pans to make salt; **and when it has boiled** for an hour and has stiffened into a paste they press it into a mould, forming blocks the size of a twopenny loaf which are flat on the bottom and rounded on top and weigh around half a pound. When the blocks are ready they are placed on superheated stones beside a fire to dry and solidify. And on this type of money they stamp the emperor's seal; in fact it can only be made by the emperor's appointed agents. Eighty of these salt blocks that I have described to you are worth one *saggio* of fine gold, and this is what they spend for small change. **But traders bring** this currency to people who live in wild and isolated places among the mountains and exchange a *saggio* of gold for sixty, fifty or even forty of these salt blocks, depending on how remote these people's habitats are and how cut off they are from cities and civilized life; they cannot easily sell their gold and other wares, such as musk and other things, because they have no one to sell them to, and so they part with them for less than their value. For as said above they find gold in the rivers and lakes. And these merchants criss-cross the mountains and the other regions of Tibet we have mentioned where salt money is likewise used; and they make vast profits, because the people use the salt in their food as well as buying their necessities with it. But in the cities they invariably salt their food with broken bits of these blocks and use the whole blocks for money.

In this country they have enormous numbers of *gudderi*, the animals that produce musk; the hunters catch them and collect a great deal of musk. There are plenty of fine fish, which are caught in the lake I told you about where the pearls are found. They have many lions and lynxes and bears and fallow deer and roe deer, as well as huge numbers of birds of every type. They have no grape wine but make wine from wheat and rice mixed with many spices; it is a very good drink. Cloves grow plentifully in this province; they come from a little tree with leaves like a laurel but somewhat longer and narrower. It bears small white flowers like our carnations.²⁴ They

also have a great deal of ginger, as well as cinnamon and many other spices that never reach our part of the world and so are not worth mentioning.

Now we will move on from this city, which we have certainly described in enough detail, and tell you about the rest of the province.

When the traveller leaves the city of Jiandu and heads towards the borders of the province, he rides for a good ten days past numerous villages and hamlets. The people have the same customs as those I have told you about. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. And when you come to the end of this ten-day journey you reach a large river called Brius,²⁵ which marks the boundary of the province of Jiandu and yields great quantities of gold dust. There is also plenty of cinnamon. This river runs into the Ocean Sea.

Since there is nothing else worth saying about this river, let us move on and tell you about a province called Qarajang,²⁶ just as you will hear.

After crossing this river the traveller enters the province of Qarajang, which is so large that it is actually seven kingdoms. It lies towards the west, and the people are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan. A son of his named Yisun Temur²⁷ is its king, and he is a very great king, rich and powerful. He rules his land well and with great justice, for he is wise and experienced.

After leaving the river I have told you about above, the traveller proceeds westward for five days passing many cities and villages where very fine horses are bred. The people live by rearing cattle and on the profits they make from the land. They have their own language, which is very hard to understand.

At the end of this five-day journey the traveller reaches the capital of the kingdom, which is called Yachi.²⁸ It is very large and splendid and is home to many merchants and artisans. The people are a mixed bunch: there are some who worship Muhammad, some idolaters and a few Christians, Turks who follow the Nestorian creed. There is plenty of wheat and rice, but they do not eat wheat bread because in this province it is unwholesome. Instead they eat rice, and they make a drink of rice mixed with spices that is delicious and crystal-clear and gets a man drunk just like our wine.

They have money of a type I will describe to you. They use white cowries, shells that are found in the sea and are used to make necklaces for dogs. Eighty cowries are worth one *saggio* of silver, which is worth two Venetian groats. And you should know that eight *saggi* of fine silver are worth one *saggio* of fine gold. They also have brine wells from which they make enough salt to supply the whole country; and I assure you the king derives great profit from this salt. I assure you, too, that the men do not care a jot if one touches another's wife, so long as she consents to it.

Now we have told you about this kingdom, and we will tell you about the kingdom of Qarajang. But first I will tell you something that slipped my mind. I can tell you that they have a lake²⁹ a good hundred miles in circumference in which enormous quantities of the finest fish in the world are found. There are many different varieties, all huge. And I can also tell you that the people eat the raw flesh of poultry, sheep, oxen and buffalo; for the poor go to the butcher's and take the raw liver as soon as it is drawn from the animal and chop it into pieces. Then they put it in a garlic sauce and eat it straight away. And they do the same with every other meat. The gentlemen all eat raw meat, too, but they have it finely minced and then put it in the garlic sauce mixed with choice spices, after which they eat it with as much pleasure as we do cooked meat.

So now we will tell you about the kingdom of Qarajang, which I spoke to you about above.

After setting out from city of Yachi and riding westward for ten days, the traveller comes to the kingdom of Qarajang. The capital of the kingdom is also called Qarajang.³⁰ The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. And Hukechin,³¹ who is a son of the Great Khan, is its king. Gold dust is found in the rivers of this province, and larger nuggets are also found in the lakes and the mountains. They have so much gold that I assure you they exchange one *saggio* of gold for six of silver. In this province, too, the cowries I have already told you about are used for money. But I can tell you that these cowries are not found in this province but come here from India.

Huge snakes and serpents live in this province, of such mind-boggling size that anyone would be dumbfounded merely to hear about them, never mind see them; but if you do see them and study them, you will find that they are truly hideous. I will tell you just how big and beefy they are. You may depend on it that some of them are ten paces long **and as stout as a large cask**, with a girth of ten paces; these are the biggest. They have two short legs in front near the head, without feet but with three claws, two small and one bigger, like those of a falcon or a lion. Their heads are very large, and their gleaming eyes are bigger than a fourpenny loaf; their mouth is so large that they can easily swallow a man in one gulp. They have very big teeth. They are so surpassingly huge and fierce that there is no man or beast that does not fear them and live in dread of them. There are also smaller ones measuring eight paces in length, or six or five.

They are caught in this way. You should know that they remain underground during daytime to evade the great heat; at nightfall they emerge to hunt and feed, seizing all the animals they can catch – **lions, wolves**, or whatever they may find – and eating the lot. And when they have dined they crawl down to the rivers and lakes and springs to drink. They are so huge and heavy and stout that when they crawl through the sand on their nightly forays for food and drink, they leave behind a furrow so big that it looks as if a butt full of wine had been rolled down the sand. And the hunters who set out to catch them lay traps along these paths marking the routes the snakes normally take to the water. When they find a trail left by these snakes leading down a steep bank, they drive a hefty wooden stake into the ground until it is nearly buried and fix a sharp steel blade such as a razorblade or lancehead to the top, projecting about a palm above the stake and slightly angled towards the direction from which the serpents approach. Then they cover it with sand so that the snake cannot see any of it. The hunters plant these stakes and blades in large numbers to cover all the trails of all the serpents. And when the time comes for the snake, or rather the serpent, to head to the river for a drink, it comes straight down the path where the blades have been placed, slithering at high speed because of the incline of the bank, and impales itself on them with such

great force that the blade pierces its breast and rips a gash all the way to its navel, causing instantaneous death. The hunter knows the serpent is dead when the crows start cawing, and only then does he approach; otherwise he would not dare come near. And this is the way the hunters catch these beasts.

When they have caught one they skin it on the spot; then they draw out the gall from the belly and sell it for a high price. For you should know that a powerful medicine is made from it. If a man is bitten by a mad dog and is given a drop the weight of a small penny to drink, he is immediately cured. And when a woman is going through prolonged and painful labour and cries aloud she is given a drop of this serpent's gall; the moment she drinks it the pain disappears and she gives birth. Its third use is when someone's skin breaks out in any kind of sore; a dab of this gall and it will heal in days. For these reasons that I have given the gall of this great serpent is highly prized in this province. And let me also tell you that the flesh of this serpent fetches a high price, because it makes excellent eating and is regarded as a delicacy.

I can tell you, too, that these serpents go to the dens where the lions and bears and other ferocious wild beasts breed their cubs and gobble up the lot, old and young alike, if they can get at them.

Let me further tell you that sturdy horses are bred in this province and exported for sale in India. And you should know that they remove two or three joints of the tailbone to prevent the horse from flicking the rider with its tail or swishing it when it runs; for they consider it a very unsightly thing for a horse to swish its tail while running. You should also know that these people ride with long stirrups in the French style; **long, that is**, compared to the short stirrups favoured by the Tartars and nearly every other race for their usefulness to archers, who stand upright on their horses to shoot.

They wear armour covered with buffalo hide and carry lances and shields; they also have crossbows, and they poison all the quarrels. I was told for a fact that **all of them**, women as well as men, carry poison on their persons at all times, especially if they intend to commit a crime; and if by chance one of them is caught after perpetrating some act for which he is

liable to be tortured, rather than suffer the sting of the lash he pops the poison in his mouth and swallows it, hoping to bring on death as speedily as possible. But since the authorities are wise to this practice they always keep some dog excrement handy, so that if a prisoner swallows poison for the aforementioned reason he can immediately be force-fed the said excrement to make him vomit up the poison. And having come up with this remedy for the wicked actions of these scoundrels, the authorities do not hesitate to put it into practice.

Let me tell you about yet another shameful and wicked thing these people did before the Great Khan conquered them. If it happened that a handsome gentleman or anyone with a superior air – a ‘good shadow’ – came to lodge in the house of an inhabitant of this province, they would murder him during the night by poison or other lethal means. But you must not suppose that they did this in order to rob him; it was because they believed that his good shadow and good grace, his wisdom and soul, would remain in the house. And on this account they murdered plenty of people before the Great Khan conquered them. But ever since the Great Khan conquered them – it was about thirty-five years ago – they have abandoned this evil practice out of fear of the emperor, who has strictly forbidden it.

Now we have told you about this province and will tell you about another country, as you will be able to hear.

After leaving Qarajang, the traveller continues westward for five days until he reaches a province called Zardandan.³² The capital of the province is called Yongchang.³³ The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They all have gold teeth; that is, every one of their teeth is covered with gold. For they make gold casts of their teeth and fit them over the lower set of teeth as well as the upper. Only the men do this, not the women. The men are all gentlemen, by their own lights, and occupy themselves with nothing but warfare, hunting and falconry. All the work is done by the women, as well as by men they have taken captive and keep as slaves. And these men perform all their duties alongside these gentlemen’s wives.

When a woman has given birth to a child she washes him and swaddles him. Then her husband gets into the bed, taking the baby with him, and lies there for forty days without getting up except to answer calls of nature. And all his friends and relatives come to see him and stay with him, keeping him in high spirits and well entertained. They do this saying that the wife has overtired herself by carrying the baby in her womb and so should not be burdened any more for these forty days. And the wife, as soon as she has given birth to her child, gets up from the bed and does all the housework and waits upon her lord in bed, [taking him food](#) and drink as if he had borne the child himself.

They eat every kind of meat, both cooked and raw. They eat rice cooked with meat and other ingredients typical of these parts. They drink a wine made from rice flavoured with choice spices, which is very good. They have gold for money, and cowries are also in circulation. And I give you my word that they give one *saggio* of gold in exchange for five of silver. This is because they have no silver mines within five months' journey. So traders come here with large quantities of silver and change it among these people, giving five silver *saggi* for one of gold. And they make a handsome profit and a fine living from this exchange.

These people do not have idols or churches but worship the head of the house, saying: 'We are begotten of this man.' They do not have an alphabet and do not write; and no wonder, for they are born in extremely remote places among vast forests and tall mountains that cannot be reached in the summer for anything in the world, because the air is so bad and noisome that no foreigner could escape with his life. Instead I can tell you that when they strike a bargain with one another they take a bit of wood, either square or round, and split it in two, each keeping one half. It should be said that they first make two notches in it, or three or however many the extent of their business requires. And when they come to settle up, the one who owes money or whatever it may be demands the other one's half of the stick.

Let me tell you as well that in all the provinces I have been describing – Qarajang, Yongchang and Yachi – there are no physicians. When someone falls ill he sends for the magicians – that is, the devil-charmers and

custodians of the idols. And when these magicians have arrived and the patient has told them his symptoms, they immediately strike up a tune on their instruments and dance and leap about until one of the magicians falls flat on his back on the ground or floor, foaming heavily at the mouth and to all appearances dead. He remains in this state, looking like a corpse, because the Devil has entered his body. And when the other magicians (who have turned out in force) see that one of their number has collapsed in the manner you have heard, they start to talk to him, asking what disease the sick man has contracted. And he answers: 'Such-and-such a spirit has punished him, because he has incurred its displeasure.' Then the magicians say to him: 'We beseech you to pardon him, and to take anything you desire from him in recompense for his blood.' And when the magicians have uttered many words and prayers, the spirit that has entered the body of the prone magician gives his answer. If the patient is destined to die, he answers in this way: 'The sick man has so grievously wronged such-and-such a spirit and is such a bad man that the spirit will not pardon him for anything in the world.' This is the answer received by those doomed to die. But if the patient is to be healed, then the spirit inside the body of the magician answers: 'The sick man has sinned greatly, but even so he will be forgiven. If he wishes to be healed, have two or three sheep brought and ten or more fine and costly beverages prepared.' They might also insist that the sheep have black heads or conform to their wishes in some other way; that they are sacrificed to such-and-such an idol and such-and-such a spirit, with a certain number of magicians and women who serve the spirits and idols in attendance; and that they hold a great festival in honour of the spirit and idol in question and sing their praises. And when the answer has been received, the patient's friends act without delay on the magician's instructions. They bring sheep of the specified type and prepare drinks of the designated type, quality and number. They slaughter the sheep and sprinkle their blood where they are told, as a tribute and sacrifice to the spirit in question. Then they have the sheep cooked in the sick man's house, where the requisite number of magicians and women gather. And when they have all assembled and the sheep and the drinks have been prepared, they

begin to make music and dance and sing the praises of the spirit. They sprinkle round some of the broth from the cooked meat and some of the drink; they also go round censuring the place with incense and aloeswood and make it ablaze with lights. And when they have gone on in this way for some time, one of them falls down and the others ask him if the patient has been forgiven and is certain to recover. This time the answer comes that he has not yet been forgiven and something else must be done before forgiveness will be granted. The instructions are promptly obeyed. Then the spirit answers that, as the sacrifice has been made and everything has been done, the patient is forgiven and will soon recover. And when they have heard this answer, after the broth and the beverage have been sprinkled and the lights are shining brightly and the incense has been burned, they say that the spirit is fully propitiated. Then the magicians and the women, who are still possessed by the spirit, eat the sheep and drink the drinks with great gusto and great revelry. When their work is done and they have been paid, they all go back to their homes. And when everything is over, the patient recovers at once.³⁴ These ceremonies are not performed for every invalid, but only once or twice a month for powerful and wealthy men. And this practice is observed throughout the provinces of Cathay and Manzi and by the vast majority of the idolaters, owing to their lack of physicians.

Now I have told you about the ways and customs of these people and how these magicians are able to charm the spirits. So we will move on from these people and this province and tell you about the others, as you will be able to hear.

Now you should know that we omitted to mention a very fine battle that was fought in the kingdom of Yongchang, one that is well worth mentioning in this book. So we will now tell you exactly what caused it and how it unfolded.

The fact is that in the year 1272 of Christ's incarnation, the Great Khan sent a large army into the kingdoms of Yongchang and Qarajang to protect them from a threatened invasion from across their borders. For as yet the Great Khan had not sent any of his sons there, as he did later when he gave

the kingship to Yisun Temur, the son of his late son. Now it so happened that the king of Myanmar and Bengal,³⁵ a monarch formidably endowed with land, treasure and people and not subject to the Great Khan – though it would not be long before the Great Khan conquered him and took from him both of the kingdoms I have named to you above – this king of Myanmar and Bengal, when he learned that the Great Khan’s army was at Yongchang, decided it was expedient for him to march against them in such overwhelming force that he would slaughter them all and deter the Great Khan from ever sending another army into those parts. So this king made exhaustive preparations; and I will tell you what they were. Now you may depend on it that he had 2,000 huge elephants; and on each one he had his men erect a very sturdy wooden castle, superbly crafted and designed for warfare. He had every castle manned by at least twelve fighting men and some by sixteen or more, and he mustered another 60,000 men, counting the cavalry and some foot soldiers. In other words, he readied himself in a manner befitting a great and mighty king such as he was. For there is no doubt that this was an army fit to perform great feats. What else shall I tell you? When he had prepared himself as thoroughly as I have told you, this king lost no time in sallying forth with all his men to confront the Great Khan’s army at Yongchang. They advanced without meeting with any adventures worth mentioning until they came within three days’ march of the Tartar armies, and there the king pitched his camp to rest and refresh his men.

When the commander of the Tartar army knew for certain that this king was coming against him with such a great force, he was naturally alarmed, for he had only 12,000 horsemen. But there is no question that he was a man of great physical courage and an able leader. His name was Nasreddin.³⁶ He marshalled and rallied his troops with great skill and did everything in his power to defend the country and his men. But why make a long story of it? You can take my word for it that the whole Tartar force of 12,000 horsemen rode out into the plain of Yongchang and halted there, waiting for the enemy to attack. And this strategy was a mark of their great astuteness and

superior leadership. For you should know that on the edge of the plain there was an immense and densely wooded forest.

So the Tartars waited for the enemy on this plain in the way you have heard. Now let us leave them for a moment, though we will of course come back to them soon, and instead turn to their enemy.

Now you may take my word for it that when the king of Myanmar and all his army had halted for a while, they set off and continued on their way until they reached the plain of Yongchang where the Tartars were drawn up at the ready. And when they emerged on the plain within a mile of the enemy position, he marshalled his elephants with their castles on top and the men in them well armed for the battle. He arrayed his cavalry and infantry skilfully and prudently, like the wise king he was. And when he had put all his plans into effect, he advanced with all his forces towards the enemy.

When the Tartars saw them coming, they did not betray a hint of anxiety but showed themselves to be brave and battle-tested warriors. For you should have no doubt that they all advanced together as one impressively disciplined and well-ordered body. Then, just as they drew close and it only remained to join battle, the Tartars' horses caught sight of the elephants and were seized with such terror that every time their riders tried to urge them on towards the enemy they balked and turned tail. And the king and his troops kept on coming with their elephants.

When the Tartars saw this, they were deeply troubled and at a loss what to do; for it was clear to them that if they could not spur their horses forward all would be lost. But they acted very wisely, and I will tell you what they did. Let me say, then, that when the Tartars saw their horses in such a state of panic, they all dismounted and led the horses into the wood, where they tethered them to the trees. Then they grasped their bows, drew the strings, and let fly at the elephants. They unleashed such flurries of arrows at them that it was truly a wonder, and the elephants were grievously wounded. And the king's men returned fire on the Tartars, discharging volley after volley at them and attacking them with great vigour. But the Tartars were much

better soldiers than their enemies, and they defended themselves with great valour. What else shall I tell you? You should know that when virtually all the elephants were as badly wounded as I have told you, they wheeled round and fled towards the king's men with such an enormous bellow that it seemed as if the whole world had been torn apart. They hurtled towards the woods and ploughed into them, smashing their castles and wrecking and ruining everything as they headed this way and that through the trees in a frenzy of terror.

When the Tartars saw that the elephants had cut loose in the manner you have heard, they wasted no time in leaping onto their horses and charging at the king and his men. So, as they unleashed their arrows, began a vicious and dreadful battle; for the king and his men defended themselves bravely. And when they had drawn their bows and shot all their arrows, they grasped their swords and clubs and charged at one another with unconstrained ferocity.

Mighty blows fell all round. Here you could see men laying into one another with swords and clubs; here knights and horses slaughtered; here hands and arms, shoulders and heads hacked off. For you should know that many men fell to the ground dead or mortally wounded. The clamour and the uproar were so great that God's thunder would have gone unheard. As the fearful battle raged there were tremendous struggles on every side; and yet, you should know without a doubt that the Tartars had the better of it. It was an evil hour for the king and his people when that battle began, on that day when so many lost their lives.

As afternoon came and the battle still raged, the king and his men were reduced to such a plight, with so many of their number dead, that they could no longer hold out. For it was plain to them that if they stayed there any longer they would all be dead. So they shrank from staying longer and fled as fast as they could. And when the Tartars saw them fleeing, they set about cudgelling and chasing and killing them with such a vengeance that it was a pitiful sight to see. After a while they abandoned the pursuit and went into the woods to catch some of the elephants. In fact I can tell you that they felled the great trees in order to block the elephants' path and prevent them

from getting away. Despite all their efforts they failed to catch a single elephant. But I can tell you that some of the king's men who had been taken captive themselves succeeded in capturing them; for elephants are more intelligent than any other animal in the world. By this means they caught more than 200 elephants. And from the time of this battle the Khan began to keep elephants in large numbers.

This is the way this battle unfolded, just as you have heard.³⁷

Leaving the province of Zardandan that I told you about above, the traveller finds himself at the head of a long downhill slope. In fact you may take my word for it that the road continues to drop down for a good two and a half days. Nothing of note is found during these two and a half days, except for a huge open area where a great market is held. All the people of the country make their way here on market days, which take place three times a week, and exchange gold for silver, giving one *saggio* of gold for five of silver. Merchants travel from far away to change their silver for these people's gold, and I assure you they make a handsome profit and reap great rewards. As for the locals who bring the gold, they make their homes in such impregnable and inaccessible spots that they are completely beyond harm's reach. In fact no one knows where they live, because nobody goes there but themselves.

After descending this road for two and a half days, the traveller reaches a province lying to the south that borders on India and is called Myanmar. He continues on his way for fifteen days, passing through remote wildernesses and great jungles teeming with elephants, unicorns and other exotic wild beasts. There are no people or dwellings here, so we will pass over these jungles and tell you a story, as you will now be able to hear.

Now you should know that this fifteen-day ride through the wildernesses that I have told you about above leads to a city called Pagan,³⁸ which is very large and splendid and is the capital of the kingdom. The people are idolaters and have their own language. They are subject to the Great Khan. The most magnificent thing is found in this city, and I will tell you about it.

The fact is that a rich and powerful king once lived in this city. And when he was dying he gave orders that his tomb, or rather his monument, was to be topped with two towers, one of gold and the other of silver and fashioned in the way I will tell you. One tower was built of fine stone and then covered with gold to at least the thickness of a finger; the entire tower was covered with it so that it appeared to be made of pure gold. It was a good ten paces tall, and its girth was in proportion to its height. The top was shaped like a ball, and all around it were hung gilded bells that tinkled whenever the wind blew through them. The other tower that I mentioned above was covered in silver and exactly matched the gold one in its construction, size and shape. [The tomb was likewise](#) covered partly with gold and partly with silver. The king had these towers built to glorify himself and elevate his soul. And I assure you that they were the most beautiful towers to be seen in the world, and their value was quite staggering.

Now let me tell you how the Great Khan conquered this province. The fact is that the Great Khan kept a large number of jesters and acrobats at his court. And he told them that he wished them to go and conquer the province of Myanmar³⁹ and that he would give them a captain and the necessary support. The jesters replied that they were very happy to oblige, and they set out on the road with the captain and the support the Great Khan had given them. What else shall I tell you? You should know that these jesters, along with the men who accompanied them, conquered this province of Myanmar. And when the conquest was complete and they arrived in this noble city, they found these two beautiful and costly towers and were moved to wonder. They sent word to where the Great Khan was staying, describing the towers' appearance and beauty and great value, and adding that if he so desired they would dismantle them and send him the gold and silver. But the Great Khan, who knew that the king had built them for the sake of his soul and so that he might be remembered after his death, replied that far from having them demolished he wanted them left just as the king who built them had intended and stipulated. And this was not surprising, because I assure you that no Tartar ever disturbs the property of the dead.⁴⁰

In this province they have many elephants and big, beautiful wild oxen, as well as stags, fallow deer, roe deer and all kind of animals in abundance.

Now I have told you about this province of Myanmar. So we will move on and tell you about a province called Bengal, as you will hear.

Bengal is a province that lies to the south and borders on India. In the year 1290 from the birth of Christ, when I, Marco, was at the Great Khan's court, he had not yet conquered it, though his army and men were already there on a campaign of conquest. Nevertheless I can tell you that this province has a king and a language of its own. The people are inveterate idolaters. There are many eunuchs, and all the barons and lords from neighbouring lands obtain them from here. The oxen are as tall as elephants, though not so stout. They live on meat and milk and rice. They have plenty of cotton and are great traders, for they have spikenard and galangal and ginger and sugar and many other valuable spices. The Indians come here and buy the eunuchs I have mentioned, [who are found here](#) in enormous numbers because all the men taken captive by these people are immediately castrated and afterwards sold. They also buy large numbers of slave girls. And let me tell you that having bought all these eunuchs and slave girls in this province, the merchants export them for sale in many other countries.

Since there is nothing else worth mentioning about this province, we will move on and tell you about a province that lies towards the east and is called Jiaozhi Guo.⁴¹

Jiaozhi Guo is a province lying towards the east. It has its own king. The people are idolaters and have their own language. They have submitted to the Great Khan and pay him an annual tribute. The king is so lascivious that I assure you he has no fewer than 300 wives; for whenever a good-looking woman is seen in the country, he promptly marries her.

Plenty of gold is found in this province. They also have many kinds of precious spices in great abundance, but they are so far from the sea that their wares are worthless as trading goods and can be had very cheaply.

They have plenty of elephants and animals of many other kinds, and no lack of wild game. They live on meat and milk and rice. They have no grape wine but make a very good wine from rice and spices. All the people, both men and women, are painted from head to toe in the way I will tell you. They have pictures made with needles all over their skin, depicting lions and dragons and birds and many other forms and done in such a way that they are indelible. They have them on their faces, their necks, their bellies, their hands, their legs and everywhere else. [This is the procedure](#). To begin with, the person being painted has the various images he has chosen sketched out in black all over his body. This done, he is tied hand and foot and held down by two or more men. Then the artist takes five needles, four fastened together in the form of a square and the fifth in the centre, and starts pricking the client all over, following the outlines of the drawings. The instant the pricks have been made ink is applied to them, and eventually the figure as sketched appears in these pricks. Meanwhile the client suffers such agonies that they might be thought sufficient to serve out purgatory. In fact many of them die while they are under the needle, for they lose a great deal of blood. But they go through with it in the name of gentility; for the more pictures they sport, the more refined and desirable they are held to be.

We will now move on from this province and tell you about another province, which is called Amu⁴² and lies to the east.

Amu is a province lying to the east whose people are subject to the Great Khan. They are idolaters. They live on their flocks and the profit of the land. The women wear extremely valuable gold and silver bangles on their legs and arms. And the men wear them too, but of better quality and higher cost. They have plenty of good horses and sell them in vast numbers to the Indians, who carry on a thriving trade in them. They also have enormous numbers of buffaloes and oxen and cows, because the land is extremely fertile and the pasture is good. They are amply provided with all the necessities of life. And you should know that Amu lies fifteen days' journey beyond Jiaozhi Guo, which in turn is thirty days beyond Bengal.

We will now leave Amu and move on to another province, which is called Tulaman⁴³ and lies a good eight days' journey away to the east.

Tulaman is a province lying to the east. The people are idolaters and have their own language and are subject to the Great Khan. They are a very handsome people, not at all fair-skinned but rather brown. They are born soldiers. They have plenty of cities but many more villages located among towering mountains and fastnesses. When they die they have the corpses burned, and taking the incombustible bones that remain they put them in little caskets, which they carry high up into great mountains and hang from the roofs of huge caverns in such a way that neither man nor beast can touch them. Plenty of gold is found here, but they use cowries for small change in the manner I have described. And all these provinces, namely Bengal and Jiaozhi Guo and Amu, likewise use gold and cowries for money. There are not many merchants, but those there are are very rich and carry on a thriving trade. They live on meat and milk and rice. There is no grape wine, but they make a very good wine with rice and spices.

Now we will leave this province, which contains nothing else worth mentioning, and tell you about a province that lies to the east and is called Kuizhou.⁴⁴

Kuizhou is a province lying towards the east. After setting out from Tulaman, the traveller proceeds for twelve days along a river⁴⁵ lined with towns and villages but otherwise lacking anything worthy of mention. And at the end of this twelve-day river journey he comes to the city of Fuling,⁴⁶ which is very large and splendid. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They live by trade and crafts. And I can tell you that they weave cloths of great beauty from the bark of trees; they wear these cloths in summer. They are born soldiers. They have no currency other than the Great Khan's paper money, which I told you about before. For let me say that from now on we are in the lands where the Great Khan's paper money circulates.

There are so many lions that no man can sleep outdoors at night, for the lions would eat him at once. And I will tell you another thing, too: when men are travelling along this river and stop somewhere for the night, unless they sleep well away from the bank the lions will come out to the boat, snatch a man from it and drag him off to devour. But I can also tell you that the men have learned how to protect themselves. Be in no doubt that these lions are huge and dangerous; but believe me when I say I will tell you something remarkable. For I can tell you that there are dogs in this country that are brave enough to attack the lions – at least if there is a pair of them. You should know that one man and two dogs can kill an adult lion, and I will tell you how. If a man is out riding with a bow and arrows and two huge dogs and comes across a full-grown lion, these strong, stout-hearted dogs will run at the lion with great courage the moment they see him, one barking at his head and the other attacking him from behind. The lion rounds on them, but the dogs dart around so fast that he cannot touch them, and finally he backs off. As soon as the dogs see this they run after him, snapping at his haunches or tail. He wheels round in a fury, but he cannot catch them because they know exactly how to protect themselves. What else shall I tell you? The lion, startled by the noisy clamour of the dogs, goes off in search of a tree against which he can back up while he faces them. But at every step they keep on biting him in the rear, and he keeps lurching this way and that. And when the hunter sees this, he draws his bow and lets fly an arrow – then another – then more, as many as are needed until the lion falls dead. They kill many lions in this way, for they cannot defend themselves against a man on horseback with two good dogs.

They have plenty of silk and goods of all descriptions in great abundance, which are ferried to many regions along this river.

You may take my word for it that the route follows this river for twelve more days, leading past countless cities and towns at every stage. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They use the emperor's paper money and live by trade and industry.

After this twelve-day journey the traveller finds himself back in Chengdufu, which was mentioned earlier in this book. And from

Chengdufu he rides for a good seventy days across provinces and lands we have already passed through and have written about earlier in our book.

At the end of these seventy days he reaches Zhuozhou, which is where we started out.



FIVE

From Beijing to Quanzhou

When the traveller leaves Zhuozhou, he rides southward for four days past many cities and villages. The people thrive on trade and industry. They are idolaters and use the paper money of the Great Khan their lord. At the end of these four days he comes to the city of Hejianfu,¹ which lies towards the south and is in the province of Cathay. And we will tell you about this Hejianfu and its affairs, as you will be able to hear. Hejianfu is a large and noble city of Cathay, lying towards the south. The people are idolaters and burn their dead. **There are also some Christians** who have a church in the city. They are subject to the Great Khan and have paper money. They live by trade and crafts, for they have plenty of silk from which they make gold and silk fabrics and sendal in great quantities. This city governs many satellite cities and towns. **Through the midst** of the city runs a large river that carries a great deal of merchandise to the city of Khanbaliq; **for they have extended** it all the way to that city by means of canals and manmade waterways.

Now we will leave this place and journey south for three days to tell you about another city, which is called Changlu.²

Changlu is another very large city lying towards the south. It is subject to the Great Khan and belongs to the province of Cathay. They use paper money. They are idolaters and burn the bodies of the dead. You should know that vast quantities of salt are produced in this city, and I will tell you how. The fact is that they take a type of earth that is extremely salty and heap it up in great mounds. Then they douse these mounds with enough water that it percolates through the soil and leaches the salt from it. The briny water is collected in channels and poured into big vats, then thoroughly boiled in big iron cauldrons **no more than four fingers deep**. And so salt is formed, very pure and white and fine-grained. I can also tell you this salt is exported to many neighbouring countries and is a source of great wealth to the people and great revenue and profit to the Great Khan. Huge peaches also grow here, weighing no less than two small pounds apiece.

As there is nothing else here worth mentioning, we will now leave this city and tell you about another city called Jiangling.³ It lies to the south, and we will tell you about its affairs.

Jiangling is a city of southern Cathay and is subject to the Great Khan; the people are idolaters and use paper money. It is five days away from Changlu, and this five-day journey takes in many towns and villages that are all subject to the Great Khan. This is a region of thriving trade that provides the emperor with considerable revenue. And you should know that a great broad river flows through the middle of the city of Jiangling, along which enormous quantities of merchandise – silks, spices and other valuable things – are transported both upstream and downstream.

We will now leave Jiangling without telling you anything else about it, and we will tell you about another city located six days' journey further south and called Dongpingfu.⁴

When the traveller sets out from Jiangling, he heads south for six days through a region with many cities and towns of great wealth and splendour. The people are idolaters and burn the bodies of the dead. They are subject to the Great Khan and use paper money. They live by trade and crafts and

are abundantly provided with all the necessities of life. But there is nothing else worth mentioning, and so we will tell you about Dongpingfu.

Dongpingfu is a very large city and was once a great kingdom, but the Great Khan conquered it by force of arms. Even so, I assure you it is the finest city in the entire region. Its merchants are high-powered figures who do business on a grand scale. They have so much silk that it is quite amazing. There are many beautiful and mouth-watering gardens heavy with every kind of choice fruit. And believe me when I say that this city of Dongpingfu presides over eleven imperial cities, by which I mean noble cities of great prosperity; for they are all centres of active and profitable trade and have incalculable quantities of silk.

Let me tell you that in the year 1272⁵ from the incarnation of Christ the Great Khan sent one of his barons, a man named Litan Sangon, to defend and protect this city and province. Moreover, he gave this Litan 80,000 horsemen to enforce his authority. But when Litan had established himself and his men in this province he traitorously conceived an act of terrible disloyalty, as you will hear. He conferred with every one of the elders from each of these cities and plotted with them to launch a rebellion against the Great Khan. And they went ahead with the support of all the people of the province, rebelling against the Great Khan and refusing to obey him. When the Great Khan became aware of this he sent against them two of his barons, who were called Ajul and Mongatai, together with no fewer than 100,000 horsemen. But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that these two barons and their men fought the rebel Litan and the greatest force he could muster, which amounted to about 100,000 cavalry and an immense number of infantry. But as luck had it Litan lost the battle and was killed there with many others. After Litan's defeat and death, the Great Khan launched an investigation to identify all those guilty of this treachery. And all those who were found guilty were put to a cruel death. The rest of the people he pardoned and did them no harm, and from then on they were always very loyal subjects.

You should also be aware that the young women of Cathay are incomparably chaste and cultivate the virtue of modesty. On no account do they skip and dance or romp around or fly into a funk. They do not stay glued to the window, checking out the faces of passers-by and showing their own faces to them; they do not listen eagerly to indecent stories; they do not frequent feasts and parties. And if they happen to visit some respectable place, such as the temples of the idols or the houses of their relatives, they are chaperoned by their mothers and, far from staring shamelessly at other people, wear pretty bonnets designed to prevent them from looking up, so that they always walk with their eyes cast down on the ground in front of their feet. In the company of their elders they are reserved and never utter an ill-considered word; in fact they do not speak at all in their presence without first being asked. At home they keep to their rooms and apply themselves to their tasks, seldom showing themselves to their fathers or brothers or the elders of the house. As for suitors, they do not give them the time of day. And the same applies to the boys and young gentlemen, who never presume to speak in the presence of their elders without being asked. What more can we say? They have such a strong sense of modesty that no two members of the same family or anyone related to them would dream of going to the hot or cold baths together.

Furthermore, if a man wishes to give his daughter in marriage or receives a request for her hand, he pledges her to her prospective husband as a virgin. And the father and suitor draw up contracts covering this point, for if the reverse were discovered to be true the marriage would be null and void. When the contracts and covenants between them have been properly entered into and executed, the girl is led off to have her virginity checked at the baths; there her mother and relatives are gathered together with her suitor's family and certain matrons specially deputed for this purpose by both parties, who begin by testing the girl's virginity with a pigeon's egg. And if the women representing the suitor are not satisfied with this test, on the grounds that a woman's private parts can easily be contracted by medicinal means, one of these matrons will adroitly insert a finger wrapped in fine white linen into the private parts and will make a little rupture in the

virginal vein to see if the linen becomes blotted with the virginal blood. For this blood is of such a type and viscosity that no amount of washing can remove its stain from the cloth on which it is fixed. And if it can be washed out, it is a sign that the girl has been defiled and that the blood is not that of a virgin. If after this test the girl is found to be a virgin, the marriage is valid; otherwise it is not and the girl's father is punished by the authorities according to the stipulations in the contract.

You should know, too, that in order to preserve their virginity, the girls always tread with such a dainty step that they never put one foot in front of the other by more than a finger's length, because a virgin's private parts are frequently opened up by an overly wanton gait.

It should also be understood that this applies to those born in the province of Cathay. The Tartars do not trouble themselves with such niceties, for their daughters as well as their wives go riding with them and this could plausibly be said to cause them a degree of damage. The people of the province of Manzi observe this custom along with those of Cathay.

Here is another thing practised in Cathay that you should know about. Among the idolaters there are eighty-four idols, each with its own name. The idolaters say that the supreme god has given each idol a requisite power; so to one he has given the power of finding lost property, to another ensuring that the land is fertile and blessed with seasonable weather, to another protecting the flocks, and so on for every eventuality, both good and bad. Every idol is called by its own name, and they know and can name the functions and powers of any idol you choose. The idols whose role is to find lost property take the form of two small wooden statues representing twelve-year-old boys, which they deck out with beautiful ornaments. And an old woman permanently resides with them in their temple, acting as a kind of sacristan. If anyone loses anything, whether because it has been stolen or because he has forgotten where he left it or for any reason cannot find it, he goes or sends someone to this old woman, so that she can enquire of the idols about the missing item. The old woman tells him to burn incense before the idols, and he duly censes them. After the incense has been offered the old woman consults the idols about the missing object, and

they give her the appropriate answer. Then the old woman says to the man who has lost the object: 'Look in such-and-such a place and you will find it.' Or if someone has taken it, she says: 'So-and-so has it; tell him to give it to you. And if he denies it, come back to me and I will make him restore it to you without fail. Otherwise I will see to it that he cuts off a hand or foot, or falls and breaks an arm or a leg, or meets with some other kind of accident, so that he will be forcibly compelled to restore it to you.' And so it turns out in practice. If anyone has stolen anything from anybody and denies it, refusing to return it when ordered to do so, then if the culprit is a woman, while she is using a knife in the kitchen or occupied in another way, she cuts off her hand or falls into the fire or meets with some other misfortune; if the culprit is a man, he likewise cuts off his foot while chopping wood, or breaks his arm or leg or another extremity. And as the people have learned from experience that this happens to them if they refuse to confess to a theft, they promptly give back what they have stolen. If, however, the idols do not immediately reply, the old woman instead says: 'The spirits are not here. Go away and come back at such-and-such an hour, because they will appear in the meantime and I will question them.' The petitioner returns at the appointed time, and by then the spirits have given the old woman an answer, delivered in a thin, low whisper that sounds like a hiss. Then the old woman thanks them profusely in this manner. She lifts her hands before them, gnashing her teeth three times as if to say: 'Oh, what a worthy deed! How holy! How virtuous!' And if a man has lost horses, she tells him: 'Go to such-and-such a place, and you will find them there.' Or she might say: 'Robbers found them in such-and-such a place and are leading them off by such-and-such a route. Run and you will find them.' And everything turns out exactly as she has said. The upshot is that nothing is lost that cannot be found. And when they have recovered their lost property, the people make an offering to the idols as a mark of reverence and devotion: perhaps an ell of fine fabric, such as silken sendal or cloth of gold. And in this way I, Marco, found a ring that I had lost; not, mind you, that I made any offering to the idols or paid homage to them.

Now we will move on from this subject, since we have given you a thorough account of it, and tell you about another country that lies to the south and is called Xinzhou.

When the traveller leaves Dongpingfu he continues southward for three days, passing many splendid cities and towns where trade and crafts flourish. There is plenty of wild game of all kinds, both beasts and birds. They are abundantly supplied with all things.

At the end of this three-day journey he reaches the noble city of Xinzhou matou,⁶ which is extremely large and wealthy and a thriving centre of trade and crafts. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They use paper money. I can further tell you that they have a river from which they derive great profit; and I will tell you how. The fact is that this major river flows from the south as far as this city of Xinzhou matou, whose townspeople have made two rivers out of this one big one; for they have channelled half of it to the east and the other half to the west, so that the one leads to Manzi and the other through Cathay. And believe me when I say that this city possesses such extensive shipping – that is, such a huge number of vessels – that no one would credit it without seeing it. You should not suppose that they are large ships; rather they are just the type suited to navigating a large river. Moreover, I assure you that the volume of merchandise shifted to Manzi and across Cathay on board these boats is quite astonishing; not only that, but when they come back they are laden with return cargoes. So all in all, it is a marvellous thing to see the goods that are shipped up and down this river.

We will now leave Xinzhou matou and tell you about another land lying towards the south. Our subject will be a great province called Liucheng.⁷

On leaving the city of Xinzhou matou the traveller follows the way south for eight days, passing many cities and towns of great splendour and size and wealth where trade and industry flourish; the people are idolaters, burn the bodies of the dead, are subject to the Great Khan and use paper money. And at the end of this eight-day journey he reaches a city called, like the

province, Liucheng. This is the capital of the kingdom and a very splendid and wealthy city. The men are soldiers, though it is true that trade and handicrafts are also practised here on a large scale. They have plentiful supplies of wild game, both beasts and birds, as well as every other kind of foodstuff. [The whole region](#) also produces great quantities of jujubes, which are twice the size of dates and are used by the people of the province for making bread.

This city is also on the river that I referred to above. Their ships are bigger than the ones I told you about and are used to transport large and valuable cargoes.

Now we will move on from this province and this city and carry on telling you about the other novelties that lie ahead. Our next topic will be a city called Pizhou,⁸ which is very large and rich.

On leaving the city of Liucheng the traveller continues southward for three days, passing through many fine cities and towns that belong to Cathay. The people are idolaters who burn their dead and are subject to the Great Khan: in other words, they are like the others I have told you about above. They use paper money. There is also the finest game in the world, both beasts and birds. They have everything needed for life in great plenty.

At the end of this three-day journey he comes to a city called Pizhou, which is very large and splendid and is a thriving centre of trade and industry. They have enormous quantities of silk. This city stands at the entrance to the great province of Manzi, and here merchants load their carts with all manner of goods to be transported into Manzi by way of many cities and towns. It is a city that yields large revenues to the Great Khan.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about another city. It is called Suqian⁹ and also lies to the south.

After setting out from the city of Pizhou, the traveller heads south for two days through glorious countryside teeming with all good things and well stocked with game of all kinds, both beasts and birds. And at the end of this two-day journey he reaches the city of Suqian, which is very large and

wealthy from both trade and crafts. The people are idolaters and burn the bodies of their dead in fires. They use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan. The city lies amid sublime plains and fine fields that yield bountiful harvests of wheat and every other kind of grain, but there is nothing else worthy of note. And so we will move on and tell you about the other lands that lie ahead.

Leaving this city of Pizhou, the traveller continues south for a good three days through a delightful landscape of charming towns and villages and fine farmland and fields that abound in game as well as wheat and every other kind of grain. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They have paper money. And this three-day journey ends at the mighty river of Qara-Muren, which flows from the land of Prester John and is very large and broad. For I assure you it is a mile wide and so deep that big ships can easily navigate it. It is teeming with big fish. **I am afraid to tell you** how many ships there are on this river for fear of being called a liar – and not just in this place but in many others, too; wherever, in fact, there is a city built by this river. There are in fact 15,000 ships, all belonging to the Great Khan and ready to ferry his armies to the islands in the sea. For I can tell you that the sea is within a day's journey of this place. I can also tell you that each of these ships requires a crew of twenty sailors and can carry about fifteen horses, along with their riders and provisions.

There is a city on the near bank and another on the far bank, the one facing the other. The first is a large city called Huai'anzhou,¹⁰ and the second is a small city called Huaiyin.¹¹

After crossing this river you enter the great province of Manzi; and I will tell you how the Great Khan conquered this province of Manzi. **But you must not suppose** that we have given a step-by-step account of the entire province of Cathay, or even a twentieth of it. The cities that have been described are merely those that lie along the route that I, Marco, used to take across the province; those to either side and in the interior have been passed over, since it would take too long to tell you about them all.

The fact is that the lord and master of the great province of Manzi was a mighty king named Facfur¹² who was formidably endowed with treasure, subjects and lands, so much so that there was scarcely a greater king in the world and certainly none richer or more powerful except for the Great Khan himself. That said, you should know that he was no soldier but rather a man who found pleasure chiefly in women and was a friend to the poor. His province had no horses and his people were unaccustomed to battles or weapons or armies, for the reason that this province of Manzi is exceptionally well fortified by nature. For all the cities are surrounded by broad, deep expanses of water; indeed there is not a city that does not have water around it to a width exceeding a crossbowshot and to a great depth, and therefore I assure you that if the people had been soldierly they would never have lost it. But lose it they did, through lack of valour and inexperience in bearing arms. For I can tell you that the only way into all these cities is across a bridge.

This is how it happened. In the year 1268 from the incarnation of Christ the Great Khan now reigning, namely Khubilai, sent here a baron of his named Bayan Chingsang, which means 'Bayan Hundred-eyes'.¹³ You should also know that the king of Manzi had learned from his astrologers that he could not lose his kingdom except at the hands of a man who had a hundred eyes. This Bayan set out for Manzi with a vast force of cavalry and infantry provided by the Great Khan. He also had a large fleet of ships to transport the horsemen and foot soldiers where the need arose. And when Bayan and his full force arrived at the entrypoint to Manzi – in other words the city of Huai'anzhou where we now are and which we will tell you all about in due course – he ordered the inhabitants to submit to the Great Khan. They replied that they would do no such thing. This being so, Bayan went on his way until he reached another city, which likewise refused to surrender; so he set off again and moved on ahead. And he acted in this way because he knew that the Great Khan was sending another large army after him.

What else shall I tell you? He went to five cities, none of which he was able to take and none of which would surrender. But when he came to the

sixth, Bayan stormed it [and had all the inhabitants put to death](#). After this he took a second and a third, and I can tell you that things carried on in this way until he had taken twelve cities in a row. But why make a long story of it? You can take my word for it that when Bayan had captured as many cities as I have said, he headed directly for the capital of the kingdom, the city of Xingzai,¹⁴ where the king and queen were. When the king saw Bayan and his army he was seized with fear. He abandoned the city with many of his people and embarked on no fewer than 1,000 ships to take refuge among the islands of the Ocean Sea. And the queen, who had remained in the city with a large force, set about defending it as best she could.

Then one day the queen happened to ask the name of the enemy commander, and she was told that he was called Bayan Hundred-eyes. And when she heard that this man's name was Hundred-eyes, she immediately recalled the astrologers' prediction that a man with a hundred eyes would strip them of their kingdom. So the queen gave herself up to Bayan. And when the queen had surrendered, all the other cities and the whole kingdom surrendered without putting up the slightest resistance. This was a momentous conquest, since there was no kingdom worth half so much in the whole world; for the wealth the king had at his disposal was truly astounding.

Let me tell you, too, about some of his acts of princely benevolence. You should know that every year he had no fewer than 20,000 little children looked after; and I will tell you how. In this province babies are turned out of doors the moment they are born; this is done by poor women who have no means of rearing them. And the king had them all taken in hand and a record made of the constellation and planet they were born under. Then he had them raised in numerous establishments around the country, for he retained huge numbers of nurses. And if a rich man was childless, he went to the king and arranged to take as many of these children as he wanted, choosing those that pleased him best. Moreover, when the boys and girls reached marriageable age he gave the girls to the boys as their wives and

provided them with enough to live on comfortably. And counting both boys and girls he raised at least 20,000 children a year in this way.

Here is another thing this king did. When he was out riding along a road and he chanced upon two fine houses with a small one in between, the king would enquire why that house was so small compared to the large ones. And the answer would come that the small house belonged to a poor man who did not have the means to enlarge it. Then the king would give orders to have the little house made as fine and tall as the two next to it.

I can also tell you that this king kept more than 1,000 of the best-looking boys and girls in attendance on him at all times. He maintained justice in his kingdom so well that no one committed a crime; the shops were left open all night and nothing was ever found missing. It was as safe to travel by night as by day. There is no telling the great wealth that was found in this kingdom.

Now I have told you about the kingdom, and next I will tell you about the queen. She was taken to the Great Khan. And when the emperor saw her, he had her treated with honour and lavishly attended as befitted a great lady. But as for the king her husband, he was destined never to leave the islands of the Ocean Sea, and there he died. So we will leave him and his wife and this subject and return to our account of the province of Manzi. We will describe all the customs and manners and affairs of its people, treating each thing fully in its turn so that you may follow them clearly. And we will begin at the beginning, which is to say at the city of Huai'an Zhou.

Huai'an Zhou is a very large, splendid and wealthy city situated towards the south-east at the entrance to the province of Manzi. The people are idolaters and burn the bodies of their dead. They are subject to the Great Khan. They have enormous numbers of ships; for you know, as I have told you, that the city stands on the great river called Qara-Muren. I can tell you, moreover, that immense quantities of merchandise arrive in this city, as it is the capital of the kingdom in these parts. For many cities send their goods here to be distributed along the river to many other cities. And I can also tell you that salt is produced in this city and exported to at least forty other cities. What

with the salt and the duty on the extensive trades that are carried on here, the Great Khan receives huge revenues from this city.

Now we have told you about this city, so we will move on and tell you about a city called Baoying.¹⁵

After leaving Huai'anzhou, the traveller proceeds south-eastward for a day along a causeway that lies at the entrance to Manzi. This causeway is built of very fine stones and is bordered on either side by water; [to be precise](#), there are vast marshes on one side and on the other more marshes but also deep water that is navigable by ships. The only ways to enter this province are to cross this causeway or to arrive by boat.

At the end of this day's journey the traveller comes to a big and very beautiful city called Baoying. The people are idolaters and burn the bodies of their dead. They are subject to the Great Khan. They use paper money. Some Turkish Nestorian Christians also live here and have a church in the city. They live by trade and by crafts. They have a great deal of silk and make many kinds of gold and silk fabrics in large quantities. They have all the means of life in great plenty, but as there is nothing else worth mentioning we will move on and tell you about a city called Gaoyou.¹⁶

After leaving the city of Baoying the traveller continues south-eastward for a day until he reaches a very large and splendid city called Gaoyou. The people are also idolaters and use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan. They live by trade and by crafts. They have all the means of life in great abundance. They have fish beyond counting and vast stocks of game, both beasts and birds. For I assure you that you can get three pheasants here for one Venetian groat of silver.

So we will leave this city and tell you about a city called Taizhou.¹⁷

Now you should know that on leaving the city of Gaoyou the traveller continues for one day, passing many villages and fields and farms at every stage, until he reaches a city called Taizhou, which, though by no means very big, is rich in all the good things of the earth. The people are idolaters

and use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan. They live by trade and by crafts, for great profits and fortunes are made here in various lines of business. The city lies towards the south-east. They have many ships and plenty of game, both beasts and birds.

You should also know that if you turn off to the left, heading towards the east, you reach the Ocean Sea in three days; and vast quantities of salt are produced in every place between the Ocean Sea and the city. There is a city called Tongzhou¹⁸ that is very large, prosperous and splendid, and this city produces enough salt to supply the whole province. Moreover, you can take my word for it that the revenue accruing to the Great Khan from this source is so stupendous that it could scarcely be credited without being seen first-hand. The people are idolaters and use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan.

And so we will leave this place and return to Taizhou; and we will leave Taizhou too, since we have given you a good account of it, and tell you about a city called Yangzhou.¹⁹

On leaving Taizhou the traveller continues south-eastward for a day, passing through glorious countryside full of towns and villages, until he reaches a large and splendid city called Yangzhou. And you should know that it is so great and powerful that its authority extends over twenty-seven cities, all large and fine and bustling with trade. This city is the seat of one of the Great Khan's twelve highest-ranking barons, for it has been chosen for one of their twelve seats. The people are idolaters and use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan. Messer Marco Polo himself, who is the subject of this book, governed this city for three years by the Great Khan's commission in lieu of one of these barons. They live by trade and by crafts; for accoutrements for knights and men-at-arms are manufactured here in vast quantities. For you may be certain that many men-at-arms live in this city and its satellite cities. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will set out from here and tell you about two great provinces that also form part of Manzi. They are situated towards the west, and because there is a

great deal to say about them we will tell you all about their ways and customs. Let us begin with the province called Anqing.²⁰

Anqing is a province of Manzi lying towards the west. It is a very splendid and wealthy province. The people are idolaters who use paper money and are subject to the Great Khan. They live by trade and by crafts. They have a good deal of silk. They make all sorts of gold and silk fabrics. They have every kind of grain and all the means of life in great plenty, for it is a very fertile province. They are well supplied with game. They burn the bodies of their dead. They have many lions. There are many wealthy merchants from whom the Great Khan receives handsome tributes and revenues.

Now we will move on from here, for there is nothing else worth mentioning; and next we will tell you about the splendiferous city of Xiangyangfu,²¹ which deserves a place in our book because it is involved in a very important matter.

Xiangyangfu is a large and splendid city whose authority extends over no fewer than twelve cities, all large and wealthy. It is an important centre for trade and handicrafts. The people are idolaters, use paper money, and burn the bodies of their dead. They are subject to the Great Khan. They have plenty of silk and make many types of gold and silk fabrics. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. In short it has all the superior things befitting a superior city.

Moreover, I give you my word that this city held out for three years after Manzi as a whole surrendered. Throughout this time a large army sent by the Great Khan was menacing it; but the army could only hold a position on one side of the city, namely to the north, because on every other side there was a huge deep lake. So the Great Khan's army could only lay siege to it on this northern side. And provisions flooded into the city from every other side, coming from across the water. And I assure you that the Great Khan would never have taken it, but for a factor that I will now explain.

Now you should know that, after keeping up their siege of this city for three years without getting anywhere, the Great Khan's troops were in a

fearful temper. At this point Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco declared: 'We will find you a way to make the city surrender²² at once.' And the men from the army said that they yearned for nothing more. All these words were spoken in the presence of the Great Khan, for envoys from the army had come to tell the emperor why they were unable to take the city by siege and how it was that provisions were reaching it via channels that they were unable to secure.

'Something must be done to ensure this city is taken,' said the emperor. At this the two brothers and their son Messer Marco declared: 'Majesty, we have with us in our retinue men who can make mangonels capable of hurling such huge stones that the people of the city will not be able to hold out but will give themselves up the moment the mangonels, that is the trebuchets, begin their bombardment.'

The emperor told Messer Niccolò and his brother and son that he was most anxious to see this happen, and directed them to have this mangonel built as quickly as possible.

So Messer Niccolò and his brother and son told a German and a Nestorian Christian who were among their retinue and were skilled masters of this art to construct two or three mangonels capable of throwing stones weighing 300 pounds. And the two men built three very fine mangonels, **each capable of throwing** stones weighing in excess of 300 pounds a great distance; there were more than sixty of these round stones, each weighing the same as the next. When they were complete the emperor and his men inspected them with great interest and had several projectiles flung as they looked on; they were quite astonished by this display and praised the work highly. Then the emperor had them delivered to his armies, which were still besieging the city of Xiangyangfu without success. And as soon as the army took delivery of the trebuchets they set them up, and the Tartars thought they were the greatest wonder in the world.

What else shall I tell you? The trebuchets were made ready and wound up, and one of them hurled a stone into the city. The stone hurtled into the houses, smashing and wrecking everything and making a terrific din and uproar. And when the citizens saw this calamity, the like of which they had

never seen before, they were so unnerved and terrified that they did not know what to say or do. They held counsel together, but could not hit on any scheme for escaping from these trebuchets. They came to the conclusion that unless they gave themselves up they were all dead men. So they made up their minds to surrender at all costs, and sent word to the commander of the army that they were willing to surrender on the same terms as the other cities of the province and submit to the suzerainty of the Great Khan. The commander of the army replied that he was perfectly willing to grant them this. So he accepted their surrender, and the citizens gave themselves up. And this came about thanks to the good offices of Master Niccolò and Master Maffeo and Master Marco. It was no small achievement, for you should know that this city and its province undoubtedly rank among the best of all the Great Khan's possessions and bring him considerable revenues and profits.

Now I have told you how this city surrendered on account of the trebuchets that Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco had built. So we will move on from this subject and tell you about a city called Zhenzhou.²³

Now you should know that when the traveller sets out from the city of Yangzhou and continues south-eastward for fifteen miles, he reaches a city called Zhenzhou. It is by no means very large, but is a great centre of shipping and trade. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They have paper money. And you should know that it is located on the greatest river in the world, which is called the Yangtze. At some points this river is ten miles wide, at others eight and at others six; it is more than 120 days' journey²⁴ in length. **Countless rivers** flow into it from every direction, all of them navigable and each enlarging and swelling it in turn. And on account of this river, this city has a quite exceptionally large fleet of boats for transporting merchandise and items of all kinds along the river. Consequently it is a city that yields substantial revenues and taxes to the Great Khan.

Moreover, let me tell you that this river runs for such a distance, crosses so many regions, and has so many cities on its banks that I swear the number of boats that sail it, and the quantity and value of their precious wares, exceeds that of all the rivers of Christendom put together, and all the seas to boot. For I give you my word that I have seen no fewer than 15,000 boats²⁵ in this city at the same time, all afloat on this river.²⁶ Now you can well imagine, given that this city of no great size has so many ships, how many there must be in the others. For I assure you that this river flows through more than sixteen provinces, and there are more than 200 cities on its banks, all with bigger fleets than this one. **This does not include** the cities and districts located on the rivers that flow into the main stream, which also have a great deal of shipping. And all of these ships bring merchandise to this city of Zhenzhou and take more merchandise back with them. The chief article of trade on this river is salt, which merchants load in this city and carry to all the regions bordering the river as well as further upcountry, leaving the main river and sailing up its tributaries to supply all the surrounding districts. For this reason salt is brought to this city of Zhenzhou from all points along the seashore, and here it is put aboard ships and carried throughout these regions. The same ships also carry iron. On their return journey downstream they bring to this city wood, charcoal, hemp and many other articles that are supplied to the regions near the seashore. Believe it or not, there is not enough shipping to carry everything and many goods are transported on rafts. And this is why this port or city provides the Great Khan with such a hefty income.

At many points hilly islands and rocky outcrops rise from this river and are covered with monasteries of the idols and other dwellings; and there are villages and homesteads everywhere.

The ships are decked and have a single mast, but their capacity is substantial; for I assure you that they carry from 4,000 to 12,000 cantars,²⁷ speaking in the measures of our country.

Now we will move on, having given you a full account of this place, and proceed to tell you about a city called Guazhou.²⁸ But first I want to tell you about something that had slipped my mind, for it is well worth including in

our book. Now you should know that not all the ships have hemp ropes. Their masts and sails, it is true, are rigged with them; but I can tell you that the lines by which they are towed upstream are made of cane. You understand that these canes are the long, thick variety that I mentioned before as being a good fifteen paces long. They split them and bind them together into lengths of no less than 300 paces, and they are stronger than if they were made of hemp. [And each of these ships](#) has eight or ten or twelve horses to tow it upstream.

Now we will leave this subject and revert to Guazhou.

Guazhou is a small city lying towards the south-east on the river. The people are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan and use paper money. Enormous quantities of corn and rice are stockpiled in this city and transported onwards by water as far as the great city of Khanbaliq and the court of the Great Khan; not by sea, you understand, but along rivers and across lakes. And you should know that the grain that comes from this city feeds a large proportion of the Great Khan's court. Moreover, let me tell you that the Great Khan has transformed the waterways²⁹ between this city and Khanbaliq. For he has built huge channels, both wide and deep, from one river to the next and from one lake to another; and he has made the water flow along them, with the result that they look like great rivers and are used by quite large ships. And in this way it is possible to travel from Manzi as far as the city of Khanbaliq. I can tell you, too, that it is equally possible to go by land. For a causeway runs alongside these canals; so by these means the journey can be made either by water or by land, as you have heard.

In the middle of the river opposite this city there is a rocky island on which stands a monastery of the idolaters housing 200 brothers. And in this great monastery there is an immense number of idols. You should know that this monastery is the motherhouse of many other monasteries of idols, making it just like an archbishopric.

Now we will leave this place and cross the river; and we will tell you about a city called Zhenjiangfu.³⁰

Zhenjiangfu is a city of Manzi. Its people are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan and use paper money. They live by trade and crafts. They have plenty of silk and they make gold and silk fabrics of many kinds. Its merchants are wealthy and powerful. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. They have corn and other foodstuffs in great plenty. There are two churches of Nestorian Christians that have been here since the year 1278 from the incarnation of Christ, and I will tell you how this came about. The fact is that there had never been a Christian monastery there, or a single believer in the God of the Christians, until the year 1278, when the city was governed for three years in the name of the Great Khan by Mar Sergius, who was a Nestorian Christian. And this Mar Sergius had these two churches built here, and ever since there have been churches where before there were neither churches nor Christians.

Now we will move on from this subject and tell you about a very great city called Changzhou.³¹

After leaving the city of Zhenjiangfu the traveller proceeds south-eastward for three days, at every stage passing numerous cities and towns where trades and handicrafts thrive. The people are all idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan, and they use paper money. And at the end of this three-day journey he reaches the city of Changzhou, which is very big and splendid. The people are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan, and they use paper money. They live by trade and crafts. They have a good deal of silk and make many kinds of gold and silk fabrics. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds, and are abundantly supplied with everything needed to live well, for the land is very fertile.

I will further tell you about a wicked act that was perpetrated by the people of this city, and how they paid for it dearly. The fact is that when the province of Manzi was conquered by the Great Khan's troops under the command of Bayan, it happened that Bayan sent a contingent of his men, who were Alans and Christians, to take this city. Now as it happened these Alans captured the city³² and entered it. And inside they found such fine wine that they went on a drinking binge and fell into a drunken stupor so

profound that they were insensible to anything around them, whether good or bad. When the men of the city saw that their conquerors had metamorphosed into what looked like corpses, they did not lose a moment but began killing them all there and then during the night until not a single one remained alive. When Bayan, the commander of the great army, heard that the people of this city had killed his men so treacherously, he dispatched a large detachment to storm the city. And believe me when I tell you that when they had captured it they put all the inhabitants to the sword. This was how so many men of this city came to die, as you have heard.

Now we will leave this place, and moving on we will tell you about a city called Suzhou.³³

Suzhou is a large and very splendid city. Its people are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan; they use paper money and have a great deal of silk. They live by trade and crafts and weave large quantities of silk fabric to make into clothes. Its merchants are rich and powerful. The city is so big that its perimeter measures forty miles. It has such a vast population that no one could reckon the number. I assure you that if they were a soldierly people, these men of the province of Manzi, they would conquer all the rest of the world. But they are not soldiers; rather, I can tell you that they are astute merchants and skilled practitioners of every craft, and among them are great philosophers and great natural physicians with a deep understanding of nature. **There are also many magicians and diviners.** Moreover, I give you my word that in this city there are no fewer than 6,000 stone bridges under which one or two galleys could easily pass. And I can also tell you that rhubarb and ginger grow very profusely in the nearby mountains. In fact, I assure you that one Venetian groat would buy you a good sixty pounds³⁴ of fresh ginger of excellent quality. You should also know that this city presides over sixteen other cities, all very large and busy centres of trade and industry. And you should know that its name, Suzhou, means in our language 'Earth'; and not far from here there is another city called 'Heaven'. They were given these names as a mark of their great grandeur.

We will tell you later about the second of these splendid cities, the one called 'Heaven'.

Now we will leave Suzhou and go on to a city called Wujiang.³⁵ And you should know that this Wujiang is a day's journey beyond Suzhou. It is a very large and prosperous city and a major centre of trade and industry. But since there are no novelties worth mentioning we will move on and tell you about another city, this one called Wuxing.³⁶

This Wuxing is also a very large and splendid city. The people are idolaters and subject to Great Khan, and they use paper money. They have a great deal of silk and many other precious wares. They are astute merchants and skilled craftsmen.

Now we will leave this city and tell you about a city called Changxing.³⁷

Now you should know that this city of Changxing is very large and wealthy. The people are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan, and they use paper money. They live by trade and handicrafts. Many kinds of sendal are made here in huge quantities. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and, moving on, will tell you about the next city. Our subject will be the splendid city of Xingzai, which is the capital city of the king of Manzi.

On leaving the city of Changxing the traveller journeys for three days through fine countryside, passing many cities and towns of great splendour and wealth whose inhabitants live by trade and crafts. The people are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan. They use paper money. They are plentifully supplied with every kind of nourishment for the human body.

This three-day journey ends at the magnificent city of Xingzai, which in our language means 'the city of Heaven'. And since we have now arrived here, we will describe it to you in its full splendour; it is well worth recording, because this is without doubt the finest and noblest city in the world. Now in telling you of its splendours, we will follow the written account that the queen of the realm sent to Bayan, the conqueror of this province, to be forwarded to the Great Khan in the hope that, being aware

of its magnificence, he might forbear from having it destroyed or sacked. And I will recount the contents of her letter in due order; for it is all true, as I, Marco Polo, later saw clearly with my own eyes.³⁸

The first thing mentioned in this account was that the city of Xingzai is about 100 miles in circumference, **because its streets** and canals are very big and wide. Then there are squares where they hold markets, which on account of the vast crowds that gather in them are necessarily very large and spacious. The city is situated in such a way that on one side is a crystal-clear freshwater lake, while on the other is a huge river that flows into every part of the city along numerous canals, both large and small, carrying away all its waste before flowing into the lake and onwards towards the Ocean. This makes the air very wholesome. It is possible to get around every part of the city both by land and by these streams. The streets and canals are wide and capacious so that carts and boats can easily pass along them to carry the things needed by the inhabitants. There are said to be 12,000 bridges, mostly built of stone **though some are made of wood. Those that span** the principal canals and the main street are raised on such high arches and are so well designed that big ships can pass under them without a mast; and yet carts and horses pass over them, so well are the streets graded to reach these heights. Smaller boats can pass under any of the other bridges. No one should be surprised that there are so many bridges, because I can tell you that the entire city rises from the water³⁹ and is surrounded by water, making it necessary to have many bridges so that people can get to all the different parts of town.

On the other side the city is closed off by a ditch, some forty miles long and very wide, which is filled with water from the river. It was made at the behest of the ancient kings of the province, in order to draw off water from the river whenever it overflowed its banks; it also acts as a bulwark for the city, for the earth that was dug out was piled up on the inner side to form what looks like a little mound running along the perimeter.

There are ten principal squares, their sides half a mile long, as well as countless others serving the various quarters of the city. In front of them is the main street, which is forty paces wide and runs in a straight line from

one end of the city to the other, with many bridges conveniently crossing it on the same level; and every four miles there is one of these squares that measure two miles, as mentioned, around the perimeter. In a similar fashion a very wide canal runs parallel to this street at the back of the squares; its near bank is lined with large stone warehouses where all the merchants who come from India and elsewhere store their goods and merchandise, in order to be conveniently close to these squares. Three times a week a market is held in each of these squares, attracting crowds of forty thousand to fifty thousand people who bring with them everything that could be desired in the way of food; for produce is always in plentiful supply, whether it be game, such as roebucks, red deer, fallow deer, hares and rabbits, or birds such as partridges, pheasants, francolins, quails, chickens, capons and untold quantities of ducks and geese, which they rear in such numbers on the lake that a brace of geese and two brace of ducks can be had for one Venetian silver groat. Then there are the shambles, where they slaughter large animals such as calves, oxen, kids and lambs whose flesh is eaten by magnates and potentates. But the rest of the people, those of low status, do not scruple to eat every kind of unclean flesh.

These market squares are always stocked with all kinds of vegetables and fruits, most notably giant pears weighing ten pounds apiece, white as dough inside and very fragrant, as well as peaches in season, yellow and white ones and very dainty. Grapes and wine are not produced locally, but excellent raisins are imported from abroad and so is wine, though the inhabitants do not set much store by it since they are accustomed to wine made from rice and spices. Every day, too, great quantities of fish are brought twenty-five miles upstream from the Ocean Sea. There is also a supply of fish from the lake, for there are many fishermen who make this their sole occupation; the varieties vary according to the season, but thanks to the effluent coming from the city they are always plump and tasty. Anyone who saw the sheer quantity of fish would never imagine they could all be sold; yet in a few hours the whole lot has been cleared away, so vast are the numbers of inhabitants who are accustomed to refined living and who eat both fish and meat at the same meal.

All ten squares are surrounded by tall houses with shops beneath where every manner of trade is carried on and all kinds of merchandise, including spices, jewels and pearls are sold. Some shops sell nothing but wine made from rice and spices, which is constantly being brewed in fresh batches and is cheap to buy. In some of the many streets that give onto these squares there are numerous cold-water baths, well staffed by male and female attendants who are always on duty to bathe the men and women who go there; for from childhood onwards they are used to taking cold baths all the time, a practice which they say is very beneficial to the health. There are also some rooms in these bathhouses that are supplied with hot water and kept aside for foreigners, who could not bear the cold water since they are not hardened to it. It is their custom to bathe every day, and they will not sit down to a meal without first washing.

Other streets are occupied by prostitutes, whose number is so great that I do not dare give it. They are not just found in the area around the squares, which is where places are usually assigned to them, but all over the city. They live in great luxury, with exquisite perfumes and numerous maidservants, in lavishly decorated houses. These women are very skilled and practised in the arts of flattery and seduction and are always ready with the right words for every kind of person, so that foreigners who have once enjoyed them remain, so to speak, in a transport of delight and are so captivated by their sweetness and charm that they can never forget them. And this is why, when they return home, they tell people that they have been in Xingzai, that is to say in the city of Heaven, and long for the time when they can go back there.

Other streets house all the doctors and astrologers, who also teach reading and writing. And countless other professions have their own quarters around these squares. Two large palaces front onto each square, one at either end, housing the magistrates deputed by the king to arbitrate on the spot in any disputes that might arise between merchants or between any of the people living in the neighbourhood. These magistrates are also responsible for checking on a daily basis whether the guards who, as will be

explained below, are posted on the nearby bridges are actually there or have deserted their post, and where necessary to punish them as they see fit.

The main street that we mentioned before, which runs from one end of the city to the other, is lined on either side with houses – both vast mansions with their gardens and, beside them, the dwellings of artisans who work in their shops – and at every hour of the day is thronged with people going this way and that on their business, so much so that anyone who saw such a huge crowd would be convinced that it would be impossible to find enough food to feed so many mouths; and yet, every market day, all the squares are crammed full with people and traders bringing in supplies by cart and boat, and everything is sold. Let me quote by way of an illustration the amount of pepper consumed in this city, from which you can infer the quantities of meat, wine, spices and other foodstuffs that are supplied to the tune of their collective household budgets. Messer Marco witnessed the inventory made by one of the Great Khan's customs officers and found that, in the city of Xingzai, forty-three cartloads of pepper are consumed every day, each load amounting to 223 pounds.

It was further stated in the queen's report that this city possessed twelve guilds: one for each of the crafts [that are best established](#) and do the most business, for there are also countless lesser ones. Each guild has 12,000 establishments, that is to say 12,000 workshops, each employing at least ten men, or in some cases fifteen, twenty or forty. Do not imagine that they are all master craftsmen; rather, they are teams working under the direction of masters. All this is needed because this city supplies many others in the province. There are so many merchants who are so rich and conduct such a great volume of trade that no one could give a full picture of their business; it is truly a remarkable phenomenon. I can also tell you that the great men and their wives, as well as all the heads of the workshops that I have told you about, spurn every kind of manual labour and live lives as refined and pristine as if they were kings. And their women are also very delicate and angelic creatures, [very tenderly](#) and daintily raised and bedecked with so many silks and jewels that the value of their finery is beyond reckoning.

I can further tell you that the king of this city and province, in the days when he reigned, decreed that every man had to take up his father's trade; even if he had a hundred thousand bezants he could not practise any other trade but his father's. **They were not, you understand**, obliged to work with their own hands,⁴⁰ but only to employ men, as I mentioned above, to carry on their craft. But the Great Khan no longer enforces this rule. Nowadays, if an artisan has grown so rich that he wants and is able to quit his trade, he is under no obligation to continue practising it. For the Great Khan reasons like this: if a man practises a craft because he is poor and could not afford to live without it, and in due course is smiled on by fortune to the extent of being able to lead an honourable life without practising his craft, why then should he be compelled to work at it against his will? For when the gods have given him great success, it would look unseemly and unjust for men to refuse to accept it.

Let me tell you, too, that towards the south there is a lake a good thirty miles in circumference and surrounded by many beautiful palaces and mansions of such wonderful construction that they could not have been better or more sumptuously built or designed. They belong to nobles and magnates. There are also many abbeys and monasteries devoted to idols, of which there are vast numbers here. And I can also tell you that in the middle of the lake there are two islands, each boasting a truly marvellous and sumptuous palace with **more rooms** and apartments than can be imagined and so finely constructed and embellished that it really seems like an emperor's palace. When some people want to hold a wedding or banquet, they go to these palaces and hold their wedding or feast here. Here they find all the trappings needed for the banquet, such as plateware, linen and crockery, **all kept in these palaces** ready for the people of this city to use on these occasions, because they were made by the people themselves. Sometimes there might be a hundred parties at once, some wanting to hold feasts and others weddings; yet all will be accommodated in various rooms and pavilions with such efficiency that none get in the way of each other.

Besides this, the lake is equipped with a large number of boats or barges, both big and small, ready for pleasure-trips and recreation; they can take

ten, fifteen, twenty or more people, being from fifteen to twenty paces long with broad, flat bottoms so that they sail without heeling to either side. Anyone who wants to have a good time with women or with his friends hires one of these boats, which are always kept furnished with handsome seats and tables and all the other trappings needed for a feast. **They carry on board** the finest wines and bring the choicest sweetmeats; and so these men go about the lake living it up, for their minds and thoughts are bent on nothing but bodily delights and the pleasures of feasting in company. **Each barge is roofed** over with a deck where men stand holding poles that they thrust into the bottom of the lake (for it is no more than two paces deep) and so propel the boat in the desired direction. The underside of this deck is painted in various colours and designs, as is the entire barge, and all round there are windows that can be opened and shut so that the diners who are seated along the sides can see in every direction and feast their eyes on the ever-changing beauties of the scenes through which they are passing. **There is no doubt** that a trip on this lake affords greater refreshment and contentment than any other experience **on earth; for on one side** it skirts the city, so that from a distance the sightseers on the barges can take in all its grandeur and beauty, all its palaces, temples, monasteries and gardens with their overarching trees running down to the water's edge. These barges filled with pleasure-seekers are found on this lake at all times, for the inhabitants of the city think of nothing else but rounding off the day's labour or trading by spending some time with their women, or with prostitutes, and devoting themselves to pleasure either on these barges or by riding about the city in carriages – which we must mention, because just like the boats on the lake this is one of the inhabitants' favourite ways of passing time in the city.

There are many fine houses in the city, and at numerous points on every side there are great stone towers where the people take all their belongings whenever a fire breaks out. And you should know that outbreaks of fire are very common, because many of the houses are made of wood. **The houses are very solidly** constructed and richly decorated, and the people take such

delight in ornaments, paintings and buildings that the sums they spend on them are quite staggering.

The natives of the city of Xingzai are men of peace, a quality instilled and ingrained in them by their kings, who were of the same temper. They cannot handle weapons and do not keep any at home. They are never seen or heard to quarrel or engage in any kind of dispute. They work at their trades and crafts with great diligence and honesty. They have such love for one another that, to judge by the camaraderie among the men and women of a neighbourhood, you might think a whole district consisted of a single family. These bonds of affection are so strong that they are untouched by any jealousy or suspicion of their wives, for whom they have the utmost respect; any man who dared address an unseemly remark to a married woman would be looked upon as an out-and-out brute. They are equally friendly to foreigners who visit them on trade; they welcome them into their homes, entertaining them as honoured guests, and are always ready with help and advice on matters of business. On the other hand they loathe the sight of soldiers, including the Great Khan's guards, whom they hold responsible for depriving them of their rightful kings and lords.

I can further tell you that the people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan and use paper money. **The men as much as the women** are fair-skinned and handsome. Most of them wear silk all the time, since this material is available in great abundance owing to its production throughout the territory of Xingzai, not to mention the great quantity that is constantly being imported from other provinces by merchants. They eat every kind of meat, including the flesh of dogs and other brute beasts and animals of every kind that no Christian in our parts would touch for anything in the world.

Let me also tell you that each of the 12,000 bridges is guarded by ten men, **five by day** and five by night, who are stationed under cover. They are there to protect the city against evildoers and anyone headstrong enough to incite a rebellion. **In each guardhouse** there is a big wooden drum together with a large gong and a clock by which they tell the hours both of the day and of the night. At the beginning of every night, when the first hour has

passed, one of the guards strikes a single blow on the drum and the gong so that the whole neighbourhood knows it is one o'clock. At the second hour they strike two blows, and they keep this up every hour, increasing the number of strokes. They never sleep but are always on the alert. In the morning, after sunrise, they start over by beating one hour as they did the previous evening; and so they go on, hour by hour. Some of them patrol the district to see if anyone has kept a light or fire burning beyond the permitted hours; if they find one they mark the door of the house and summon its master to appear before the magistrates in the morning, and unless he can offer a legitimate excuse he is punished. If they find anyone abroad at night after the prescribed hours they arrest him, and in the morning they bring him before the magistrates. Similarly, if in daytime they come across a poor man who is unable to work on account of a disability, they remove him to one of the countless hospitals that were built throughout the city by the ancient kings and are handsomely endowed; and if he is fit and well they compel him to take up some form of work. The moment they see a fire ablaze in any building they sound the alarm by beating the drum, and the guards from the other bridges come running up to extinguish it and to rescue the goods of the merchants or whoever it may be, by carrying them off to the towers we mentioned or stowing them in boats and taking them out to the islands in the lake. For no resident of the city would be bold enough to leave his house during the night even to go to a fire, except for the owners of the goods and these guards who come to help, who never number fewer than one or two thousand.

I will tell you another thing, too. There is a hill within the city, and on its summit is a tower, and atop the tower is a wooden drum⁴¹ which a man steadies with one hand while striking the inside with a mallet so that the sound can be clearly heard from far off. And he sounds this drum every time a fire breaks out in the city or any civil disturbance happens to flare up. The instant anything of this sort happens, this drum is sounded without delay.

The Great Khan has this city kept under such close guard by so many men because it is the principal city and capital of the whole province of

Manzi, and because it contains vast treasures and provides the Great Khan with such immense revenues that anyone who heard tell of it would scarcely be able to credit it. And the emperor also has it so well guarded by so many men out of fear that the inhabitants might mount a rebellion [or uprising](#); hence he always keeps vast forces of infantry and cavalry in the city and its environs, among them as many as possible of his leading barons and most trusted henchmen.

You may also take my word for it that all the streets of this city are paved with stone and brick; so, too, are all the roads and causeways of the entire province of Manzi, so that you can ride or walk across any part of it without getting your feet dirty.⁴² [But since the Great Khan's couriers](#) would not be able to ride post-haste on horseback along paved roads, a strip of road at the side is left unpaved for their benefit. The main street that we mentioned above – the one that runs from one end of the city to the other – is likewise paved with stones and bricks to a width of ten paces on either side, but the centre strip is actually filled with fine gravel that drains off the rainwater into the nearby canals by means of vaulted sewers, keeping the street dry at all times. Now there can always be seen going up and down this street a procession of long carriages decked out with silk awnings and cushions and capable of seating six people. They are hired by the day by men and women who want to go on a pleasure trip. Countless numbers of these carriages can be seen passing along the middle of this street at all hours, taking their passengers to gardens where they are received by the garden-keepers under arbours specially designed for this purpose. They stay here all day, enjoying themselves with their women, and in the evening they drive home again in the same carriages.

I can also tell you that there are at least 3,000 hot baths⁴³ in this city; the people visit them with great enthusiasm several times a month, for they hold great store by bodily hygiene. And let me tell you that they are the biggest, best and most beautiful baths in the world. For I assure you they are so spacious that a hundred men or women can bathe in one at once.

I would also have you know that twenty-five miles beyond this city, between east and north-east, lies the Ocean Sea. On its shore is a city called

Ganpu,⁴⁴ which has an excellent harbour frequented by very big ships carrying enormous quantities of highly valuable merchandise from India and elsewhere. The city of Xingzai is connected to the harbour by a great river⁴⁵ that is navigable by the ships as far as the city. **All day long** vessels from Xingzai go up and down carrying merchandise to be transferred at Ganpu onto other vessels that go on to various parts of India and Cathay. And this river continues on its course through regions beyond the city.

I can also tell you that the Great Khan has divided the province of Manzi into nine parts; that is to say, he has put it under the rule of nine very powerful kings, each with a great kingdom of his own. But as always, you must understand that each of these kings rules on behalf of the Great Khan, which means that every year they individually make a report covering the revenue and everything else about the kingdom to the emperor's agents. One of these nine kings lives in Xingzai and is lord of more than 140 large and wealthy cities. And I will tell you another thing that will astound you. For I assure you that there are no fewer than 1,200 cities in the province of Manzi, and each one has a garrison of the Great Khan's troops on the following scale. You may be certain that at a minimum these cities are garrisoned by a thousand men, while some are manned by 10,000, some by 20,000, and some (including Xingzai) by 30,000, so that the total number is so vast as to be almost beyond reckoning. But you should not suppose that these men are all Tartars; some are Cathayans. Nor do the garrisons in these cities consist entirely of mounted troops; on the contrary, a large proportion consists of foot soldiers. **The Tartars themselves**, being horsemen, stay away from cities built in marshy regions and only base themselves outside cities surrounded by firm, dry land where they can exercise on horseback. The Great Khan garrisons the cities lying in marshy regions with Cathayans and those among the men of Manzi who are soldiers. For every year he levies troops from among all of his subjects who appear fit to carry arms and enlists them in the army, and they are all counted as his soldiers. The men who are chosen from the province of Manzi are not set to guard their own cities but are posted to others perhaps twenty days' journey away by road. They stay there for four or five years, after which they return home

and others are sent in their place. This system applies both to the Cathayans and to the men of Manzi. The lion's share of the revenue that flows from these cities into the Great Khan's treasury goes to maintain these garrisons of soldiers. And if it happens that any city rises up – for often enough the men are seized by a fit of madness or intoxication and massacre their rulers – then the moment the news is heard the neighbouring cities send a great force of these troops to crush the offending city; for it would be a drawn-out affair to bring up an army from another province of Cathay, involving a delay of two months.

To sum up, you should have no doubt that the business of the province of Manzi – its wealth, its revenue and the profit derived from it by the Great Khan – is so tremendous that no man who heard tell of it would believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes; and as for the sheer splendour of this province, there are scarcely words enough to describe it. So I will hold my tongue on this subject and not tell you much more about it. That said, I will tell you a little more about it before we move on.

Now you should know that all the people of Manzi share certain customs that I will describe to you. The fact is that as soon as a child is born, the father or mother has a record made of the day, minute and hour of his birth and the constellation and planet under which he was born, so that everyone knows his own horoscope. Whenever anyone plans to travel abroad, he consults an astrologer⁴⁶ and tells him his horoscope; and the astrologer tells him whether or not he should embark on his journey. And often they are dissuaded from making their journeys. **Similarly, when a wedding** is planned the astrologers first examine whether the groom and bride were born under concordant planets. If they were, the wedding goes ahead; if the planets were opposed, it is called off. For you should know that their astrologers are skilled in their art and in diabolical enchantments, so that many of their predictions come true and the people have great faith in them. **Huge numbers of these astrologers**, or magicians, are to be found in every city square.

I can also tell you that when a rich and notable man dies and his body is being carried to the pyre, all his relatives, both women and men, dress in

mourning clothes made of sackcloth and accompany the body to the place of cremation, taking many different instruments with them and playing and singing prayers to the idols. When they reach the place where the body is to be burned, they halt and have horses made, together with male and female slaves, camels, cloth of gold and silk, and gold and silver coins, all in huge numbers. All these things are made by painting them on sheets of paper. When everything is ready they make a great fire and burn the body with these things, saying that the dead man will possess them all in the next world in living flesh and bone or, in the case of the money, in gold. And when the cremation is over they play all their instruments together in high spirits and sing nonstop, for they say that all the honour they show him while he is being burned will be shown him in equal measure in the next world by their gods and idols, when he is born again and begins life anew in that world. [Because they have this faith](#) they do not fear death or let it bother them so long as they are honoured in death in the manner described above, firmly believing that they will be similarly honoured in the next world. For this reason the men of the province of Manzi are more hot-blooded than any other race and regularly kill themselves out of anger and grief. For if it happens that one of them gives another a slap, or pulls his hair, or wrongs or slights him in some other way, and the offender is so powerful and prominent that the other is powerless to exact vengeance, then the injured party will hang himself from a surfeit of grief at the offender's door during the night and die there, with a view to expressing most effectively his outrage and contempt. Then, when the offender has been exposed by his neighbour's testimony, he is condemned to make reparation for the wrong he has done by honouring the corpse during its cremation with lavish festivities, complete with music, attendants and all the other things described above that their customs demand. And his chief reason for hanging himself will have been just this: so that this rich and powerful man will honour him in death and ensure that he will be similarly honoured in the next world. This is why they keep up this custom.

In this city stands the palace of the fugitive king who was formerly lord of Manzi. It is the most beautiful and splendid palace in the world. No

words of mine could adequately describe its magnificence, but I will give you a quick rundown of its main features.⁴⁷

You should know that [King Facfur's predecessors](#) had enclosed an expanse of land some ten miles in circumference with tall battlemented walls and had divided it into three parts. The central part was entered through an enormous gate that led to a level area flanked by huge, broad-fronted pavilions with roofs supported by columns painted and embellished with gold and the finest azures. At the end stood the principal pavilion, larger than the others but decorated in the same way with gilded columns and a ceiling exquisitely embellished with gold; running around the walls were tableaux painted with great skill depicting episodes in the lives of former kings, as well as countless images of beasts and birds, knights and ladies, and many other wonderful things. It was a glorious sight to see, for all the walls and the whole ceiling were entirely covered with paintings in gold and other gorgeous and brilliant colours. Here, every year, on the days dedicated to his idols, King Facfur used to hold court and lay on a banquet for the chief lords, the leading magnates and the wealthiest craftsmen of the city of Xingzai. Altogether, across all twenty pavilions in the palace, 10,000 people could comfortably sit down to dinner at the same time. These courts went on for ten or twelve days, and it was astounding beyond belief to see the magnificence of the guests dressed in silk and gold and adorned with so many precious stones, because everyone went all out to look as ostentatious and well-heeled as possible.

Behind this pavilion that we mentioned – the one standing directly ahead of the great gate – was a wall closing off the other part of the palace. In it was a door that led into another large court, built in the style of a cloister with pillars supporting a portico that ran round the sides. Here were various chambers for the king and queen likewise decorated with all manner of embellishments, as were all the walls. Leading out of this cloister was a covered passage, six paces wide and so long that it ran all the way down to the lake. Facing pairs of courtyards opened onto this passage, ten along each side and built in the form of elongated cloisters with porticoes running all round. Every cloister or courtyard had fifty rooms complete with

gardens, and together these rooms housed 1,000 girls whom the king kept in his service. And sometimes he would take the queen and some of these girls with him and go out on the lake for recreation in barges canopied with silk, or pay a visit to the temples of the idols.

The other two parts of the enclosure were laid out with woods and many delightful gardens filled with every choice fruit known to man. There were numerous fountains, several lakes well stocked with fine fish, and all kinds of animals, including roe deer, fallow deer, red deer, hares and rabbits. Here the king went to dally with his damsels, some going in carriages and some on horseback, and no man ever intruded. He would have the women hunt with hounds and give chase to the animals; and when they grew tired they would head into the woods that fringed the lakes, leave their clothes there, run out naked, and plunge into the water, swimming about in different spots while the king stood watching them with the greatest delight until they all went back home. Sometimes he would have his meal brought out to these woods, which were dense with the thick foliage of tall trees, and be waited on by these damsels. Dallying nonstop with women in this way, he grew up completely ignorant of what weapons might be. In the end this proved his undoing, because through his cowardice and incompetence he was deprived by the Great Khan of his whole state and was utterly shamed and disgraced, as you have learned above.

This whole story was related to me by a very wealthy merchant of Xingzai during my stay in the city; he was very old and had been an intimate friend of King Facfur and knew all about his life. He had seen this palace in its former glory and agreed to lead me through it. The first pavilions, being occupied by the Great Khan's viceroy, are just as they used to be. But the girls' rooms have all fallen into ruin, with only traces of them visible. The wall that encircled the woods and gardens has likewise fallen down, and the trees and animals are all gone.

[It so happened that Messer Marco](#) found himself in this city of Xingzai when a report was being made to the Great Khan's factors of its revenue and population; and he learned that there were 160 *tomans* of hearths here, which is to say 160 *tomans* of houses. I can tell you that a *toman* is the

equivalent of 10,000; so you can deduce that there are altogether 1,600,000 houses, many of which are palatial mansions. Among such a great population there is only a single church belonging to Nestorian Christians.

Now that I have described the city I will tell you something that is worth repeating. You should know that all the townsfolk of this city – and of all the others as well – have the following custom. Each one has his name and the names of his wife, his sons, his sons' wives, his slaves and his whole household written on the door of his house. And the number of horses he keeps is also written there. If one of them happens to die, his name is struck out; if a child is born there, his name is added to the list. In this way the governor of every city is kept informed about all the people who live in it. This custom is followed throughout the provinces of Manzi and Cathay.

I will also tell you about another fine custom they have. You should know that all those who keep inns or provide lodgings for travellers write down the names of all those who lodge with them and the dates of their stay, so that the Great Khan can keep a year-round check on all the comings and goings throughout his lands. This is undoubtedly the action of a wise man. **Another thing**: in the province of Manzi almost all the poor and needy sell their sons and daughters to the rich and noble, in order to support themselves with the sum they receive and see their children more comfortably settled in their new homes.

Let us turn to a miraculous event that occurred while Bayan was besieging this city. After King Facfur had fled before him, a large crowd of the townsfolk tried to escape by boat along a broad, deep river that flows past one side of this city. They were getting away by this river when all of a sudden it completely dried up. When Bayan heard about this, he headed to this place and compelled all the fugitives to return to the city. And lying high and dry across the river bed there was found a fish of the most extraordinary appearance; for it was a good hundred paces long, though its girth was out of all proportion to its length, and hairy all over. Many people dined on it, and many of them died. And Messer Marco, as he tells it, saw the head of this fish with his own eyes in one of the temples of the idols, etc. ...⁴⁸

Now I have told you part of what I want to say, and next I want to tell you about the enormous revenue that the Great Khan draws from this city and its dependent territories, which comprise one of the nine parts of Manzi.

Now I want to tell you about the immense revenue that the Great Khan draws from this city of Xingzai and from the lands that come under its authority, which comprise one of the nine parts of the province of Manzi. So I will begin by telling you about the salt, because it yields the greatest amount in revenue. Now you may be certain that the salt of this city normally yields eighty *tomans* of gold a year; and as a *toman* is equivalent to 70,000 *saggi* of gold, eighty *tomans* amount to 5,600,000 *saggi*,⁴⁹ with every *saggi* worth more than a gold florin or ducat. And this is truly an astonishing thing and an enormous sum of money. **The salt revenue** of this city is so substantial because it is located in a coastal region covered with lagoons and marshes where the seawater condenses in summer; so much salt is gathered from them that the city supplies no fewer than five kingdoms of Manzi with enough for their use.

Since I have told you about the salt, I will now tell you about the other goods and merchandise. I assure you that this province grows and produces more sugar than the rest of the world put together, and this too is a prodigious source of revenue. But instead of telling you about each item separately, I will group the various spices⁵⁰ together. For you should know that duty of three and a third per cent is paid on all spices. **All the merchants** who import goods into this city by land and export them to other parts, as well as those who export them by sea, likewise pay a thirtieth of the value of the goods on their own account, one part in thirty being in other words three and a third per cent. But those who import merchandise by sea from distant countries and regions such as the Indies pay ten per cent. A tenth part of the produce of the land, both crops and livestock, is also apportioned to the imperial authorities. Huge revenues also accrue from the wine that they make from rice and from charcoal. Vast revenues are exacted from all twelve of the guilds that I described to you above as having 12,000

establishments each; for they pay duty on everything. And the duty on silk, which they have in such great abundance, is phenomenal. But why make a long story of it? Let me tell you that ten per cent is paid on silk, and this amounts to an incalculable sum. And there are many other articles that also pay ten per cent. All in all, I, Marco Polo, having on several occasions heard the tally being made of the revenue from all these articles, excluding the salt, can tell you that it typically amounts to 210 *tomans* of gold a year, equivalent to 14,700,000 *saggi* of gold.⁵¹ This is without doubt one of the most incredible sums of revenue that anyone has ever heard of. And this is only one of the nine parts of the province. [Yet the Great Khan](#) spends all these revenues on maintaining the armies that guard the cities and districts and on relieving poverty in the cities.

Now we will leave this city of Xingzai, which we have certainly described to you in nearly all its detail, and continuing on our way we will tell you about a city called Tonglu.⁵²

On leaving Xingzai the traveller heads south-eastward⁵³ for a day, at every stage passing towns and houses and the most mouth-watering gardens where all the means of life are found in great abundance. At the end of this day's journey he comes to the city called Tonglu that I mentioned above, which is very big and beautiful and is subordinate to Xingzai. The people are subject to the Great Khan and use paper money. They are idolaters and burn the bodies of their dead in the way I have described above. They live by trade and crafts and have all the means of life in great abundance. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will set out from here and speak of the city of Wuzhou.

After leaving this city of Tonglu the traveller continues south-eastwards for three days, at every stage passing cities and towns of great size and beauty where all the good things of life are available very plentifully and cheaply. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. They use paper money⁵⁴ and also come under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. There are no novelties worth mentioning.

At the end of this three-day journey the traveller comes to the city of Wuzhou.⁵⁵ This Wuzhou is a large city whose inhabitants are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan. They live by trade and crafts and also come under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. There is nothing here that we want to put in our book, so we will move ahead and tell you about the city of Quzhou.⁵⁶

Now you should know that when the traveller leaves Wuzhou he continues south-eastwards for two days, passing through so many towns and villages along the way that they seem to be part of a single city. All manner of things are readily available. There are the thickest and longest canes in the whole region; for you should know that they measure as much as four palms around the stem and no less than fifteen paces in height. There is nothing else worth mentioning. And at the end of this two-day journey the traveller comes to a very big and beautiful city called Quzhou. The people are subject to the Great Khan and are idolaters; they also come under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. They have plenty of silk. They live by trade and crafts. They have all the means of life in great abundance. Here again there is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and go on our way.

On leaving the city of Quzhou the traveller heads south-eastwards for four days,⁵⁷ at every stage passing cities and towns and villages where all the means of life are plentifully available and the people are all idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan. They use paper money and again come under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. They live by trade and crafts. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. There are many huge and fierce lions. There are no sheep in the whole province of Manzi, but they have oxen and cows and billy goats and nanny goats and many pigs. Since there is nothing else worth mentioning we will leave this place, and continuing on our way we will tell you about another thing.

At the end of these four days the traveller reaches the city of Suichang,⁵⁸ which is very big and beautiful and stands on a hill that divides a river into two branches, [with one branch flowing](#) to the south-east past one side of the city and the other flowing to the north-west past the other side. It also comes under the jurisdiction of Xingzai, and the people are idolaters who

are subject to the Great Khan and live by trade and crafts and use paper money. But there is nothing else here worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and go on our way.

You may depend on it that after leaving Suichang the traveller proceeds for three days through glorious countryside peppered with plenty of cities, towns and villages that are home to many merchants and craftsmen. They are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan, and they also come under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. They are plentifully supplied with the means of life. They have a great deal of game, both beasts and birds. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will continue on our way.

You should know that at the end of this three-day journey lies the city of Chuzhou,⁵⁹ which is very big and beautiful. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. This is the last city that comes under the jurisdiction of Xingzai. From here on Xingzai has no further say in matters; rather, this is the start of another kingdom – that is to say, another of the nine parts of Manzi – called Fuzhou.⁶⁰

On leaving the city of Chuzhou, the last in the kingdom of Xingzai, the traveller enters the kingdom of Fuzhou. He sets off south-eastwards and journeys for six days, passing through mountains and valleys where there are many cities, towns and villages. The people are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan and fall under the jurisdiction of Fuzhou, of which we have now begun to speak. They live by trade and crafts. They have all the means of life in great abundance. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. There are many lions of great size and ferocity. They have untold quantities of ginger and galangal; indeed for a Venetian groat you can buy a quantity of ginger equivalent to a good eighty pounds. They also have a fruit that resembles saffron in both scent and colour but is actually nothing of the sort, though for practical purposes it is every bit as good as saffron **and is used** by all the inhabitants in their food, as a result fetching a high price.

Here is another thing, too. You should know that they eat all manner of foul things and any kind of meat, including human flesh, which they devour with great relish. They will not touch someone who has died of natural

causes, but if he has been stabbed to death or otherwise killed they eat him all up and consider it a great delicacy.

When men enlist in the army and take up soldiering, they have a makeover in the following manner. I can tell you that they have their hair cropped back to their ears, and in the middle of their faces they have the shape of a sword blade painted in blue. Except for their captains they all go on foot. They carry lances and swords and are the most brutal men in the world. For I assure you that all day long they slaughter men, and after killing them they first drink their blood and then eat them. And they are always impatient to get on with killing men in order to drink their blood and eat their flesh.

Now we will leave this subject and tell you about something else. For you should know that on the third day of the six-day journey I mentioned above, the traveller reaches the city of Jianningfu.⁶¹ This is a very large and splendid city whose people are subject to the Great Khan. It has three bridges that are the finest and most beautiful in the world. They are no less than a mile long and nine paces wide, and they are made entirely of stone with marble columns. They are so beautiful and breathtaking that it would cost a fortune to build just one. The people live by trade and crafts. They have a good deal of silk. Ginger and galangal grow here profusely. [So much cotton cloth](#) is woven here from twisted threads that it supplies the whole province of Manzi. The women of this city are very good-looking. There is one curiosity worthy of note: I assure you that there are hens that have no feathers but have hair like a cat's and are pure black. They lay eggs like the hens of our country, and they are very good to eat. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will set out and go on our way.

I can further tell you that for the remaining three days of the six-day journey I mentioned above, the route takes in many more cities and villages that are home to plenty of craftsmen and merchants who do a brisk trade. They have a good deal of silk and are idolaters and subject to the Great Khan. They have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. There are big, fierce lions that pounce on travellers.

Towards the end of this three-day journey, with fifteen miles still to go, the traveller reaches a city called Houguan⁶² that produces a vast amount of sugar. Indeed all the sugar consumed in the Great Khan's court comes from this city, the quantity being so great that it is worth a small fortune. **But you should know** that before the Great Khan conquered them, the people of these parts did not have the expertise to prepare and refine sugar on a par with that produced in Egypt. Instead of putting it in moulds to set and solidify, they merely boiled and skimmed it until it was reduced to a black paste. When the country fell under the Great Khan's rule, though, some Egyptians who were at the court came here and taught them how to refine it with the ashes of certain trees. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will continue on our way.

After leaving this city of Houguan the traveller continues for fifteen miles until he reaches the splendid city of Fuzhou, which is the capital of the kingdom. So we will tell you what we know about it.

Now you should know that this city of Fuzhou is the capital of the kingdom called Choncha,⁶³ which is one of the nine parts of the province of Manzi. And you should know that a great deal of trade is carried on in this city, which is home to many merchants and craftsmen. The people are idolaters and are subject to the Great Khan. Enormous numbers of soldiers are based here, for you should know that many of the Great Khan's armies are stationed here on account of the frequent rebellions that break out in cities and towns across the country. **This is because**, as we have said elsewhere, the people are indifferent to death, believing they will enjoy an honoured existence in the next world, and also because they live in mountain strongholds; so whenever they are intoxicated and stirred up against their rulers they kill them. As soon as they rebel the soldiers who are garrisoned in this city march off to the trouble spot, seize it and destroy it. So this is why many of the Great Khan's armies are stationed here in this city.

You should also know that a major river, a good mile wide, flows along one edge of the city. **It is spanned** by a superb bridge resting on huge

pontoons held in place by strong anchors and overlaid with great sturdy planks. Many of the ships that sail this river are built in the city.

The country is infested with lions, which are trapped in this way. Two very deep pits are dug in suitable spots, one beside the other but separated by a strip of earth about an ell in width. A tall hedge is put up along either side of the pits, but the ends are left clear. At night the owner of the pits will tie up a little dog on the strip of earth in the middle and go away, leaving him there alone. Abandoned by his master and tied up in this way, the dog sets up an incessant howling; these dogs, by the way, are always white. And the lion, however far away he may be when he hears the howls of the dog, rushes towards him in a raging fury. When he sees him standing out white against the darkness, he tries to take a running jump at him and falls into the pit. In the morning the owner returns and kills the lion in the pit. Then the flesh is eaten, because it is tasty, and the skin is sold, because it fetches a very high price. If he prefers to take him alive, he hoists him out of the pit with the aid of special tackle.

This region is also home to a species of animal called *papiones*, which look rather like foxes. They do a great deal of damage by gnawing at the canes that produce sugar. And when merchants crossing the district with caravans pitch camp in any spot to rest and get a night's sleep, these *papiones* sneak up on them and make off with everything they can steal, inflicting great losses on them. But they catch them by the following means. They take large gourds and cut into the bulge at the top, making an opening designed to be just wide enough for one of these *papiones* to force its head through. To prevent the gourd from splitting apart under the frenzied thrusts of the creature's head, they make little holes around the opening and thread a cord through them. This done, they smear a little fat inside the gourds near the bottom and place large numbers of them at a short distance from the caravan, forming a ring around it. When the *papiones* approach the caravan to do their thieving they smell the fat in the gourds; and going up to them they try to put their heads inside, only to find they cannot. But such is their greed for the food inside that they push with all their might and squeeze their heads through the opening. Then they find they cannot pull

them out again. So they lift up the gourds, which weigh very little, and carry them off; but as they have no idea where they are going the merchants catch them at their leisure. Their flesh is very tasty and their skins fetch a very high price.

This district also breeds geese of such a size that a single one weighs no less than twenty-four pounds. They have a large swelling under the throat and a kind of lump above the bill near the nostrils, like that found on a swan only much bigger.

Sugar is also produced here in indescribable quantities. A roaring trade is done in pearls and other precious stones, because many ships come here from India bringing large parties of merchants who traffic in the Indian islands. I should add that the city of Fuzhou is six days' journey from the port of Zayton⁶⁴ on the Ocean Sea, where many ships from India put in carrying large cargoes before heading up the great river I mentioned above as far as the city of Fuzhou. And this is how many precious goods arrive here from India. They have everything needed to nourish the human body in great abundance. There are beautiful, mouth-watering gardens full of fine fruit. To put it simply, it is such a fine city and so well ordered in every respect that it is marvellous beyond words.

[One thing that Messer Marco](#) recounted is well worth recording, and we will tell you about it. When Messer Maffeo, Marco Polo's uncle, and Messer Marco himself were in this city of Fuzhou, there was a learned Saracen in their company. He said to them: 'In such-and-such a place there is a sect of people whose religion is a mystery to everyone. It is evidently not idolatry, since they have no idols; they do not worship fire; they do not profess the faith of Muhammad; and neither do they seem to follow the Christian rule. I suggest we pay them a visit and talk with them; perhaps you will be able to make out something about their way of life.' So they went there and began talking with these people and interviewing them, asking about their way of life and religion. But they seemed afraid, as if they suspected that these interviews were motivated by a desire to deprive them of their faith. When Messers Maffeo and Marco realized they were frightened, they sought to encourage them by saying: 'Do not be alarmed.

Our purpose in coming here was not to do you harm in any way, but only to help you and to improve your condition.’ For they were afraid that the visitors had been commissioned by the Great Khan to carry out this investigation, and that some harm might come to them from it. But Messers Maffeo and Marco kept on visiting this place every day, putting themselves on easy terms with the people and asking about their affairs, until they discovered that they followed the Christian faith. For they had books that Messers Maffeo and Marco studied, gradually interpreting what was written in them and translating them word by word from one language to another, until they realized they were the words of the Psalter. Then they asked the people where their religion and law had come from. And they replied, saying: ‘From our ancestors.’ In one of their temples there were, in fact, three figurative paintings representing three of the seventy apostles who spread the word around the world; and they said that these three had instructed their ancestors in the faith long ago and that, to date, the faith had been preserved among them for 700 years. But because they had not had any instruction for a long time, they were ignorant of the cardinal doctrines. ‘Yet,’ they said, ‘we hold true to what we know from our ancestors: we worship in accordance with our books and do reverence to these three apostles.’ To this Messers Maffeo and Marco replied: ‘You are Christians, and we are Christians too. We advise you to make representations to the Great Khan, explaining your situation so that you may gain his recognition and be free to keep your law and religion.’ For being mindful of the idolaters, they did not altogether dare to proclaim or practise their religion openly. And so they sent two of their number to the Great Khan. Messers Maffeo and Marco instructed them to present themselves first to a certain man who was the leader of the Christians at the court of the Great Khan, so that he might raise their business in the presence of the emperor. And the messengers did as instructed. What next? The man who was leader of the Christians went before the Great Khan and declared that these people were Christians and ought to be recognized as Christians in his dominions. But the man who was the leader of the idol-worshippers got wind of this and put in a counterplea, saying that this was the wrong course because these people

were idolaters, had always been idolaters, and were recognized as idolaters. And so a fierce argument broke out over this question in the presence of the emperor. After a while the emperor became infuriated and dismissed everyone, and summoning the messengers before him he asked them whether they wished to be Christians or idolaters. They replied that, if it pleased him and if it was not discreditable to his majesty, they wished to be Christians as their ancestors had been. Then the Great Khan ordered that they be granted privileges stating that all those who belonged to this sect were to be addressed as Christians and were to be free to practise their faith. And it was discovered that there were more than 700,000 families scattered throughout the province of Manzi who followed this rule.⁶⁵

There is nothing else worth mentioning here, so we will say no more of it and move on to tell you about other matters.

Now you should know that on leaving Fuzhou the traveller crosses the river and for five days follows a south-easterly route that leads past numerous cities, towns and villages of great splendour and wealth that have all things in great plenty. There are hills and valleys and plains, as well as vast forests where the trees that produce camphor grow in large numbers. There is plenty of game, both beasts and birds. The people live by trade and crafts. They are subject to the Great Khan and come under the jurisdiction of Fuzhou, living as they do in its kingdom.

This five-day journey leads to a city called Zayton, which is very large and splendid. In this city is the port where all the ships from India arrive laden with costly wares, including precious stones of great value and big pearls of fine quality. This port is also the point of departure for the merchants of Manzi, which is to say the whole of the surrounding region. The quantities of merchandise and precious stones entering and leaving this port are so enormous that it is a wonderful thing to see. From this city and its harbour the goods are distributed throughout the province of Manzi. And I assure you that for every shipload of pepper sent to Alexandria or elsewhere for export to Christian lands, a hundred arrive in this port of

Zayton. For you should know that this is one of the two busiest ports in the world by volume of trade.

Moreover, I can tell you that the Great Khan receives enormous revenues from this port and this city; for I would have you know that all the ships coming from India pay a ten per cent duty on all their wares and all their precious stones and pearls – in other words, they hand over a tenth of everything they carry. For the hire of the ships, that is for freight, thirty per cent is paid on small wares, forty-four per cent on pepper and forty per cent on aloes and sandalwood and other bulk goods. So what with the freight and the Great Khan's duty the merchants have to surrender half the value of everything they import. **And yet they make** such fat profits on the half that remains to them that if they could they would come back every hour with another cargo. So it must be obvious to everyone that the Great Khan accumulates an enormous quantity of treasure in this city.

The river that enters the port of Zayton is very large and wide and very fast flowing. Because of its strong current it carves out many channels for itself, splitting up at numerous points into different branches. It is crossed by five spectacular bridges, the largest of which is a good three miles long as it spans a point at which the river is divided into many branches. The bridges are constructed in the following manner: their piers are made of large stones laid one on top of another and so shaped that they bulge in the middle and taper off at the ends, which are angled both towards the sea, on account of the strong current when the tide comes in, and towards the direction from which the river flows.

The people of Zayton are idolaters and subjects of the Great Khan. The land is overflowing with everything needed to nourish the human body, and **the inhabitants are very docile** and inclined towards a leisurely and idle life. **Many people come here** from upper India to have themselves painted with needles in the manner described earlier, for there are many skilled masters of this art in the city.

I can also tell you that the most beautiful porcelain bowls imaginable, both large and small, are made in this province in a city called Tingzhou.⁶⁶ They are made nowhere else but in this city, from where they are exported

throughout the world. Here they are so plentiful and cheap that for one Venetian groat you can buy no fewer than three bowls of such beauty that it would be impossible to conceive of anything better. **These bowls are made** of the following type of earth. The fact is that the people of the city gather mud and decomposing earth and pile it up in great mounds which they leave undisturbed and exposed to the wind, rain and sun for thirty or forty years. After sitting all this time in these mounds the earth becomes so refined that the bowls made from it have an azure tint⁶⁷ and a lustrous shine and are unparalleled in their beauty. And you must understand that when a man makes a mound of this earth, he does so for his sons or grandsons. Clearly, given that it needs to sit still for so long to become refined, he cannot hope to profit from it or make use of it himself; but after his death his son will reap the reward.

I can further tell you that the inhabitants of this city have their own language. You must understand, however, that throughout the province of Manzi a single language and form of writing is used; while it is true that there are regional variations in speech, as there are, among laymen, between Lombards, Provençals, Frenchmen⁶⁸ and so on, these do not prevent the people of any district of the province of Manzi from understanding the idiom of those from another district.

Now I have told you about this kingdom of Fuzhou, one of the nine parts of Manzi. And I will add that the Great Khan receives from it no less duty and revenue, if not more,⁶⁹ than he does from the kingdom of Xingzai; **and this is solely** on account of the revenue from the port of Zayton.

We have not told you about all nine kingdoms of Manzi, but only about three; these are Yangzhou, Xingzai and Fuzhou, and you have learned a great deal about them. We could easily give you an account of the other six; but it would be a longwinded affair to go into them all, so we will say no more of them. Moreover, **we have given you a point-by-point** description of these three because Messer Marco journeyed through them, lying as they did along his route. He heard and learned many things about the other kingdoms, but since he did not travel in them, he could not have described them as fully as the others.

So we have given you a fine and full account of the whole province of Manzi, and particularly of parts of it; we have clearly described Cathay, both as a whole and in detail, so far as we were able to learn about it; and we have told you about many other provinces, about the people and beasts and birds and gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and merchandise and many other things, including the manners and customs of the people, just as you have heard. Yet because our book is still not complete and lacks something we want to include – for it is still missing any account of the Indians, whose affairs are certainly worth revealing to those who are unaware of them as they involve many weird and wonderful things that are unknown anywhere else in the world – for this reason it is fitting, desirable and profitable to record these things in our book. And the master will expertly set them all down, just as Messer Marco Polo describes and relates them. Moreover, you may take my word for it that Messer Marco stayed so long in India and learned so much about the people, their way of life, their customs and their trade that there has scarcely ever been a man more qualified to tell the truth⁷⁰ about them. Some of the things found there, it is true, are so extraordinary that anyone hearing about them would doubtless be highly sceptical. Nevertheless we will set them all down, one by one, just as Messer Marco faithfully reported them; and we will begin straight away, as you will be able to hear in the next part of this book.



SIX

From China to India

Now since we have told you about so many regions of the mainland as you have heard, we will leave all that behind and make our way into India; and we will relate all the wonders that are found there, beginning first of all with the ships in which the merchants travel to and from India.¹

Now you should know that these ships are made in the following manner. I can tell you that they are built from a wood called spruce as well as from pine. They have one deck, and above this deck there are generally no fewer than sixty cabins, each capable of accommodating a merchant in comfort. They have one rudder and four masts, to which are often added two more masts that are raised and lowered as needed. [Below decks on some of the ships](#), namely the bigger ones, there are also no fewer than thirteen holds, or rather compartments, formed from strong planks tightly joined together; these provide protection in case disaster strikes and the ship is holed, whether by hitting a reef or being rammed by a whale searching for food. This happens all the time, for if a ship is sailing at night and churning up the water when it passes near a whale, the whale takes the light shimmering on the foam as a sign that there is food at hand and leaps forward, slamming into the ship and as often as not rupturing part of the hull. When the water pours through the breach it runs into the bilge, which is always kept

unobstructed. Then the sailors track down the leak and shift the cargo from the flooded compartment into the others, for the bulkheads are so soundly built that water cannot pass from one compartment to another; and then they repair the damage to the hull and put back the displaced cargo.

The hulls are fastened together in a particular way; for they are all lined, which is to say they have two layers of planking, one on top of the other. This lining extends all the way round, with one plank on top of another. They are caulked both inside and out and hammered together with iron nails. They are not coated with pitch, since they have none; instead they oil them in the manner I will describe, because they have another substance that they consider superior to pitch. Let me tell you, then, that they take lime and finely chopped hemp and pound them together with a type of oil extracted from a tree. And when they have thoroughly pounded these three things, I assure you they form a substance as sticky as birdlime. They daub their ships with it, and it is every bit as good as pitch.

I can also tell you that some of these ships require a crew of around **300 sailors**, some 200, and some 150, the number varying with their size. Moreover, they carry a much larger cargo than our ships. At one time their ships were even bigger than now, but the onslaught of the sea has so badly eroded the islands in various parts that many no longer have harbours deep enough for such huge ships; so now they are built on a smaller scale. Even so, they are big enough to take at least 5,000 baskets of pepper, and in some cases 6,000.

I can further tell you that they are propelled by sweeps, or oars, with four sailors rowing at each station. Two or three tenders accompany these ships and are themselves so big that they can easily carry 1,000 baskets of pepper. In fact let me tell you that these are crewed by forty, sixty, eighty or a hundred sailors and are propelled by oars. They are often used to tow the big ships **by means of ropes** or hawsers, pulling them by oar power; they also go under sail if the wind is abeam – for the smaller vessels precede the larger one, towing it with the ropes that link them – but not if they are running before the wind, because then the larger ship would take the wind out of the sails of the smaller and so overhaul them. The big ships also take

with them as many as ten small boats, which are used for laying out the anchors, fishing and running errands. And I can also tell you that the tenders likewise carry boats.

Let me tell you another thing, too. When a big ship has been out at sea for a year and is in need of renovation – in other words, when it needs repairing – they repair it in the following manner. They nail yet another layer of planks over the whole hull, on top of the original two, so that there are three of them. Then they caulk and oil it; and this is how they carry out the repairs. The next time they repair the ship they nail down yet another layer of planks. And so they go on until there are six layers of planks, after which the ship is scrapped.²

Next we will tell you about an experiment they conduct every time a ship is headed out on a voyage, to determine whether the venture will go well or badly. The seamen take a hurdle in the form of a wickerwork frame and attach a rope to each corner and side – making eight ropes in all – then tie the loose ends together with a long rope. Next they find an idiot or a drunkard – for no sane or temperate man would expose himself to such danger – and bind him on the hurdle. And they do this when it is blowing a gale. Then they set up the hurdle in the teeth of the wind, and the wind snatches it up and flings it into the sky while the men keep a hold of it by hanging onto the long rope. If the hurdle tips into the wind while it is up in the air they give a little tug on the rope until it rights itself, then pay out some more rope so that it climbs again. If it tips over again they pull in the rope as much as necessary until it rights itself, then pay out the rope again; and so they go on, the only thing stopping the hurdle from climbing completely out of sight being the length of the rope. The upshot of the experiment is this: if the hurdle climbs straight up into the sky they say the ship that is the subject of the experiment will have an easy and prosperous voyage, and all the merchants flock to it to secure their passage. But if the hurdle fails to rise no merchant is willing to set foot on the ship that is the subject of the experiment, because they say that she would never finish her voyage and all sorts of disasters would overtake her. And so the ship stays in port that year.

Now I have described to you the ships in which merchants voyage to and from India. So we will move on from this subject of the ships and tell you about India. First of all, though, I want to tell you about the many islands that are found in this Ocean Sea that we have now reached. These islands lie to the east, and we will begin with an island called Japan.³

Japan is an island that lies out to the east in the open sea, 1,500 miles⁴ from the mainland. It is an exceptionally large island. The people are white, good-looking and courteous. They are idolaters and are completely independent, having no rulers from any race but their own. Moreover, I can tell you that they are exceedingly rich in gold, because it is found here in inestimable quantities. And I can tell you that no one takes it off the island, because no merchant or any other man comes here from the mainland; and I can tell you that this is why they have as much gold as I have said. And I will relate to you an extraordinary thing about a palace belonging to the ruler of the island.⁵

You may take my word for it that he has a huge palace entirely covered with fine gold. In the same way that we roof our houses and churches with lead, so this palace is roofed with fine gold; its value is so great that it is almost beyond reckoning. I can also tell you that all the chambers, of which there are many, are likewise paved with fine gold to a depth of more than two fingers. And all the other parts of the palace, including the halls and the windows, are likewise adorned with gold. I assure you that this palace is of such incalculable richness that anyone who tried to estimate its value would find it too staggering for words.

They also have pearls in abundance; they are red, very beautiful, round and large. They are worth as much as the white ones, if not more. In this island some of the dead are buried and some are burned; everyone who is buried has one of these pearls put in his mouth, this being the custom that is observed among them. They also have many other precious stones in abundance. It is such a rich island that no one could reckon its wealth. Moreover, I can tell you that when news of this island's wealth reached the Great Khan – this was the same Khubilai Khan who now reigns – he

declared that he desired to conquer it. So he sent two of his barons there with a huge fleet of ships carrying cavalry and infantry. One of these barons was called Abacan, the other Vonsamchin.⁶ Both were able and courageous. What else shall I tell you? They embarked at Zayton and Xingzai and put out to sea, sailing until they reached this island; then they landed and occupied a large stretch of open country and a number of villages. But they had not yet taken a single city or castle when disaster struck them in the manner I will now describe.

First you should know that there was a great deal of jealousy between these two barons and neither would lift a finger to help the other. Now one day such a gale happened to blow in from the north that the soldiers spoke out, saying that their ships would all be wrecked if they did not leave. So they all returned to the ships and left the island, putting out to sea. But let me tell you that they had only gone about four miles [when the force of the wind](#) intensified, and the crush of ships was so great that many of them collided and were wrecked. Those ships that were not hemmed in by the others but scattered around the sea escaped shipwreck. However, they soon came to another island of no great size; and while the ships that were able to get clear of this island escaped, those that could not get clear were [driven onto its shores](#) by the gale and wrecked. Many of those who were shipwrecked made it to the island – in fact there were great crowds of them – but those who could not reach the island lost their lives. When the violence of the wind and the tumult of the sea died down, the two barons returned to this island with the ships – there were a great number of them – that had escaped shipwreck by keeping to the open sea. They took on board all the officers, namely the captains of hundreds, thousands and ten thousands; this was because the numbers were so great that they could not find room on the ships for the others. And then they left the island and set sail for home. The 30,000 men who were left stranded on the island gave themselves up for dead, seeing to their great dismay that they had no means of escape by which they might reach a safe harbour. For they watched as the ships that had weathered the storm left them high and dry and made off for

home. And this is exactly what they did, for I can tell you that they sailed on until they arrived back in their own country.

Now let us leave those who fled and return to the men stranded on the island who had given themselves up for dead.

Now you should know that these 30,000 men who had escaped to the island considered themselves worse off than if they had been dead, since they could see no possible means of escape. They were filled with bitterness and despair and did not know what to do. And this as I have said was the predicament of those on the island.

When the ruler and the people of the main island saw that the invading army was so scattered and routed and heard about the men who had escaped to the island, they were overjoyed and exultant. As soon as the sea was calm and quiet they embarked on numerous ships that were harboured around the island and headed straight for the small island, where they all landed at once to seize the men who had been left there. And when the 30,000 men saw that the entire enemy had come ashore and no one was left on board the ships to keep watch, they acted with great cunning. As the enemy advanced to capture them they headed for the far shore of the island, which rose to a high peak in the centre; then, rapidly making their way round to the other side, they reached the enemy fleet and promptly boarded it. And they could do this quite easily because they found it completely undefended; everyone had joined in the pursuit across the island to the shore by which they had fled, without suspecting a thing.

What else shall I tell you? When they were all on board they left this island and headed for the other island. They landed and made their way to the capital city, brandishing the standards and ensigns of the ruler of the island. The people who had remained in the city saw their standards and had no doubt that these were their own people. So they let them in. And the invaders, finding no one there but old men and women, seized the city and chased out all the people except for some good-looking women, whom they kept to serve them. And this as I have said is how the Great Khan's men took this city.

When the ruler and the people of the island saw that they had lost their city and that the affair had turned out this way, they were ready to die of grief. They returned to their island on other ships and laid siege to the city on every side, so that no one was able to enter or leave without their assent. What else shall I tell you? The Great Khan's men held the city for seven months, racking their brains day and night to find a way of informing the Great Khan of the situation. But nothing came of all these attempts to get word to him. Realizing that it was futile to keep on trying, they at last made terms with the besiegers and surrendered on condition that their lives were spared and they stayed here for the rest of their days. And this happened in the year 1269⁷ from the incarnation of Christ.

So this affair turned out in the way you have heard.⁸ And the Great Khan had one of the barons who commanded the army beheaded and the other banished to a [desert island called Ciorcia](#),⁹ where he has many people who commit grave offences put to death in the following manner. When a man is sent to this island to be killed, his hands are thoroughly wrapped in freshly flayed buffalo skin and tightly sewn up. As the skin dries, it shrinks around the hands until it becomes impossible to remove. Then he is left on the island to die an agonizing death, for he is incapable of fending for himself and has nothing to eat, and if he thinks of eating grass he has to crawl along the ground. This is how the Great Khan did away with the baron. And he had them dealt with in such a cruel way because he knew how miserably they had acted in this affair.

Let me also tell you about a great marvel that occurred when these two barons captured a large group of men in a castle on the island. As they had refused to surrender, the two barons gave orders to kill them all and cut off their heads. The order was duly carried out and all their heads were cut off – saving just eight men, whose heads could not be cut off. And this was on account of some stones that they had. For each of them had a stone embedded in his arm, between the flesh and the skin, so that it was invisible on the surface. And this stone possessed a magic property that made anyone who had it on his person invulnerable to death by steel. When the barons were told why these men could not be killed with a sword they had them

beaten to death with clubs, which killed them instantly. Afterwards these stones were removed from their arms and were very highly prized.

So this is how this story and this affair unfolded – the story of the discomfiture of the Great Khan’s men – just as I have said. Now we will leave them and return to the matter at hand in order to go on with our book.

Now you should know that the idols of these islands are identical to those of Cathay and Manzi. And I can tell you that the islanders, like the other idolaters, have idols with an ox’s head, and others with a pig’s head, and others with the head of a dog or a sheep, and others of many different sorts. There are some that have a head with four faces and some that have three heads, one in the usual place and one on either shoulder. And there are some with four hands and some with ten hands, and some with a thousand; but these are the superior ones that command the greatest reverence. When Christians ask them why they make such an array of idols, they answer: ‘Our ancestors handed them down to us in these forms, and we will pass them on to our sons and to those who come after us.’

The exploits of these idolaters are so outlandish and diabolical that they are not fit to be mentioned in our book, because such wickedness would be too much for Christian ears. So we will stop speaking about these idolaters and tell you about other things. But I will just say this about them. I would have you know that when the idolaters of these islands capture some man who is not a friend of theirs and find he is unable to pay them a ransom, they call together all their relatives and friends, saying: ‘I invite you to come and dine with me at my house.’ And then they have the captive killed and eat him *en famille*. You understand of course that they first have him cooked. And they consider this human flesh to be the finest food in existence.

Let us move on from this subject and return to the matter at hand. Now you should know that the sea in which this island lies is called the China¹⁰ Sea – that is, the sea adjacent to Manzi, because I can tell you that in the language of the islanders ‘China’ means Manzi. It lies towards the east, and according to the experienced pilots and sailors who sail these waters and are

well acquainted with the facts, it contains 7,448 islands, most of them inhabited. And I assure you that in all these islands there is not a single tree that does not give off a powerful and agreeable fragrance and serve a valuable purpose, at least as much as aloeswood if not more so. There are also many precious spices of various types. And I can also tell you that pepper as white as snow grows profusely in these islands, as well as some black pepper.¹¹ The sheer value of the gold and the other precious things found in these islands is quite extraordinary; but I must tell you that their remoteness from the mainland makes any attempt to reach them a formidable challenge. When ships from Zayton or Xingzai come here they make a large profit and a handsome return, but I can tell you that they put a year's hard work into the voyage, for they set out in winter and return the following summer. This is due to the fact that only two kinds of wind blow here – one kind that carries them out and another that brings them home – the first blowing in winter and the second in summer. You should also know that this country is an enormously long way off from India. And let me also say, since I have told you that this sea is called the China Sea, that you should understand it is really the Ocean Sea. Just as you might speak of the Sea of England or the Sea of Rochelle, so in these parts they speak of the China Sea or the Indian Sea or such-and-such a sea; but in reality all these names refer to parts of the Ocean Sea.

From here on I will say nothing more of this country and these islands, because they are too far out of the way and also because we have not been there. And I can also tell you that the Great Khan has nothing to do with them and they pay him no tribute or anything else. And so we will return to Zayton and begin our book again from that point.

Now you should know that when the traveller heads out of the port of Zayton on a west-south-westerly bearing, he sails for 1,500 miles across a wide gulf called the Gulf of Cheynam.¹² [Sailing instead in a northerly](#) direction, the gulf stretches the distance of a two-month voyage. The province of Manzi occupies the whole of its south-eastern shore, but on the other side it borders Amu and Tulaman and many other provinces that we

mentioned above alongside them. There are countless islands scattered across the gulf, nearly all of them inhabited. They are rich in gold dust, which is collected from the sea at the mouths of rivers. There is also a great deal of copper or brass and of other commodities. They trade among themselves, exchanging the products of one island for those of another. They also trade with the mainland, selling gold, brass and other goods and in return buying whatever they need. Corn grows plentifully on most of the islands. This gulf is so large and so heavily populated that it seems almost like a world in itself.

Now let us return to our starting point. When the traveller has left Zayton and has sailed across the mouth of this gulf for 1,500 miles as mentioned above, he reaches a country called Champa,¹³ which is very large and rich. They have their own king and language and are idolaters. The king pays a hefty annual tribute of elephants and aloeswood to the Great Khan, but apart from this he pays him nothing. And I will tell you how and why he pays this tribute to the Great Khan.

The fact is that in the year 1278 from the incarnation of Christ, the Great Khan sent a baron of his named Sogatu with a large force of cavalry and infantry against this king of Champa and launched an all-out attack on the kingdom. And the king, who was very old and did not have an army to match the Great Khan's, was unable to defend himself in a pitched battle but held out in the cities and fortified towns, which were so strong that those inside feared no one. But the open country and villages were all ravaged and destroyed. And when the king saw that this man was going about ravaging and destroying his kingdom like this, he was deeply distressed. He straight away summoned his messengers and sent them to the Great Khan with a message whose contents you will hear. The messengers travelled post-haste till they came before the Great Khan. 'Sir,' they addressed him, 'the king of Champa salutes you as his liege lord and sends you word that he is a man of great age and has long ruled his kingdom in peace; he also sends you word that he is willing to be your liegeman and to render you a yearly tribute of elephants and aloeswood; and he throws himself on your mercy and humbly begs you to order the baron and army of

yours who are wrecking his kingdom to leave his lands.’ With this the envoy fell silent and said no more. And the Great Khan, when he had heard the old king’s message, took pity on him. He immediately sent word to his baron and his army to leave this kingdom and find other lands to conquer. They did as their lord commanded and left at once for another place. And so every year this king pays tribute to the Great Khan to the tune of twenty of the biggest and most beautiful elephants to be found in the land and a great deal of aloeswood.

So this is how the king became a vassal of the Great Khan and why he pays him the tribute of elephants that you have heard about. Now we will move on and give you more details about the king and his country.

Now you should know that in this kingdom no beautiful girl can marry without the king first seeing her. If he likes her, he takes her as his wife; if not, he gives her a sum of money appropriate to her station so that she can find another husband. I assure you that in year 1285¹⁴ I, Marco Polo, was in this country, and at that time this king had 326 children, male and female, including more than 150 men of an age to bear arms.

There are huge numbers of elephants in this kingdom. They have aloeswood in great abundance. They have many forests of the wood called ebony, which is very black and is used for making chessmen and inkpots. There is nothing else worth mentioning in our book, so we will set out from here and going on our way will tell you about a great island called Java.

Now you should know that a traveller who sails 1,500 miles from Champa in a south-south-easterly direction comes to a very large island called Java. According to veteran sailors who know it well, this is the largest island in the world; in fact it is more than 3,000 miles in circumference. It belongs to a powerful king, and the people are idolaters and pay tribute to no man on earth. This island is enormously rich. They have pepper and nutmegs and spikenard and galangal and cubeb and cloves and all the precious spices that can be found in the world. It is visited by great numbers of ships and merchants who buy many goods and make great profits and handsome returns. There is so much treasure in this island that there is not a man in the

world who could appraise or describe it. Moreover, I can tell you that the Great Khan has never been able to conquer it, on account of the long and perilous voyage that must be made in order to get there. The merchants of Zayton and Manzi have acquired stupendous wealth from trading with this island, and they acquire more every day. **And the majority of the spices** that are consigned to the world's markets come from this island.

Now I have told you about this island and will say no more about it; instead I will tell you what comes next.

On leaving Champa¹⁵ and sailing south-south-west for 700 miles the traveller reaches two islands, one big and one smaller, called Sondur and Condur.¹⁶ These islands are uninhabited, so let us pass over them.

From these islands, a voyage of 500 miles to the south-east leads to a very large and wealthy province of the mainland called Lochac.¹⁷ There is a powerful king, and the people are idolaters and have their own language. They pay tribute to no one, because their country is so situated that no one can approach it with hostile intent. If it were accessible the Great Khan would soon make it submit to his rule. This province produces cultivated brazilwood¹⁸ in huge quantities. They have gold in great abundance – so great that no one would believe it without seeing it. They have elephants and plenty of game, both beasts and birds. And all the cowries that are spent in all the provinces I have mentioned come from this kingdom. There is nothing else worth mentioning, except to say that it is such a wild place that few people go there. And the king himself does not want anyone to go there, or to find out about his wealth or the state of his realm. So we will leave this place and move on to tell you about something else.

Now you should know that after setting out from Lochac and heading south for 500 miles the traveller comes to an island called Bintan,¹⁹ which is a very savage place. All its forests consist entirely of trees whose wood is heavily scented and extremely hard. Moving on from here we head for about sixty miles through a strait between two islands. At many points during these sixty miles the water is only four paces deep, so the large ships

that sail this way have to haul up their rudders because they have a draught of nearly four paces. After these sixty miles another voyage of thirty or so miles towards the south-east leads to an island kingdom called Malayu,²⁰ which has a king and a language of its own. The capital, which is also called Malayu, is very large and splendid and a busy trading centre for all manner of things, including spices, which are found here in great abundance. As there is nothing else worth mentioning we will leave this place and go on to tell you about Lesser Java, as you will be able to hear.

After leaving the island of Bintan, a voyage of about 100 miles to the south-east leads to the island of Lesser Java.²¹ However, you should know that it is not so small as to measure less than 2,000 miles in circumference. And we will tell you all the facts about this island.

Now you should know that there are eight kingdoms and eight crowned kings on this island. The people are all idolaters and have their own languages. In fact you should know that each of these kingdoms has its own language. This island is absolutely overflowing with treasures, including every precious spice and aloeswood, spikenard, [brazilwood and ebony](#), as well as many other spices that never reach our shores [on account of the length](#) and hazards of the journey but are exported to the provinces of Manzi and Cathay.

Next I want to tell you about the customs of all these peoples, taking each in turn. But first I will tell you something that will without doubt amaze everyone. The fact of the matter is that this island lies so far to the south that the Pole Star is not visible there, either faintly or strongly.

We will now return to the customs of the people and begin by telling you about the kingdom of Ferlec.²²

Now you should know that the people of this kingdom of Ferlec all used to worship idols, but on account of the Saracen merchants whose ships frequent this place they have all been converted to the law of Muhammad. This only applies to the people of the city; those of the mountains live like beasts. For I give you my word that they eat human flesh and every other kind of flesh, whether clean or unclean. They worship many different

things; for when they get up in the morning they worship the first thing they see.

Now I have told you about Ferlec, and next I will tell you about the kingdom of Basman.

On leaving this kingdom of Ferlec the traveller enters the kingdom of Basman. This Basman is an independent kingdom. The people have their own language, but they have no law except the law of the jungle. They profess allegiance to the Great Khan, but pay him no tribute because they are so far removed that the Great Khan's men are unable to reach them. Even so, all the people of the island call themselves his subjects. And sometimes they send him strange and beautiful gifts by travellers who pass that way, most notably a kind of black goshawk.

They have wild elephants and plenty of unicorns, which are scarcely smaller than an elephant. The unicorn has the hair of a buffalo and feet like an elephant's. In the middle of its forehead is a single horn, very thick and black. I assure you it does no harm with its horn but only with its tongue and knees; for it has long, sharp spines on its tongue, and [whenever it wishes](#) to hurt anyone it tramples him and holds him down with its knees, then slashes him with its tongue. It has a head like a wild boar's and always holds it bowed towards the ground. It is perfectly content to wallow in mud and mire. It is a very ugly beast to look at. It is nothing like the animal we talk of and describe in our parts, where we say that it lets itself be caught by a virgin; in fact I can tell you it is the exact opposite of what we believe it to be.

They have great numbers of monkeys in many strange shapes and forms. They also have great big hawks as black as crows that are excellent for fowling.

I also want to say and have you know that the people who claim to bring pygmies from India are guilty of a great lie and a great fraud; for I can tell you that these creatures that they say are men are handmade on this island, and I will explain how. The fact is that this island is home to a breed of very small monkeys with a face like a man's. Now the men take these monkeys and remove all their hair [with a kind of ointment](#); then they attach long

hairs to their chins²³ in the shape of a beard. When the skin shrivels the holes through which the hairs are threaded shrink so much that it seems as if they grew there naturally. As for the feet and hands and the other limbs, which are not quite like human limbs, they stretch and shorten and shape them by hand into a human likeness. Then the bodies are dried and put in moulds and smeared with camphor and other things until they take on the appearance of a man.

But it is a great con, because they are made in the manner you have heard. In fact never in the whole of India or in more savage regions still have men been seen as small as these appear to be.

Now we will say no more about this kingdom, since there is nothing else worth mentioning. And so we will move on and tell you about the next kingdom, which is called Sumatra.

Now you should know that on leaving Basman the traveller enters the kingdom of Sumatra, which is on the same island. I, Marco Polo, stayed here myself for five months, on account of some adverse weather that prevented us from going on our way. Let me tell you that here, too, the Pole Star is nowhere to be seen. And I can also tell you that the stars of the Plough are not visible, either brightly or dimly. The people are savage idolaters and have a rich and powerful king. They are also nominally subject to the Great Khan.

This is how we spent our five months. [We disembarked from our ships](#) with about 2,000 men who were in our company and built five towers or castles on the shore from beams and logs, for there is a great deal of timber here. And for five months we stayed in these castles with our people. On the side facing the island I ordered great ditches to be dug around us, their ends meeting the shoreline on either side, for fear of these bad, brutish people who are only too happy to catch, kill and eat men. Even so, the islanders used to come to us and barter food and other things; for a mutual confidence grew between us.

The fish here are the best in the world. They have no wheat but live on rice. They have no wine except for a type I will describe to you. You may

take my word for it that they have a kind of tree from which they cut off the branches; then they put a large pot under the stump left on the tree. I can tell you that in a day and a night it is filled, and the wine is excellent to drink.

This wine is so therapeutic that it cures dropsy, consumption and spleen. The trees resemble small date palms and have four branches that are cut off and produce the large quantities of wine I have described, which is very good. I will tell you another thing, too: when the stumps stop exuding wine, they draw off as much water **as they deem necessary** from conduits that lead from streams and pour some of it round the base of the tree. After an hour's watering the stumps soon begin to exude wine again. And I can tell you that some of it is white and some red, **for there are some trees** that naturally produce a red liquor and some a white.

They have huge numbers of coconuts **as big as a man's head** and delicious to eat, sweet and flavoursome and as white as milk; and beneath the flesh the centre of these nuts is filled with a liquid as clear and fresh as water and finer and more delicate in flavour than any other drink that was ever drunk. They eat every kind of flesh, both clean and unclean. Now we have told you about this kingdom, so we will move on and tell you about Dagroian.

Dagroian is a separate kingdom by itself with its own language. It forms part of the same island and has its own king. The people are very savage and nominally answer to the Great Khan. They are idolaters. And before we go on I will tell you about an especially vile custom of theirs, as you will hear.

You may take my word for it that when any of them, man or woman, falls ill, their relatives send for the magicians to find out whether the patient is destined to recover. These magicians claim by means of their enchantments and idols and diabolical art to know whether he is to recover or to die – though when we say 'by diabolical art' do not imagine that they admit as much; on the contrary, they profess to work by the grace of the gods as transmitted through the **medium of their art**. **If they say** the patient is doomed to die, then his relatives send for certain men who are specially appointed to put such people to death. When these men arrive they hold

down the soon-to-be-dead patient and put something over his mouth so that he dies of suffocation. And when he is dead they cook him. Then all the relatives of the deceased come together for a friendly feast and eat him whole. I can tell you that they even eat all the marrow in his bones. And they do this because they do not want a scrap of him to be left. For they say that if a trace of his substance were to remain it would generate worms, and the worms would die for want of food. And they say that by the death of these worms the soul of the deceased would incur great sin and torment, [since so many souls](#) sprung from his substance would have perished. This is why they eat him whole. And when they have finished eating him they take the bones and put them in a beautiful little casket, which they carry to the mountains and hang in a huge cavern where no beast or other evil thing can touch it. I can also tell you that they take every opportunity to catch strangers who are not from their country, and if the captives cannot ransom themselves they kill them and eat them on the spot. Now this is a very evil practice and a bad custom.

Now we have told you about this kingdom, so we will move on and tell you about Lambri.

Lambri is a kingdom with its own king who is also nominally subject to the Great Khan. The people are idolaters. There is a great deal of brazilwood. They also have camphor and other precious spices in profusion. Regarding the brazilwood, I can tell you that they sow the seed and when it puts up shoots they dig it up and replant it in another place; there they leave it for three years, after which they dig it up roots and all.²⁴ I give you my word that we brought some of this seed back to Venice and sowed it in the earth. Yet I can tell you that nothing came up; and this was due to the cold climate.

We will tell you something else, too – something quite remarkable. For I give you my word that there are men in this kingdom who have tails more than a palm long and not at all hairy; indeed the majority have them. These men do not live in cities but in the open among the mountains. Their tails are as thick as a dog's.

They have many unicorns and plenty of game, both birds and beasts.

We have now told you about Lambri, so we will move on and tell you about Fansur.

Fansur is a separate kingdom with its own king. The people are idolaters and are nominally subject to the Great Khan. They belong to this same island that we have told you about above. This kingdom produces the finest camphor in the world, which is called Fansuri camphor and is worth more than any other kind. For I can tell you that it is sold for its weight in gold. They have no wheat or other grain, but live on rice and milk. They have wine made from the kind of trees I mentioned above in the chapter about Sumatra.

I will tell you another thing too – a marvel well worth relating. You should know that in this province they get flour from trees;²⁵ and I will tell you how they do it. You should know that they have a type of tree of great girth and height that is entirely filled with flour. **After stripping off** a thin bark you first reach a layer of wood perhaps three fingers thick; inside this is the pith, which consists purely of flour. These trees are so big that it takes two men to encircle one with their arms. And this flour is put in tubs full of water and stirred with a stick, so that the chaff and detritus float to the surface and the pure flour sinks to the bottom. This done, the water is drained off and the clean flour is left in a lump at the bottom. Then it is seasoned and used to make a variety of delicious pastries.²⁶ For I assure you that we ourselves sampled them with some care, as we often ate them.

The wood of this type of tree, though, is as heavy as iron and when thrown into water sinks like iron. This wood can be split in a straight line from top to bottom like a cane; for when the tree is emptied of flour the remaining wood, as we have said, is about three fingers thick. These people make short lances from this wood – not long ones, because if they were long no one would be able to carry them, never mind use them, on account of the excessive heaviness of the wood. They sharpen the lances at the head and then lightly scorch the point in the fire; and lances treated in this way are superior to any iron lance for piercing any type of armour.

Now we have told you about the kingdoms on this side of the island. We will tell you nothing of the remaining kingdoms on the other side because we never went there. So we will move on and tell you about a very small island called Gauenispolā.²⁷

When the traveller sets out from Lesser Java and the kingdom of Lambri and sails north for about 150 miles, he comes to two islands, one of which is called Nicobar.²⁸ The people of this island have no king and live like beasts. I assure you that they all go naked, both men and women, covering themselves with nothing whatsoever in the world. They are idolaters. **They have very beautiful cloths** or sashes, some three ells long and made from silks of every colour. They buy them from passing merchants and keep them hanging from poles in their houses as a token of their wealth and nobility, just as we keep pearls and precious stones and gold and silver vessels. They make no use of them whatsoever but keep them purely for show, and whoever has the largest number of them, and the finest ones, is considered the noblest and best.

I can also tell you that all their forests consist of splendid trees of great value. These are red sandalwood, coconuts (which we call Pharaoh's nuts), apples of paradise, cloves, brazilwood and many other fine trees besides. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about the other island, which is called Andaman.

Andaman is a very large island. They have no king; they are idolaters and are like wild beasts. And I will tell you about a race of people who well deserve a mention in our book.

Now you may take my word for it that all the men of this island have heads like dogs and teeth and eyes like dogs; in fact I assure you that their heads are just like those of great mastiffs. They are very cruel people and eat men, as many as they can catch, provided they are not of their own race. They have every kind of spice in great abundance. Their food is rice and milk, and every sort of meat. They also have **Pharaoh's nuts, apples of paradise and many other** fruits that are unlike ours.

[This island lies](#) in a sea so turbulent and deep that ships cannot anchor or sail away, because it sweeps them into a gulf from which they can never escape. This is because the sea in its wildness eats away all the land, unearthing and upending trees with their roots attached and dragging them into the gulf. All the time astonishing numbers of trees are being driven into this gulf without ever breaking free. As a result ships that enter the gulf become so jammed in among these trees that they cannot move from the spot and so are stuck there for good.

Now we have told you about these strange people, so we will leave them and move on to tell you about other things. And we will speak to you about an island called Ceylon.²⁹

Leaving the island of Andaman and sailing about 1,000 miles a little south of west brings the traveller to the island of Ceylon, which is undoubtedly the finest island of its size in the world. I will tell you why. It is 2,400 miles in circumference. And I assure you that it was once even bigger, for it was 3,600 miles in circumference as stated on the mariners' charts of this sea. But the north wind blows so hard in these parts that it has caused a large section of this island to be submerged underwater; and this is the reason why it is not as big as it once was.³⁰

We will now tell you about the affairs of this island. It is ruled by a king called Sendernam. The people are idolaters. They pay tribute to no one. They go about stark naked, both men and women, except that they cover their private parts. They have no grain other than rice; they also have sesame from which they make oil. They live on milk and flesh and rice. On this island they also have wine from those trees that I told you about above. They have the best brazilwood in the world in great abundance.

We will now move on from these things and tell you about the most precious objects to be found in the world. For I can tell you that precious and noble rubies are produced on this island and nowhere else on earth. Sapphires, topazes, amethysts [and garnets](#) are also produced here, along with many other precious stones. And I assure you that the king of this province possesses the most beautiful ruby that can be seen, has ever been

seen, or is ever likely to be seen in the whole world. I will describe its appearance for you. Now you should know that it is about a palm long and at least as thick as a man's arm. It is the most dazzling thing in the world to look at. It is flawless. It is as red as fire. It is so hugely valuable that it could scarcely be bought for any sum. Moreover, I give you my word that the Great Khan sent his envoys to this king to inform him that he wished to buy this ruby, and that if he would give it to him he would be paid the value of a city in return. But the king replied that he would not give it up for anything in the world because it belonged to his ancestors, and for this reason the Great Khan could not have it at any price.

The men of Ceylon are not warriors but are cowardly and base. In the event that they need soldiers they hire them from abroad, especially Saracens. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and move on to tell you about Maabar.³¹



SEVEN

India

When the traveller leaves the island of Ceylon and sails westward for about sixty miles he comes to the great province of Maabar, which is called Greater India.¹ It is indeed the best of the Indies and forms part of the mainland. You should know that there are five kings² in this province who are all brothers by birth; and we will tell you about each one in turn. You can also take my word for it that this province is the richest and most splendid in the whole world. And I will tell you why.

Now you should know that at this end of the province one of these brothers, Sundara Pandya Devar³ by name, is king. Fine pearls of great size and beauty are found in his kingdom; [for the fact is](#) that most of the world's pearls and precious stones are found in Maabar and Ceylon. And I will tell you how these pearls are found and gathered.

Now you should know that in this sea there is a gulf between the island and the mainland; and across this entire gulf the water is no more than ten or twelve paces deep, while in some places it is no more than two paces deep. It is in this gulf that the pearls are gathered, and I will tell you how. [A group of merchants](#) will enter into partnership and form a company, and they will take a large ship specially fitted out for the purpose on which each

will have his own room equipped and furnished for his use with a tub full of water and other necessities. There are many of these ships, for there are many merchants engaged in this type of fishing and they form numerous companies. **The merchants who are associated** together on one ship will also have several boats to tow the ship through the gulf. And they hire many men, giving them a fixed sum for the month of April and the first half of May, or as long as the fishing season lasts in this gulf.

These merchants take their big ships and small boats out into the gulf from the month of April till mid May. They make for a place on the mainland called Bettala, **this being where** the greatest concentration of pearls is found. From here they head out to sea, sailing **due south** for sixty miles, and there they cast anchor. Then they go out in the little boats and begin to fish in the following manner. The men in the little boats, who have been hired by the merchants, jump overboard and dive into the water, some descending four or five paces or even twelve depending on the depth of the water in each spot. They stay underwater as long as they can. **When they can hold out** no longer they come to the surface and rest for a moment before once more diving to the bottom; and they continue in this way all day long. When they reach the seabed they find a type of shellfish called sea oysters, **and they bring them** to the surface in little net bags tied to their bodies. In these oysters are found pearls, both big and small and of every variety. **The shells are split** open and put into the tubs of water that are carried on the ships as mentioned, because the pearls are embedded in the flesh of the shellfish. **As it soaks in water** in these tubs, the flesh decomposes and rots until it resembles the white of an egg; it then floats to the surface while the clean pearls remain at the bottom.

This is how the pearls are gathered; and the quantities found are beyond all reckoning. For you should know that pearls from this gulf are exported throughout the world, **because they are** mostly round and lustrous. I can also tell you that the king of this kingdom receives a substantial duty on them, amounting to an enormous sum in revenue. The merchants pay the following duty on the pearls. First of all they pay a tenth to the king. Then they give some to the man who charms the fish so that they do not do harm

to the divers who go underwater to find the pearls; they give him one in twenty. These men are called Brahmins and only charm the fish by day; at night they break the charm⁴ so the fish are free to do as they please. I can also tell you that these Brahmins are experts at charming every kind of creature, including all the birds and all the animals.

We have now told you how the pearls are found. And I give you my word that as soon as the middle of May comes round [the fishing stops, because](#) these shellfish – I mean the ones that produce pearls – are no longer found here. Yet it is true that about 300 miles away they are found from September to mid October.

I can also tell you that in this whole province of Maabar there is no need of tailors or needleworkers to cut or stitch clothes, because all the people go naked all year round. For I assure you that their weather is temperate at all seasons – which is to say it is never cold or hot – and so they always go naked, except for their private parts, which they cover with a scrap of cloth. The king goes round like the others, except for certain royal ornaments that I will describe to you. You may depend on it then that their king goes stark naked save that he covers his private parts with a beautiful cloth and wears round his neck a full collar so crammed with precious stones – rubies, sapphires, emeralds and other brilliant gems – that it is undoubtedly worth a fortune. He also has round his neck a thin silk cord that hangs down his chest to the length of a pace; and on this cord are strung very large, fine pearls and immensely valuable rubies, altogether 104 in number. I will tell you why there are 104 stones and pearls on this necklace. You may depend on it that he wears these 104 gems because every day, morning and evening, it falls to him to recite 104 prayers in honour of his idols, as ordained by their faith and customs and as practised by the kings who preceded him and who handed down the obligation to him. And this is the reason why the king wears these 104 gems around his neck. The prayer simply consists of the words '*Pauca, Pauca, Pacauca*'.⁵

Let me further tell you that the king also wears, at three points on his arms, gold bracelets crammed with precious stones and pearls of great size and value. And let me add that this king likewise wears, in three places

round his legs, gold bracelets crammed with opulent pearls and gems. I will tell you, too, that this king wears such beautiful pearls and other jewels on his toes that it is a marvellous sight to see. What else shall I tell you? You may take my word for it that this king wears so many gems and so many pearls that their value easily exceeds that of a substantial city; in fact there is no one who could reckon or estimate the great sum that these jewels worn by the king are worth. And no wonder he has as many jewels as I have said; for I assure you that all these precious stones and pearls are found in his kingdom.

Let me tell you something else. No one is allowed to take out of his kingdom any large and valuable gem, nor any pearl that weighs half a *saggio* or more. In fact several times a year the king issues a proclamation across his kingdom to the effect that all who possess fine pearls and precious stones must bring them to the court, and that in return he will give twice their value. It is the custom of the kingdom to pay double the value of all precious stones. So when merchants or other people have any of these precious stones and pearls, they readily take them to the court because they are well paid. And this is how this king comes to have so much wealth and so many precious stones.

Now I have told you about this. So next I will tell you about some other wonderful things.

I give you my word that this king has at least 500 wives or concubines.⁶ For I assure you that the moment he lays eyes on a beautiful woman or girl, he wants her for himself. On one occasion this led him into the shameful behaviour I will describe to you. Let me tell you that this king caught sight of a very beautiful woman **who happened to be his brother's wife**. And he took her from him and kept her for himself. His brother, who was a wise man, patiently bore his wrong and did not quarrel with him; **and this was why**. Despite his forbearance he was repeatedly on the brink of making war on him, but their mother would show them her breasts, saying: 'If you fight with each other I will cut off these breasts that suckled you.' And so the trouble was averted.

I will tell you yet another thing about this king that is truly to be marvelled at. I assure you that this king has large numbers of faithful followers who conduct themselves in the following way. The fact is that they declare themselves to be his followers in this world and the next. I will tell you more about this great wonder. These followers wait on the king at court; they go riding with him; they hold positions of great trust in his service. Wherever the king goes these barons accompany him, and they exercise high authority throughout the kingdom. And you should know that when the king dies and his body is burned in a great fire, then all these barons who were his faithful followers as I have told you above fling themselves into the fire and burn with the king in order to keep him company in the next world.

I will also tell you about a custom that prevails in this kingdom. The fact is that when a king dies leaving a great treasure, the sons who survive him would not touch it for anything in the world. For they say: 'I have the whole of my father's kingdom and all his subjects; surely I can find ways to profit from it as my father did.' Consequently the kings of this kingdom never touch their treasure but hand it down from one to another, each making his own fortune. And this is why this kingdom has such a titanic store of treasure.

Let me tell you next that this country does not breed horses. Consequently the entire annual revenue, or the greater part of it, is swallowed up by the purchase of horses; and I will tell you how this comes about. You may take my word for it that the merchants of Hormuz, Kish, Dhofar, Shihr and Aden – all provinces where chargers and other horses are plentiful – as I was saying, the merchants of these provinces buy up the best horses, load them onto ships and take them to this king and his four brothers, who are also kings. They sell each one for no less than 500 *saggi* of gold, which is worth more than 100 silver marks. And I assure you that this king buys no fewer than 2,000 of them every year and his brothers as many more. And by the end of the year not one of them has 100 left. They all die because these people have no farriers and no idea how to care for them, so ill treatment kills them off. And you can take it from me that the

merchants who export these horses neither bring farriers with them nor allow any to come here, because they are only too glad for these kings' horses to die off in large numbers.

Let me move on to yet another custom of this kingdom, which I will describe to you. When a man has committed a crime that warrants the death sentence and the king has decreed his execution, the condemned man declares that he wishes to kill himself in honour and adoration of such-and-such an idol. The king replies that he approves of this. Then all the relatives and friends of the man who must kill himself take him and sit him in a chair and give him twelve swords or knives, and they carry him around the city proclaiming at every step: 'This brave man is going to kill himself out of devotion to such-and-such an idol.' They carry him like this round the whole city, and when they reach the place of execution the condemned man takes two of the knives⁷ and cries out loud: 'I kill myself for the love of such-and-such an idol!' Having uttered these words, at one stroke he thrusts the knives into his thighs. Then he thrusts two into his arms, two into his stomach, two into his chest and so on until he has **stuck them all in his body**, at every stroke calling out: 'I kill myself for the love of such-and-such an idol!' When all the knives are stuck in him, he takes a two-handled knife like those used for making hoops and holds it against the nape of his neck; then jerking it violently forward he severs his own neck, for the knife is razor sharp. And when he has killed himself his relatives burn his body amid great rejoicing.

I will go on to tell you about yet another custom of this kingdom. When a man is dead and his body is being burned, his wife flings herself onto the fire and lets herself burn with her husband **out of love for him**. The women who do this are highly praised by all. And believe me when I say that many women – though not all – do as I have told you.

I can also tell you that the people of this kingdom worship idols. Most worship the ox, because they say that an ox is a very good thing. None of them would eat beef for anything in the world, nor kill an ox on any account. I should tell you that there is a race of men among them called Gavi who do eat beef, but even they would not dare kill an ox. Instead,

when an ox dies of natural causes or gets killed by accident, these Gavi whom I have mentioned eat it. And let me add that they daub their houses all over with ox dung.

I will move on to yet another custom of theirs, which I will describe to you. You should know that the king and the barons and all the other people sit on the earth. When asked why they did not seat themselves more honourably, they replied that it was honourable enough to sit on the ground since we are made of earth and to the earth we must return, from which it follows that no one can honour the earth too highly and no one should scorn it.

I can also tell you that these Gavi – that is, that entire race of people who eat cattle when they die a natural death – are the same people whose ancestors killed Messer St Thomas the Apostle long ago. Let me tell you another thing, too: of all those of this tribe called Gavi, none have been able to enter the place where the body of Messer St Thomas lies. For the fact is that ten men would not be able to cling onto one of these Gavi in the presence of the holy body. I will go further: twenty or more men could not drag one of these Gavi into the place where the body of Messer St Thomas lies, because the place will not receive them by virtue of the holy body.

No grain grows in this kingdom with the sole exception of rice. And I will tell you an even stranger thing that is well worth relating. You should know that if a prize stallion mounts a prize mare, their offspring is a stunted colt with its feet askew that has no value and cannot be ridden.

I can also tell you that these people go into battle stark naked and armed only with a lance and shield. Far from being valiant or battle-hardened, they are mean-spirited cowards. They do not kill any animals or other living creatures; if they wish to eat the flesh of a sheep or any other beast or bird they have it slaughtered by Saracens or others who do not follow their faith or customs.

Let me tell you about another of their customs. All of them, men and women, bathe from head to toe in water twice a day – that is, morning and evening. They would neither eat nor drink without washing, and anyone who fails to wash himself twice a day is considered a heretic, much as we

think of the Paterins. [You should also know](#) that in eating they use only the right hand; they never touch food with their left hand. Everything clean and pleasant they do and touch with the right hand, for the left hand is reserved for unpleasant and unclean necessities like wiping the nostrils, anus and suchlike. Another thing: they drink only from tankards, each from his own; for no one would drink from another's tankard. And when they drink they do not put the tankard to their lips but holding it up high pour the drink into their mouth. On no account would they touch the tankard with their lips or give it to a stranger to drink from. But if a stranger is thirsty and has not got his own tankard with him they pour the wine or other beverage into his palms and he drinks from them, making a cup of his own hands.

I can also tell you that harsh justice is administered in this kingdom to murderers, thieves and all other criminals. [And as for debts](#), the following laws and procedures are observed among them. If a debtor who has been repeatedly asked by his creditor to pay a debt keeps on fobbing him off day after day with promises, and the creditor is able to get hold of him in such a way that he can draw a circle around him, the debtor cannot leave that circle until he has satisfied the creditor or given him a lawful and binding pledge that the debt will be discharged in full that very day. Otherwise, if the debtor ventured to leave the circle without paying the debt or pledging that the creditor would be paid the same day, he would incur the penalty of death for violating natural law and the justice established by the king. And Messer Marco saw this done in the case of the king himself. For it happened that the king was indebted to a certain foreign merchant for some goods he had had from him, and though the merchant had repeatedly petitioned him he kept on postponing the settlement date on the grounds of inconvenience. This delay was damaging him by blighting his business, so one day he made himself ready while the king was out riding and all at once drew a circle on the ground round him and his horse. When the king saw this, he reined in his horse and did not move from the spot until the merchant had been satisfied in full. When some bystanders saw this they exclaimed in astonishment: 'See how the king obeys the law!' And the king replied:

‘Should I, who established this just law, break it because it goes against me? No, I more than anyone am obliged to observe it.’

I can further tell you that most of these people abstain from drinking wine. A man who drinks wine is disqualified from acting as a witness or guarantor, as is one who sails the seas; for they say that a man who goes to sea must be a desperado, and so they reject him and discount his testimony. On the other hand, you should know that they do not regard any form of sexual indulgence as a sin.

The climate is amazingly hot, which explains why they go naked. There is no rain except in the months of June, July and August;⁸ and were it not for the rain that comes during those three months and freshens the air, the heat would be so oppressive that no one could endure it. But thanks to this rain the heat is moderated.

I can also tell you that among these people there are many experts in the field of physiognomy – that is, the study of men and women’s characters and whether they are good or bad. They ascertain this merely by looking at the man or woman. They are also expert at divining the meaning of encounters with birds or beasts. They pay more attention to omens than any other people in the world, and they are better than any others at telling good omens from bad. For let me tell you that when a man sets out for some destination and happens along the way to hear someone sneeze, he immediately sits down on the road and will not budge. If the sneezer sneezes again, he gets up and continues on his way; but if he sneezes no more, he abandons his journey and turns back for home.

Likewise they say that for every day of the week there is one unlucky hour, which they call *choiach*.⁹ So, on Monday it is the hour after seven in the morning, on Tuesday after nine, on Wednesday the first hour after noon, and so on for each day throughout the year. They have recorded and defined all these things in their books. They tell the hour by measuring the length of a shadow in feet – that is, a man’s shadow. So, on such-and-such a day, when a man’s shadow reaches seven feet long in the opposite direction to the sun, then it will be the hour of *choiach*. And when this measurement changes, whether becoming longer or shorter (for as the sun rises the

shadow shortens and as it sinks the shadow lengthens), then it is no longer *choiach*. On a different day it will be *choiach* when the shadow reaches twelve feet long; and when this measure passes then *choiach* will likewise be over. They have set down all these things in writing. And you must know that during these hours they steer clear of trading or doing any kind of business. So two men may be in the middle of bargaining together when someone steps into the sunlight and measures the shadow; and if it is on the cusp of that day's hour, according to what is laid down for the day, he will at once say to them: 'It is *choiach*. Stop what you are doing.' And they will stop. Then he will take a second reading and finding that the hour is past will say to them: '*Choiach* is over. Carry on.' They have these calculations at their fingertips; for they say that if anyone strikes a bargain during these hours he will never profit by it but will find it turns out badly for him.

Again, their houses are infested with certain animals called tarantulas that run up the walls like lizards. These tarantulas have a poisonous bite and cause great pain if they bite a man. They make a sound as if they are saying '*Chis!*' and this is their cry. These tarantulas are taken as an omen in the following way: if some people are doing business in a house infested with these tarantulas and a tarantula utters its cry within their hearing, they check its position relative to each merchant, whether buyer or seller – in other words whether it is to the left or right, in front or behind, or overhead – and according to the direction they know whether its significance is good or bad. If good, the bargain is struck; if bad, it is called off. Sometimes it augurs well for the seller and ill for the buyer, sometimes ill for the seller and well for the buyer, and sometimes well or ill for both; and they modify their actions accordingly. They have learned these things from experience.

I can also tell you that as soon as a child is born in this kingdom, whether boy or girl, the father or mother immediately has a written record made of his nativity – that is, the day, month, lunar cycle and hour of birth. They do this because they always act on the advice of astrologers and diviners who are well versed in enchantment and magic and geomancy. And some of them, as I have told you, also know astronomy.

Again, any man who has sons boots them out of the house the moment they turn thirteen and refuses to feed them at the family table. For he says that they are now old enough to feed themselves and trade at a profit as he himself did. And he gives each son twenty or twenty-four groats, or coins to that value, to bargain with and make a profit. The fathers do this so that the sons become practised and quick-witted in all their actions and accustomed to doing business. And this is exactly what happens; for the boys never stop running to and fro all day long, buying this and that and then selling it. When the pearl fishery is in full swing they run down to the port and buy five or six pearls from the fishermen, or as many as they can get. Then they take them to the dealers, who stay indoors for fear of the sun, and say: 'Do you want these? This is what they cost me, for real; let me have whatever profit you think fit.' And the dealers allow them some profit on top of the cost price. Then the boys run off again; or else they say to the dealers: 'Would you like me to go and buy something?' And in this way they become very able and very crafty traders. They still take groceries home for their mothers to cook and prepare for them, but this does not mean they eat anything at their father's expense.

You should also know that in this kingdom and throughout India the beasts and birds are different from ours – all except one bird, and that is the quail. This bird unmistakably resembles ours, but all the rest are very strange and different. I give you my word that they have bats – these are the birds that fly by night and have no quills or feathers – they have birds of this type as big as goshawks. There are goshawks as black as crows and much bigger than ours; they are good fliers and good hawkers. And let me add something else that is worth recounting. You should know that they feed their horses on cooked meat and rice and many other cooked foods.

Let me further tell you that they have many idols, both male and female, in their monasteries; and many girls are offered to these idols in the following manner. The fact is that their mother and father offer them to the idols of their choosing. Once they have been offered, then whenever the monks belonging to the monastery of the idol require the girls who have been offered to this idol to come to the monastery and entertain the idol,

they go without delay; and, singing and dancing, they hold a high-spirited celebration. And there are great numbers of these girls forming huge troupes. Another thing: every month, several times a week, these girls bring food to the idols at the place where they were offered; and I will explain how they bring the food there and in what manner they say the idol has eaten. I can tell you that many of these girls whom I have mentioned prepare dishes of meat and other choice ingredients and take them to their idols in the monasteries. Then they spread a table before him with all the dishes they have brought and leave them there for some time. Meanwhile all these girls sing and dance nonstop and lay on the finest entertainment in the world. And when they have kept up this entertainment for as long as it would take a great baron to enjoy a leisurely meal, the girls say that the spirit of the idol has eaten the substance of the food. Then they gather it up and eat it all themselves with great relish and great gaiety. Afterwards they return to their homes. These girls carry on in this way until they get married. And there are plenty of girls like these throughout the kingdom, doing all the things I have told you about.

Why do they lay on these entertainments for the idols? Because the priests who serve the idols often declare: ‘The god is angry with the goddess; they refuse to come together or speak to one another. So long as they are bad-tempered and angry and until they are reconciled and make their peace, all our affairs will be undone and will go from bad to worse because they will not bestow their blessing and favour.’ And so the aforementioned girls go to the monastery in the way we have said, completely naked apart from covering their private parts, and sing before the god and goddess. The god stands by himself on an altar under a canopy, the goddess by herself on another altar under another canopy; the people say that he often takes his pleasure with her and they have intercourse together, but when they are angry they refrain from intercourse. This is when these girls come to placate them; and when they arrive they set about singing, dancing, leaping, tumbling and performing all sorts of diversions liable to cheer up the god and goddess and reconcile them. While they are performing they say: ‘O Lord, why are you angry with the goddess and

hard-hearted towards her? Is she not beautiful? Is she not delightful? May it please you therefore to be reconciled with her and take your pleasure with her, for she is unquestionably most delightful.’ Then the girl who has spoken these words will lift her leg above her neck and perform a pirouette for the pleasure of the god and goddess. And when they have done enough coaxing they go home. In the morning the priest of the idols will announce as a great blessing that he has seen the god and goddess together and that harmony is restored between them. And then everyone rejoices and gives thanks.

So long as these girls remain virgins, their flesh is so firm that no one can grasp them or pinch them anywhere on their bodies. For a penny they will let a man try to pinch them as hard as he can. After they are married their flesh remains firm, but not as firm as before. Owing to this firmness their breasts do not hang down but stand pertly and conspicuously erect.

The men have very light cane beds fashioned in such a way that when they are in bed and want to go to sleep they can hoist themselves with ropes up to the ceiling and suspend themselves there. They do this in order to escape the aforementioned tarantulas, which have a nasty bite, as well as fleas and other vermin; and also to catch the breeze and combat the heat. Not all do this, though; only the nobles and heads of houses. The rest sleep in the streets. And we will tell you, apropos of the excellent justice kept by the king, that when a man is travelling by night (for on account of the lower temperatures they make their journeys by night rather than day) and wishes to sleep, he will, if he has a sack of pearls or other valuables, put the sack under his head and sleep where he is; and no one ever loses anything by theft or otherwise. And if he does lose something, he is reimbursed without delay – provided, that is, that he has slept on the road, because if he has slept away from the road he gets nothing. In fact he is presumed guilty. For the authorities say: ‘Why would you have slept off the road unless you intended to rob others?’ So he is punished and his loss is not made good.

We have now told you a great deal about the customs and manners and affairs of this kingdom. So we will leave it and move on to tell you about another kingdom, whose name is Motupalli.¹⁰

Motupalli is a kingdom reached by travelling north from Maabar for about 1,000 miles.¹¹ It belongs to a queen¹² who is a woman of great wisdom. For let me tell you that it was a good forty years since the king her husband had died – a husband to whom she had been so deeply devoted that she declared God would never wish her to take another when he whom she had loved more than herself was dead. So for this reason she never sought to marry again. You may take my word for it that throughout her forty-year reign this queen has ruled her kingdom with great justice and great integrity, just as her husband did before her. And I assure you that she is more dearly loved by her subjects than any lady or lord has ever been.

The people are idolaters and pay tribute to no one. They live on rice, meat, milk, fish and fruit.

Diamonds are also produced in this kingdom, and we will tell you how. You should know that in this kingdom there are many mountains in which diamonds are found,¹³ as you will hear. For you should know that when it rains the water rushes down through these mountains, cascading wildly along vast ravines and caverns. And when the rain has stopped and the water has drained away the men head out into the ravines through which the water flowed in search of diamonds, which they find in plenty. In summer, when there is not a drop of water to be found here, they uncover plenty of them in the mountains themselves. The heat, though, is so intense as to be all but intolerable. And let me tell you that these mountains are so heavily infested with great fat serpents¹⁴ that men cannot go there without fearing for their lives. But all the same they make their way as best they can and find some very fine, large diamonds. I can also tell you that these serpents are highly venomous and vicious, so the men do not dare enter the caves where these vicious serpents live. And again I can tell you that the men extract the diamonds by other means. You should know that there are great, deep valleys whose rocky sides are so steep that no one can penetrate them. But I will tell you what the men do. They take some lumps of bloody meat and fling them down into the depths of the valleys; and the places where the meat is flung are littered with diamonds, which become embedded in the flesh. Now the fact is that many white eagles live among these mountains

and prey on the serpents. And when these eagles see the meat lying at the bottom of the valleys, they swoop down, seize the lumps and carry them off. The men, meanwhile, have been carefully watching where the eagles go, and as soon as they see that one has alighted and is swallowing the meat they rush over as fast as they can. The eagles are so fearful of the men who have surprised them that they fly off and fail to take away the meat. And when the men reach the place where the meat is, they pick it up and find it studded with diamonds.

The men also get hold of the diamonds in the following way. When the eagles eat the meat I have told you about, they also eat – or rather swallow – some of the diamonds. And at night, when they return to their nests, they pass the diamonds they have swallowed along with their faecal matter. Then the men arrive and collect the eagles' excrement, which also turns out to be rich in diamonds.

You have now heard three ways in which diamonds are gathered; there are many others besides. And you should know that diamonds are not found anywhere else in the world but in this kingdom alone. Here, though, they are both plentiful and of fine quality. And do not imagine that the best diamonds find their way to our Christian countries; on the contrary, they are taken to the Great Khan and the kings and barons of these various regions and realms. For they have the greatest treasures, and they buy all the costliest stones.

Now I have told you about the diamonds, so we will move on to other matters. You should know that this kingdom produces the best quality buckrams – the finest, most beautiful and most valuable in the world. For I assure you that they resemble the linen fabrics of Rheims. There is not a king or queen in the world who would not gladly wear a fabric of such magnificence and beauty.

They have plenty of beasts, including the biggest sheep in the world. They are amply and richly endowed with all the means of life.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this kingdom and tell you about the burial place of Messer St Thomas the Apostle.

The body of Messer St Thomas the Apostle lies in a little town¹⁵ in the province of Maabar. There are few inhabitants, and merchants do not visit the place because it has no merchandise worth taking away and because it is in a very out-of-the-way spot. Yet the fact is that many Christians and many Saracens make pilgrimages to this place. For I can tell you that the Saracens of this country have great faith in him and declare that he was a Saracen; they say he was a great prophet and call him *avariun*, which means 'holy man'.

The Christians who guard the church have many trees that yield wine and bear coconuts. One of these nuts provides enough food and drink to make a meal for a man. They have first an outer husk covered, so to speak, with threads; these are used in all sorts of ways and serve many useful purposes. Inside this husk there is a type of food that provides a square meal for a man. It is really very tasty, as sweet as sugar and white as milk, and is formed in the shape of a cup like the surrounding husk. At the centre of this edible layer there is enough water to fill a flask. It is clear and cool and tastes delicious, and is drunk after eating the flesh. And so from one nut a man has his fill of both food and drink. For each of these trees the Christians pay one groat a month to one of the brothers who are kings in the province of Maabar.

You should also know that a marvel such as I will describe happens here. Now let me tell you that the Christians who come here on pilgrimage gather some of the earth from the place where the saint was killed and take it back to their own country. If anyone falls ill with a quartan or tertian ague or some such fever, they give him a potion made with a little of this earth; and no sooner has the sick man drunk it than he is cured. And every sick person who has drunk this earth has likewise been cured. Messer Marco took some of this earth with him to Venice and cured many people with it. And you should know that this earth is red.

Let me tell you, too, about a fine miracle that happened around the year 1288 from the incarnation of Christ. The fact is that a baron of this country¹⁶ had a vast quantity of the grain they call rice, and he filled up all the houses around the church with it. When the Christians who guard the

church and the saint's body saw that this idolatrous baron was filling up the houses in this way and that the pilgrims would have nowhere to lodge, they were deeply distressed and earnestly begged him to desist. But he, being a cruel and haughty man, paid no heed to their prayers and filled up all these houses in accordance with his own wishes and contrary to the wishes of the Christians who guard the church. And when to the fury of the brethren this baron had filled up all the houses of St Thomas with his rice, the great miracle that I will tell you about took place. For you should know that the night after the baron had had these houses filled up, Messer St Thomas the Apostle appeared to him with a fork in his hand and held it to the baron's throat, calling him by name and saying to him: 'If you do not have my houses emptied immediately, you will die a terrible death.' As he said these words he pressed the fork hard against the throat of the baron, who was convinced he was in great pain and all but certain he was dying. And when Messer St Thomas had done this he went away. In the morning the baron arose early and had all the houses emptied. And he related everything that Messer St Thomas had done to him, which was held to be a great miracle. The Christians were filled with joy and gladness at it, and they repeatedly rendered great thanks and great honour to Messer St Thomas and profusely blessed his name. And I assure you that many other miracles happen here all year round that would undoubtedly be reckoned great marvels by anyone who heard of them – above all the healing of Christians who are lame or disabled.

Now that we have told you about this, we also want to tell you how St Thomas was killed [according to the people of these parts](#). The fact is that Messer St Thomas was outside his hermitage in the woods, praying to the Lord his God. Around him were many peacocks, for [you should know that](#) in this country they are more common than anywhere else in the world. And while Messer St Thomas was at prayer an idolater of the lineage and race of the Gavi let fly an arrow from his bow, intending to kill one of the peacocks that were gathered around the saint. He never even saw the saint; but instead of hitting the peacock as he thought, he had hit Messer St Thomas the Apostle in the middle of his right side. When he had received this blow

he worshipped his creator with great gentleness; and I can tell you it was from this blow that he died. But it is a fact that before he came to this place where he died he made many converts in Nubia. As to the ways and means by which this came about, we will set it all out clearly for you in this book at the proper time and place.

Now we have told you about St Thomas, so we will move on to tell you about other things.

The fact is that when a child is born here they anoint him once a week with sesame oil, and this turns him a great deal darker than when he was born. For let me tell you that the blackest men here are held in highest regard and considered superior to those who are not so black. And I will tell you another thing, too. You may take my word for it that these people portray and paint all their gods and idols black and their devils white as snow. For they say that God and all the saints are black – speaking, of course, of their God and their saints – and that the devils are white. And so they portray and paint them in the way you have heard; and I can tell you that the statues they make of their idols are likewise all black.

You should also know that the men of this country have such faith in the ox and such belief in its sanctity that when they go to war they take with them some of the hair of the wild oxen I told you about before; those who are horsemen tie some of this ox-hair to their horse's mane, while the foot soldiers fasten some of the ox-hair to their shields or in some cases knot it onto their own hair. And they do this because they believe that this ox-hair will help protect and save them from all kinds of danger. Everyone who joins the army follows suit. And you should know that for this reason the hair of the wild ox is worth a good deal here; for if a man has none he does not feel safe.

Since we have told you about this matter we will move on and tell you about a province of the Brahmins, as you will be able to hear.

Lar¹⁷ is a province that lies to the west of the place where St Thomas the Apostle is buried. All the Brahmins in the world are sprung from this province, for this is where they originated. Let me tell you that these

Brahmins are among the best and most trustworthy traders in the world; for they would not tell a lie for anything in the world or speak a word that was not true. You should know that if a foreign merchant who knows nothing of the manners and customs of these parts comes to this province to do business, he finds one of these Brahmins and entrusts him with his money and goods, asking him to conduct his business on his behalf lest he should be deceived through ignorance of the local customs. The Brahmin merchant promptly takes charge of the foreign merchant's goods and, both when selling and when buying, deals with them as scrupulously and promotes the foreigner's interests at least as carefully as if he were acting for himself. In return for this service he asks for nothing, leaving any recompense to the foreigner's goodwill.

They do not eat meat or drink wine. They live very virtuous lives by their own lights. They do not have sex with any women except their wives. They would never take anything that belonged to someone else, or kill an animal, or do anything they believed might lead them to sin. I can also tell you that all Brahmins are known by an emblem they wear. For you should know that all the Brahmins in the world sling a cotton cord over one shoulder and tie it under the opposite arm, so that the cord crosses both the chest and the back. And wherever they go they are known by this emblem. I can further tell you that they have a king who is mightily rich in treasure. This king is an enthusiastic purchaser of pearls and every other kind of precious stone. In fact he has struck a deal with all the merchants of his country that for all the pearls they bring him from the kingdom of Maabar known as Chola – which is the wealthiest and most sophisticated province in India and the source of the finest pearls – he will give them double the purchase price. So the Brahmins go to the kingdom of Maabar and buy up all the fine pearls they can find and take them to their king, declaring on their honour what they cost. And the king promptly has them paid double the cost price; not once have they received less than that. Thanks to this they have brought him enormous quantities of very fine, large pearls.

These Brahmins are idolaters who set more store by augury and the behaviour of beasts and birds than any other men in the world. So I will tell

you a bit about what they do in this regard, beginning with a particular custom that is observed among them. The fact is that they have allotted a sign to every day of the week, as I will explain. If it happens that they are bargaining over some piece of merchandise, the prospective buyer stands up and examines his shadow in the sunlight, saying: 'What day is it today? Such-and-such a day.' Then he has his shadow measured. If it is the right length for that day, he makes the purchase; if it is not the length it should be, he absolutely does not make the purchase but rather waits till the shadow has reached the point laid down in their rule. Just as I have told you with respect to this day, so they have laid down the length the shadow ought to be on every day of the week; and until the shadow has reached the desired length they will not conduct any bargain or any other business. But when the shadow reaches the desired length for the day, they conclude all their bargains and business.

I will tell you something even more remarkable. Say they are in the middle of striking a bargain – whether indoors or out – and they see a tarantula approaching, these being very common here. If the purchaser sees it coming from a direction that seems auspicious to him, he will buy the goods without delay; but if the tarantula does not come from a direction he believes to be auspicious, he will call off the deal and abandon the purchase.

I can also tell you that if they are leaving their house when they hear someone sneeze and they decide it is not propitious, they will stop and go no further. And here is another thing. Say these Brahmins are going on their way when they see a swallow flying towards them, whether from ahead or from the left or right. If it appears according to their beliefs that the swallow comes from an auspicious direction, then they will go ahead; but if it appears to come from an inauspicious direction, then they will go no further but turn back.¹⁸

These Brahmins live longer than any other people in the world; this is due to their sparse diet and strict abstinence. They have very healthy teeth thanks to a herb they chew with their meals, which is a great aid to digestion and very wholesome for the human body. And you should know

that these Brahmins do not practise bloodletting, either from the veins or from any other part of the body.

Among them are some men living under a rule who are called Yogis.¹⁹ They live even longer than the others, for they reach 150 to 200 years of age. Yet they remain so physically fit that they can still come and go wherever they want and perform all the necessary services for their monastery and idols, serving them just as well as if they were younger. This comes of the strict abstinence they practise by eating small portions of healthy food; for their customary diet consists chiefly of rice and milk. And I can further tell you that these Yogi who live to the great age I have mentioned also ingest the following substance, which will surely strike you as an extraordinary thing. For I assure you that they take quicksilver and sulphur and mix them together to make a drink, which they then swallow. They say it prolongs life, and so they live all the longer. I can tell you that they take it twice a month. You should know, too, that these people start taking this drink from childhood in order to live longer. And certainly those who live to the age I have mentioned take this drink of sulphur and quicksilver.

There is also a religious order in this kingdom of Maabar of those called Yogi. They carry abstinence to the extremes I will describe and lead a harsh and austere life. For you may take my word for it that they go stark naked and entirely unclothed, with their private parts and every other part of their bodies uncovered. They worship the ox, and most of them wear a miniature ox made of gilt copper or bronze in the middle of their foreheads; you understand that these are tied in place. I can also tell you that they burn ox-dung and make a powder of it. Then they anoint various parts of their body with it, showing great reverence – at least as much as Christians do when using holy water. [And if anyone salutes them](#) in the street, they anoint his forehead with this powder as if it were the holiest of actions. They do not eat from bowls or trenchers; instead they take their food on the leaves of apples of paradise or other large leaves, but only when they are dried and no longer green. For they say that green leaves have souls and so it would be sinful. And let me tell you that they guard against acting towards any living

creature in a way they believe will give rise to sin; for the fact is they would sooner die than do anything they deem sinful. When other men ask them why they go naked and are not ashamed to show their members, they reply: 'We go naked because we want nothing of this world; for we came into the world naked and unclothed. As for not being ashamed to show our members, the fact is that we do no sin with them and therefore have no more shame in them than you have when you show your hand or face or the other parts of your body that do not lead you into carnal sin; whereas you use your members to commit sin and lechery, and so you cover them up and are ashamed of them. But we are no more ashamed of showing them than we are of showing our fingers, because we do not sin with them.' This is the explanation they give to men who ask them why they are not ashamed to show their members. Again, I assure you they would never kill any creature or living thing on earth – be it a fly, flea, louse or any other kind of vermin – because they say they have souls. This, they say, is why they would never eat them; for if they did they would commit a sin. I can also tell you that they never eat anything green, be it herb or root, until it has been dried; for they say that green things have souls. [When they wish to void](#) their bowels, they go down to the beach or seashore and relieve themselves on the sand near the water's edge. When they are done they wash themselves thoroughly in the water, and when they are clean they take a little rod or twig and use it to flatten out their excrement, spreading it this way and that across the sand until no trace of it can be seen. When asked why they do this, they reply: 'Because it would breed worms, and when the sun dried out their source of nourishment, these worms that had been created would die for want of food; and since this substance emanates from our body (for we, too, cannot live without food) we would be committing a very grave sin by bringing about the death of so many souls that would have sprung from our substance. So we destroy this substance in such a way that worms cannot possibly be born from it only to die soon afterwards for want of food through our faults and failings.' And another thing: I can tell you that they sleep stark naked on the ground without a stitch to cover them or to lie on.

It is quite astonishing that they do not die but rather live to the great age I mentioned above.

They are the most abstemious eaters, for they fast all year round and drink nothing but water.

I will tell you another thing about them, too. Among them are monks who live in monasteries to serve their idols. And when they are named to a new office or rank – for instance if someone dies and his replacement needs to be chosen – they are put to the test in the following way. The girls who have been offered to the idols are brought in and made to touch the men who tend to the idols. They caress them in this place and that all over their bodies, embracing and kissing them and bringing them to the utmost pitch of earthly pleasure. If a man is fondled in this way by the girls I have told you about and his member does not in the least react but rather stays just as it was before the girls touched him, he passes muster and stays in the monastery. But if another man is fondled by the girls and his member reacts and grows erect, far from retaining him they drive him away at once, declaring that they cannot stand having a lecher among them. This is how cruel and false-hearted these idolaters are.

The reason they give for burning their dead is this. They say that if they did not burn the corpse it would breed worms, and after the worms had eaten the body from which they sprang they would have nothing left to eat and would perforce die. And they say that if the worms were to die the soul of the deceased would incur great sin. So this is the reason they give for burning their dead. And they say that worms have souls.

Now we have told you about the customs of these idolaters, so we will take our leave of them and tell you a delightful story²⁰ that slipped our mind when we were dealing with the island of Ceylon. You will hear it for yourselves, and it will surely fill you with wonder.

Ceylon, as I told you earlier in this book, is a big island. Now the fact is that on this island there is a very high mountain, so precipitous and rocky that no one can climb it except in the way I will now tell you. For many iron chains are hung from the side of the mountain, so arranged that men can use

them to climb to the summit. Now let me tell you this: it is said that on the top of this mountain is the monument of Adam, our first father. The Saracens say it is Adam's grave; the idolaters, though, say it is the monument of Sakyamuni Burqan.²¹

This Sakyamuni was the first man in whose name idols were made. For by their lights he was the best man who ever lived among them, and he was the first whom they revered as a saint and in whose name they made idols. He was the son of a great king who was both rich and powerful. And he – the son – was so pure of mind that he paid no heed to worldly affairs and did not wish to be king. When his father saw that he had no wish to be king and had no interest in worldly affairs, he was deeply troubled. So he made him a very generous offer: he said he would crown him king of the realm and that he could rule it at his pleasure. Moreover, he was willing to resign the crown and issue no commands whatsoever, so that his son would be the sole ruler. His son replied that he wanted nothing. And when his father saw that nothing in the world would tempt him to accept the kingship, he was so deeply distressed that he came close to dying of grief. And no wonder; for he had no other son and no one else to whom he could leave his kingdom. So the king took the following course of action. He resolved to find a way to make his son willingly embrace worldly affairs and accept the crown and the kingdom. So he moved him into an exquisite palace and gave him 30,000 ravishing and captivating girls to serve him; not a single man was admitted but only these girls. And girls put him to bed and served him at table and kept him company all day long. They sang and danced for him and did everything they could to divert him, just as the king had commanded. Yet I can tell you that all these girls could not do enough to awaken any sexual appetites in the king's son; on the contrary, he lived more strictly and chastely than before and led a very virtuous life by their lights. I should also tell you that he was brought up so fastidiously that he had never left the palace nor seen a dead man or anyone who was not able-bodied, for his father had not let anyone old or infirm into his presence. Now it happened one day that this young man was riding along the road when he saw a dead body. He was quite horrified, as someone would be if

they had never seen one before, and immediately asked his companions what it was. They told him it was a dead man. 'What,' said the king's son, 'do all men then die?' 'Indeed they do,' they replied. At this the young man fell silent and rode on deep in thought. He had not ridden far when he came across an ancient man who could not walk and had no teeth in his mouth, having lost them all through extreme old age. And when the king's son saw the old man he asked what he was and why he could not walk. His companions told him it was owing to old age that he could not walk and it was owing to old age that he had lost his teeth. And when the king's son had digested the truth about the dead man and the old man, he went back to his palace and resolved to remain no longer in this evil world but to set out in search of him who never dies and who had created him. And so he abandoned his palace and his father. He headed among vast, remote mountains and spent the rest of his days there, leading a life of virtue, chastity and great abstemiousness. If he had been a Christian he would undoubtedly be a great saint and dwell with our Lord Jesus Christ.

When this prince died, his body was brought to the king his father. And when the king saw that the son whom he loved more than himself was dead, there is no need to ask whether he was afflicted and grief-stricken. First he mourned deeply. Then he had an image made in his likeness, entirely of gold and precious stones, and had it honoured by all the people of the land and worshipped as a god. And they say that he died eighty-four times. For they say that the first time he died he became an ox, and the second time he died he became a horse. In this way they say he died eighty-four times, each time becoming a dog or another sort of animal until the eighty-fourth time, when they say he died and became a god. And the idolaters hold him to be the best and the greatest of their gods. You should know that this was the first idol the idolaters had, and all the idols derive from him. And this happened in the island of Ceylon in India.

Now you have heard how the idols originated. And I give you my word that the idolaters come here on pilgrimage from very distant parts, just as Christians make pilgrimages to the shrine of Messer St James. The idolaters say that the monument on this mountain is that of the king's son of whom

you have heard, and that the teeth and the hair and the bowl that are kept here also belonged to this prince whose name was Sakyamuni Burqan, which means St Sakyamuni. But the Saracens, who also come here in great numbers on pilgrimage, say it is the monument of Adam, our first father, and that the teeth and hair and bowl also belonged to Adam. So now you have heard how the idolaters say he is the king's son who was their first idol and their first god, and how the Saracens say he is Adam our first father. But God alone knows who he is and what he was. For we do not believe that Adam is in this place, since our Scripture of Holy Church says that he is in another part of the world.

Now it happened that the Great Khan heard that the monument of Adam was on this mountain, along with his teeth and his hair and the bowl from which he ate. He made up his mind that he must have the teeth and the bowl and the hair. So he sent a great embassy here in the year 1284²² from the incarnation of Christ. What else shall I tell you? You may be quite certain that the Great Khan's messengers set out with a vast retinue and journeyed so far by land and sea that they came to the island of Ceylon. They went to the king and made such great efforts that they acquired two great big molar teeth as well as some of the hair and the bowl. The bowl was made of exquisite green porphyry. And when the Great Khan's messengers had these items I have mentioned in their possession, they set off and made their way back to their lord. When they were near the great city of Khanbaliq where the Great Khan was residing, they sent him word that they were coming and were bringing the things he had sent them for. At this the Great Khan ordered all the people, both the monks and the others, to go out and meet these relics, which they were given to understand belonged to Adam. But why make a long story of it? You may well believe that all the people of Khanbaliq went out to meet the relics; and the monks received them and brought them to the Great Khan, who accepted them with great joy and great ceremony and great reverence. And let me tell you that they found in their scriptures a passage declaring that the bowl possessed this property: that if food for one man were put inside, it would provide enough to feed

five. And the Great Khan announced that he had put this to the proof and that it was quite true.

This is how the Great Khan came by these relics you have heard about; and undoubtedly the treasure it cost him to obtain them amounted to a substantial sum.

Now that we have told you this whole story in due order, with all the facts, we will move on and tell you about other things. And first of all we will tell you about the city of Kayal.²³

Kayal is a great and splendid city that belongs to Ashar, the eldest of the five royal brothers. And you may take my word for it that this is the port of call for all shipping coming from the west – that is, from Hormuz and Kish and Aden and all Arabia – laden with horses and other goods. The merchants use this city's port because it is conveniently situated and offers a good market for their wares, and also because merchants from many parts congregate here to buy merchandise and horses and other things. The king is very rich in treasure; he adorns his person with many valuable gems and goes about in great state. He governs his kingdom ably and maintains a high standard of justice, especially in the case of the merchants who come here from other parts – that is, the foreign merchants. He watches over their interests with great integrity. And the merchants, I assure you, are very glad to come here on account of this good king who looks after them so well. And it is certainly true that they make huge profits here and their business prospers.

I will also tell you that this king has at least 300 wives; for the more wives a man keeps here, the greater his honour is held to be. And I can tell you, too, that when a quarrel breaks out between these five kings (who are brothers-german born of the same father and mother) and they are determined to declare war on one another, then their mother, who is still alive, intervenes²⁴ between them and refuses to let them fight. If, as often happens, her sons will not heed her prayers but are determined to defy her and fight, then their mother seizes a knife and cries: 'If you do not stop quarrelling and make peace with one another, I will kill myself here and

now. And first of all I will cut from my bosom the breasts with which I gave you my milk.’ And when the sons see how deeply their mother is grieved and how tenderly she pleads with them, and reflect that it is for their own good, they come to terms and make peace. This has happened time after time. Even so, I can tell you that after their mother’s death an almighty quarrel will unavoidably break out among them and they will destroy one another.

You should also know that the people of this city, as of India as a whole, have the following custom: out of habit and for the pleasure it gives them, they almost constantly keep in their mouths a kind of leaf called *tambur*.²⁵ They go round chewing this leaf and spitting out the resulting spittle. And this habit is especially prevalent among the nobles and magnates and kings. They have these leaves prepared with camphor and other spices and go about continually chewing them; lime is also added to the mix. And this keeps them very healthy. Moreover, if anyone wishes to insult and taunt someone who has offended him, then when he meets him in the street he collects this mixture in his mouth and spits it in the other’s face, saying: ‘You are not worth this’, referring to what he has spat out. The other, regarding this as a gross affront and insult, promptly complains to the king that so-and-so has slighted and abused him and asks the king’s leave to avenge himself. To be precise, if the assailant has insulted him and his clan, he will ask leave to pit himself against the assailant and his clan until he has proved whether or not he is worth no more than that. But if it is a purely personal insult, he will ask leave to settle it man to man. Then the king grants leave to both parties. If it is to be a battle of the clans, each man gets ready for the fight with his own people; and the only armour they don and wear for protection is the skin their mothers gave them when they were born. When they are on the field and battle commences they strike, wound and kill one another, for their swords easily pierce their skin and they are all easy targets. The king will be present with a multitude of people to watch the proceedings; and when he sees that large numbers have been killed on both sides and that one side seems to have the upper hand and is overwhelming the other, he will take one end of the cloth he has wrapped

round him and put it between his teeth, then hold out the other end at arm's length. At this the combatants will immediately stop fighting without striking another blow. And this is often how it turns out. If the combat is man to man they will both be naked, just as they are normally, and each will have a knife.²⁶ They are very skilled at defending themselves with these knives, for they are adept at parrying a blow with them as well as attacking their opponent. This, then, is the procedure. As you have gathered, they are dark-skinned people. So one of them will draw a white circle wherever he chooses on the other's body, saying to him: 'Know that I will strike you in this circle and nowhere else; defend yourself as best you can.' And the other will do the same to him. Lucky for him who fares better, unlucky for him who fares worse; for whenever one of them strikes the other he feels it sharply enough.

Now that we have told you something about this king we will leave him and tell you about the kingdom of Kollam.²⁷

Kollam is a kingdom that is reached by travelling south-west for 500 miles after leaving Maabar. The people are idolaters, though there are also some Christians and Jews. They have their own language. The king pays tribute to no one.

Now I want to tell you what can be found in this kingdom and what it produces. You should know that the Kollam brazil²⁸ grows here and is very good. Pepper also grows here in great abundance in all the fields and woods; it is gathered in the months of May, June and July. And I can tell you that the pepper trees are planted and watered and grown under cultivation. They also have a good deal of very fine indigo, which I can tell you is produced from a herb. They gather this herb, leaving its roots, and put it in a huge tub to which they add water. They leave the herb there until it is completely decomposed and then put it out in the sun, which is intensely hot and makes it boil and condense into a paste. This is then chopped into the little pieces you are familiar with. And I can tell you that the heat in this country is so fierce and the sun so scorching that it is

scarcely endurable. For I assure you that if you were to drop an egg into one of the rivers it would be boiled before you had gone any distance.

I will also tell you that merchants sail to this kingdom from Manzi and Arabia and the Levant and do a roaring trade, for they bring goods from their own countries and go back with their ships laden with the merchandise of this kingdom.

There are many strange animals that are unlike those found anywhere else in the world. For I assure you that there are black lions without another colour or mark on them. There are various kinds of parrots: some white as snow with red feet and beaks, others red and blue and the most delightful sight in the world. There are some very tiny ones, too, that are also very beautiful. Then there are peacocks of a different kind from ours and much bigger and more beautiful. Their hens are also different from ours. What else shall I tell you? All their things are different from ours, and better and more beautiful. For they have no fruit like ours, nor any beasts or birds; and this is a consequence of the extreme heat. They have no grain except rice. They make wine from palm sugar;²⁹ it is an excellent drink and gets you drunk faster than grape wine. Everything the human body needs for life can be had cheaply and in great abundance, with the sole exception of any grain other than rice.

They have many excellent astrologers. They have physicians who are adept at keeping a man's body in good health. They are all black-skinned, both men and women, and go stark naked except for very fetching cloths with which they cover their private parts. There is no form of lechery or carnal sin that they regard as sinful. Their marriage customs take the following form. The fact is that they may marry their cousin-german, their father's widow or their brother's widow. And these customs are common to all the people of India.

Now we have told you something about this kingdom; and since there is nothing else worth mentioning we will leave it and tell you about Kanyakumari,³⁰ as you will hear.

Kanyakumari is a country of India proper from which it is possible to glimpse the Pole Star, which we have not seen all the way here from the island of Java. If you go a good thirty miles out to sea from this place, you can see it suspended about a cubit above the water. This is not an overly civilized place; in fact it is rather savage. There are animals of various kinds, notably monkeys, some of them so odd-looking that you might take them for men. There are also apes called 'Paul cats' which are so singular that they are a real marvel. Lions, leopards and lynxes abound. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so will we leave this place and move on to tell you about the kingdom of Ezhimala,³¹ as you will hear.

Ezhimala is a kingdom about 300 miles west of Kanyakumari. The people have a king and are idolaters and pay tribute to no one and have their own language. We will give you a straightforward account of their customs and their produce; and you will be able to understand things better, because we are approaching more civilized lands.

This province or kingdom has no port except for a large river with a very fine estuary. Pepper grows in great abundance, and ginger likewise. They also have plenty of other spices. The king is very rich in treasure, but not so strong in manpower. But his kingdom has such secure borders that no one could invade it with a hostile force, and so he is afraid of nobody.

Let me tell you another thing. If a ship happens to enter that estuary and anchor there, and it is not a ship bound for this place, they will seize it and carry off all its cargo, saying: 'You were bound for another place and God has sent you to me, so I will take everything you have.' So they take everything off the ship and keep it for themselves, and the thought that they have committed a sin never crosses their minds. And this happens throughout these provinces of India; for if a ship sets out from its home port for a particular destination and is driven by adverse weather to put in at a place it never intended to visit, then whatever the region or place it arrives in it will be impounded and robbed of all its merchandise and everything on board. For the people will say: 'You meant to go somewhere else, but my

good fortune and my happy fate have brought you here so that I should have your possessions.'

You should also know that ships from Manzi and other points come here in summer, load in four days or perhaps eight, and set sail as quickly as possible because of the lack of a harbour; there are sandy beaches but no harbour, which makes it very hazardous to linger here. It is true, however, that the ships from Manzi are not as afraid to beach on the sands as the others, because they carry such great wooden anchors that they hold fast in the fiercest storms.

They have lions and other wild beasts. There is plenty of game, both beasts and birds.

Having told you about the kingdom of Ezhimala we will tell you about the kingdom of Malabar³² so that you can understand all about it.

Malabar is a very large kingdom that lies towards the west. Its people have their own king and their own language; they are idolaters and pay tribute to no one. From this kingdom the Pole Star is more clearly visible, to the extent that it appears to rise about two cubits above the water.

You should know that every year more than a hundred pirate ships cruise out from Malabar and from a neighbouring province called Gujarat and go about seizing other ships and robbing the merchants; for they are great thieves of the sea. Moreover, I can tell you that they take their wives and little children with them. They stay out cruising the whole summer and inflict swingeing losses on the merchants. You should know, too, that most of the ships of these evil pirates spread out in all directions to wait for and track down the merchants' ships. But they also have another wicked practice. They form a cordon across the sea; that is to say they line up at intervals of about five miles, so that twenty ships will be ranged one after the other in order to cover 100 miles of sea. As soon as they see a merchant ship they signal to one another with flaming beacons, and so no ship can pass through this sea without falling into their hands. But the merchants, who are well aware of the practices of these evil pirates and know they are bound to encounter them, go so well armed and prepared that they are not

afraid to face them after they have been tracked down. They defend themselves robustly and inflict great damage on their attackers. But of course it is impossible for them all to escape capture. And when these pirates do capture a merchant ship, they make off with the ship and all its cargo but do not harm the men. They say to them: 'Go and fetch more merchandise; with luck you will give us some again.'

Pepper is extremely abundant in this kingdom, as is ginger; there is also plenty of cinnamon, along with huge quantities of other spices, including turbit and coconuts. They also have a good deal of buckram of the finest and most delicate quality in the world. They have plenty of all kinds of valuable goods. And I also want to describe to you the goods that the merchants from other parts bring to this country, when they come here with their ships to buy their merchandise. You should know that the merchants carry copper on board – in fact they use it as ballast – as well as gold and silk fabrics, sendal, gold, silver, cloves, spikenard, and other such spices that are not available here; and they exchange these things for the products of this country. And you should know that ships come here from many parts, notably from the great province of Manzi; and the merchants export the goods they buy here in many different directions. Those that go to Aden are carried on to Alexandria.

Now we have told you about the kingdom of Malabar. So we will leave it and tell you about the kingdom of Gujarat,³³ as you will hear. You should be aware, though, that we are not telling you about every city in these kingdoms, because it would take far too long. For let me tell you that each kingdom has many cities and towns.

Gujarat is also a large kingdom. The people are idolaters and have a king and their own language; they pay tribute to no one. The kingdom lies towards the west. And from here the Pole Star is still more clearly visible, for it appears at an altitude of at least six cubits. This kingdom is home to the most infamous pirates in the world. And I assure you that they perpetrate the enormity I will now describe. For you should know that when these wicked pirates capture merchants they make them drink tamarind

mixed with seawater, which sends the merchants scurrying below to pass or vomit up the contents of their stomachs. The pirates then collect everything the merchants have produced and sift through it to see if it contains any pearls or other precious stones. For the pirates say that when the merchants are captured they swallow their pearls and other precious stones to keep them out of their captors' hands. And so these wicked pirates give the merchants this drink for the malicious purpose I have told you about.

They have huge quantities of pepper; they also have plenty of ginger and a great deal of indigo. They have plenty of cotton, too, for the trees that produce cotton grow here to a great height – as much as six paces after twenty years' growth. In truth when the trees reach this age they no longer produce cotton fit for spinning; instead it is used for wadding and quilting. And this is the rule with these trees: up to twelve years they produce fine cotton for spinning, but from twelve to twenty the cotton they produce is not as good as when they were young.

Immense quantities of skins are made into leather in this kingdom: that is, they tan the hides of goats, buffaloes, wild oxen, unicorns and many other beasts. I assure you they are tanned on such a scale that every year numerous ships load up with them and set sail for Arabia and many other parts; for this kingdom supplies many other kingdoms and provinces. I can also tell you that in this kingdom they make beautiful red leather mats embossed with birds and beasts and exquisitely embroidered with gold and silver thread. They are so beautiful that they are a marvel to behold. You should understand that these leather mats I am telling you about are used by the Saracens to sleep on; and how well you sleep on them! They also make cushions here, embroidered with gold and so beautiful that they are worth at least six silver marks. And some of the mats I have told you about are worth at least ten silver marks. What else shall I tell you? You may depend on it that in this kingdom they make the most finely crafted leather goods in the world, and the most expensive.

Now that we have given you all the facts about this kingdom in due order, we will go on our way; and moving on to the others that lie ahead, we will tell you about a kingdom called Thane.³⁴

Thane is a large kingdom lying towards the west.³⁵ It is a vast and fine place. The people have a king and pay tribute to no one. They are idolaters and have their own language. Pepper and other spices do not grow as profusely here as in the other countries we have been telling you about. There is a good deal of incense, but far from being white it is a brownish colour. Trade thrives here and ships and merchants arrive in droves, for this place exports beautiful hides worked in various styles and of excellent quality. It also exports plenty of fine buckram, as well as cotton. And the merchants who bring their ships here import a variety of wares, including gold, silver, brass and many other things the kingdom needs, before carrying away those of the kingdom's products that they think will make them a profit.

I will tell you another thing, and it is not pleasant. For I can tell you that many pirates sally forth from this kingdom and roam the seas, taking a heavy toll on the merchants. And I must declare that this is the king's doing; for he has struck a bargain with the pirates by which they give him all the horses they capture. You should know that they capture them often; for as I have told you before, a thriving trade in horses is conducted throughout India. The merchants bring them to market in huge numbers, to the extent that few ships arrive in India without some horses. And for this reason that you have heard, the king has struck this bargain with the pirates, the terms being that they pledge to give him all the horses they capture while anything else they seize, including gold, silver and precious stones, belongs to the pirates. Now this is a monstrous thing and unworthy of a king.

Now we have told you about the kingdom of Thane, so we will move on and tell you about the kingdom of Khambhat.³⁶

Khambhat is a large kingdom lying towards the west. The people have their own king and language and pay tribute to no one. They are idolaters. From this kingdom the Pole Star is more clearly visible; in fact let me tell you that the further you go towards the west,³⁷ the better you can see the Pole Star.

This kingdom is a flourishing centre of trade and produces copious quantities of high-grade indigo. Large quantities of buckram and cotton are

also produced for export to many provinces and kingdoms. There is also a thriving trade in leather goods; the quantities involved are substantial because the quality of craftsmanship here is as good as in any other country. And let me also tell you that there are many other types of merchandise besides these, which I will not mention in our book as it would take up too much space.

Merchants come here on many ships bringing their wares, above all gold and silver and brass.³⁸ They bring the products of their own countries and take away those of this kingdom – that is, those they think will give them the greatest profit and reward. And you should know that there are no pirates in this kingdom; on the contrary, I assure you that the people live by trade and crafts and are honest folk.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about what lies ahead – namely the kingdom of Somnath.³⁹

Somnath is a large kingdom lying towards the west. The people are idolaters and have their own king and language and pay tribute to no one. There are no pirates; instead they live by trade and crafts just as honest folk should do. For you may be certain that this is a kingdom where trade thrives and where merchants arrive from many parts with many goods of various types, which they sell in this kingdom before leaving with the kingdom's wares. I can also tell you that the people are very harsh and fierce idolaters. As there is nothing else worth mentioning we will move on and tell you about another kingdom, which is called Kesh-Makran.⁴⁰

Kesh-Makran is a kingdom with its own king and language. Some of the people are idolaters, **but most are Saracens**. They live by trade and crafts. They have plenty of rice **and wheat**. Their staple foods are rice, meat and milk. Merchants come here in large numbers both by sea and by land, bringing many wares and afterwards carrying away those of this kingdom. There is nothing else worth mentioning.

Let me tell you that this kingdom is the last province of India if you are on a heading between west and north-west. For you should know that

everything that lies between Maabar and this province – in other words, all the kingdoms and provinces I have told you about from Maabar to here – form Greater India, the best part of all the Indies. You should also be aware that we have only described to you the provinces and cities of this Greater India that lie along the coast; we have not told you about those that lie inland because it would take up too much space. And so we will leave this province and tell you about some islands that also form part of the Indies; and we will begin with the two islands called Male and Female.



EIGHT

The Arabian Sea

Male Island lies out in the open sea a good 500 miles south of Kesh-Makran. Its inhabitants are baptized Christians and follow the faith and customs of the Old Testament. For I assure you that when a man's wife is pregnant he does not touch her again till she has given birth; and after she has given birth he goes without touching her for another forty days. But from the fortieth day onwards he touches her as much as he likes. Even so, let me tell you that neither the wives nor any other women live on this island; instead they all live on the other island, which is called Female Island. And you should know that the men of Male Island go over to Female Island and stay there for three months, namely March, April and May. For these three months the men go over to the other island to stay with their wives; during these three months they take their pleasure with them; and when the three months are up they go back to their own island to earn their living for the other nine months of the year.

I can also tell you that very fine ambergris of high quality and great beauty is produced on this island. The people live on rice, milk and meat. They are very good fishermen, for let me tell you that large quantities of fine fish are caught in the sea around this island. In fact the catch is so huge

that they have a great quantity dried so as to have plenty to eat all year round, and still they have some left to sell to others.

They have no lord except for a bishop who in turn is subject to the archbishop of Socotra. They have their own language. And you should know that it is about thirty miles from this island to the island where their wives live. According to their own account, this is the reason why they do not stay all year round with their wives: if they were to stay with them all year round, they could not live. The mothers nurse their children on their own island. Yet the fact is that the moment a boy reaches the age of fourteen¹ his mother sends him to his father on Male Island. And this is the custom and practice of these two islands, as you have heard. When the men come to the women's island they sow corn, which the women then tend and reap; the women also gather the many kinds of fruit that grow on that island. But the wives, in truth, do nothing but rear their children.

Now we have given you the full particulars of this matter. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave these two islands and tell you about the island of Socotra.

Setting out from these two islands, a voyage of about 500 miles towards the south brings you to the island of Socotra. And you should know that the inhabitants of this island are baptized Christians and have an archbishop.

Ambergris is produced here in large quantities. [It is found in the bellies](#) of whales and cachalots, which are the two biggest fish that exist in the sea. And we will tell you how whales are caught in these parts. The whale fishers have a lot of tuna fish, which they catch purely for the purpose stated below. The tuna is very fat, and they cut it into pieces and put it in big jars or pots, adding salt to make a good amount of brine. This done, twelve or so men take a small ship, load it with this fish and all the brine or salt broth it has produced, and put out to sea. They also have some scraps of rags or other cast-offs, and they tie them in a bundle and soak them in this brine, which is very greasy. Then they attach these bundles to the little ship with a rope and throw them in the water, after which they hoist sail and cruise about all day on the sea. Wherever they go the fat from the brine

leaves a kind of trail on the water, visible by virtue of its oiliness. And if it happens that they pass the haunt of a whale, or if the whale chances to get a whiff of tuna fat by crossing the little ship's wake, it will set off in pursuit by following the scent of the tuna for as much as 100 miles or whatever distance the little ship with the tuna has gone. And it does this out of a craving to catch up with the tuna. When it has drawn near enough to the little ship for the men to see it, they throw it two or three chunks of tuna. And the moment it has eaten them it becomes intoxicated, just as a man gets drunk on wine. Then some of the men jump on its back carrying an iron pole, barbed at one end so that once driven in it cannot be pulled out. One of them holds the pole over the whale's head while another strikes the pole with a wooden mallet, instantly driving it all the way into the whale's head. For the whale in its drunken stupor barely feels the men standing on its back, so they can do what they like. A thick rope about 300 paces long is tied to the top of the pole, and at every fifty paces along the rope a barrel and a plank are fastened. A flag is fixed to the top of the barrel, and on the bottom is a counterweight that prevents the barrel from rolling over and so keeps the flag upright. The end of the rope is tied to a boat that they have with them. This boat is manned by a few of the whalers, so that when the whale feels itself wounded and turns to flee, the men who climbed on its back to drive in the pole and are now left in the water can swim to the boat and climb aboard. Then one of the barrels with a flag is thrown into the water and fifty paces of rope are paid out. And when the whale dives and flees, the boat to which the rope is fastened is towed along after it. If the whale seems to be pulling downwards too strongly another barrel with another flag is thrown overboard, because the whale cannot drag the barrels underwater. And in time the whale becomes so exhausted from towing them along that it succumbs to its wound and dies. The little ship goes after it by following the flags, and when it is dead they haul it up to the ship and tow it to their island or a nearby one, where they sell it. **From the belly they extract** ambergris, and from the head they draw off many casks of oil. **They can make as much** as a thousand pounds profit from a single one. And this is how they catch whales.

On this island they also have a great deal of very beautiful cotton cloth and plenty of other wares, notably large quantities of fat, savoury salt fish. They live on rice, meat and milk, for they have no other grain but rice. They go stark naked after the fashion of the other Indian idolaters. I can also tell you that many ships packed with merchants visit this island, bringing large cargoes of goods for sale and leaving with the products of the island to sell on at a handsome profit. And you should know that all the ships and merchants bound for Aden call at this island.

This island's archbishop has no connection with the pope at Rome; instead I can tell you he is subject to an archbishop who lives at Baghdad. This archbishop of Baghdad sends an archbishop² to this island; and he also sends many others to different parts of the world, just as the pope does. These clergy and prelates owe obedience not to the Church of Rome but to this great prelate of Baghdad whom they have as their pope.

I can also tell you that many pirates put in at this island at the end of a cruise to pitch camp and sell their booty. And I assure you they find a ready market, for the Christians of the island know that all these goods have been stolen from idolaters and Saracens and not from Christians, and so they buy them all up.

You should also know that when the archbishop of this island of Socotra dies his successor must be sent from Baghdad; they would never accept an archbishop here in any other way. Moreover, let me tell you that the Christians of this island are the most skilled enchanters in the world. It is true that the archbishop does not approve of these enchantments and berates and admonishes them for the practice. But he gets nowhere, because they reply that their ancestors did these things in the past and so they wish to continue doing them. The archbishop cannot force them to change their ways, so he lives with it as best he can since there is nothing he can do about it. And so the Christians of this island practise their sorcery to their hearts' content. Let me tell you something about the spells they cast; for you should be in no doubt that these enchanters make many strange things happen and are able to achieve almost anything they desire. If a pirate ship has done some harm to the islanders, she will be prevented from leaving

until full restitution has been made. She may be under full sail before a favourable wind and be well underway, but they will conjure up a contrary wind and make her turn back. Moreover, I can tell you that they can make the wind blow from whichever direction they please. They can calm the sea at will, or raise a raging storm and a howling gale. They are masters of many other marvellous enchantments, but it is best not to speak of them in this book; for if people heard about the effects produced by these enchantments they might become all too curious. So let us leave it at that and say no more about them.

There is nothing else on this island worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about another thing lying ahead; we will tell you about the island of Madagascar.³

Madagascar is an island lying to the south about 1,000 miles from Socotra. The people are Saracens who worship Muhammad. They have four *sheiks* – that is to say, four male elders – and these four elders exercise authority over the whole island. And you should know that this is one of the biggest and most notable islands in the whole world, for I assure you it is reputed to measure some 4,000 miles in circumference.

The people live by trade and crafts. I can tell you for a fact that more elephants are bred on this island than in any other province. And you should know that more elephant tusks are bought and sold in this island and the island of Zanzibar⁴ than in the rest of the world put together. You should also know that nothing is eaten on this island but camel meat.⁵ In fact let me tell you that the number of camels slaughtered every day is so great that no one would credit it without seeing it with his own eyes. And they say that camel meat is tastier and more wholesome than any other kind, which is why they are given to eating it every day of the year.

You should also know that there are red sandalwood trees on this island, as big as the trees of our country. These trees would be worth a small fortune anywhere else, but here they have entire forests of them as we have of other wild trees. They have plenty of ambergris because whales abound in these seas, and cachalots are also plentiful. And since they catch these

whales and cachalots in large numbers they have large quantities of ambergris; for as you know, it is the whale that produces ambergris.

They have leopards and lynxes and lions beyond count, as well as many other animals such as stags, roe deer, fallow deer and the like. They have ample stocks of game birds of many kinds. There are also many giant ostriches. The sheer diversity of birds quite different from ours is truly astonishing.

They produce a good deal of merchandise. And many ships come here laden with wares, including gold and silk fabrics of various types and many other things that we will not go into here, all of which are sold and exchanged for the island's products. The merchants arrive with their ships fully laden and unload and sell everything; then they load them with the island's wares, and when they have a full cargo they sail away. For I assure you the merchants do very well here and make a handsome profit.

I can also tell you that ships cannot sail further south to the islands that lie there but only as far as this island and Zanzibar, because the current there flows so strongly southward that they would have little chance of returning. For this reason ships do not go there. I will tell you, too, that ships make the voyage from Maabar to this island in twenty days but are hard pressed to make the return voyage to Maabar in three months; this is because the current constantly flows south, and it has always been the case that it never runs in any direction other than southward. And you may also take my word for it that these other islands that are scattered in large numbers to the south, where the ships never go willingly on account of the current that flows in that region, are reportedly inhabited by gryphon birds which make their appearance here at certain seasons of the year. Even so, you should know that they bear no resemblance to the image we have of them in our part of the world or the way we portray them; that is to say, we suppose them to be half bird and half lion, but according to the reports of those who have seen them it is not true that they are half bird and half lion. On the contrary, I can tell you that those who have seen them say they have the form of an eagle in every regard – only, they add, they are of gargantuan size. I will tell you some of the things that those who have seen this bird say

about it, and then I will tell you what I saw of it myself. They say it is so big and so strong that it can pounce on an elephant and carry it off far up into the sky; then it lets go and the elephant plunges to the ground and is pulverized, whereupon the gryphon bird perches on the carcass and feeds at leisure. Those who have seen them also say that they have a wingspan of thirty paces and their wing-feathers are twelve paces long and extremely thick in proportion to their length. As for what I saw of them, I will tell you later on because that way it will fit in better with the plan of our book.

Now I have told you what people who have seen the gryphon birds say about them. And the fact is that the Great Khan sent an embassy to these islands to learn about them, and also to negotiate the release of an agent of his who had been taken prisoner. And these envoys, together with the man who had been captured, told the Great Khan many weird and wonderful things about these strange islands. I can also tell you for a fact that these envoys brought the Great Khan the tusks of a wild boar of monstrous size. Moreover, let me tell you that the emperor had one of them weighed, and it weighed fourteen pounds; so you can imagine the size of the boar that had such tusks.⁶ And I can tell you that some of these boars are reportedly as big as buffaloes. There are also numerous giraffes and wild asses, too. Altogether their beasts and birds are so different from ours that it is a wonder to hear tell of them and an even greater wonder to see them.

I want to go back to the gryphon bird for a moment. The inhabitants of these islands call them *rukhs* and do not have any other name for them. They have no idea what a gryphon might be. But I firmly believe, on account of the sheer size they attribute to this bird, that it is a gryphon.

Now we have told you about many of the affairs and customs of the people of this island. As there is nothing else worth relating, we will move on and tell you about the island of Zanzibar so that you may hear about it.

Zanzibar is an exceptionally large and fine island. It is at least 2,000 miles in circumference. The people are all idolaters, they have their own king and language, and they pay tribute to no one. They are big and burly, though it is true that their height is not proportionate to their girth. For I assure you

they are so stocky and so large-limbed that they look like giants. And let me add that they are enormously strong, so much so that one of them can carry as much as four ordinary men. And no wonder; for I can tell you that they eat enough food for five. They are entirely black and go naked apart from covering their private parts. Their hair is so curly that wetting it does little to straighten it out. They have such big mouths and such flat noses and such large lips and eyes that they are a very horrible sight. Anyone who saw them in another country would say that they were devils.

Elephants are common here, and they do a brisk trade in their tusks. They also have lions of a different kind than those found elsewhere. They also have many lynxes, and leopards thrive here, too. What else shall I tell you? All their animals are different from all the others in the world. Moreover, I can tell you that all their sheep are of the same type and the same colour, for they are all white with black heads. And you will not find a single ram or ewe on the entire island that is not of the type I have described to you. There are also many giraffes, which are very beautiful creatures to look at. I will describe their appearance for you. Now you should know that the giraffe's body is short and its hindquarters rather low, because she has little hind legs; but her forelegs and neck are very long, so that her head is fully three paces above the ground. She has a small head and does no harm to anyone. As to colour she is dappled red and white all over, and this is a very beautiful thing to see. Let me also tell you another thing I had forgotten about the elephant. You should know that when a bull elephant wants to mate with a female elephant, he makes a hollow in the ground big enough to lay the female elephant inside on her back like a woman – this is because her sexual organs are situated very near her belly – after which the bull elephant mounts her like a man.

I can also tell you that the women of this island are very ugly to look at, for they have huge mouths, large eyes and large noses. Their breasts are four times as big as other women's. They are a truly hideous sight.

They live on rice, meat, milk and dates. They have no grape wine, but they make a wine from rice and sugar and spices that is very drinkable. A huge volume of trade is transacted here, for merchants arrive in large

numbers on numerous ships bringing a large variety of goods, all of which they sell in these islands before carrying away plenty of the island's products; above all they leave with great numbers of elephant tusks, which are very plentiful here. I can also tell you that they have a good deal of ambergris, since whales are caught here in great numbers.

You should also know that the men of this island are excellent warriors and fight fiercely in battle, for they are brave and not afraid to die. They have no horses but fight on camels and elephants. For I can tell you that they build castles on the elephants' backs and cover them thoroughly; then between sixteen and twenty men climb up into them carrying lances, swords and stones. These battles fought on elephants are almighty affairs. They have no arms but leather shields, lances and swords, and they kill one another with great gusto. I will tell you another thing, too. For you should know that when they want to send the elephants into battle, they give them a generous amount of wine to drink – that is, their kind of wine. They do this because an elephant that has drunk some of this beverage grows more ferocious and more spirited and is a great deal more effective in battle.

Now we have told you a lot of the things there are to say about this island, its people, its animals and its merchandise. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about the great province of Abyssinia.⁷ But first we will tell you one more thing about India. You may take it as read that we have only told you about the most illustrious provinces and realms and islands of India; for there is not a man in the world who could tell the truth about all the islands of India. But I have told you about all the best of them – the flower of all India. For you should know that a large proportion of all the other islands of India that I have not mentioned to you are subject to those I have told you about. And you may take my word for it that in the Indian Ocean there are 12,700 islands, both inhabited and uninhabited, as shown on the maps and writings of the seasoned sailors who ply these waters.

So we will now leave Greater India, which extends from Maabar as far as Kesh-Makran and comprises thirteen major kingdoms, of which we have described ten. Lesser India stretches from Champa to Motupalli and

comprises eight major kingdoms. And you should understand throughout that I am speaking only of the kingdoms on the mainland and not those on the islands, which comprise a vast number of kingdoms. Now we will tell you about Middle India, which is called Abyssinia.

Now you should know that Abyssinia is a very large province that forms Middle India. You should also know that the chief king of the whole province is Christian and all the other kings of the province are subject to him. There are six of them, three Christians and three Saracens.

The Christians of this province have three marks on their faces: one from the forehead to halfway down the nose and one on either cheek. These marks are branded on them during childhood with a hot iron. And this is their baptism; for these marks I have told you about are made after they have been baptized in water, as a token of rank, a conclusion of the baptism, and an aid to good health. [I can also tell you that there are Jews in these parts](#); they have two marks, one on either cheek. And the Saracens have one mark only, namely the one from the forehead to halfway down the nose.

The chief king lives in the centre of the province; the Saracens live over towards Aden. After Messer St Thomas⁸ the Apostle [had preached in the kingdom](#) of Nubia and had converted it to Christianity, he came to this province and made many converts [through his preaching and his miracles](#). Afterwards he went on to Maabar, where he was killed and where his body lies just as we have told you earlier in our book.

You should also know that this province of Abyssinia has many accomplished warriors and horsemen, as well as plenty of horses. And they are in great need of them, because you should know that they are at war with the sultan of Aden and the people of Nubia and many others. [As they are constantly](#) sharpening their skills they are deemed the best warriors in all the provinces of India. And on this subject, I will tell you a fine story concerning events in the year 1288 from the incarnation of Christ.

The fact is that this king who is lord of the whole province of Abyssinia, being a Christian, declared that he wanted to go on pilgrimage to worship at the sepulchre of Christ in Jerusalem. His barons warned him that it would

be too dangerous for him to go there and advised him to send a bishop or some other great prelate in his place. The king accepted the barons' advice. So he sent for a bishop, a man who led a very holy life, and told him that he wanted him to go on his behalf all the way to Jerusalem to worship at the sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bishop replied that he would do his bidding, as he was his liege lord. The king told him to get ready and to leave as soon as possible.

What else shall I tell you? The bishop got underway, taking leave of the king and getting everything ready and setting out on the road in the manner of a pilgrim with a great deal of pomp. He journeyed both by land and by sea until he arrived in Jerusalem, where he went straight to the sepulchre and fell on his knees, worshipping it with all the honour and reverence that a Christian ought to pay to such an exalted and noble thing as this sepulchre. He also made bountiful offerings there on behalf of the king who had sent him. And when like the wise man he was the bishop had prudently and discreetly done everything he had come for, he set out again on the road with his retinue.

He journeyed on until he came to Aden. Now you should know that the people of that kingdom detest Christians; they cannot bear to see a single one of them and loathe them as their mortal enemies. And when the sultan of Aden heard that this bishop was a Christian and an emissary of the great king of Abyssinia, he had him seized on the spot and demanded to know if he was a Christian. The bishop replied that he certainly was a Christian. And the sultan told him that if he did not accept the faith of Muhammad he would be shamed and disgraced. The bishop replied that he would sooner be killed than comply and renounce his faith.

When the sultan heard the bishop's answer he despised him, and he ordered him to be circumcised. So the bishop was seized by many men and circumcised in the Saracen fashion. When they had finished, the sultan told him that he had been humiliated in this way to scorn and dishonour the king his master. And with these words he let him go. The bishop was deeply grieved at the shame he had suffered, but he comforted himself with one thought; for he said to himself that he had suffered it for the sake of the

Christian faith and that the Lord God would reward his soul in the next world.

But why make a long story of it? You may rest assured that when the bishop was recovered and able to ride, he set out on the road with his whole retinue and journeyed on by land and sea until he came to Abyssinia and his lord the king. When the king saw him he welcomed him with joy and honour, then asked him for news of the sepulchre. The bishop gave him a faithful description of it, and the king held it to be a very holy thing and placed great faith in it. And when the bishop had given him all the facts about the sepulchre, he told him how the sultan of Aden had had him circumcised to scorn and dishonour him. When the king had heard how his bishop had been so humiliated in order to scorn him, he was so angry that he almost died of grief. In a voice loud enough that all those about him could clearly hear, he vowed that he would never again wear his crown or rule his land unless he exacted such vengeance that the whole world would speak of it.

What else shall I tell you? You may depend on it that the king mustered an immense force of horsemen and foot soldiers; and he also took with him a great troop of elephants carrying strongly fortified castles manned by no fewer than twenty men apiece.⁹ When his whole force was arrayed, he set off and marched on the kingdom of Aden. And the kings of that province of Aden marched out with an immense force of Saracen horsemen and foot soldiers and occupied the fortified frontier passes to defend their land and repel the invasion. Now it happened that the king of Abyssinia and his troops arrived at one of these fortified passes to find the enemy waiting in force. And so the fiercest and bloodiest battle began. But the upshot was that the Saracen kings – there were three of them – could not withstand the onslaught of the king of Abyssinia because of the strength of his troops, both in number and in ability. For Christians are far superior to Saracens. So the Saracens were forced to retreat, and the Christian king and his men entered the kingdom of Aden. But you should know that vast numbers of Saracens were killed at that pass.

What else shall I tell you? You may take my word for it that when the king of Abyssinia and his men had advanced into the kingdom of Aden, the Saracens barred their way at three or four fortified passes; but all their efforts to repel them were in vain and they were killed in huge numbers. Now let me tell you that when the king of the Christians had remained in his enemy's land for about a month, laying waste to great swathes of it and killing enormous numbers of Saracens, he declared that the outrage inflicted on his bishop had been fully avenged and they could return with honour to their own country. In any case the fact was that he could do no further damage to the enemy, because he would have had to breach passes so strongly fortified that a few defenders could have inflicted heavy losses on his forces. So for this reason they withdrew from the kingdom of Aden and set out on their way, never resting until they had reached their own land of Abyssinia.

Now you have heard how the bishop well and truly avenged himself on these Saracen dogs; for the number of the dead was almost beyond counting, and large swathes of land were also ravaged and laid waste. And no wonder; for it is not fitting that Saracen dogs should lord it over Christians. And now that we have told you about this, we will move on and tell you some other things about the same province of Abyssinia.

Now you may take my word for it that this province is very rich in all the means of life. The people live on rice, [wheat](#), milk and sesame. They have elephants, though these are not native to the country but rather imported from the islands of the other Indies. But giraffes are certainly native and are very plentiful. Lions, leopards and lynxes abound, as well as a multitude of other animals unlike those of our countries. Wild asses also breed well here. They have many kinds of birds that bear no resemblance to those found elsewhere. They have the most beautiful hens in the world. They have huge ostriches no smaller than donkeys. They also have many other animals that we will not tell you about here, since it would take too long to go through them all. Nevertheless you may depend on it that they have plenty of game, both beasts and birds. They have many beautiful parrots. They have monkeys of various kinds. They have Paul cats and other baboons of such

singular appearance that some of them almost look as if they have human faces.

Now we will stop telling you about this kind of thing and move on to the province of Aden. But before that, we will tell you one more thing about this same province of Abyssinia. For you may take my word for it that there are many cities and towns in this province of Abyssinia, and many merchants who live by trade.¹⁰ Beautiful cotton and buckram cloths are woven here in large quantities. There are plenty more things besides, but they are not subjects for our book. So we will go ahead and tell you about Aden.

Since we have told you about the province of Abyssinia we will also tell you about the province of Aden, as you will hear.

Now you should know that there is a lord in this province of Aden who is called sultan of Aden. The people are all Saracens who worship Muhammad and despise Christians. There are many cities and towns. Within Aden is the port to which all the ships from India come with their merchandise; and crowds of merchants gather here. In this port the merchants transfer the goods into other, smaller ships that sail along a river¹¹ for some seven days. At the end of this seven-day journey they unload the goods from the ships, pack them on camels, and carry them onwards for thirty days or so. After this thirty-day journey they come to the river of Alexandria, [which is called the Nile](#), and down this river the merchandise is easily transported into Alexandria itself. And by these means, via this route from Aden, the Saracens of Alexandria get their pepper and spices and precious wares; there is no other way for these things to reach Alexandria [that is as reliable and short](#).

Ships also set sail from this port of Aden for the islands of the Indies, carrying many merchants and a great deal of merchandise. And I can also tell you that from this port the merchants export to India large numbers of beautiful Arab chargers, which are highly prized and earn them a handsome profit; for I would have you know that the merchants sell a good horse in India for at least 100 silver marks. I assure you that the sultan of Aden

garners huge revenues and great wealth from the hefty duty he levies on ships and merchants coming and going in his country. And you may take my word for it that for this reason I have given you – on account of the heavy duties he receives from the merchants who enter his territories – he is one of the richest kings in the world.

Concerning this sultan, I will also tell you about something he did that inflicted a heavy blow on Christians. For you may take my word for it that when the sultan of Egypt attacked the city of Acre and took it at such great cost to the Christians, this sultan of Aden contributed to his forces at least 30,000 horsemen and 40,000 camels; the result was a tremendous victory for the Saracens and a terrible loss for the Christians. And he was motivated more by the malice he harboured against Christians than by any goodwill he bore the sultan of Egypt or any love he felt for him.

[We would also have you know](#) that the ships of Aden, Hormuz, Kish and elsewhere that sail on the Indian Ocean are frequently wrecked owing to their frailty. If the sea there was as wild and rough as in our parts and as often buffeted by storms, no ship would ever complete its voyage but would founder along the way. So what do the merchants and those who sail in these ships do? They take with them many leather sacks; and when they feel the weather and the sea turning stormy they fill these sacks with any pearls and precious stones they have, with their clothes or personal belongings, and with enough food for themselves, then lash them all together to form a raft or float so that if the ship sinks under the storm-tossed sea they all remain behind on the sacks. After that they are driven towards the shore each day by the prevailing winds, no matter how far out they may have been – even if they were 200 miles from land. While they are at sea on these sacks, every time they want to eat or drink they take supplies from the sacks, which they afterwards inflate by blowing. And in this way they escape, though the ships are lost along with the bulkier goods.

Now we will take our leave of this sultan and tell you about a very large city that belongs to the province of Aden but has a petty ruler of its own. It lies towards the north-west and is called Shihir.¹²

Shihr is a very large city lying towards the north-west, 400 miles from the port of Aden.¹³ This city has a count who maintains firm justice in his land. He has jurisdiction over several cities and towns, though the fact is that he is subject to the sultan of Aden. The people are Saracens who worship Muhammad. This city has an excellent port; for I can tell you for a fact that many ships and many merchants arrive here from India bringing many goods. And from this city the ships and merchants return to India with many goods. And you may depend on it that from this city the merchants export to India many fine chargers and packhorses of great worth and price, from which the merchants profit handsomely and prosper accordingly.

This province produces a great deal of fine white incense. Dates also grow profusely here. They have no grain except rice, and not much of that; but I can tell you that corn is imported from other countries at a big profit to the merchants. They have huge stocks of fish and in particular big tuna fish; there is such a surfeit of them here that you can get two large ones for a Venetian groat. They live on rice, meat and fish. They have no grape wine but make a wine from sugar, rice and dates. And I will tell you another thing, too. You may take my word for it that they have sheep with no ears or even earholes; where the ears ought to be they instead have little horns. They are small, pretty creatures. And I will tell you something else that will strike you as truly remarkable. You may take my word for it that their livestock – namely sheep, oxen, camels and ponies – eat fish. They are reduced to this diet because there is no grass in the entire country or surrounding region, which is the driest place on earth. You should know that the fish on which these animals feed are very small and are caught in March, April and May in quite staggering quantities. I can tell you that they dry them and store them in their houses, then feed them to their livestock all year round. And let me tell you that the animals also eat them alive as soon as they are taken from the water. As well as these they have fine big fish here, very plentiful and very cheap. And I can tell you that they make biscuits out of fish. They slice a pound or so of fish into little slivers and dry it in the sun, then store it in their houses and eat it all year round like biscuit. As for the incense I told you about that grows here in such

profusion, the lord buys it for ten gold bezants a cantar and sells it on to foreign merchants and others for forty bezants a cantar. [The lord of Shihr](#) does this on behalf of the sultan of the province of Aden. For the sultan of Aden has incense bought up throughout his dominions at ten bezants and afterwards sold at forty, as we have said; and from this he obtains an immense profit and revenue.

There is nothing else worth mentioning in this city, so we will take our leave of it and tell you about a city called Dhofar.¹⁴

Dhofar is a beautiful city, large and splendid, lying 500 miles north-west of Shihr.¹⁵ Here, too, the people are Saracens and worship Muhammad. They are ruled by a count and are also subject to the sultan of Aden. So you understand that this city also belongs to the province of Aden. The city stands on the sea and has an excellent port where many ships come and go carrying numerous merchants and incredible quantities of merchandise. And you may take my word for it that many fine chargers from Arabia and other countries are brought here and earn the merchants a handsome profit and a healthy return. You should also know that this city has authority over several other cities and many towns. I can further tell you that good quality incense grows profusely here; and I will explain how it grows. I assure you that the trees are by no means large but resemble small firs. Gashes are made with knives at several points, and the incense oozes out of them. It also emanates from the tree itself without any cuts being made, on account of the intense heat in these parts. I can also tell you that many of the finest Arab chargers that are brought to this city from Arabia are subsequently shipped to India, bringing the merchants a healthy return and handsome profits. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about the gulf of Qalhat.¹⁶

Qalhat is a large city lying inside the gulf of the same name, about 600 miles north-west of Dhofar. It is a splendid city built on the shore. The people are Saracens who worship Muhammad. They are subject to Hormuz; and whenever the *malik* of Hormuz is at war with neighbours more

powerful than himself he takes refuge in this city, because it is so strongly built and situated that once inside he is not afraid of anyone. Corn is not grown here but is imported from elsewhere, for traders bring it in by ship. This city has an excellent port. And I can tell you for a fact that many heavily laden ships arrive here from India. They find a ready market for their wares, because from here the spices and other goods are carried to many cities and towns in the interior. I can also tell you that many fine chargers are transported to India from this city, earning the merchants handsome profits. For you should know that the number of superb horses shipped to India from this place and the others I have mentioned is very great – so great as to be almost past reckoning.

Let me further tell you that this city stands at the mouth or entrance of the gulf of Qalhat, so that no ship can enter or leave without its warrant. The *malik* of this city has often taken advantage of this to exert a powerful influence over the sultan of Kerman, to whom he is subject. For sometimes, when the sultan slaps a tax on the *malik* of Hormuz or one of his brothers which they refuse to pay, he dispatches an army to force them to comply; they then take to the ships and leave Hormuz for this city of Qahlat, where they stay, preventing any ships from passing, until the losses suffered by the sultan of Kerman mount so high that he finds it convenient to make peace with the *malik* of Hormuz by moderating his demands for money. I can also tell you that the *malik* of Hormuz possesses a castle that is even stronger than this city and commands the gulf and the sea even more effectively.

You may also take my word for it that the people of this country live on dates and salt fish, both of which they have in great plenty. Admittedly, though, there are some among them, men of wealth and station, who unquestionably have a better and more varied diet.

Now we have told you about this city of Qalhat and about its gulf and its affairs. So we will move on and tell you about Hormuz. For let me tell you that if you set out from Qalhat and head 300 miles to the north-north-west you will come to the city of Hormuz. I can also tell you that if you set out from Qalhat and travel 500 miles to the west-north-west you will reach Kish. But let us leave Kish aside and speak of Hormuz.

Hormuz is a large and splendid city by the sea. It has a *malik* and has authority over several cities and towns. The people are Saracens who worship Muhammad. The climate is scorching, and because of the intense heat their houses are fitted with ventilators to catch the wind. The ventilators are set to face the direction from which the wind blows, and the breeze is directed into the house. They do this because they cannot bear the terrible heat in this place. But we will tell you no more about it because we told you about it earlier in our book; the same goes for Kish and Kerman. Because we set out by a different route it is fitting to return to this point; but as I just said, since we have already given you a full account of this country we will move on and tell you about Turkestan, as you will clearly hear.



NINE

Northern Regions and Tartar Wars

There is a king in Turkestan called Qaidu who is a nephew of the Great Khan's, for he was the son of the son of Chagatai, who was the Great Khan's brother-german. He possesses many cities and towns and is a very great lord. He is a Tartar, and his people are also Tartars and are good warriors. And no wonder; for they are all hardened to war. In fact this Qaidu is never at peace with the Great Khan but is always at war with him. You should also know that Turkestan is found to the north-west after leaving this route from Hormuz that we have told you about. It lies beyond the river Gihon and stretches towards the north as far as the dominions of the Great Khan.

I can tell you that Qaidu has already fought many battles with the Great Khan's men. And I will explain how the quarrel arose between them. The fact of the matter is that Qaidu was constantly asking the Great Khan for his share of the conquests they had made, especially for parts of the province of Cathay and the province of Manzi. And the Great Khan used to answer that he was perfectly willing to give him his share, as he gave his other sons theirs, so long as he would attend his court and his council whenever he was summoned. The Great Khan also desired Qaidu to be obedient to him, as his other sons and his barons were. On these terms, as you have heard, the

Great Khan said he was willing to give him a share of the conquests they had made. But Qaidu, who did not trust the Great Khan his uncle, refused to go, saying that he was willing to be obedient wherever he might be but that he would not attend his court for anything in the world because he was afraid he would have him killed. So this was the argument between the Great Khan and Qaidu, and from it sprang a terrible war that saw them fight many fierce battles. And let me tell you that all year long the Great Khan kept his armies stationed all round Qaidu's dominions, to prevent Qaidu and his men from doing any harm to his lands or his men. But for all the Great Khan's armies, King Qaidu never ceases to make incursions into his territory and has fought several times with the armies that have attacked him. And I can tell you for a fact that if King Qaidu really stretched himself to the limit, he could put into the field at least 100,000 horsemen, all battle-hardened men who are veterans of many wars and battles. I can also tell you that he has with him many barons of the imperial lineage – that is, of the lineage of Genghis Khan. When I say 'of the lineage of Genghis Khan' it is the same as saying 'of the imperial lineage', because he was the founder of the empire, the first to hold the lordship and to conquer half the world. And now we will move on and tell you about some of the battles that King Qaidu fought against the armies of the Great Khan.

First, though, we will tell you about their battle tactics. You should know that every soldier is under orders to carry sixty arrows into battle: thirty smaller ones for piercing and thirty larger ones with broad heads, which they use for shooting at close quarters, aiming for the face and arms or cutting through bowstrings and inflicting heavy losses. And I can also tell you that when they have shot all their arrows they lay hold of swords and clubs and deal mighty blows with them. Now I have told you how they go into battle, so we will return to the matter at hand.

The fact is that in the year 1266 from the incarnation of Christ this King Qaidu and his cousins, one of whom was named Yesudar, mustered an immense force and attacked two of the Great Khan's barons who were themselves cousins of King Qaidu but held land of the Great Khan. Their names were Chibai and Chiban. They were sons of Chagatai, who was a

baptized Christian and brother-german to the Great Khan Khubilai.¹ What else shall I tell you? Qaidu and his men joined battle with his two cousins, who also had an immense force at their command; altogether, counting both sides, there were easily 100,000 horsemen. The battle was fiercely contested, and many were killed on both sides. But in the end King Qaidu won the day and slaughtered his opponents in huge numbers. Even so, you should know that the two brothers who were cousins of King Qaidu escaped unscathed, for they had good horses that bore them swiftly from the field.

This is how King Qaidu won the battle. The outcome inflated his arrogance and pride, and after he had won this battle in the way you have heard, he returned to his own country and remained at peace for a good two years without raising an army or fighting a battle; nor throughout that time did the Great Khan declare war or send an army against him. Now it happened that at the end of the two years King Qaidu assembled a huge army, a truly tremendous force of cavalry. He knew that a son of the Great Khan called Nomuqan² was at Karakorum, and with him was George, the grandson of Prester John.³ These two barons also had a huge force of cavalry. What else shall I tell you? When he had mustered his full force King Qaidu left his kingdom and set off with the entire army. They rode on their way without meeting with any adventures worthy of note until they drew near to Karakorum, where the two barons were staying with their mighty army. And when these two barons – that is, the Great Khan's son and Prester John's grandson – learned that Qaidu had crossed their borders with such a vast army to make war on them, they displayed no hint of dismay but rather showed their mettle and valour. They made thorough preparations along with all their men, who amounted to more than 60,000 horsemen. And when they were fully prepared they marched out against the enemy. What else shall I tell you? They rode on until they were ten miles from King Qaidu's position and pitched camp there in a proper and orderly fashion. And you should know that King Qaidu was encamped in that same plain with all his men. Both sides rested and readied themselves as best they could for combat.

But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that early in the morning on the third day after the Great Khan's son and Prester John's grandson had arrived, both sides armed themselves and readied themselves as best they could. Neither side had any great advantage, for each had around 60,000 horsemen well armed with bows and arrows, swords, clubs and shields. Each side was drawn up in six squadrons, each containing 10,000 horsemen and each ably led. And when the two sides were drawn up and ready on the field there was nothing left but to wait for the kettledrums to sound; for the Tartars would never dare to commence battle while their lord's drums are still silent, but the moment they sound the fighting begins. They have another custom, too: when they are drawn up ready for the drums to sound and the battle to start they begin to sing and to play very sweetly on their two-stringed instruments;⁴ and they carry on singing and playing and happily passing the time while waiting at every moment for the battle. So in line with this custom, these two armies that were drawn up waiting for battle and the sound of the kettledrums sang and played so well that it was truly wonderful to hear. They carried on for some time in this manner I have described, waiting to hear the drums sound, until at last the drums on both sides began to beat. What else shall I tell you? When the drums began to beat they delayed no more; instantly both sides charged against one another. They set their hands to their bows and the arrows to the string. Now you could see the whole sky thick with arrows like rain. Now you could see many men and horses mortally wounded. Now you could hear such a great clamour and tumult that it would have drowned out God's thunder. No one could have doubted that they were deadly enemies. But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that as long as their arrows lasted, those who were fit and able did not cease to shoot them. For you may well imagine that many of them were dead or mortally wounded; certainly it was a black hour for both armies when this battle commenced, so great was the number of dead on both sides. When all the arrows were spent, they put their bows in their bow cases. Then they grasped their swords and clubs and fell upon one another, and they began dealing out terrible blows with sword and club. So began the most cruel and

savage battle. Now you could see violent blows being given and taken. Now you could see hands and arms hacked off. Now you could see man after man falling dead on the ground; for you may take my word for it that the hand-to-hand combat had barely begun before the entire field was strewn with dead and wounded men. Without a doubt King Qaidu displayed great prowess; were it not for his presence his men would have fled the field more than once and defeat would have followed. But he was so masterful and he rallied his men so strongly that they held their ground with great courage. And on the other side the Great Khan's son and Prester John's grandson also acquitted themselves very well.

What else shall I tell you? You may depend on it that this was one of the cruellest battles ever fought between Tartar armies. The din of the combatants and the clashing of swords and clubs were so terrible that they drowned out God's thunder. And you should have no doubt that those on both sides strove with every fibre of their being to overcome the enemy; they struggled indescribably. But all this striving to vanquish the enemy came to nothing, for I can tell you for a fact that the battle went on till after vespers and still neither army had managed to drive the other from the field. Yet there were so many dead on either side that it was a piteous sight; it was truly a black hour for both sides when that battle began. For many men died, and many women were widowed, and many children were orphaned, and many more women – the mothers and sweethearts of the men who died – were left crying and mourning for the rest of their days. And when the fighting had raged for as long as you have heard, and the sun was already setting, and so many men lay slain, then by necessity the battle had to be broken off. Both armies withdrew to their camps, so exhausted and worn out that there was not a man among them who did not crave rest more than fighting. As night fell, they rested gratefully after the struggles they had endured that day in this great and deadly battle.

By daybreak King Qaidu had received news that the Great Khan was sending a huge army with a vast body of warriors to attack and capture him. He decided it would not be to his advantage to stay put any longer, and in the first light of dawn he and all his men took up their weapons and

mounted their horses and set off for home. When the Great Khan's son and Prester John's grandson saw that King Qaidu and all his people had left, they were so weary and worn out that they did not pursue them but let them go in peace. And King Qaidu and his men rode on without stopping until they came to their own kingdom, which is to say to Samarkand in Turkestan. And there he stayed for some time without waging war.

The Great Khan was furious with this Qaidu for the great damage he was always inflicting on his people and his lands. In fact he said to himself that if he were not his nephew he would never escape from the terrible death he would put him to. But the ties of blood kept him from destroying him and his lands. And in the manner I have described King Qaidu escaped the clutches of the Great Khan.

With that we will leave this matter and go on to tell you about a great marvel concerning King Qaidu's daughter, so that you may know all about it.

Now you may take my word for it that King Qaidu had a daughter called Aiyurug,⁵ a Tartar name that means 'Shining Moon' in our language. This young woman was so strong that there was not a young man or squire in the entire kingdom who could overpower her; on the contrary, I can tell you she brought them all to their knees. The king her father wanted to give her a husband, but she would not hear of it and declared that she would never take a husband till she found a nobleman who could subdue her through sheer strength. And the king her father had given her the privilege of marrying as she pleased. **Before going on**, it should be understood that the Tartars observe a certain custom, namely that if a king, prince or any other nobleman wants to take a wife, he does not look for a noblewoman or someone of equal rank to himself but takes a wife purely because she is pretty and buxom, regardless of whether she is noble. For they say that no family or lineage takes its name from the woman but from the man alone; so a man is never called 'son of Bertha' or 'son of Mary' but rather 'son of

Peter' or 'son of Martin'. And this is why in choosing a wife they take no account of her nobility but only of her charm and beauty.

When the king's daughter received the deed and blessing of her father to marry according to her desires, she was overjoyed. She had it proclaimed in various parts of the world that, if any young nobleman who wanted to come and try his strength with her succeeded in subduing her by sheer force, she would take him as her husband. As news of this offer spread through many lands and kingdoms, I assure you that many gentlemen arrived from many parts and were tested against her. The trial was made in the way I will now tell you. The king and a great crowd of men and women gathered in the principal pavilion of the palace.⁶ Then the king's daughter entered wearing an exquisitely embroidered sendal tunic and went to the centre of the room. After her came the young man, also wearing a sendal tunic. This was the bargain: if the young man could so far overpower the king's daughter that he could throw her to the ground, he would have her as his wife; but if she overpowered him, he would forfeit 100 horses to her. In this way the young woman had won more than 10,000 horses from her suitors, for she could find no squire or young man of any rank whom she did not overwhelm. And no wonder; for she was so well built in every limb and so tall and big-boned that she was not far from being a giantess.

Now it happened around the year 1280 from the incarnation of Christ that a rich king's son, a very handsome youth, arrived here. He came attended by a very fine company and leading 1,000 very beautiful horses to try his strength with the young woman. King Qaidu was delighted; for he was all in favour of this man marrying his daughter, knowing as he did that he was a son of the king of Pumar.⁷ In fact I can tell you that King Qaidu privately urged his daughter to let herself be defeated. But his daughter answered that she would not do so for anything in the world.

What else shall I tell you? You should know that one day the king and queen and a host of men and women were assembled in the great hall. Then in came the king's daughter and the king's son, both so handsome and fetching that it was wonderful to see them. And I assure you that this youth was so robust and vigorous that he came across no one who could match

him in strength. When the young woman and the young man were in the centre of the hall surrounded by the great crowd I have mentioned, it was agreed that in the event of his defeat the young man would forfeit the thousand horses that he had brought especially for this contest. And when this agreement had been made the girl and the youth came to grips. All the onlookers said among themselves that they hoped the youth would win and become the husband of the king's daughter; this, too, was the hope of the king and queen. But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that when the two young people had come to grips they wrestled one another this way and that; but the upshot was that the king's daughter overpowered the youth and threw him to the palace floor. And this is how the king's son was defeated and lost his thousand horses. Such was his grief and shame that when he was back on his feet he did not linger but left the moment he could with his whole company and returned to his father, thoroughly mortified by this experience of being beaten by a girl. Moreover, I can tell you that there was not a single person in the hall who did not share his grief.

I can also tell you that King Qaidu took this daughter who defeated the king's son into many battles, and in all the action he had no knight more valiant than she. For I assure you that many a time this young woman plunged into the midst of the enemy, seized a knight by force and carried him off into her own ranks; and this happened very often.

Now we have told you the story of King Qaidu's daughter, so henceforth we will leave this subject and turn to other things. And we will tell you about a great battle between King Qaidu and Arghun, son of Abagha, lord of the Levant, so that you can hear all about it.

Now you should know that Abagha, the lord of the Levant, ruled over many provinces and territories and his lands bordered those of King Qaidu; this was in the vicinity of the Solitary Tree, which is called 'the Dry Tree' in the Book of Alexander. And in order to protect his people and lands from attack by King Qaidu and his men, Abagha sent his son Arghun⁸ with an enormous force of cavalry to the region of the Dry Tree as far as the river

Gihon. And there he stayed with his army, guarding the land from being ravaged by King Qaidu's men.

In this way that you have heard, Arghun and his men stayed in this plain of the Dry Tree, keeping a close guard over the many cities and towns of the surrounding region. Now it happened that King Qaidu mustered a great force of cavalry and placed it under the command of his brother Baraq,⁹ who was a very shrewd and astute man. And Qaidu told him that he wanted him to attack Arghun. Baraq replied that he would carry out his orders and would do everything in his power to inflict injury on Arghun and his men. And with these words Baraq set out with his whole force, amounting to a positively huge number of men, and rode for many days without meeting with any adventures of note until they came to the river Gihon and found themselves within ten miles of Arghun's position.

What else shall I tell you? When Arghun heard that Baraq had arrived with a great army, he and his men made thorough preparations. Not more than three days passed before the two armies stood arrayed and armed on the field of battle;¹⁰ that is, Arghun with his people and Baraq with his. What else shall I tell you? When they were fully prepared and drawn up, the kettledrums began to beat. Then they made no further delay but straight away charged one against the other. Now you could see volleys of arrows flying back and forth until they filled the sky like rain. And when both armies had shot away all their arrows and many men and horses lay dead, they grasped their swords and clubs and flew at one another; then the most cruel and savage battle began. Hands and arms were cut off, horses were killed, and atrocious deeds were committed. The tumult and uproar were so loud that they drowned out God's thunder. And I can tell you that within a few hours the ground was completely covered with men dead and mortally wounded. But why should I go on at such length? You may take my word for it that Baraq and his men could not withstand the onslaught of Arghun. He fell back with his forces and retreated across the river. And Arghun and his men pursued them for part of the way and killed many of them.

This battle ended in the way you have heard, with Arghun victorious. And since I have begun speaking of Arghun I will give you a full account of

him, his capture, and how he became lord after the death of his father Abagha.

Now you may take my word for it that shortly after Arghun had defeated Baraq and the army of King Qaidu he heard that his father Abagha was dead. Deeply distressed, he made ready with his whole army and set out to return to his father's court and claim the succession. Yet the fact was that he had a journey of at least forty days to go before he reached it. Now it happened that a brother of Abagha named Ahmad Sultan,¹¹ who had become a Saracen, decided as soon as he heard of his brother Abagha's death that he could take the lordship since Arghun was so far away. So he mustered a huge army and went directly to the court of his brother Abagha, where he seized power and declared himself lord. And I assure you he found such a vast quantity of treasure there that if its value were calculated it would beggar belief. He distributed it to his barons and knights with such largesse that it was truly wonderful. And in light of Ahmad Sultan's great generosity the barons and knights declared that he was a good ruler and that every one of them loved him and wished nothing but the best for him, and they said they would have no other lord but him. In truth Ahmad Sultan ruled very ably and bent himself to winning the people's approval. Yet I must tell you that there was one despicable thing he did for which he was roundly censured by many people: he took all his brother Abagha's wives and kept them for himself.

What else shall I tell you? You should know that he had not been lord for long when he had news that Arghun was approaching with a huge army. He lost no time and betrayed not a hint of dismay but resolutely summoned his barons and his followers. Make no mistake about it, within a week he had got together a huge number of horsemen who were eager to march against Arghun and declared as one that they wanted nothing so much as to kill or capture him and torture him mercilessly.

When he had mustered as many as 60,000 cavalry, Ahmad Sultan set out to meet Arghun and his army. They rode for ten full days without halting, and

at the end of this ten-day ride they heard that Arghun was approaching with a force as large as theirs and was only five days' march away. So Ahmad pitched camp on a beautiful broad plain and declared that he would wait there for Arghun, because it was an excellent place for two armies to join battle. And when the camp had been pitched and everything had been arranged in an orderly fashion, he summoned all his men to assemble and addressed them in the following words:

'Gentlemen, you are well aware that I am the rightful liege lord of everything that belonged to my brother Abagha, because I was born of the same father and it fell to me to conquer all the lands and provinces that we hold. It is true that Arghun is my brother Abagha's son, and some might suggest that the lordship should pass to him. But with all due respect to those who might suggest this, it would not be a just or honourable thing. Since my brother held the lordship for so long, as you know, it is only proper that I should hold it after his death. For during his life I was entitled to half of it, but I graciously left it all to him. Now since the matter stands as I have told you, I appeal to you to defend our rights against Arghun and ensure that the kingdom and the lordship continue to belong to us all. For I give you my word that I only desire the honour and the renown; you may take the profits and the possessions and the dominion throughout our lands and provinces. Now I will say no more, because I know that you are wise men who love justice, and that your actions will bring honour and benefit to us all.'

With that he fell silent and spoke no more. And when the barons and knights and the others who were present had taken in what Ahmad had said, they answered with one voice that they would not fail him so long as they had breath in their bodies and that they would take his side against any man in the world and especially against Arghun. And they told him not to fear, for they would capture Arghun and deliver him into his hands.

In this way that you have heard Ahmad spoke to his people and learned of their goodwill. There was nothing they wanted more than for Arghun and his men to come and join battle. And here we will leave Ahmad and his followers and return to Arghun and his men.

Now you may take my word for it that when Arghun knew for certain that Ahmad was waiting for him on the plain with such a multitude of followers, he was beside himself with fury. But he told himself that to succumb to despondency and show that he dreaded and feared his enemies would do great harm to his cause, because it would demoralize his men. So he resolved to put a brave face on it, and he sent for all his barons and counsellors. When a large crowd of them had assembled in his tent – for he had pitched camp in a very fine spot – he gave the following speech.

‘Dear brothers and friends,’ he said, ‘you know well how tenderly my father loved you. While he lived he looked on you as brothers and sons. And you remember how you used to fight by his side in many great battles and how you helped him to conquer all the lands he held. You know, too, that I am the son of this man who loved you so much. And I myself love you as much as my own life. And so, since what I have told you is the truth, both right and reason demand that you should help me against this man who defies both reason and right and is intent upon doing us so great a wrong as to disinherit us of our lands. Besides, you are well aware that he is not of our faith but has abandoned it to become a Saracen and worship Muhammad. Now think what a worthy thing it would be for a Saracen to lord it over Tartars! So, my dear brothers and friends, for all these reasons we must redouble our courage and determination to do everything necessary to stop this from happening. And I appeal to each one of you to prove your mettle as men and do everything you can and more to fight so bravely that we will win the battle and keep the lordship among ourselves rather than letting it go to Saracens. Each one of you must have faith that we will win the battle, because we have right on our side and our enemies are in the wrong. Now I will say no more to you at this time, except to entreat every man to resolve on doing his best.’ With that he fell silent and spoke no more.

When the barons and knights who were present heard the words that Arghun had spoken so well and wisely, each one said to himself that he would sooner die than fail to do his utmost to win the battle. And while they

all stood silent and speechless, a great baron rose to his feet and spoke as follows.

‘My lord Arghun,’ he said, ‘we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have spoken the truth. So I will answer for all your men who are ready to fight this battle at your side: let us tell you unequivocally that we will not fail you so long as we have breath in our bodies and that we would all rather die than fall short in this battle. And this is why we should be certain of victory: because all the right is on our side and all the wrong is on theirs. And so I counsel and urge that we prepare with all possible speed to go and seek out our enemy. And I call upon all our comrades to perform such feats in this battle that we will make ourselves the talk of the entire world.’

Then this veteran soldier fell silent and spoke no more. What else shall I tell you? You may depend on it that after this speech no one wanted to add anything and everyone agreed with him. And they wanted nothing more than to join battle with their enemies.

The next day Arghun and his men rose early in the morning and set out with renewed spirit to strike at the enemy. They rode till they came to the plain where Ahmad was encamped and pitched their camp in an orderly manner about ten miles from his. And when they had pitched their camp, Arghun picked two of his men whom he trusted implicitly and sent them to his uncle with the message you will hear.

When these two wise and venerable men had their lord’s commission and his leave to go, they straight away took two horses and set out without further ado. They rode directly to the camp and dismounted before Ahmad’s tent, where they found him with a large retinue of barons. They knew him very well, and he them. They greeted him courteously. And Ahmad, wearing a benign expression, said they were welcome and seated them before him in the tent. When they had been there a while one of the two envoys rose to his feet and spoke the following words:

‘Lord Ahmad,’ he said, ‘your nephew Arghun is quite astonished by your actions; for having robbed him of his lordship you are now coming against him to fight him in mortal combat. In no way could this be seen as right;

nor have you behaved in the way a good uncle should behave towards his nephew. Therefore he sends you this message by us: he cordially begs you, as his uncle and the father he thinks of you as, to desist from this course of action and let there be no battle or bloodshed between you. And he assures you that he is willing to treat you with the respect due to an elder and a father and to make you lord and ruler of all his land. Now this is what your nephew says to you and begs of you through us.' With this he fell silent and spoke no more.

When Ahmad Sultan had heard the demands of his nephew Arghun, he replied in the following manner. 'Noble emissaries,' he said, 'what my nephew says is nothing, for the land is mine and not his. For I had as much a part in its conquest as his father did. So you can tell my nephew that I will make him a great lord if he so wishes. And I will give him all the land he needs and treat him as my son and the greatest baron after me. And if this does not meet with his approval, he may be sure that I will do everything that lies in my power to put him to death. Now these are my intentions concerning my nephew, and you will never get any other terms or agreements from me.' With this Ahmad fell silent and spoke no more.

When the messengers had heard what the sultan had to say, they addressed him a second time. 'Is there nothing you have to offer,' they asked, 'other than what you have said already?'

'You will get nothing more,' he replied, 'so long as I live.'

At these words the messengers delayed no longer but set out and rode until they reached their lord's camp. They rode straight into the tent and dismounted, telling Arghun everything they had learned from his uncle. When Arghun heard the message his uncle had sent him, he was so furious that he cried out loud enough for all those nearby to hear clearly: 'Since my uncle is guilty of such a wrong and such an outrage, I cannot live or rule any realm unless I take such great vengeance on him that the whole world will speak of it!' Then he turned to his barons and knights and said: 'Now nothing remains but to strive as soon as possible to put these traitors and

renegades to death. We will attack them in the morning and do our utmost to destroy them.’

What else shall I tell you? Throughout the night they made all the necessary preparations for a pitched battle. And Ahmad Sultan, who had learned from his spies that Arghun was planning to attack in the morning, likewise made thorough preparations and exhorted his followers to make a good account of themselves and act with manly courage.

When morning came Arghun armed himself together with all his men, drew them up in battle array with great skill and judgement, and courteously entreated them to do their best. And when everything was ready they advanced upon the enemy. Sultan Ahmad had done likewise – that is, he had drawn up his men in battle array – and rather than wait for Arghun to come to his camp he deftly and astutely advanced with his whole force. And I can tell you that they had not gone far when they met Arghun and his army. When the two great armies came face to face, they were so eager to come to blows that far from waiting they instantly charged at one another. Now you could see arrows being shot; now you could see them flying so thickly in every direction that they looked like showers from the sky. Then a very cruel and bloody battle began. Now you could see knights unhorsed and thrown to the ground. Now you could hear the shouts and moans and the terrible weeping of those who had fallen to the ground stricken with mortal wounds. And when they had shot all their arrows they grasped their swords and clubs and ran vengefully at one another, trading terrible blows with their sharp swords. Now you could see hands and arms and shoulders and heads being hacked off. The din and clamour were so great that they would have drowned out God’s thunder. For you should know that it was a black hour for both sides when this battle commenced; for many seasoned warriors lost their lives there, and many women were condemned to a life of mourning and tears.

But why make a long story of it? You may depend on it that Arghun acquitted himself very well that day, showing great prowess on the battlefield and setting his men a fine example. But it was all in vain; for

chance and fortune went so against him that disaster and defeat crowded in on him. For when his men could no longer hold out, they broke and fled as fast as they could. Ahmad and his men gave chase and killed many of them, wreaking great havoc among them. And I can tell you that Arghun himself was captured in this pursuit. With his capture the men abandoned the pursuit and returned exultantly to their camp and their tents in the highest possible spirits. Ahmad had his nephew Arghun bound with fetters and vigilantly guarded. Then, being an exceedingly lecherous man, he decided to return to his court and indulge himself with all the beautiful women he kept there. He left one of his chief *maliks* in charge of the entire army and put Arghun in his safekeeping, enjoining him to guard him as he valued his life. He also ordered this *malik* to bring the troops home in easy stages so as to spare their strength. The *malik* promised to follow his orders closely. So Ahmad left with a great company and set off on his way to court.

In this manner that I have described Ahmad left his army and handed over the command to this *malik* I have spoken of. And Arghun was left imprisoned and in irons, so heartbroken that he longed to die.

Now it so happened that a great Tartar baron who was very long in the tooth felt great pity for Arghun and reflected that they were guilty of great wickedness and great disloyalty for keeping their lord a prisoner. He resolved to do everything he could to set him free. So without a moment's delay he went directly to a number of other barons and impressed on them what a wicked thing it was to hold their liege lord a prisoner and what an admirable thing it would be if they freed him and made him their lord, as by right he ought to be. When the other barons heard what he put to them, knowing him to be one of the wisest men among them and recognizing that he spoke the truth, they were all in accordance and told him they were keen to see this happen. And when the barons had agreed to this, then Buqa, the man who had made the proposal, and his confederates Elchidei, Toghan, Tegene, Taghachar, Ulaatai and Samaghar¹² – all these men whose names you have heard went off to the tent where Arghun was imprisoned. When

they came there Buqa (as the most senior and the ringleader in this conspiracy) was first to speak, and this is what he said:

‘Dear Lord Arghun,’ he said, ‘we are well aware that we did wrong to take you prisoner. So we have come to tell you that we want to make amends and do the right thing – that is, we want to set you free and make you our liege lord, as by right you ought to be.’ With that Buqa fell silent and spoke no more.

When Arghun had heard what Buqa had to say, he was convinced he was being taunted and replied with great scorn and sadness. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘you commit a grave offence in mocking me. Surely it was enough for you to do me such a great wrong as to take me prisoner and keep me in fetters when you ought to acknowledge me as your lord. Doubtless you are well aware that you are guilty of a great wrong and a great sin, so I beg you to go on your way and not make fun of me.’

‘Dear Lord Arghun,’ said Buqa, ‘you may depend on it that we do not speak a word in jest; we are perfectly serious, and we swear to it on our faith.’ Then all the barons swore to accept him as their lord. And Arghun in turn swore to them that he would not make them suffer or pay for taking him prisoner but would look upon them with as much favour and fondness as his father Abagha had done. And when these oaths had been exchanged in the way you have heard, they freed Arghun from his fetters and recognized him as their lord.

‘Have a volley of arrows shot into that tent,’ Arghun then ordered, ‘until the *malik* who held me prisoner and commanded this army is dead.’ There was no delay when he said this; instantly they let fly such a shower of arrows at the tent that the *malik* was killed. And when this was over Arghun assumed the lordship and gave his orders as lord and was obeyed by everyone. And you should know that the man whom we have named to you as *malik* and who was killed was known as Sultan and was the most powerful lord after Ahmad.

This, as you have heard, is how Arghun recovered the lordship.

When Arghun saw that he was truly accepted as lord by all, he ordered the army to move towards the court. And without delay they set out to return to court. Now it happened one day, when Ahmad was at court in his chief palace and feasting sumptuously, that a messenger came to him and said: 'Lord, I bring you news; not at all the kind I would like to bring, but very bad news indeed. Now you should know that the barons have set Arghun free and recognized him as lord, and have killed our dear friend Sultan. And I bring you word that they are coming this way as fast as possible to seize and kill you. So you must do what you think is best for yourself.' With that the messenger fell silent and spoke no more.

When Ahmad had heard what this man had to say, and knowing him to be a trusty servant, he was so unnerved and terrified that he did not know what to do. Nonetheless, speaking like the brave and valiant man he was, he told the messenger not to breathe a word of this to any living soul. The messenger replied that he would faithfully obey his command. And straight away Ahmad and his most trusty followers mounted their horses and set off to visit the sultan of Egypt, with whom he hoped to find refuge. Only those with him knew where he was headed.

When he had ridden for six days he came to a pass that afforded the only way forward. The captain of the guard at once recognized Ahmad and perceived that he was fleeing. So he decided to seize him, which he was easily able to do since Ahmad had no force to speak of. And you should know that this captain did just as he had planned, for he seized him without delay. Ahmad begged him for mercy's sake to let him go and promised to give him a great treasure. And this man, who loved Arghun with a fierce devotion, replied that all this would get him nowhere and that even if he gave him all the treasure in the world it would not stop him from handing him over to his rightful lord Arghun. What else shall I tell you? Having captured Ahmad the captain of the guard lost no time but straight away readied himself with an excellent company and set out for the court, taking Ahmad with him and guarding him so closely at every moment that he could not escape. They rode nonstop till they reached the court; and there

they found Arghun, who had arrived just three days earlier and was furious because Ahmad appeared to have escaped.

When the captain of the guard came before him leading Ahmad, Arghun was so overjoyed that nothing could have added to his pleasure. He told his uncle that he was not a welcome guest and that he would deal with him as reason dictated. Then he ordered him to be removed from his presence, and without taking any counsel he ordered him to be killed and destroyed. The man he charged with this duty seized Ahmad and led him to a place from which he never again emerged. And no wonder; for he had him killed and his body flung into some place where no one ever found it. And this, just as you have heard, is how the affair of Arghun and his uncle Ahmad unfolded.

When Arghun had done all these things you have heard about and was established in the chief palace as sole ruler, all the barons from all the countries that had been subject to his father Abagha came to do him the homage that was owing to their lord and obeyed him as was his due. And when Arghun's grip on power was secure, he sent his son Ghazan with some 30,000 horsemen to the Dry Tree – that is, to that region – to guard and protect his land and his people. So Arghun recovered his lordship in the way you have heard. And you should know that when Arghun began his rule it was the year 1286 from the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Ahmad Sultan held the lordship for two years, and Arghun reigned for six years. After six years Arghun died of an illness, though rumour has it that he was poisoned.

After Arghun's death an uncle of his named Gaykhatu, who was brother-german to his father Abagha, seized the lordship. And he was easily able to do this because Ghazan was as far away as the Dry Tree. Even so, the fact is that Ghazan came to learn that his father was dead and that Gaykhatu had seized power. He was deeply grieved at his father's death and even more deeply grieved that his father's uncle had usurped the lordship. He could not leave his post for fear of his enemies; but he vowed that at the right time

and place he would take vengeance just as fully on him as his father took on Ahmad. What else shall I tell you? Gaykhatu kept the lordship and everyone was obedient to him, except for those who were loyal to Ghazan. He took his nephew Arghun's wife and kept her for himself. He enjoyed himself immensely with women, for he was a man of unbridled sexual appetite. What else shall I tell you? Gaykhatu held the lordship for two years and after two years he died; for you should know he was poisoned.

After Gaykhatu's death his uncle Baidu, who was a Christian, seized the lordship; this was in the year 1294 from the incarnation of Christ. Baidu kept the lordship, and all the people were obedient to him except Ghazan and his army. When he learned that Gaykhatu was dead and Baidu had seized power, Ghazan was furious that Gaykhatu had died before he could take vengeance on him; but he vowed to wreak such revenge on Baidu that the whole world would talk about it. And this time he made up his mind to delay no longer but to march directly against Baidu and put him to death. So he and all his men got ready and set off for home to take the lordship. When Baidu was certain that Ghazan was coming against him, he mustered a large force, made the necessary preparations, and marched for some ten days to meet him. Then he pitched camp and waited for Ghazan and his troops to join battle with him, urging on his men and exhorting them to do their best. But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that he had not waited two days when Ghazan and his entire army arrived. And believe me when I say that on the very day of their arrival they engaged in the cruellest and bloodiest battle. But no action of Baidu's could withstand Ghazan's onslaught for long, especially when many of his followers went over to Ghazan's side in mid battle and fought against him. And for this reason Baidu was not just defeated but killed, while Ghazan won the battle and became lord and master of all the people. Once he had won the battle and put Baidu to death he returned to court and took the lordship, and all the barons paid him homage and obeyed him as their liege lord. So it came about that Ghazan began to reign as sovereign in the year 1294 from the incarnation of Christ.

Now you have heard how this whole affair unfolded from Abagha to Ghazan. And you should also know that Hulegu, the conqueror of Baghdad and brother of the Great Khan Khubilai, was the first of this line of kings whom I have named to you above; for he was father to Abagha, and Abagha was father to Arghun, and Arghun was father to Ghazan, who currently reigns.

Since we have told you about these Tartars of the Levant we will now take our leave of them and go back to speaking about Turkestan, so that you can hear all about it. But as a matter of fact we have already told you all about Turkestan and how it is ruled by Qaidu, so we have nothing left to say about it. And so we will move on and tell you about the provinces and peoples to the north.

Now you should know that in the north there is a king called Qonichi.¹³ He is a Tartar and all his people are Tartars who observe the true Tartar law, which is very brutish. But they observe it all the same, just as Genghis Khan and the other bona fide Tartars did, and so I will tell you something about it.

Now you should know that they make one of their gods out of felt and call him Nachigai; they also make him a wife. And they say that these two gods, namely Nachigai and his wife, are the gods of the earth and watch over their flocks and their crops and all their earthly goods. They worship them, and when they gather to eat anything special they smear their god's mouth with it. Altogether they live like beasts.

Qonichi is subject to no one. In actual fact he is descended from Genghis Khan – that is, he is of the imperial lineage – and is a close relative of the Great Khan. This king has no city or village, for his people spend their whole lives amid vast plains and valleys and mountains. They live on the flesh and milk of their herds and have no grain. He has a great many subjects, yet he never fights wars or battles with anyone but keeps his people at peace. They have enormous herds of camels, horses, cattle, sheep and other animals. They have very big bears, pure white and more than twenty palms in length. They have foxes that are big and all black. They

have wild asses. They have plenty of sables – the same that produce the costly furs I have described to you as worth 1,000 bezants of silver for one man’s fur coat. They have squirrels in abundance. They have vast swarms of Pharaoh’s rats and live off them all summer long, for they are very big. They have plenty of wild game of all kinds, because they live in very wild and remote places.

You may also take my word for it that there is a stretch of this king’s country where no horses can go, because it is a land of many lakes and springs and so covered with ice and mire and mud that no horse can cross it. This bad tract extends the distance of a thirteen-day journey. At the end of each day’s journey there is a post house where the messengers who criss-cross the country can lodge. At each of these posts there are at least forty huge dogs, each barely smaller than an ass. These dogs transport the messengers¹⁴ from one post to the next – that is, for a day’s journey – and I will tell you how. Now you should know that, because horses cannot be used throughout this journey on account of the ice and mud – for these thirteen stages run the length of a great valley between two mountains, and so the ice and mud are as bad as I have told you – for this reason, just as I have told you, horses cannot pass. And because a wheeled cart could not pass there either, they have had sledges constructed in such a way that they glide over the ice and mud and mire without sinking into them much at all. Sledges of this sort are common in our parts, for they are the kind that are used to carry hay and straw in winter when it is raining heavily and very muddy underfoot. They spread a bearskin on the sledge, and then one of these messengers jumps up and takes his seat. Six dogs – the big ones I told you about – pull these sledges. These dogs have no one to guide them but make directly for the next post, capably hauling the sledge across ice and mud alike. And so they go from one post to another. In actual fact, the keeper of the post house also mounts on a sledge and is pulled by a team of dogs, which he drives by the best and most direct route. When they arrive at the next post they find dogs and sledges waiting to take them on their way, while those that have brought them so far turn back. And so they continue for the duration of this journey, pulled all the time by the dogs.

I can also tell you for a fact that the people who live in the valleys and mountains that extend throughout this thirteen-day journey are great trappers. They catch many precious little creatures that fetch a high price and bring them a handsome profit and rich rewards; these include sable, ermine, squirrel, *ercolin*, black foxes and many other precious animals from which costly and valuable furs are made. They set their traps in such a way that nothing can escape them. But let me also tell you that they build all their houses underground on account of the bitter cold in these parts and live all the time underground.

There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will move on and tell you about a place where it is perpetually dark.

The fact is that far beyond this kingdom, still travelling northward, there is a province called the Land of Darkness¹⁵ on account of the perpetual darkness that reigns there. For neither sun nor moon nor star is seen there, but it is always as dark as it is with us in the early evening. The people have no ruler and live like beasts. Nor do they fall under the sway of any other rulers, though it is true that the Tartars sometimes enter the country in the following manner. The Tartars enter riding mares that have foals and leave the foals at the border, because mares find their way back to their offspring more surely than men trying to retrace the same route. So the Tartars arrive in this manner, riding the mares I have told you about and leaving the foals at the border, and rob the people of everything they can lay their hands on. When they have finished their thieving they give free rein to the mares to return to their foals; and the mares find their way very nimbly.

These people have enormous quantities of costly furs. They have sables, which fetch the huge sum I mentioned before; they have ermines; they have *ercolin* and squirrel and black fox and many other costly furs. They are all trappers, and they collect so many of these furs that it is quite wonderful. And I can tell you that the inhabitants of the neighbouring lands, who live in the light, buy all these furs off them. For these people who live in darkness carry the furs into the light and sell them to them. And I assure you that the merchants who buy the furs off them make vast profits and do

very well for themselves. I can further tell you that these people are very tall and have a fine physique but are very pale and colourless. And let me add that Great Russia borders at one end on this province. Now there is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and continue with our account; and first of all we will tell you about the province of Russia.¹⁶

Russia is a very large province lying towards the north. The people are Christians and observe the Greek rite. They have a number of kings and their own language. They are very simple people. But they are very handsome, both men and women, for they are all fair-skinned and blond. There are many strong defiles and passes. They pay tribute to no one, except that from time to time they give something to a king of the west who is a Tartar and is called Toqta.¹⁷ To him they pay tribute, though the amount is next to nothing.

It is not a trading land, though it is true that they have a great deal of precious and valuable fur; for they have plenty of sables as well as ermines, squirrels, *ercolins*, and large numbers of the finest and most beautiful foxes in the world. **They have a great deal of wax.** And I can also tell you that they have many silver mines that yield a good deal of silver. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave Russia and tell you about the Black Sea and the provinces and peoples that border it. And we will begin first of all with Constantinople. Before that, though, we will tell you about a province lying between west and north-west. Now you should know that in this region I have told you about there is a province called Lac¹⁸ that borders on Russia. They have their own king and are Christians and Saracens. They have plenty of fine furs, which are exported far and wide by merchants. They live by trade and crafts. There is nothing else worth mentioning, so we will leave this place and tell you about the others.

But I also want to tell you something else about Russia that I had forgotten. Now you may be certain that in Russia the cold is more intense than anywhere else in the world, to the extent that men are hard pressed to survive it. **In fact, if it were not for** the many stovehouses they have, the

inhabitants could not avoid dying from the extreme cold. Luckily there are plenty of these stovehouses, built out of piety by noblemen and magnates in the same way that hospitals are built in our parts. Everyone can take refuge in these stovehouses when the need arises. For sometimes such an intense chill sets in that men who are going about the country, either on their way home or from place to place on business, are virtually frozen between leaving one stovehouse and reaching the next, even though the stovehouses are so numerous and set so close together that they say there is one every sixty paces. So, when a man comes out warm from one stovehouse and continues on his way, he is frozen before he reaches the next; then he goes straight in to get warm, and when he is warmed through he leaves and goes on to the next, where he is warmed again; and so on till he reaches his home or wherever he is headed. And they always go at a run, so as to move quickly from one stovehouse to the next without getting frozen solid. It frequently happens that a man who is not warmly dressed or is too old to hurry or has a weaker constitution and nature than the others will fall to the ground frozen by the extreme cold before he can make his way from one stovehouse to another. And there he would die; but other passers-by immediately pick him up and take him to a stovehouse and strip him, and as he warms up he recovers his senses and comes back to life. The stovehouses themselves are built in the following way. They are made of thick beams laid one on top of another in the form of a square and joined so tightly together that there is not a chink of light between them. The joints are thoroughly caulked with lime and other substances, so that the wind and cold find no place to penetrate. Above, in the roof, there is a window from which the smoke issues when a fire is lit inside to warm it. Ample supplies of logs are naturally kept there, and the people heap them on the fire to make a great blaze. While the logs are burning and giving off smoke, the upper window is kept open and the smoke escapes; but when the smoke has died down the window is blocked with a very thick piece of felt, and the great mass of glowing embers that remain keep the stovehouse very hot. Lower down – that is, in the side of the building – there is a window blocked with a very fine, thick piece of felt; naturally they open this

window if they want to let in the light and there is no wind. But if it is windy and they want to let in the light, they open the upper window. The door leading into the building is also made of felt. And this is how these stovehouses are constructed. Every man of rank or wealth, though, has a private stovehouse. All their houses are likewise very well sealed against the cold.

We will also tell you about a particular custom they observe. They make a most excellent wine called mead¹⁹ from honey and panic and hold tremendous drinking bouts with it in the following fashion. They gather together numerous clubs of men and women, particularly noblemen and magnates, ranging from thirty to forty to fifty people and including husbands, wives and children. Each club elects a king or captain and establishes a set of rules: for instance, if anyone utters an unseemly remark or breaks the rules in some way, he is to be punished by the elected leader. Now they have men akin to tavern-keepers who keep this mead for sale. The clubs go off to these taverns and spend the whole day drinking. And they call these drinking sessions *stravitza*. In the evening the tavern-keepers reckon up the quantity of mead they have drunk, and each man pays his share and that of his wife and children if they are present. And while they are engaged in these *stravitza* or drinking sessions, they borrow money on the security of their children from merchants who come from Khazaria,²⁰ Sudak and other neighbouring countries. And they spend this money on drink, and so sell their children. Women taking part in one of these all-day bouts do not leave the room if they need to relieve themselves; instead their maids bring big sponges and place them underneath them so stealthily that no one else notices. For one of them will pretend to be talking to her mistress while another places the sponge beneath her, and so the mistress will urinate into the sponge while she sits; and when she is done the maid will remove the sodden sponge. And they relieve themselves in this way whenever the urge takes them. We will also tell you about something that happened here on one occasion. A man and his wife were going home in the evening after one of these drinking bouts when the wife squatted down to urinate. The cold was so intense that the hairs on her thighs froze and stuck

to the grass, so that she could not move for the pain and cried aloud. Then the husband, stone drunk and taking pity on his wife, stooped down and began to blow, hoping to melt the ice with his warm breath. But as he blew the moisture in his breath froze, and so the hairs of his beard got stuck to the hairs on his wife's thigh. So he, too, was unable to move on account of the excruciating pain; and there he stayed, bent over in this position. And before they could budge from that spot they had to wait for some people to come along and break the ice.

The large unit of currency used by these people is actually a gold bar half a foot long and worth perhaps five broad shillings. For small change they use martens' heads. It is such a vast province that it stretches all the way to the Ocean Sea. And I can tell you that there are some islands in that sea where gerfalcons and peregrine falcons are bred and exported to many parts of the world. Let me add that it is only a short way from Russia to Norway, and were it not for the cold it would be a quick journey; but the intense cold makes it difficult to go there at all.

Now we will move on and tell you about the Black Sea, just as I promised above. It is true that there are many merchants and others who are familiar with it; but still there are many more who do not know about it, and for their sake it is best to set down the facts in writing. So this is what we will do, beginning first of all with the mouth of the sea, the Strait of Constantinople.

At the outer edge of the entrance to the Black Sea, on the western side, stands a mountain called the Faro.

But now that we have started on the Black Sea we have had second thoughts about setting it down in writing, because it is well known to many people. So we will drop the subject and, taking up another, we will tell you about the Tartars of the West and their lords.

The first lord of the Tartars of the West was Sain,²¹ who was a very great and powerful king. This King Sain conquered Russia, Cumania,²² Alania,²³ Lac, Mengiar,²⁴ Circassia,²⁵ Gothia²⁶ and Khazaria; these provinces were all

conquered by King Sain. Before he conquered them they were all subject to the Cumanians; but they did not hold together as one or present a unified front, and so they lost their lands and were driven out and scattered all over the world. And those who were not driven out but stayed on were all enslaved by this King Sain.

After King Sain reigned King Batu; and after Batu reigned King Berke; and after Berke reigned King Mengu-Temur;²⁷ and after Mengu-Temur reigned King Tode-Mengu;²⁸ and after Tode-Mengu came Toqta, who now reigns.

Now we have told you about the kings of the Tartars of the West, and next we will tell you about a great battle²⁹ that was fought between Hulegu, lord of the Levant, and Berke, lord of the West. We will also tell you how this battle came about and how it unfolded.

The fact is that in the year 1261 from the incarnation of Christ a great dispute arose between King Hulegu, the lord of the Tartars of the Levant, and Berke, king of the Tartars of the West. This came about on account of a province at the boundary of their territories. For each wanted it for himself and neither of them was willing to come to terms about it with the other, each being convinced that his claim was strong and valid. So they challenged one another to war, each declaring that he would go and take it and would like to see who would stand in his way. And when they had declared war on one another, they both summoned all their followers and between them assembled one of the greatest war machines that has ever been seen; for you should know that each did everything he could and more to gain the upper hand. And you should know that before six months had passed since the declaration of war each had mustered no fewer than 600,000 horsemen, all admirably equipped with everything needed for their style of warfare. And when everything was ready Hulegu, the lord of the Levant, set out with all his men. They rode for many days without meeting with any adventure worthy of note until they came to a great plain lying between the Iron Gates and the Sea of Sarai.³⁰ He pitched his camp on this plain in a proper and orderly manner. And I assure you there were many

opulent pavilions and tents. Without doubt it had the appearance of a rich man's camp. Hulegu declared that he would wait here to see if Berke would come. So there they stayed, waiting for the enemy. And you should know that this place where they were encamped was right on the boundary between the two kingdoms.

But here we will leave Hulegu and his men and return to Berke and his men.

Now you may depend on it that when King Berke had made all his preparations and assembled all his men and heard that Hulegu had set out with his whole army, he declared that he was not going to wait a moment longer. So they set off without delay and rode day after day till they came to the great plain where the enemy was waiting. They pitched camp in a proper and orderly manner ten miles from Hulegu. And I can tell you for a fact that this camp was just as beautiful and opulent as Hulegu's; for I assure you that anyone who saw the pavilions of gold cloth and the gorgeous tents might well have wondered whether a more beautiful and opulent camp had ever been seen. Besides, Berke had many more troops than Hulegu; for it would be no lie to say that he had no fewer than 350,000 horsemen. And when they were encamped they rested for two days. On the third day Berke assembled all his men and addressed them in these words:

'Good sirs,' he said, 'you know well that since I came to rule this land I have loved you like brothers and sons. And you know, too, that many of you have already taken part with me in many great battles and have helped me to conquer large parts of the lands we now hold. And you also know that everything I have is as much yours as mine. Since this is so, each of you must give everything you have and more to uphold our honour. Up till now we have not failed in this. Now you know that Hulegu, a great and powerful man, is intent on fighting us in an unjust cause. And since the truth is that he is in the wrong and we are in the right, each of you must take heart that we will win the battle. And you should also be reassured by the fact that we have more people than they have. For we know for certain that they only have 300,000 horsemen, whereas we have 350,000 as good as theirs and

better. Now then, good sirs, for all these reasons I have given you it is perfectly clear that we will be victorious in this battle. And so, since we have come so far for no other purpose than to fight this battle, let us set the date for three days from now and let us conduct ourselves with such wisdom and discipline that our affairs may go from good to better. And I pray with all my heart that each one of you will show himself to be a valiant man and that we will act at this moment in a way that will make all the world fear us. Now I will say no more, except to entreat each one of you to be well prepared on the appointed day and to resolve to do your best and be brave.’ And with that Berke fell silent and spoke no more.

But now, having given you a full account of part of Berke’s story, we will leave him and his men and tell you how Hulegu and his men acted when they knew that Berke and his men were close at hand.

Now the story goes that when Hulegu knew for certain that Berke had come against him with such a huge army, he likewise called a great meeting of his trusty followers. And when he saw that they were all assembled, he spoke the following words:

‘Dear brothers, sons and friends,’ he said, ‘you know that throughout my life you have stood by me and helped me. Down to this day you have helped me to win many battles; nor were you ever in any battle that we did not win. And now here we are, having come so far to pit ourselves against the mighty Berke. I am well aware – and it is true – that he has as many men as we have and more; but not as good. For I assure you that if they were twice as many as they are, with such fine men as ours we would still drive them off and defeat them. And since we know by our spies that they will attack us in three days’ time – and I am very glad of it – I entreat each one of you to be well prepared on that day and to resolve to do his best, as you always do. There is only one thing I wish to remind you of: that it is better to die on the field with your honour intact, if there is no other way, than for us to suffer defeat. So let each man conduct himself in such a way that our honour may be saved and our enemy defeated and destroyed.’ And with that Hulegu fell silent.

These great lords made their speeches in the manner you have heard and waited for the appointed day when the battle was due. And both sides made sure that everything they knew they would need was prepared as well as possible.

When the day appointed for the battle dawned, Hulegu rose early in the morning and ordered all his men to arm themselves. He arrayed his battalions to the best of his ability; in other words, skilfully and wisely, like the wise man he was. And I can tell you for a fact that he drew up thirty battalions and put 10,000 horsemen in each; for you should know, as I said, that he had about 300,000 horsemen at his disposal. And he assigned a capable leader and captain to each. When he had marshalled and ordered his affairs skilfully and wisely, he ordered his forces to ride out towards the enemy. And his men carried out his orders, for they immediately galloped ahead until they reached the halfway point between the two camps. And there they halted and waited for the enemy to join battle.

There they waited in the manner you have heard. Meanwhile, on the other side, King Berke had risen that same morning with all his men, who were very well armed and prepared. And you should know that he arrayed his forces with skill and wisdom. He drew up thirty-five battalions, for like Hulegu he put 10,000 horsemen in each under a capable captain and leader. And when Berke had done all this he ordered his forces to advance; and they did so wisely and well, galloping at full tilt until they were half a mile from the enemy. At this point they halted awhile. And after some time they renewed their advance.

What else shall I tell you? When they were two crossbowshots apart, the two sides halted once more and drew up their ranks. The plain here was the finest and widest that was known in these or any other parts and was eminently suitable for a great cavalry battle. And so it needed to be, for seldom if ever have so many people fought on a single field. For it would be no lie to say that there were at least 650,000 horsemen; and both Hulegu and Berke were among the most powerful men in the world. They were also near relations, for both were of the imperial line of Genghis Khan.

When the two great kings and all their forces had faced each other awhile across the short distance I mentioned, nothing remained but to begin the battle; and they eagerly anticipated the sound of the kettledrums. Then, with no more delay, the drums began to beat on both sides. And as soon as they heard the drums they waited no longer; all at once the two armies charged full tilt at one another. They grasped their bows, fitted the arrows to the strings, and drew on the enemy. Now you could see arrows flying from one side and the other, so that in no time the air was so thick with them that the sky was hidden from sight. Now you could see many men falling dead on the ground, and many horses, too. And you must believe this; for it could hardly be otherwise when so many arrows were unloosed at once. But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that they never stopped shooting while there were arrows left in their quivers, until the entire field was covered with dead and mortally wounded men. And when they had shot all their arrows they grasped their swords and clubs and ran at one another, dealing out mighty blows. So began a battle so cruel and so terrible that it was heart-rending to watch. Now you could see hands and arms and heads being hacked off. Now you could see men and horses thrown dead to the ground. So many were killed that it was in a black hour that this battle had begun; for seldom if ever did so many die on a single battlefield as died on this. The din and the uproar were so loud that God's thunder would have gone unheard. I am not exaggerating when I say that you could not walk there without treading on the bodies of dead men; for the ground was completely covered with them, and red with blood. I can tell you for a fact that the world had not seen a battle of this magnitude for many a year. The cries and shouts of those who had fallen mortally wounded to the ground and had no strength to lift themselves up were heartbreaking. This battle began in a black hour for both sides; for many women were widowed by it and many children were orphaned. Both sides clearly showed by their actions that they bore one another no goodwill but only mortal hatred.

King Hulegu, who was a highly experienced leader and a mighty warrior, acquitted himself so well in this battle that it was plain he was a man fit to

rule a realm and wear a crown. He fought with great prowess on his own account and greatly emboldened his men. When they saw their lord bearing himself so well and so gallantly, they were each given fresh heart and courage to do their best. And without doubt it was an astonishing feat of arms, to the extent that all who saw him, both friends and enemies, were awestruck by it; for he did not seem so much a man as a thunderbolt or tornado. And this, as you have heard, is how Hulegu bore himself in the battle.

As for King Berke, I will likewise tell you how he acquitted himself. Now you may take my word for it that he acted very ably and conducted himself very valiantly. In fact he acted so ably that he deserves the praise of the whole world. But it was all in vain; his prowess availed him nothing on that day, for so many of his people were killed and so many wounded and beaten to the ground that they could endure no more. And so, when the battle had lasted till evening, King Berke and his men could hold out no longer but were obliged to abandon the field.

What else shall I tell you? When they could endure no longer they turned and fled as fast as their horses could carry them. And when Hulegu and his people saw that their enemies had turned and fled, they went after them and gave chase, beating them down and killing them. They wreaked so much havoc among them that it was pitiful to see. And when they had kept up the chase some time, they called it a day and returned to their tents. They took off their armour, and those who were wounded had their wounds bathed and bandaged. They were so tired and so drained that there was not one among them who did not have more need to rest than fight. That night they rested, tired and exhausted.

In the morning Hulegu ordered all the bodies of the dead, friend and foe alike, to be burned. His order was carried out without delay. And when all this had been done, King Hulegu returned to his country together with as many of his men as had survived the battle. For although they were the victors, you may be certain that they had suffered heavy losses. Undoubtedly, though, many more of the enemy were killed. For the number

of those who died in this battle was so great that anyone who heard it would scarcely credit it.

So this battle unfolded in the way you have heard, and King Hulegu was the victor. Now we will leave Hulegu and this matter and tell you about a battle fought among the Tartars of the West, so that you will be able to gain a clear understanding of it.

The fact is that when the lord of the Western Tartars called Mengu-Temur died of old age, the lordship passed to Tele-Buqa while he was still a young lad. And Tode-Mengu, who was a very powerful man, killed Tele-Buqa³¹ with the help of another Tartar king who was called Noghai.³² In this way that you have heard, Tode-Mengu took power with the help of Noghai. After a brief reign Tode-Mengu died and Toqta, who was a very wise and shrewd man, assumed power and was elected to the lordship. And this man reigned and took over the rule from Tode-Mengu. Now it happened in the meantime that two sons of the murdered Tele-Buqa had grown up into men who were well able to bear arms and were wise and shrewd. These two brothers who were the sons of Tele-Buqa assembled a splendid retinue and set out for Toqta's court. When they arrived they entered his presence and greeted him with due courtesy, both staying all the while on bended knee. And Toqta replied that they were very welcome and told them to stand up. When the two young men were on their feet, the elder spoke the following words:

‘Esteemed lord Toqta, I will tell you as well as I can why we have come before you. The truth is, as you know, that we are the sons of Tele-Buqa, who was killed by Tode-Mengu and Noghai. Concerning Tode-Mengu there is nothing I can say, because he is dead; but Noghai we call to account, and we beg you like the righteous lord you are to give us justice by making him pay for killing our father. Now this is the reason why we have come to your court, and this is our suit to you.’ And with that the young man fell silent and spoke no more.

Having heard the young man and being well aware that he spoke the truth, Toqta replied to him in these words:

‘My good friend,’ he said, ‘in this matter that you put to me wherein you ask me to bring Noghai to justice, I will act most willingly. We will summon him to our presence and deal with him as due process demands.’ So Toqta sent two envoys to Noghai and ordered him to come to his court to answer the charge brought against him by Tele-Buqa sons concerning their father’s death. But when the envoys gave this message to Noghai, he scoffed at it and told them that he would not go on any account. When the envoys had received Noghai’s answer they set off and rode on their way until they reached their lord’s court, where they told him that Noghai sent him word that nothing would induce him to come. When Toqta had heard Noghai’s message he took it as a gross insult and cried aloud, so that everyone present could hear him: ‘So help me God, either Noghai will come to my presence to answer the case brought by Tele-Buqa’s sons or I will set upon him with all my men and destroy him.’ Then without a moment’s delay he dispatched two more envoys with the message you will hear.

The two envoys Toqta entrusted with the task set out and rode till they reached Noghai’s court. They came before him and greeted him with due courtesy, and Noghai told them they were welcome. Then one of the envoys spoke as follows. ‘Esteemed sir,’ he said, ‘Toqta sends you word that if you do not come to his court to answer the charge of Tele-Buqa’s sons, he will attack you with all his forces and do the greatest harm he can both to your possessions and to your person. So think carefully about how you intend to act in this matter and send him word by us.’ When Noghai had heard Toqta’s message he took it as a gross insult and replied to the envoys in the following words: ‘Noble envoys,’ he said, ‘go back now to your lord and tell him on my behalf that I am not afraid of his war; and tell him, too, that if he marches against me I will not wait for him to invade my territory but will come out and meet him halfway. Now this is my message and my reply to your lord.’ And with that he fell silent and spoke no more.

When the envoys had heard what Noghai had to say, they waited no longer but set off straight away and rode till they reached their lord. They told him everything that Noghai had said, including his comments that he did not give a fig for his war and that he would come further than halfway to meet him. And when Toqta had heard everything and saw that he was left with no choice but to fight, he immediately dispatched couriers in many directions to summon all his subjects to prepare for war with King Noghai. What else shall I tell you? He made the most thorough preparations imaginable. Meanwhile Noghai, when he was certain that Toqta was planning to attack him in such force, likewise made very extensive preparations – not on the scale of Toqta’s, because he did not have his resources or manpower, but very thorough and substantial all the same.

When King Toqta had completed his preparations, he set off with his full force. And you may take my word for it that he took with him no fewer than 200,000 horsemen. Day after day they rode on without meeting with any adventures worth mentioning until they reached the fine, broad plain of Nerghi.³³ There Toqta pitched his camp and waited for Noghai, for he knew he was coming as fast as he could to do battle. And you may be sure that the two sons of Tele-Buqa were also there, with a very fine company of horsemen, to avenge their father’s death. But now we will leave Toqta and his men and return to Noghai and his men.

Now you may take my word for it that when Noghai learned that Toqta was on the move and was approaching, he immediately set out with his full force. And you should know that he had no fewer than 150,000 horsemen – all exceedingly able and valiant warriors and better men-at-arms than Toqta’s. What else shall I tell you? Less than two days after Toqta had reached the plain, Noghai arrived there with all his men and pitched camp in a proper and orderly manner ten miles from the enemy. When the camp had been set up and its many beautiful pavilions of cloth of gold and many splendid tents could be seen, it undoubtedly looked like the camp of a wealthy king. And Toqta’s camp was no less beautiful or opulent but rather

more so; for his pavilions and tents were so sumptuous that it was a truly wondrous sight.

When the two kings had established their positions on the plain of Nerghi, they ordered a pause so as to be fresh and rested on the day of battle.

Then King Toqta called a great assembly of his men and addressed them in the following words:

‘Sirs,’ he said, ‘we have come here to fight against King Noghai and his men, and with very good reason. For you know that all this hatred and rancour has arisen because Noghai will not come to answer the charge brought by the sons of Tele-Buqa. Since he flouts justice it is only right that we should emerge victorious from this battle and that he should be left dead and destroyed. For this reason you should all take heart and look forward to vanquishing the enemy. Nonetheless, I implore you, with all the strength of my being and more, to do everything you can and more to ensure that we put the enemy to destruction and death.’ And with that he fell silent and spoke no more.

Meanwhile on the other side King Noghai called his men together and addressed them as follows.

‘Dear brothers and friends,’ he said, ‘you know that we have already won many great battles and fierce struggles, and that we have already pitted ourselves against many better men than these and emerged victorious. Since this is the truth – as you yourselves know – you should certainly spur yourselves to win this battle. And also because right is firmly on our side and they are in the wrong. For you know well that it was no lord of mine who summoned me to appear before him in his court and answer a charge brought by a third party. Now I will say no more, except to urge every one of you to resolve to do your best, so that we may perform such feats in this battle that the whole world will speak of us and we and our heirs will be feared for all eternity.’ And with that King Noghai fell silent and spoke no more.

When these two kings had given their speeches they swung into action, and the next morning they arrayed their troops for battle with great skill. King Toqta drew up twenty battalions and put an able leader and captain in charge of each. And King Noghai drew up fifteen battalions – for each consisted of 10,000 horsemen – and put able leaders and captains in charge. What else shall I tell you? When the two kings had arrayed and drawn up their men to their satisfaction they both advanced, riding towards one another until they were a crossbowshot apart. There both sides halted and paused for a while. But in no time the kettledrums began to beat. And when the drums sounded they charged at one another with their bows at the ready and let fly their arrows. Now you could see arrows flying from one side and the other in such numbers that it was truly a wondrous sight, for the air was thick with them like rain. Now you could see horses and knights falling to the ground dead or mortally wounded. The din and the uproar were tremendous. And when they had shot all their arrows and had none left to shoot, they grasped their swords and clubs and ran at one another, dealing out mighty blows. Then the most cruel and savage battle began anew. Hands and arms and shoulders and heads were hacked off. Now you could see knights falling to the ground dead and dying. The cries and the clamour and the clashing of swords were so loud that God’s thunder was drowned out. The number of the dead was so vast that it was scarcely equalled in any other battle. But without doubt many more died on Toqta’s side than on Noghai’s. For Noghai’s men were better soldiers than Toqta’s. I can tell you for a fact that the two sons of Tele-Buqa bore themselves very well in this battle and performed great feats of arms; for they strove with all their strength to avenge their father’s death. But it was all in vain; for it was beyond their power to put King Noghai to death. What else shall I tell you? The battle was so cruel and brutal that it was in a black hour that it had begun. For untold numbers of men who just that morning had been full of health and strength were killed in this battle; and many women had become wives only to be widowed by this battle. And no wonder, for this battle was beyond barbaric.

King Toqta strove with all his might to rally his men and uphold his honour, and he performed mighty feats of arms. Without doubt he bore himself so well that he deserved to be praised throughout the world. He plunged into the midst of the enemy as though he cared nothing for death. He laid about him to right and left. He whirled through the serried ranks, scattering them as he went. His exploits that day were of such an order that they inflicted heavy losses on friends and foes alike. He brought losses on the enemy because he killed many of them with his own hand; and he brought losses on his friends because the sight of him performing such feats filled them with courage and emboldened them to rush at the enemy with a determination that ended only in slaughter and death.

Of King Noghai I can speak just as highly. For you may take my word for it that he performed such feats in his own person that he did not come up against anyone on either side who was his equal. Without doubt he earned the highest honours and praise in all that day's battle. He threw himself among the enemy as fearlessly as a lion among wild beasts, went round beating them down and killing them, and wrought inordinate havoc among them. He charged in wherever the press was thickest and went about scattering them this way and that as if they were a herd of calves. And when his men saw their lord acting in this way they summoned every last ounce of energy and, charging furiously at the enemy, inflicted dreadful suffering on them.

But why make a long story of it? You may take my word for it that Toqta's men strove with all their might to uphold their honour. But it was all in vain, for they were overmatched by strong and able opponents. When they had endured all they could, they saw plainly that if they remained any longer they would all be dead men. So when they knew they could endure no more they turned and fled as fast as they could. And King Noghai and his men pursued them and slaughtered them without mercy.

So Noghai won the battle in the way you have heard. And let me tell you that no fewer than 60,000 men died that day. But King Toqta escaped, as did the two sons of Tele-Buqa.

Yet you should also know that King Toqta had not mustered all the forces at his disposal for this operation; for he firmly believed that those he had assembled were enough to ensure victory, since Noghai had brought a quarter fewer men to the battle. But as you have heard, Noghai's men were more valiant and battle-hardened than Toqta's and King Toqta was overmatched and overwhelmed in battle. So afterwards, having assembled his entire force, King Toqta rose up manfully against King Noghai and defeated and killed him³⁴ [and his four sons](#), who were very valiant and seasoned soldiers. And so vengeance was done for the death of Tele-Buqa.

Further Reading

EDITIONS OF THE TRAVELS

- Marsden, William, trans., *The Travels of Marco Polo*, rev. Thomas Wright (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854). Based on the sixteenth-century text printed by Giovanni Battista Ramusio; first published in 1818 and still one of the most frequently reissued translations.
- Moule, A. C. and Paul Pelliot, trans. and eds., *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1938). Volume 1 weaves into a literal translation of the celebrated Paris manuscript nearly every additional word from seventeen of the other most significant texts. Volume 2 reprints the important Latin manuscript discovered in Toledo in 1932.
- Ramusio, Giovanni Battista, *Navigazioni e Viaggi*, ed. Marica Milanese, 6 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1978–88). Volume 3 includes the Italian text of Ramusio's version of *The Travels*.
- Ronchi, Gabriella, ed., *Milione: Le Divisament dou monde* (Milan: Mondadori, 1982). Includes a printed version of the Paris manuscript in the original Franco-Italian.
- Yule, Henry, trans. and ed., *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian: Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, rev. Henri Cordier (London: John Murray, 1921). A classic and lavishly annotated translation first published in 1871 and still reissued. Based on a controversial French manuscript; now outdated, but remains illuminating.

CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL WORKS

- Akbari, Suzanne Conklin, and Amilcare Iannucci, eds., *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (University of Toronto Press, 2008). Essays exploring *The Travels* as an instance of cultural interchange between Asia and Europe.
- Atwood, Christopher P., *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004). Everything you need to know about the Mongol world, arranged alphabetically.
- Critchley, John, *Marco Polo's Book* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993). Examines the composition of *The Travels* in its medieval European context.
- Haw, Stephen G., *Marco Polo's China: A Venetian in the Realm of Khubilai Khan* (London: Routledge, 2006). Convincingly identifies nearly every Chinese place mentioned by Marco and confirms his observations on matters ranging from canals to rhubarb.
- Jackson, Peter, 'Marco Polo and his "Travels"', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61 (1998), pp. 82–101; reprinted in G. R. Hawting, ed., *Muslims, Mongols and Crusaders* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). A pithy and persuasive investigation of the issues surrounding Marco's journey and his book.
- Larner, John, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven and London, 1999). A clear, comprehensive study of the making of Marco's book and its impact on the later world.

- Olschki, Leonardo, *Marco Polo's Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960). A thorough and erudite (if occasionally eccentric) survey of Asia in Marco Polo's time and as represented in his book.
- Pelliot, Paul, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959). In this magisterial but unfinished glossary the noted sinologist delves into every abstruse term in *The Travels*.
- Rachewiltz, Igor de, 'Marco Polo Went to China', *Zentralasiatische Studien* 27 (1997), pp. 34–92. A defiant rebuttal of Frances Wood's assault on Marco's veracity, by the translator of *The Secret History of the Mongols*.
- Rossabi, Morris, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*, 20th anniversary edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009). Scholarly biography of Khubilai, focusing on his reign as emperor of China.
- Rossabi, Morris, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Exactly what it says; accessible and up to date.
- Vogel, Hans Ulrich, *Marco Polo Was in China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Definitively establishes that Marco's details of Chinese currencies, salt production and revenues agree with later Chinese sources and were compiled from direct experience.
- Wood, Frances, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995). A prominent sceptic sets forth her case; interesting for collecting all the doubts about Marco in one place.

BOOKS INSPIRED BY THE TRAVELS

- Calvino, Italo, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974). Marco Polo describes to Khubilai Khan various imaginary cities he visited – all in some way versions of his hometown, Venice.
- Dalrymple, William, *In Xanadu: A Quest* (London: Collins, 1989). The young author's adventures in Marco's footsteps.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations refer to manuscripts or (where noted) early printed editions of *The Travels*. The two groups are explained in more detail in [A Note on the Text](#), but a full list of versions cited in the [Appendix](#) and [Notes](#) is given here for convenience. In many cases numerous variants of each copy exist in different locations; those listed below are the ones used in this edition. The classification system is that devised by Luigi Foscolo Benedetto and reproduced with additions in A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, trans. and eds., *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1938), Vol. 1: pp. 509–16.

GROUP A

- F Franco-Italian, early fourteenth century; also known as the Paris MS and held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF). Based on F are:
- FA Court French, fourteenth century; at the BNF.
- FB¹ Court French, fourteenth century; at the British Library (BL).
- FB⁴ Court French, c.1460; at the BNF.
- TA Tuscan, fourteenth century; at the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.
- LT Latin, fourteenth century; based on TA. At the BNF.
- VA Venetian, dated 1445; at the Biblioteca Civica, Padua.
- LA Latin, fifteenth century; based on VA. At the Vatican Library.
- P Latin, fourteenth century; made by the Dominican friar Francesco Pipino from an early version of VA. At the BL (and numerous other extant copies).

GROUP B

Based on a text that predates F are:

- Z Latin, fifteenth century; discovered in Toledo in 1932.
- R Ramusio's Italian text, printed at Venice in 1559.
- V Venetian, fifteenth century; at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.
- L Latin compendium dated 1401; in the Museo Correr, Venice.
- I Jacopo d'Acqui's *Imago Mundi*, a fourteenth-century Latin MS in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.
- VB Venetian, dated 1457; at the BL.

Appendix

The following is a list of the significant passages from versions other than F that are incorporated in the present text. In some cases these or related passages are also found in versions other than those listed here; where relevant, they are referred to in the [Notes](#).

Addition

Source

PROLOGUE

end of the earth ... east-north-easterly direction	Z
'I have brought him ... as your slave.'	VB
And he held him ... everyone at court.	R
And when everything was prepared ... everything that had happened to them	R
Of these ships ... 250 to 260 seamen.	R
They decided the proper course ... as they were instructed.	R
they returned to Gaykhatu ... with him for nine months	R
each a cubit long ... three or four marks	R

CHAPTER 1

Lesser Armenia ... lands of the Christians.	Z
And in a village ... a great silver mine.	Z
very high and shaped like a cube ... never entirely melts	Z
and new snow ... mud on the hillsides.	R
In these fastnesses ... only of box-trees.	Z
This province ... lies to the north.	Z
or the Sea of Baku	Z
the Tigris, the Gihon	Z
It contains many well-populated islands ... other big fish.	Z
Near this province ... few in number.	Z
Silks and many other fabrics ... in more detail below.	R
Next to this province ... king of the Tartars.	Z
And most of the pearls ... geomancy and physiognomy.	Z
Hulegu was one of four ... captured along with the city.	R
'In the name of the Father ... power of the Holy Ghost.'	Z
from its summit	Z
a mile nearer to the plain.	Z
Ever since, out of reverence ... keep to themselves.	Z
And if they are killed ... to be martyrs.	Z
This is why ... no sin is forbidden.	R, V
Within the city limits ... devoutly wishes to have one.	R
which is a twelve-day journey distant.	L, R, V
They sell for much more ... better price than the horses.	Z
They also use camels ... swift as the asses.	R
It should be noted ... no value or strength.	Z
For the lord of the Levant ... length of the journey.	R
Someone may object ... along with its taste.	Z
that lies on its eastern border.	Z
Here is an account ... lie in the soil.	Z
It produces wheat and other grains	Z
which grow on the slopes ... surrounding the plain	R
pomegranates, lemons	Z
Countless turtledoves ... other birds are also found here.	Z
which means 'mongrels' in our language?	VB
Sometimes they rode out ... towards Rudbar	Z
all the merchants who come ... they let them go.	R
Here they build latticework ... ward off the sun.	R
to prove just how hot ... and throw them in.	R
And since they are dying ... any day you name.	Z
the traveller reaches ... themselves and their beasts.	R
mixed with flour to tempt them	Z
country used to be populated by heretics.	Z
'a place where heretics live'.	R
This happened because ... loyalties and interests.	Z

CHAPTER 2

There are also mountains ... is held here.	Z
though there is enough grass for horses.	R
copper and lead	Z
There used to be horses ... so it is extinct.	Z
and of wild sheep ... are never depleted.	R
These mountains have ... into the valley below.	Z
These streams are well ... other choice fish.	R
On the mountaintops ... head up into the mountains	Z
two or three days'	R
And Messer Marco ... his own experience.	Z
For while he was in these parts ... he was cured.	R
There are also two ... always sulphurous.	Z
where the brethren lead ... provide them with food.	Z
The country is also rife ... many of these sheep.	Z
So many horns and bones ... covered with snow.	R
especially cotton weaving.	Z
The land is fertile ... staple crops	Z
Turks	Z
along with flax, hemp and grain.	R
It was once a proud ... badly ravaged it.	Z
You should also know ... as much as they need.	R
and the clash of arms.	R
Sometimes, during the night ...	VB
For this reason ... straying off the path.	R
Turks who are	Z
The priests of the idols ... some of the meat.	Z
And all this is done ... requirements of his station.	Z
they seal the joints with pitch and lime.	R
If they acted differently ... where it should have been.	R
While he is away ... stranger is still there.	R
but for three years ... one misfortune after another	R
Go and live ... gifts for travellers.	R
The whole population ... with the greatest joy	R
Uyghuristan is a large ... other part of the world.	Z
are Turks who follow	Z
It is a fact that travellers ... native to the area	R
for a poisonous herb ... avoid feeding on it.	Z
The whole province ... brown-skinned.	Z
This is how they see it ... the act a sin.	Z
They hold festivals ... on the assigned days.	L
For the sake of piety ... eat it regardless.	Z
so long as they are not their own mothers.	FB
sheets of water ... other fish.	V
made of earth ... source of stone.	Z
An added reason ... stayed in one place.	R

on four-wheeled wagons	R
Even if there are ten ... in common between them.	R
They say that there ... strong in health.	R
as an offering to the other spirits.	R
If he lacks this ... pot and all.	L, V
It is dried like this ... pounds of this milk.	R
They also live on birds ... They also live on fish.	R
'White Lake' in our language	L, R
And to feed them ... anyone to reap them.	R
to prevent anyone ... they flock to him.	R
And in winter ... wherever he may be.	R
images of birds and animals ... wonder to see.	FB
It extends from the centre ... join the other side	R
in such a way ... through the palace.	R
It stands on beautiful ... holding up the ceiling.	R
though for protection ... in place with nails.	R
perform this sacrifice of milk with his own hands.	R
To this end they go about ... permanently squalid state.	R
In addition to the names ... anything they wish.	R
And when he has finished ... their starting point.	R
until the husk ... tastes of nothing.	Z

CHAPTER 3

and was keen ... on campaign and has	R
and 100,000 foot soldiers	R
who were mobilized in twenty ... sixty days' journey apart.	R
He did this in the presence ... rouse his armies.	R
packed with crossbowmen ... silk and gold cloths.	R
He had his troops ... with their pikes.	R
The sheer number of men ... to the other side.	R
because Nayan's generosity ... turn their backs.	R
It was in the month of November ... desire to be converted.	R
You must know that ... report to the Great Khan.	R
Those who possess ... for their bodyguard.	R
Every two years or so ... for his own chamber.	R
that she sleeps peacefully without snoring	R
and sweet ... this careful scrutiny	R
indeed he had already ... father was alive.	R
bridles, saddles, stirrups ... and so on with the rest.	R
Towards the north ... soldiers parade.	R
A marble wall ... where people can gather.	R
To the rear of the palace ... are not admitted.	R
The meadows are lush ... grass grow thickly.	R
pit, very deep ... These pits or ponds	R
And to get from one ... over this lake.	R
the great town of Daidu ... happened to be in this place.	
<i>The description of Daidu includes numerous additions from R, which gives a much fuller account than F and is the only source for the story of Ahmad.</i>	
the most beautiful piece ... in the form of	R
Certain barons are also ... no such edict is enforced.	R
saying to one another ... turn out well	R
And if they are not pure white ... all the other things.	R
Then the priest proclaims ... 'God do so!'	R
These garments are always ... last about ten years.	R
This is how they catch ... often with arrows.	R
The reason they are caged ... bolt at once.	R
And these two brothers ... counting as one head.	R
the emperor always rides ... otherwise he always	R
The Great Khan always ... troubled with the gout	R
throughout the whole ... privilege in this regard.	R
And they are made ... ultimate penalty.	R
All the armies ... kind of money.	R
and powerful barons ... except the Great Khan himself.	R
And these barons also supervise ... military matters.	R
which means 'Second Highest Court'	R
So neither of these courts ... than any other office.	R
All this is furnished ... in some cases the court.	R

in order that they may ... for fresh ones.	R
The emperor sends people ... grow around them.	R
through all the provinces ... convenience and ease	R
If anyone is wondering ... means of life so abundant.	R
And when the fruit ... meting out punishments.	R
On his orders ... help of local experts	R
though the nearby cities ... aid to such cities.	R
As they approach ... prepare the horses	R
In cases of extreme urgency ... fatigue of such a ride	R
Where the roads cross ... lives a long life.	R
Like charcoal ... a powerful heat.	R
the population is so vast ... for so many fires	R
When he hears that ... in the manner I have described.	R
and not a day goes by ... free of charge.	R
For this astonishing and staggering munificence	R
There are also about 5,000 ... consult the astrologers.	Z
He will go to find one ... trading venture.	R
And he tells him ... accompanied by his wife and children.	Z
They worship him ... other such things.	R
They have absolutely ... satisfying their appetites.	Z
Regarding the soul ... in this sense.	R
They believe that when ... That is to say	Z
if he is a poor man ... will be a lord	R
if he is the son of a knight ... on the other hand	Z
he has behaved badly ... son of a peasant	R
from a peasant ... follows the same pattern.	Z
They revere their fathers ... the Great Khan's government.	R

CHAPTER 4

The approach to the bridge ... drawn with a ruler.	R
resting on a marble tortoise	R
decorated all over ... inset into the columns	R
with each pillar a pace and a half from the next	R
because there is a concentration ... incalculable numbers.	R
This Golden King ... nobly and justly.	R
The Golden King was subject ... rebelled against him.	R
Huge canes ... in numerous ways.	R
apart from a few Turkish ... and a few Saracens.	Z
There are some Turkish Nestorian Christians and Saracens.	Z
along with the finest azures and countless marbles.	R
There are also some Christian ... some Saracens.	Z
that flows down from the distant mountains	Z
These rivers encircle the city ... width of the rivers.	Z
or at best finds ... every third or fourth day	Z
towns perched on precipitous crags.	Z
They reason that a woman ... shunned and despised.	Z
And the chosen girls ... ruefully return home.	R
so when a girl ... on her breast.	Z
If she has become pregnant ... as his own children.	I
They are so ubiquitous ... province reeks of it.	Z
They summon up tempests ... without end	Z
especially the huge ... in great numbers.	Z
though you should not take ... own governors there.	R
they are pure white but not round ... clumped together.	Z
The Great Khan has outlawed ... act in the same manner.	Z
and when it has boiled ... emperor's appointed agents.	R
But traders bring ... whole blocks for money.	R
and as stout as a large cask	FA
lions, wolves ... would not dare come near.	R, Z
<i>The account of crocodile hunting is based on F but</i>	
<i>incorporates a number of small additions from R and Z.</i>	
long, that is ... horses to shoot.	Z
all of them ... put it into practice.	Z
taking him food ... the child himself	R
The tomb was likewise ... partly with silver.	R
who are found here ... castrated and afterwards sold.	Z
This is the procedure ... lose a great deal of blood.	Z

CHAPTER 5

There are also some Christians ... church in the city.	Z
Through the midst ... city of Khanbaliq.	Z
for they have extended ... manmade waterways.	R
no more than four fingers deep.	R
You should also be aware ... or paid homage to them.	Z
The whole region ... for making bread.	Z
I am afraid to tell you ... built by this river.	Z
But you must not suppose ... tell you about them all.	Z, R
and had all the inhabitants put to death.	R
to be precise ... navigable by ships.	Z
each capable of throwing ... praised the work highly.	FB
Countless rivers ... swelling it in turn.	Z
This does not include ... idols and other dwellings	Z
And each of these ships ... tow it upstream.	Z
There are also many magicians and diviners.	Z
because its streets ... needed by the inhabitants.	R
though some are made of wood.	Z
Those that span ... any of the other bridges.	R
On the other side ... amounting to 223 pounds.	R
that are best established ... countless lesser ones.	Z
very tenderly ... beyond reckoning.	R
They were not, you understand ... refuse to accept it.	Z
more rooms ... can be imagined	R
all kept in these palaces ... needed for a feast.	R
They carry on board ... feasting in company.	Z
Each barge is roofed ... which they are passing.	R
There is no doubt ... any other experience	Z
on earth; for on one side ... passing time in the city.	R
The houses are very solidly ... rightful kings and lords.	R
The men as much as the women ... by merchants.	R
five by day ... stationed under cover.	R
In each guardhouse ... one or two thousand.	R
or uprising ... most trusted henchmen.	R
But since the Great Khan's couriers ... in the same carriages.	R
All day long ... India and Cathay.	R
The Tartars themselves ... a delay of two months.	R
Similarly, when a wedding ... great faith in them.	Z
Huge numbers of these astrologers ... every city square.	R
Because they have this faith ... keep up this custom.	Z
King Facfur's predecessors ... animals are all gone.	R
<i>The description of the palace is based on the much fuller version of R, but F occasionally supplies extra details.</i>	
It so happened that Messer Marco ... he learned that	R
Another thing ... in their new homes.	R, Z

Let us turn to ... temples of the idols, etc ...	Z
The salt revenue ... enough for their use.	R, Z
All the merchants ... imperial authorities.	Z
Yet the Great Khan ... poverty in the cities.	Z
with one branch flowing ... past the other side.	R, Z
and is used ... fetching a high price.	R
So much cotton cloth ... province of Manzi.	Z
But you should know ... ashes of certain trees.	Z
This is because ... they kill them.	Z
It is spanned ... great sturdy planks.	Z
The country is infested ... a swan only much bigger.	Z
One thing that Messer Marco ... worth mentioning here	Z
And yet they make ... with another cargo.	R
The river that enters ... from which the river flows.	Z
the inhabitants are very docile ... idle life.	R
Many people come here ... in the city.	Z, R
These bowls are made ... reap the reward.	Z
and this is solely ... port of Zayton.	Z
we have given you a point-by-point ... fully as the others.	Z
So we have given you ... learn about it	Z

CHAPTER 6

Below decks on some of the ships ... displaced cargo.	Z
300 sailors ... on a smaller scale.	Z
by means of ropes ... overhaul them.	Z
Next we will tell you ... stays in port that year.	Z
when the force of the wind ... escaped shipwreck.	Z
driven onto its shores ... set sail for home.	Z
desert island called Ciorcia ... did away with the baron.	Z
Sailing instead in a northerly ... as mentioned above	Z
and aloeswood	Z
And the majority of the spices ... come from this island.	Z
brazilwood and ebony	Z
on account of the length ... Manzi and Cathay.	Z
whenever it wishes ... slashes him with its tongue.	Z
with a kind of ointment ... into a human likeness.	Z
We disembarked from our ships ... grew between us.	Z
<i>Many details of the stockade are only found in Z and R.</i>	
This wine ... consumption and spleen.	Z
as they deem necessary ... lead from streams	Z
for there are some trees ... some a white.	Z
as big as a man's head ... that was ever drunk.	R
though when we say ... medium of their art.	Z
If they say ... people to death.	R
since so many souls ... would have perished.	Z
After stripping off ... Then it is seasoned	Z
They have very beautiful cloths ... noblest and best.	Z
Pharaoh's nuts, apples of paradise and many other	Z
This island lies ... stuck there for good.	Z
and garnets	Z

CHAPTER 7

for the fact is ... Maabar and Ceylon.	Z
A group of merchants ... many of these ships	Z
The merchants who are associated ... through the gulf.	Z
this being where ... pearls is found.	R
due south	R
When they can hold out ... all day long.	VA
and they bring them ... tied to their bodies.	R
The shells are split ... ships as mentioned	Z
As it soaks in water ... remain at the bottom.	Z
because they are ... lustrous.	R
the fishing stops, because	Z
who happened to be his brother's wife.	Z
and this was why ... trouble was averted.	Z
stuck them all in his body ... razor sharp.	Z
out of love for him.	Z
You should also know ... a cup of his own hands.	Z
And as for debts ... obliged to observe it.	Z
Likewise they say ... these things from experience.	Z
Again, any man who has sons ... at their father's expense.	Z
Why do they lay on ... his loss is not made good.	Z
The Christians who guard ... province of Maabar.	Z
Messer Marco took some ... cured many people with it.	Z
according to the people of these parts.	Z
You should know that ... foreigner's goodwill.	Z
And if anyone salutes them ... holiest of actions.	Z
When they wish to void ... faults and failings.	Z
for instance ... needs to be chosen	Z
You should also know that the people ... sharply enough.	Z
but most are Saracens	Z
and wheat	Z

CHAPTER 8

It is found in the bellies ... where they sell it.	Z
From the belly they extract ... casks of oil.	R
They can make as much ... how they catch whales.	Z
I can also tell you that there are Jews in these parts	Z
had preached in the kingdom ... to Christianity, he	R
through his preaching and his miracles.	R
As they are constantly ... provinces of India.	R
wheat	Z
which is called the Nile	Z
that is as reliable and short.	Z
We would also have you know ... bulkier goods.	Z
The lord of Shihr ... forty, as we have said	Z

CHAPTER 9

Before going on ... charm and beauty.

Z

They have a great deal of wax.

Z

In fact, if it were not for ... they use martens' heads.

Z

and his four sons ... death of Tele-Buqa.

Z

Notes

PROLOGUE

1. *Tartars*: Late medieval Europe's collective name for the peoples united by Genghis Khan and now known as Mongols; see the Introduction.
2. *the small fraction that he was able to remember*: This sentence and the comment about Marco's decision to make profitable use of his time in prison are from Z, which, however, does not mention Rustichello. R adds that the text as it stands is nothing compared to the 'many and almost infinite things' that Marco would have been able to recount if he had believed he would ever return home; but convinced that it was virtually impossible to leave Khubilai Khan's service, he only wrote down 'a few small things in his notebooks'.
3. *Baldwin was emperor of Constantinople*: Baldwin II (r. 1237–61) was the last ruler of the Latin Empire, the short-lived creation of the Fourth Crusade of 1202–4. The crusade, which set out for Egypt but ended by putting Constantinople to a brutal and irrecoverable sack, succeeded mainly in deepening the schism between Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox (known after their liturgical languages as Latins and Greeks); its largest beneficiaries were its Venetian paymasters, who effectively ran the city for half a century until the Byzantines recovered it with Genoese help.
4. *the year was 1260*: F puts Niccolò and Maffeo in Constantinople in 1250, but since we later learn that Marco was fifteen years old on their return in 1269 – making the year of his birth 1254 – the date is almost certainly wrong. The narrative describes a journey of about nine years' duration, and 1260 is the most commonly given departure date. It

remains conjecture, and others have suggested that the Polos may have left earlier and stayed for several years in Constantinople or Sudak.

5. *Sudak*: Ancient town in Crimea; under control of the Venetians (who called it Soldaia) for several decades until 1365, when they ceded it to Genoa. [Soldadie]
6. *Berke Khan*: Ruler (1257–66) of the Golden Horde or Kipchak Khanate, the north-western part of the Mongol Empire that stretched from Eastern Europe to Siberia and was bound in the south by the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains and the border with the Ilkhanate. Marco refers to the Golden Horde as the ‘Tartars of the West’. [Berca]
7. *Bolghar*: On the Volga River, now in Tatarstan; capital of the state of Volga Bulgari, which was conquered by the Mongols and assimilated into the Golden Horde. [Bolgara]
8. *Sarai*: Capital of the Golden Horde on the lower Volga; the site was north of the Russian city of Astrakhan. [Saray]
9. *Hulegu*: Grandson of Genghis Khan and brother of Khubilai; conquered much of south-west Asia and founded the Ilkhanate (r. 1256–65). Marco calls the Mongols of this state the ‘Tartars of the Levant’ (i.e. the East; literally, the land of the rising sun). In 1258 Hülegü destroyed Baghdad; in retribution Berke, a convert to Islam, declared war on him. This first Mongol civil war, which began the unravelling of the unified empire, is described at some length in [Chapter 9](#). [Ulau]
10. *Ukek*: On the Volga halfway between Bolghar and Sarai; now ruined. [Oucaca]
11. *the river Tigris*: The river was actually the Volga.
12. *Bukhara*: Now in Uzbekistan; the former capital of the Samanid Empire, it was a renowned Islamic centre of learning and an important Silk Road emporium. [Bucara]
13. *Baraq*: Baraq took the Chagatai khanship in a coup in 1266, so he can only have been ruler of the region around Bukhara towards the end of the Polos’ stay; Marco was of course not present and may have supplied the faulty information himself. The security situation was not helped when Baraq went to war with Qaidu, Khubilai’s nephew and rival, who

had become the de facto ruler of the region. Mongol civil wars as much as the timely appearance of an envoy seem likely to have once again persuaded the Polos to move on; not least since Baraq, like Berke, was a convert to Islam. For the subsequent alliance of Qaidu and Baraq against the Ilkhanate, see [Chapter 9](#). [Barac]

14. *Khubilai*: Fifth Great Khan of the Mongol Empire and first Yuan emperor of China. [Cublai]
15. *Latins*: Either Italians or, more likely, Western Europeans who recognized the Latin church of Rome as distinct from the Greek church of the Byzantine Empire.
16. *the great lord of the Tartars has never seen any Latins*: In fact, Chinese sources record the earlier visit of a group of ‘Frankish’ envoys to Khubilai’s court. See H. Franke, ‘Sino-Western Contacts Under the Mongol Empire’, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6 (1966), pp. 54–5.
17. *the seven arts*: The seven branches of the *artes liberales* or liberal arts that were taught in medieval schools: grammar, rhetoric and dialectic (the *trivium*) and arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music (the *quadrivium*).
18. *Ayas*: Port-city of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in south-central Anatolia; a Mediterranean terminus of the Silk Road in the late thirteenth century. Now Yumurtalik in Adana province, Turkey. [Laias]
19. *Acre*: The main Crusader port on the Mediterranean, it was lost to Saladin and recaptured in 1191 by Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade. It remained in Christian hands for a century, but by the time Marco returned from his travels it had fallen to the Mamluks of Egypt.
20. *the year 1269*: F says 1260, but the pope in question, Clement IV, died on 29 November 1268. The brothers most likely reached Acre in April 1269 and returned in mid 1271 with Marco, following a two-year stay in Venice. After a short trip to Jerusalem the three left Acre for Ayas, where news reached them that on 1 September Theobald had been elected pope. They returned to Acre before Theobald (who took the

name Gregory X) departed on 19 November, finally heading east soon afterwards.

21. *Theobald of Piacenza*: Tedaldo (or Teobaldo) Visconti, born in Piacenza, was not the papal legate for Egypt nor even a priest but archdeacon of Liège. He was probably not in the Holy Land in 1269, though he was certainly in Acre in 1271, when he found out he had been elected pope while attached to the retinue of the future Edward I of England, who was engaged in the Ninth Crusade. [Teald de Plajençe]
22. *Negropont*: Venice's name for the Greek island of Euboea, which fell under its control from the mid-thirteenth century. The town of Negropont is now called Chalcis.
23. *oil from the lamp at Christ's sepulchre*: V adds that Khubilai wanted the oil for his mother, who was a Christian. The powerful Sorghaqtani Beki was indeed a Christian of the Church of the East, but she died in 1252.
24. *Pope Gregory of Piacenza*: After a three-year papal election – the longest in history – to his considerable surprise Tedaldo Visconti was elected as a compromise candidate on 1 September 1271 and took the name Gregory X.
25. *if they had not already gone on*: V adds that they were unable to go further because a grandson of the Great Khan's, a Christian named Chariziera, had turned against him and had blocked all the roads through the desert by digging great trenches and pits to prevent armies from pursuing him.
26. *Abagha*: Khubilai Khan's nephew; Hülegü's son and successor as ruler of the Ilkhanate (r. 1265–1282). [Abaga]
27. *other gifts that he gave them*: The details of the papal authority and the gifts are in V; the petition to Abagha is in L.
28. *Bunduqdari*: Marco's *Bondocdaire*, sultan of *Babilonie*, is Baibars al-Bunduqdari, sultan of Egypt from 1260 to 1277, a great vanquisher of Mongols and Crusaders alike.
29. *they would go no further*: As noted earlier, there was no Egyptian invasion of Armenia in 1271. In November Baibars did send forces against the Mongols who had invaded Syria the previous month, and the

Armenians were sufficiently alarmed to dispatch an embassy to the sultan. But the danger seems underwhelming to friars coming from the Crusader stronghold of Acre in the middle of the Ninth Crusade.

30. *Kaipingfu*: Khubilai Khan built his summer capital here in 1252–6. When he built a new capital at Daidu (Beijing), Kaipingfu was renamed Shangdu ('northern capital' or 'former capital'). Thanks to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's great poem 'Kubla Khan', itself inspired by an account largely derived from Marco, Shangdu is forever known in English as Xanadu. The ruins are in Inner Mongolia, a short distance north-west of Duolun. [Chemeinfu]
31. *snow and rain and flooded rivers*: V adds to the litany of bad weather in the form of violent south-westerly gales in the countries they had to cross.
32. *I give you my word*: Actually '*il vos di por verité*' – 'he tells you for truth' – in F.
33. *go home to their own country*: According to R and V, it was more burning desire than preference: 'Despite finding themselves very rich in priceless jewels and gold, an intense longing to see their native land was always at the front of their minds; even though they were honoured and favoured they thought of nothing else. Besides, as the Great Khan was very old they were afraid he might die before they were able to leave, in which case they might never be able to return home on account of the great distance and infinite perils that would threaten them; whereas if he was alive they hoped they could make it. And so one day, seeing that the Great Khan was in an excellent mood, Messer Niccolò took the opportunity to beg on his knees on behalf of all three men for permission to depart. On hearing this word the Great Khan was greatly disturbed and replied: "Why do you want to leave and die along the way? Tell me! If you need gold I will give you much more than you have at home, and the same goes for anything else you ask for." And he said he would promote them to whatever rank they desired. Then Messer Niccolò answered: "O Lord, I do not ask this for want of gold but because I have a wife at home, and in accordance with the Christian

faith I cannot desert her as long as she is alive.” Then, on account of the great love he had for them, the Great Khan replied: “Under no circumstances in the world will I let you leave my kingdom, though I am perfectly happy for you to travel anywhere you like within it.” ’

34. *Queen Bulughan*: Arghun’s favourite wife (and previously his father Abagha’s principal wife); she died around 1286. [Bolgana]
35. *Arghun, lord of the Levant*: Son of Abagha and fourth ruler of the Ilkhanate (r. 1284–91). [Argon]
36. *Ulaatai ... Abishqa ... Qoja*: The names are recorded in a Chinese source as Wuludai, Abishihe and Huozhe; see note 14 to the Introduction.
37. *Kokechin*: A princess from the Bayaut tribe of Mongolia. [Cocacin]
38. *have the three Latins accompany them*: R gives a fuller account of this episode and says that Marco told the Great Khan that the sea route to India was perfectly safe.
39. *the kings of France*: FB¹ adds: ‘and England’.
40. *to last two years*: F says ten years but many texts say two, including R, which adds that the Great Khan also gave them ‘many rubies and other exquisite jewels of enormous value’.
41. *Java*: Presumably ‘Lesser Java’ or Sumatra, which unlike Java proper Marco visited. See [Chapter 6](#).
42. *only one died*: So says R. V claims that only one woman – the queen – survived out of 100 on board, which is hard to reconcile with F’s statement that the daughter of the king of Manzi also survived the voyage.
43. *Gaykhatu*: Fifth ruler of the Ilkhanate after his brother Arghun’s murder (r. 1291–5). Perhaps a Uyghur pronunciation of a Chinese Buddhist name. [Quiacatu]
44. *Ghazan*: Arghun’s son was the seventh ruler of the Ilkhanate (r. 1295–1304). [Caçan]
45. *three or four marks*: The mark was widely used in medieval Western Europe as a unit of measure for precious metals. Four marks is the equivalent of approximately one kilogram.

46. *not a legitimate ruler*: Gaykhatu replaced his murdered brother Arghun when the intended nominee, Hülegü's grandson Baidu, failed to show up. Gaykhatu was subsequently himself murdered to make way for Baydu, who was executed five months later by Ghazan. See [Chapter 9](#).
47. *owed allegiance*: R adds that during this journey the Polos learned of the death of Khubilai, putting paid to any hopes of returning to his realm. Khubilai did in fact die in early 1294, though he is referred to several times during the book as if he was still alive.
48. *Manzi*: Southern China, as distinct from Cathay; the area ruled by the Song Dynasty for three centuries until its conquest by Khubilai in 1279. Originally a term coined by northerners meaning 'southern barbarians'.
49. *so deeply attached*: In his play *Marco Millions*, Eugene O'Neill imagined that Kökechin fell in love with Marco, who comically failed to notice as he was only interested in money.
50. *Trebizond*: Ancient Silk Route city on the Black Sea coast of north-east Turkey and now known as Trabzon; capital of the Empire of Trebizond from 1204 to 1461. [Trepisonde]

ONE

1. *Lesser Armenia*: Also known as the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, it was established from 1080 in southern Anatolia by refugees from Seljuk-occupied Armenia.
2. *subject to the Tartars*: I adds that the inhabitants were formerly good Christians who have strayed from the true path but could soon be brought back if some dependable preachers were posted there; a similar claim is made about Greater Armenia.
3. *merchants come here from Venice*: LT adds: 'and Pisa'.
4. *Saracens*: Muslims. The Romans originally applied the term to the nomadic Arabic tribes that harassed their Syrian borders; later it came to signify Arabs in general. By the time of the Crusades it usually denoted Muslims (a term that first appeared in the West in the seventeenth century).

5. *Karamanids*: Dynastic rulers of the Principality of Karaman in south-central Anatolia from the thirteenth century till 1483. [Caramani]
6. *Kayseri*: Seljuk city on the Silk Road in central Anatolia; the name was adapted from the Arabs' *Kaisariyah*, which derived from the Roman-era *Caesarea*. [Caiserie]
7. *Sivas*: Seljuk city on the Silk Road in central Anatolia; founded by Pompey the Great as Megalopolis and renamed Sebasteia, it was formerly the capital of the Roman province of Armenia Minor. [Sevasto]
8. *worship Muhammad*: A common misconception among Christians in medieval Western Europe.
9. *their flocks*: I adds: 'These Turkmens rarely live anywhere except in open fields; they have clothes made of skins and houses made of felt or skins.'
10. *Konya*: Seljuk capital in central Anatolia. [Como]
11. *rule over them*: I adds: 'These Tartars do not care what god is worshipped in their territories. So long as all their subjects are loyal and fully obedient to the Khan and accordingly pay the prescribed tribute, and so long as justice is well observed, you may do as you please with your soul. True, they object to your disparaging their souls or failing to contribute to their affairs. But while you live among the Tartars you can do what you will with God and your soul, whether you are Jew or pagan, Saracen or Christian. They freely confess in Tartary that Christ is a lord; but they say that he is a proud lord because he will not keep company with other gods but wants to be God over all the others in the world. And so, in some places, they have a Christ figure made of gold or silver and keep it hidden in a chest, saying that he is the great Supreme Ruler of the Christians.'
12. *Greater Armenia*: Region covering modern Armenia and much of eastern Turkey; historically Armenian but conquered variously by Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuk Turks and Mongols.
13. *Erzincan*: In eastern Anatolia; an Armenian principality, much devastated by fighting between the Mongols and Seljuks in 1243.

[Arçingan]

14. *Erzurum*: Seljuk city in eastern Anatolia devastated by the Mongols in 1242; formerly Armenian Karin and Roman Theodosiopolis. [Argiron]
15. *Ercis*: In eastern Anatolia; formerly Artchesh. [Arçiçi]
16. *Bayburt*: In north-eastern Anatolia; an important trading post on the Silk Road. [Paperth]
17. *on the hillsides*: I adds: ‘The ark can be seen from a great distance because the mountain on which it rests is very high and is covered in snow nearly all year round; in one part there is a kind of spot where a large black thing can be seen from far away amid the snow, though on closer inspection it disappears. For this Armenia has many vast and high mountains, among them one called Mount Boris or Mount Olympus, which seems to touch the sky. Some say that many people were saved there from the waters of the Great Flood. In these parts Noah’s Ark is called the Ship of the World. And they speak as little about it as if it didn’t exist, unless visitors ask about this object, in which case they tell you that the black thing is the Ship of the World.’
18. *Mosul*: Then a principality centred on the city of Mosul, now in northern Iraq; under Mongol control from 1261.
19. *Nestorians*: Adherents of the Christological doctrine proposed by Nestorius, a fifth-century patriarch of Constantinople, and rejected as heresy at successive Church councils. Nestorianism was adopted by the schismatic Church of the East and spread widely across Asia, though by the late fourteenth century Islam and Buddhism had largely taken its place.
20. *Jacobites*: After Jacob Baradeus, a sixth-century bishop of Edessa who spread the Christological doctrine of Miaphysitism adhered to by the Oriental Orthodox Churches.
21. *a hundred ships*: Z has ‘a thousand camels’. The ‘spring’ was probably at Baku, on the Caspian.
22. *rule of the Greek Church*: I says they have lost the Christian faith for want of preachers.
23. *head west*: R etc.: ‘north’.

24. *Cumans*: Turkic nomads living around the Black Sea and later in the Balkans. [Comain]
25. *the Black Sea*: Marco calls it ‘the Greater Sea’.
26. *2,800 miles in circumference*: The figure is from Z; F says 700. The sea is the Caspian; Marco later calls it the Sea of Sarai, perhaps not realizing that he is referring to the same body of water.
27. *Euphrates ... Tigris ... Gihon*: F gives only the ‘Euphrates’, presumably the Aras. Z and V add the Tigris and Gihon, which like the Euphrates were believed to be branches of the river that flowed out of Paradise (Genesis 2:11–14). The Gihon has been identified with various rivers, including the Nile, but here, as in the Islamic historians of the Mongol empire of this period, refers to the Oxus (Classical Greek) or Amu Darya (modern Persian).
28. *Tbilisi*: Then as now capital of Georgia, which fell to the Mongols in 1236. Formerly called Tiflis. [Tyflis]
29. *a patriarch whom they call Catholicus*: The Jacobite patriarch had his seat near Mosul, the Nestorian at Baghdad (see [Chapter 8](#)).
30. *Cathay*: Northern China, as distinct from Manzi; the Anglicized version of Marco’s *Catai*, from *Khitai*, a Mongolic people who conquered northern China. Popularized by the *Travels*, the term was later used by Europeans to refer to China as a whole.
31. *mosulin*: Hence muslin, though Mosul evidently produced a wide range of fabrics.
32. *Mus and Mardin*: Both cities are now in eastern Turkey. [Mus and Meridin]
33. *Kish*: Actually located on the island of the same name in the Persian Gulf. [Chisci]
34. *around the year 1255*: The actual date was 1258.
35. *Mengu*: The fourth Great Khan (r. 1251–9), son of Genghis Khan’s youngest son, Tolui. The other brothers were Khubilai and his rival Ariq Böke. [Mongu]
36. *at least 100,000 cavalry*: So says R, which gives much the fullest account of the fall of Baghdad [Baudac]. F, in a heavily truncated

version, gives the cavalry to the defenders.

37. *Tabriz*: From 1265 to 1306 the capital of the Ilkhanate; in north-west Iran. [Tauris]
38. *a great miracle*: In F the description of Tabriz follows here, before the account of the miracle; the chapter headings, though, follow the reverse order.
39. *the year 1225*: F says 1275, which is contradicted by the preceding account of the fall of Baghdad. Z, V and R have 1225.
40. *one of the Gospels*: As Z points out, the reference is to Matthew (17:20).
41. *Hormuz*: Once a major trading port controlling the strategic Strait of Hormuz; around 1300 it moved from the Iranian mainland to the nearby island of Hormuz. [Curmos]
42. *Saveh*: Near Tehran in north-western Iran. [Sava]
43. *Town of the Fire-worshippers*: I.e. Zoroastrians. The ‘church’ referred to below is a fire temple. By the time of Marco’s visit Islam had pushed Zoroastrianism to the fringes of Persia, but it survived in cities like Yazd and Kerman (see below). Out of confusion, Marco associates the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus with the foundation of a religion that in fact predated Christianity by several centuries. [Cala Ataperistan]
44. *Qazvin ... Tun-Qaen*: Qazvin [Casvin] and Kurdistan [Curdistan] are still provinces of north-western Iran. Lorestan [Lor] and Shulistan [Cielstan] are historical areas of western Iran; the lands, respectively, of the Lur or Lor people and a group of Lur people known as Shul. Isfahan [Ispaan] is still a province in central Iran. The city of Shiraz [Çiraç] is now the capital of Fars province in southern Iran. Shabankara [Soncara] is a province of south-western Iran inhabited by a Kurdish people of the same name. Tun-Qaen [Tunocain] is a historic province of eastern Iran known after its two principal cities, now in South Khorasan province.
45. *livres tournois*: Or ‘Tours pounds’, a medieval French unit of currency.
46. *groats*: Venetian *grossi*, large silver coins worth an eighth of a *lira* (originally a pound of silver).
47. *Yazd*: Still capital of the province of the same name in central Iran. [Iasd]

48. *Kerman*: In south-east Iran; the city of Kerman is still the capital of Kerman province. [Cherman]
49. *Kamadin*: South of Kerman; an important trading centre destroyed by the Mongols. [Camadi]
50. *Rudbar*: Now a district of Kerman province. [Reobar]
51. *Neguder*: Marco appears to have conflated two men with the same name: a general in Berke's army whose retreating troops seized areas near the Indian border; and a grandson of Chagatai (see next note) who served under Hülegü and whose forces became a group of roving bandits, known as the Negударis and similar to, but distinct from, the equally ferocious Qaraunas. [Negodar]
52. *Chagatai*: Second son of Genghis Khan and founder of the Chagatai Khanate of Central Asia [Ciagatai]
53. *Badakhshan*: Historical region on the Silk Road; now north-eastern Afghanistan and south-eastern Tajikistan. [Badascian]
54. *Pashai*: Land of the Pashai people; now in eastern Afghanistan and the bordering area of Pakistan. [Pasciai]
55. *Kashmir*: Then ruled by the Hindu Lohara Dynasty. [Chescemir]
56. *Dilivar*: Probably Lahore, now in Pakistan. R, which gives a fuller if somewhat confused account of this story, says that after this conquest the invading Tartars mated with Indian women; their offspring, who were known as Qaraunas, or people of mixed race, learned their dark arts in Malabar.
57. *Asidin Sultan*: Ghiyas ud-Din, sultan of Delhi (r. 1266–87).
58. *Ocean Sea*: A term, derived from the Romans' *mare oceanus* (as distinct from *mare mediterraneum*, or 'sea in the middle of the earth'), signifying the single great body of water that was thought to encircle the known continents.
59. *Ruknuddin Ahmad*: Marco's Rucnedin Acmat is probably Ruknuddin Mahmud (r. c.1243–78).
60. *no iron to make nails*: According to Z, the type of wood they used was as hard and brittle as earthenware and split as soon as a nail was driven in.

61. *Kuhbanan*: The city now belongs to Kerman province. [Cobinan]
62. *Alexander and Darius*: There were in fact two great battles – Issus (333 BC) and Gaugamela (331 BC) – fought between Alexander the Great and Darius III of Persia that brought about the downfall of the First Persian Empire.
63. *Mulehet*: As R and Z suggest, the word comes from the term, meaning ‘heretics’, used by mainstream Muslims to refer to the Nizari Ismaili sect; they were also known by the popular Arabic insult *hashshashin* (‘hash-eaters’), hence ‘Assassins’. F says it means ‘of Saracens’. The Assassins’ headquarters were at Alamut, near present-day Tehran.
64. *Alauddin*: Alauddin Muhammad (r. 1221–55), the twenty-sixth Nizari Ismaili imam and seventh Grand Master of the Assassins. [Alaodin]

TWO

1. *When the traveller leaves this castle*: The following itinerary leads eastwards through modern-day northern Afghanistan, taking in Sheberghan [Sapurgan], Balkh [Balc], Taleqan [Dogava/Taican], Iskashim [Scassem], Badakhshan [Badascian] and Wakhan [Vocan], with a digression to Pashai [Pasciai] and Kashmir [Chescemir].
2. *Iskashim*: Marco’s Scassem is certainly the same name as the modern Iskashim, but the actual description is a better fit for Keshem (also spelled Kishim).
3. *another mountain*: V adds a third mountain from which sapphires are produced.
4. *We will not go any further*: L says that twelve days further on are the regions where pepper grows, near the Kingdom of Braaman (presumably the land of the Brahmins).
5. *Bolor*: A historical region now known as Gilgit-Baltistan and located in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.
6. *Kashgar*: At this point Marco enters what is now China from the mountainous north-west, descending into the sandy Tarim Basin. The city of Kashgar (‘Cascar’ as Marco renders the Uyghur name he adopts here; Chinese *Kashi*) is now in westernmost Xinjiang Uyghur

Autonomous Region. From here until we leave China I have (except where noted) adopted Stephen G. Haw's persuasive identifications of the places Marco mentions, buttressed by the earlier linguistic archaeology of Paul Pelliot and other commentaries as needed.

7. *The province*: Here as elsewhere in his description of China, Marco uses 'province' and sometimes 'kingdom' rather loosely to describe the area under a city's authority. It should be remembered that Chinese provinces in the modern sense – the highest-level administrative divisions – began with the Yuan Dynasty and were still being drawn up while Marco was in China. What he calls provinces were in fact the former units of local government (in descending order of importance, the *lu*, *fu*, *zhou* and *xian*, together with more elastic units like the *jun*) that continued in varying degrees. The status of an area can often be determined by the ending of its name – as in Changlu, Chang'anfu or Yangzhou – which as Marco suggests was usually also the name of the city that governed it.
8. *Samarkand*: As the account suggests, Marco probably never visited the great Silk Road city that lay off his route in modern-day Uzbekistan. [Samarcande]
9. *nephew of the Great Khan*: Qaidu; see [Chapters 3](#) and [9](#).
10. *Yarkand*: The narrative rejoins Marco's route through this region south-east of Kashgar. [Yarcán]
11. *drinking water*: Z gives the information about the mismatched feet; V and L refer to the goitres on the throat. R blames the drinking water for the goitres and for the prevalence of swollen legs but does not mention the unequal feet.
12. *Khotan*: The city and prefecture (Chinese *Hetian*) are in south-western Xinjiang. Strategically situated at the intersection of the branch of the Silk Road that Marco is following and a major route leading from India through Tibet to Central Asia, this was the site of the ancient Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan. [Cotan]
13. *Pem*: Probably modern Keriya (Chinese *Yutian*), in Xinjiang.
14. *Cherchen*: As usual Marco gives the Uyghur name; the Chinese version is Qiemo County, Xinjiang. [Ciarcian]

15. *Lop*: The town of Luobuzhuang, north of present-day Charklik or Ruoqiang, Xinjiang. The desert it stands on is to the east of the Taklamakan. Chinese sources also describe this as a disorientating place full of strange noises (presumably made by singing sand).
16. *Shazhou*: Former name for present-day Dunhuang in north-western Gansu province, Western China. [Saciou]
17. *Tangut*: The name came from the Tangut Empire or Xi Xia (Western Xia) Dynasty, which was destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1227 and annexed by the Mongols.
18. *eat the substance of the flesh*: Z alternatively suggests that they absorb its savour.
19. *Kumul*: Chinese *Hami*; city and prefecture in Xinjiang north of the Gobi Desert. Here a digression starts before we rejoin the main route at Suzhou. [Camul]
20. *Uyghuristan*: Uyghur kingdom in present-day eastern Xinjiang that adopted Buddhism and lasted from the ninth to the fourteenth century. The ruins of its capital Kara-Khoja [Carachoço] are at Gaochang on the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert.
21. *Gingin Talas*: This region has never been conclusively identified.
22. *salamander*: I.e. asbestos. The exact location of the mines is unknown, but in 1267 Khubilai's finance minister Ahmad Fanakati had submitted a proposal for their systematic exploitation.
23. *wrapped in it*: Z adds that the cloth bore the inscription: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' V claims that the elder Polos brought the cloth to the pope.
24. *Suzhou*: Now known as Jiuquan; in westernmost Gansu province. [Succiu]
25. *Ganzhou*: Now known as Zhangye; in central Gansu province. [Campçio]
26. *Ejina*: The Tangut city was known in Mongolian as Khara-Khoto and in Chinese as Heishui, both meaning 'Black City'. Located on the northern edge of the Gobi Desert, the ruins are in modern-day Ejina Banner in

western Inner Mongolia. A long digression begins here, after which we return to Ganzhou. [Eçina]

27. *no source of stone*: L says the entire city was built of wood and earth. V and R refer to a great castle just outside the city, containing the magnificent palace of its ruler. The remains are on the Orkhon River in the Mongolian Republic. [Caracorom]
28. *Manchuria*: R adds: 'and Barghu' (the region near Lake Baikal). [Ciorcia]
29. *Prester John*: The belief that a mighty Christian king ruled over a lost Eastern realm had its roots in rumours of the St Thomas Christians in India and a military victory by a Nestorian monarch in Persia, but it took a sensational turn in 1165 when a letter signed by Prester John, Emperor of the Three Indias, swept across Europe. The work of a master forger, it was written in the haughty tone befitting a man who boasted of being served at table by 'seven kings, each in his turn, by sixty-two dukes, and by three hundred and sixty-five counts' while 'there dine daily, on our right hand, twelve archbishops, on our left, twenty bishops'. Pope Alexander III took the letter seriously enough to send a reply in the care of his personal physician, and though the good doctor disappeared somewhere in Palestine, for centuries Europeans continued to search after Prester John and the promise he held out of building a universal Church.
30. *Ong Khan*: The usual name of the Kereyit ruler born as To'oril, the blood brother of Genghis Khan's father, who turned against Genghis and spurned his proposal that their children marry; he was defeated by Genghis Khan in 1203 and killed while fleeing the battlefield. The honorific *Ong* is the Mongolian version of the Chinese *wang*, or 'great'; only V provides the translation, but it is accurate and may be authentic. The Kereyit, long the dominant tribe of Mongolia, converted to East Syriac Christianity around the eleventh century; if that was welcome news to the West, the diminution of Prester John from all-powerful emperor to defeated tribal leader was a bitter pill, though also a realistic response to the Mongol domination of Asia. [Ung Can]

31. *across several countries*: R adds, presumably from some corrupt source: ‘So every time some lord rebelled against him he took the opportunity to pick out three or four from every hundred of these Tartars and send them to these parts; and so their power diminished. And he used to do likewise in his other affairs.’
32. *chosen as king*: VB and R add: ‘he ruled with such justice and restraint that he was loved by all and revered not as a lord but almost as God’; it was only after his reputation spread far and wide, they suggest, that the world’s Mongols beat a path to his door. R gives a fuller account of Genghis Khan’s personality and early career, claiming *inter alia* that he was too strong a character to brook being confined to the desert; that his reputation for justice and benevolence led people everywhere he went to submit voluntarily to him; that his progress was aided by the patchwork of commonalties and kingdoms in this part of the world, incapable of acting in unison and separately powerless to resist such a large force; and that he installed governors of the utmost probity in the conquered provinces and cities. There is no mention of the more common view of Genghis as a genocidal warlord.
33. *a great part of the world*: TA says ‘the whole world’.
34. *killed in battle*: R adds that Genghis Khan married Prester John’s daughter. In fact Genghis Khan married his son Tolui to Sorghaqtani Beki, a niece of Ong Khan and a Christian of the Church of the East; their sons included Mengü, Khubilai and Hülegü.
35. *six years after this battle*: Genghis Khan in fact outlived Ong Khan by twenty-four years. The place and means of his death are unknown.
36. *Guyuk Khan ... Khubilai Khan*: Güyük [Cui] (r. 1246–8) was the third Great Khan, after Genghis and Ögedei. Batu (r. 1227–55) was the founder of the khanate of the Golden Horde. Altun [Alton] is a Uyghur form of Mongolian ‘Altan Khan’ or ‘Golden Khan’, i.e. Marco’s *Roi d’or* or Golden King. The name is given as *Alau* or *Ulau* in some MSS; i.e. Hülegü, the founder of the Ilkhanate or, as Marco puts it elsewhere, lord of the Levant. Mengü was the fourth Great Khan and Khubilai the

fifth. The form of some names differs from that used elsewhere; perhaps the list may have been added by another hand.

37. *Pharaoh's rats*: *Pikas* or mouse hares.
38. *tuq*: Not a unit of 100,000 but the battle standard of the Mongol rulers and the commanders-in-chief of their armies. It had nine 'feet' or tassels and according to a c. 1400 Chinese translation of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, was made from yak tails, though Mongolian sources do not specify the material and today only horse hair is used.
39. *toman*: Persian pronunciation of Mongolian *tümän*, '10,000'; used correctly here as an army unit and in [Chapter 5](#) as a simple number.
40. *blood of their horses*: R adds that each man has about eighteen horses and mares to allow for frequent changes of mount.
41. *system of justice*: A Latin MS (LA) adds: 'For homicide there is no atonement in money. If a man strikes a blow with a weapon, or even threatens to do so, he loses his hand. For a wound he receives a corresponding wound from the sufferer.'
42. *Merkit*: One of the five groups on the Mongolian plateau united by Genghis Khan. They were not a forest people but lived in a well-watered steppe region that was (and is) Mongolia's main centre of agriculture. Marco seems to have confused them with the Barghu [Bargu] people who lived in the forests to the north.
43. *bagherlac*: Probably the Pallas's sandgrouse; the word is Turkic.
44. *Erguiul*: Present-day Wuwei, in China's Gansu province on the border with Inner Mongolia; formerly known as Liangzhou, it was a key city on the northern Silk Road. Probably, as elsewhere in this section, Marco is using the Tangut name.
45. *Xiningzhou*: Now Xining, in modern Qinghai province. It is not on the road from 'Erguiul' to Cathay and does not have the fauna described; Haw argues that the correct identification is instead with Xizhou (now Lintao, in southern Gansu province). However, Marco may be attaching to the place a description of the region reached through it, a trap he occasionally falls into elsewhere. [Silingiu]

46. *three palms long*: VB and R add that the hair of these ‘oxen’ – evidently yaks – is finer and whiter than silk and that Marco brought back a sample to Venice, where everyone agreed with him that it was a wonderful thing.
47. *pungent perfume*: VB and R add that the musk sac grows at the full moon, which is when the musk-deer are hunted; that their flesh is very tasty; and that Marco brought back the dried head and feet of one animal to Venice together with some pairs of little teeth and some musk still in the sac.
48. *Egrigaia*: The region around Yinchuan (Mongolian *Irgai*) in present-day Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China; perhaps from the Tangut.
49. *Alashan*: Still the name of a region in Western Inner Mongolia. Marco is probably referring to Zhongxing, the chief city of the province.
[Calacian]
50. *Tenduk*: After *Tiande*, an old Chinese military town. This is the territory of the Öngüt tribe (many of whose members were Nestorian Christians) on the northern loop of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia.
51. *George*: Prince George (Körgis) of the Öngüt tribe; a Nestorian, he was later converted to Roman Catholicism by the Italian missionary John of Montecorvino. [Giorge]
52. *Ung and Mungul*: Marco seems to have transferred the legend of Prester John from the Kereyit tribe of Ong Khan (whose title he spells ‘Ung Can’) to the ‘Ung’ or Öngüt tribe by virtue of their similar names and the fact that both were predominantly Christian. Having made that leap he cannot resist another; and associating the province of Ung with that of Mungul (Mongol), he identifies them as the savage nations of Gog and Magog. However, Christopher Atwood argues that the Mongols were themselves familiar with the legend of Gog and Magog being walled up by Alexander and even identified themselves with Gog and Magog, while to them the hated Alexander represented the Jin dynasty that tried to wall them off. The Öngüts, though, had served the Jin and were seen in the early Chinggisid period as traitors. See Christopher P. Atwood, ‘Historiography and transformation of ethnic identity in the

Mongol Empire: the Öngüt case’, in *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2014), pp. 514–34. In any case, the lowly ruler of this benighted place was no use to anyone in Western Europe, and the Prester John legend swiftly moved elsewhere – first back to India and finally to Ethiopia, whose emperor the Portuguese identified as the elusive priest-king in the fifteenth century.

53. *Tartars lived in Mungul*: FB⁴ adds: ‘And this is why the Tartars are sometimes called Monguls.’
54. *Xuandezhou*: Now known as Xuanhua; in north-west Hebei province, China. [Sindaciu]
55. *Ydifu*: This place has never been conclusively identified.
56. *Chagan Nur*: Marco’s Ciagannor.
57. *Shangdu*: Better known, thanks to Coleridge, as Xanadu. Marco earlier referred to the city by its former name, Kaipingfu. [Ciandu]
58. *Brothers Preachers or Friars Minor*: I.e. Dominicans and Franciscans.

THREE

1. *sixth Great Khan*: Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–94) was in fact the fifth Great Khan, and from 1264 the first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty.
2. *play their instruments*: VB elaborates that these were two-stringed instruments producing a pleasing melody.
3. *a baptized Christian*: R adds that Nayan was secretly baptized but never behaved like a Christian and that his army included countless Christians, all of whom died.
4. *Manchuria ... Korea ... Barkol ... Sikintinjiu*: Marco’s *Ciorcia* and *Cauli* are widely identified as Manchuria (then inhabited by the Jurchen people) and Korea. His *Barscol* may be Barkol in faraway eastern Xinjiang. *Sikintinjiu* [Sichintingiu] has resisted identification.
5. *set out to comfort them*: R instead has Khubilai Khan lecture the mockers, saying: ‘If the cross of Christ has not helped Nayan, it acted with reason and justice, for Nayan was a traitor and a rebel against his lord; so take care that you never have the effrontery to say that the God of the Christians is unjust, for he is the height of goodness and justice.’

6. *Khanbaliq*: Turkic name (meaning ‘City of the Khan’) for the capital city founded by Khubilai Khan; Daidu in Chinese. Now Beijing. [Cambaluc]
7. *Sakyamuni Burqan*: The Uyghur and Mongolian title Burqan means ‘god’ or ‘deity’ and is here used as equivalent to the Sanskrit *Buddha* (‘awakened’ or ‘enlightened one’).
8. *saggi*: A Venetian weight for precious substances; one *saggio* was a little under 5g.
9. *Onggirat*: Also known as Kungrat among many variants, their homeland was near Lake Hulun in north-eastern Mongolia. [Ungrat]
10. *The eldest was called Genghis*: Khubilai’s son (and Temür’s father) was in fact called Zhenjin or Jingim. F, out of some confusion, gives *Cinchin* for both Zhenjin and Genghis Khan, though in other places it gives the latter as *Cinghis*.
11. *I will describe it to you*: R adds more details to the description of Khanbaliq: ‘First, the city is surrounded by a wall that forms a square of which each side is eight miles long. The wall is protected by a deep ditch, and in the middle of each side is a gate through which everyone arriving from all around must pass. Inside there is a space a mile wide, where the troops are stationed. After that comes another square wall, six miles long on each side, which has three gates on its southern face and three on its northern. Of the three, the middle one is larger and always remains locked, never being opened except when the Great Khan wants to come in or go out; while the two smaller gates on either side always stand open and are used by all the people.’
12. *Genghis*: Again, the reference is to Khubilai’s son Zhenjin or Jingim, who as Marco explained above died leaving the succession to his son Temür.
13. *the great town of Daidu*: This is the Chinese name (meaning ‘Great Capital’) for Khubilai’s new city and so is interchangeable with Khanbaliq. [Taidu]
14. *an ancient city*: The old Jin capital, sacked by Genghis Khan in 1215, was in fact called Zhongdu; as noted above, Khanbaliq was another

name for Daidu. Marco calls the new city by both names, so the error is presumably a copyist's. As with the palaces, the description of Daidu includes substantial additions from R, which gives a much fuller account than F and is the only source for the story about Ahmad.

15. *Ahmad*: Ahmad Fanakati, Khubilai's powerful Muslim finance minister for twenty years until his assassination by a rival faction led by Wang Zhu and Gao Heshang in 1282. His many revenue-raising measures, including the extension of the state salt monopoly, earned him Khubilai's favour; but as an outsider among the Mongol elite he was widely despised, and Chinese sources accuse him of extensive corruption and abuse of power. The conspirators in his murder were executed, but after his death Khubilai executed his sons, revoked the offices he had created and dismissed officials who had offered women from their families as bribes. Marco's account of Ahmad's career and death is correct in outline but unreliable in detail. [Acmat]
16. *Qianhu*: R's *Cenchu*; actually a rank, meaning 'commander of a thousand'.
17. *Wanhu*: R's *Vanchu* has often been identified as Wang Zhu, the instigator of the plot to assassinate Ahmad, but is perhaps more likely *Wanhu* or 'commander of ten thousand'. Probably a copyist mistook both ranks for names.
18. *Several barons*: R says twelve of his favourites; V says twelve gentlemen and twelve ladies.
19. *falcons or birds of prey or hunting dogs*: F omits the rest of this sentence and the next, giving the unlikely impression that merchants, artisans and peasants are free to fowl and hunt anywhere further than a twenty-day journey from the Great Khan's location. This version is based on R.
20. *When he arrives at his capital city*: In F this is the start of a long chapter that gives details of Khanbaliq's suburbs, visiting merchants, prostitutes and imports before moving on to the imperial mint; in the current version this section is appended to the earlier account of the city.

21. *Tai*: F omits this court and only mentions *Sheng*, mistakenly equating the two. It is silent on the word's meaning, though FB⁴ glosses 'the highest court', which fits with the sense of F. R, which gives the only full account of both courts, translates *Tai* as 'the higher court' and *Sheng* as 'the second highest court'. This sits awkwardly with F's abridged account but has been followed here. *Sheng* (Marco's *Scieng*) is the modern word for province and stems from the administration of the 'barons' that Marco describes, which was technically known as *Zhongshusheng* ('Central Secretariat') in Daidu and *Xingzhongshusheng* ('Branch Secretariat') in the provinces. *Tai* (Marco's *Thai*) is similarly a short version of *Yushitai*, the Censorate.
22. *how the emperor dispatches his messengers*: The vast and efficient Yam relay messenger system, developed and expanded by Genghis Khan and his successors, was also marvelled at by other early European visitors to China.

FOUR

1. *Pulisanghin*: Marco gives as the name of the river the Persian name for the stone bridge, which is now known as the Lugouqiao or Marco Polo Bridge; the river is the Sanggan, known near Beijing as the Yongding.
2. *Zhuozhou*: Now adjacent to Beijing in Hebei province. [Giogiu]
3. *Taiyuanfu*: Modern-day Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi province; formerly the seat of government of a *fu* or large administrative region. It was standard for a city's name to change along with its jurisdiction, though the popular name often failed to catch up. Some cities had multiple jurisdictions and hence multiple names, none of which were used in common parlance. [Taianfu]
4. *Aq-baliq*: Or 'White City', a Turkic name for Zhending (now Zhengding) in Hebei province. [Achbaluch]
5. *Pingyangfu*: Now known as Linfen, in southern Shanxi province. [Pianfu]
6. *Hezhongfu*: Now known as Puzhou, in south-western Shanxi province. [Cacionfu]

7. *Xiezhou*: Still the name of this town in Shanxi province; home to a Guan Di Temple that may be a later version of Marco's castle. [Caiciu]
8. *Qara-Muren*: The Yellow River. Qara-Müren is the Mongolian and means 'Black River'.
9. *asper*: Or *aspron*, a Byzantine silver coin.
10. *Chang'anfu*: Usually known as Chang'an and now Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, this ancient city marked the eastern end of the Silk Road and several times served as capital of China. [Quengianfu]
11. *Manggala*: Marco's visit presumably took place before Khubilai's son died in 1280. [Mangalai]
12. *Guangyuan*: Still the name of a city in Sichuan province. The identification is Christopher Atwood's; other commentators have suggested Hanzhong (see next note). It appears that Marco conflated two routes from Shaanxi to Sichuan: a mountainous western route through Guangyuan, and another passing by a steep ridge and plain to Hanzhong and another ridge into Sichuan. [Cuncun]
13. *Aq-baliq Manzi*: Probably Turkic (though some commentators have seen Persian) for 'white city on [the frontier to] Manzi'. This is most likely Hanzhong, in south-western Shaanxi province. [Acbalect Mangi]
14. *Chengdufu*: Again, the seat of a *fu* and not properly speaking of a province. Now Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. [Sindufu]
15. *These bridges*: F only speaks of one bridge over one great river; Z (closely followed by R) gives the account of numerous rivers and bridges followed here.
16. *1,000 gold bezants*: F ascribes this figure to its single bridge. Some MSS say this sum is taken every day; R says more than 100 gold bezants are taken per day.
17. *Yangtze*: Given as *Quiansui* in F and *Quian* in R. From Chinese *Jiang*, which simply means 'river' and is still used instead of the proper *Chang Jiang*, or 'Long River'.
18. *ships so huge*: Presumably a copyist's slip, corrected in the next phrase.
19. *Tibet*: Marco's account of 'Tebet' largely covers the mountainous western part of Sichuan province lying to the east of the present Tibetan

frontier; this area was historically considered to be part of Tibet.

20. *so terrible is it to hear*: FB⁴ adds in alarmist vein: ‘And you should know that anyone who was unfamiliar with the sound and heard it might easily lose his senses and die. But those who are accustomed to hearing it pay no attention. Those who are not familiar with it are obliged the first time round to take some cotton and thoroughly plug their ears, then bind up their heads and faces as tightly as possible and wrap them in all the clothes they have with them; and in this way they manage to survive the initial shock until they are used to it.’
21. *Jiandu*: Now known as Xichang, in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province. [Gaiandu]
22. *the following custom*: The passage closely echoes the account of similar practices in Kumul (see [Chapter 2](#)).
23. *half an ell*: The length of an ell varied in different countries; in England it was equal to 45 inches, or 114cm; hence half an ell was not much more than half a metre.
24. *like our carnations*: Marco actually says ‘like cloves’, presumably referring to clove pinks, wild ancestors of carnations that give off a strong clove-like scent.
25. *a large river called Brius*: A major source of the Yangtze known in Tibetan as the ‘Bri chu. *Chu* means ‘river’; Marco’s form is ‘*bri* with *usu*, Mongolian for ‘water’ or ‘river’. Probably he originally wrote Briusu; Europeans tended to drop the final *-u* to make the ending look like the Latin *-us*. In modern Chinese, the river is known as the Jinsha Jiang, or ‘Gold Dust River’.
26. *Qarajang*: The land of the Wu Man or ‘Black Southern Barbarians’, in Yunnan province. [Caragian]
27. *Yisun Temur*: Actually a grandson of Khubilai, as Marco correctly states further on. [Esentemur]
28. *Yachi*: The former Wu Man capital near modern-day Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, on the Dian Chi Lake. This is presumably the first of the seven kingdoms Marco refers to. [Iaci]
29. *they have a lake*: The Dian Chi, near Kunming.

30. *The capital ... is also called Qarajang*: Dali City in north-western Yunnan province; capital of the Kingdom of Dali until its conquest by the Mongols in 1253.
31. *Hukechin*: Khubilai's fifth or sixth son (r. 1267–71). The name means 'cow herder'. [Cogacin]
32. *Zardandan*: Persian for 'Gold teeth'; in Chinese, *Jin Chi*. The kingdom's people apparently covered their front teeth with gold, a tradition continued by their modern-day descendants, the Dai people of Yunnan.
33. *Yongchang*: Now known as Baoshan, in western Yunnan. [Uncian]
34. *the patient recovers at once*: R adds a moralizing sentiment that is unlike Marco and is probably a pious interpolation: 'And if by God's providence the sick man is healed, they say that the idol to which they offered the sacrifice has cured him. But if he dies, they say that the sacrifice was a fraud and those who prepared the food tasted it before the idol had been given its share ... And so the Devil scorns the blindness of these poor benighted people.'
35. *Myanmar and Bengal*: Marco gives the Chinese name 'Mien' for Myanmar (Burma). His 'Bengala' is most likely Bengal, though given the lack of corroboration, southern Myanmar – perhaps Bago (Pegu) – has alternatively been suggested.
36. *Nasreddin*: His father was one of Genghis Khan's officers and the governor of Yunnan. [Nescradin]
37. *just as you have heard*: VB, followed by R, gives an even fuller account of the battle. R adds the following explanatory passage: 'The victory went to the Tartars. And the reason was that the king of Bengal and Myanmar did not have his men equipped with armour to match that of the Tartars; likewise the elephants, which were in the front rank, were not wearing strong enough armour to withstand the first volley of the enemy's arrows and advance to rout them. More importantly still, the king should never have launched an attack on the Tartars' position with the woods on their flanks; he should have drawn them out into the open plain where they would not have been able to withstand the charge of

the first armed elephants; then, with the two wings of cavalry and infantry, he could have surrounded and destroyed them.’ The Chinese sources largely corroborate Marco’s account but give the date as 1277, not 1272.

38. *Pagan*: Now known as Bagan; the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan from the ninth century until the Mongol conquests. Marco must have visited after the Mongols took the city in 1287. He gives ‘Mien’ as the name of both country and city.
39. *conquer the province of Myanmar*: a fourteenth-century Catalan text says he sent an army of jesters purposely to show the king of Myanmar how much he despised him and to punish him for having taken up arms against him.
40. *the property of the dead*: V and Z say ‘the Great Tartar’ and add that things struck by lightning or plague were also shunned and exempted from tribute, in case divine judgement was at work.
41. *Jiaozhi Guo*: Known subsequently as Annam and today as North Vietnam. [Caugigu]
42. *Amu*: Probably the land of the Hani people immediately to the north of Jiaozhi Guo.
43. *Tulaman*: The land of the Tulaman people in eastern Yunnan. [Toloman]
44. *Kuizhou*: The provincial seat was at Fengjie, now in eastern Chongqing Municipality. [Cuigiu]
45. *along a river*: F and other MSS say upstream, but the direction of travel is downstream. The river is probably the Wu.
46. *Fuling*: F gives Cuigiu as the name of the city on the Yangtze as well as the province, but other versions give various alternatives, including Fungul and Funilgul. Haw argues that these derive from Fuling, which is in the right place and still has the same name. Now in central Chongqing Municipality.

FIVE

1. *Hejianfu*: Now Hejian, south of Beijing in Hebei province. [Cacanfu]

2. *Changlu*: Now Cangzhou, of which Hejian forms part. The old town stood on the Grand Canal. [Cianglu]
3. *Jiangling*: Now known as Dezhou, in Shandong province. The old town was on the Grand Canal. [Ciangli]
4. *Dongpingfu*: Now Dongping, in Shandong province. [Tundinfu]
5. *the year 1272*: Li Tan's rebellion in fact took place ten years earlier, in 1262. A Chinese governor, he rose up in support of the Song Emperor who was then still reigning in South China.
6. *Xinzhou matou*: Or 'Port of Xinzhou'. Now Jining in Shandong province. [Singiu Matu]
7. *Liucheng*: This place, where goods were transferred from the large ships Marco mentions to the smaller vessels described in Xinzhou matou, no longer exists but was on the Grand Canal a little north of Xuzhou. The latter, not Liucheng, was the regional capital. [Lingiu]
8. *Pizhou*: Now known as Gupi, in northern Jiangsu province. [Pingiu]
9. *Suqian*: Still the name of this city in northern Jiangsu province. [Ciugiu]
10. *Huai'an Zhou*: Now known as Huai'an, in central Jiangsu province. [Coigangiu]
11. *Huaiyin*: The two cities were on opposite sides of the Grand Canal, not the Yellow River. [Caguy]
12. *Facfur*: Not a name but the Persian version of the Chinese imperial title 'Son of Heaven', i.e. the Song Emperor. Marco conflates at least three emperors. Duzong (1240–74), whom Marco labels effeminate, ruled from 1264. His son Zhao Xian, born in 1270, reigned under the regency of his grandfather's widow, the Empress Dowager Xie (doubtless Marco's 'queen'), until they surrendered to Bayan in 1276. The boy emperor was taken north to Khubilai's court with his mother, the Empress Quan, who became a Buddhist nun; the Empress Dowager, who was at first unfit to travel, followed later that year and was honourably treated. Two of Zhao Xian's half-brothers were subsequently declared emperor in turn; both fled to different islands and died there in 1278 and 1279, marking the end of the Song Dynasty.

News of the last emperor's death apparently took some years to reach Khubilai Khan, and he was popularly believed to be in hiding.

13. *Bayan Hundred-eyes*: Chingsang is in fact an official title, meaning 'minister'. Bayan means 'rich' in Mongolian but its similarity with Chinese *baiyan* ('hundred eyes') gave rise to the nickname. The suggestion in many texts (but not in R) that Chingsang means 'Hundred-eyes' is probably a scribe's error.
14. *Xingzai*: Now Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province. At the southern end of the Grand Canal, it was the Southern Song capital until 1276. The city became known in the West by Marco's own version of its name, Quinsai (or Kinsay).
15. *Baoying*: Still the name of a county in Jiangsu province but now governed by Yangzhou. Like all the cities Marco describes here, it stood on the canal system that extended throughout this area. [Paughin]
16. *Gaoyou*: Still the name of this city on the Grand Canal between Beijing and Nanjing; now in central Jiangsu province. [Cauyu]
17. *Taizhou*: Still the name of this city, now in central Jiangsu province. [Tigiui]
18. *Tongzhou*: Now Nantong in south-eastern Jiangsu province; it lies south-east rather than east of Taizhou. [Cingiu]
19. *Yangzhou*: Still the name of this city to the west of Taizhou. The claim that Marco was governor for three years is not mentioned in Z and several other versions; see the Introduction. [Yangiu]
20. *Anqing*: Formerly the seat of a large administrative area or *lu*. The city still bears the same name and is now in south-western Anhui province. However, while the description is of Anqing, the name Marco gives corresponds to *Namging*, the medieval pronunciation of Nanjing ('Southern Capital'). In the Yuan era this name referred not to modern Nanjing but to modern Kaifeng, the 'Southern Capital' of the Jin dynasty. [Namghin]
21. *Xiangyangfu*: This is the seat of the second westerly province mentioned above; the promised details of their 'ways and customs'

never appear. Now Xiangyang, part of the conurbation of Xiangfan in Hubei province. [Saianfu]

22. *a way to make the city surrender*: The city in fact surrendered after a five-year siege in 1273, before Marco arrived in China. Z and several other versions omit this entire episode, including any reference to the Polos' involvement. R more plausibly suggests that Niccolò and Maffeo proposed the solution of mangonels to Khubilai, who had them constructed by local craftsmen among whom were some Nestorian Christians. Possibly this occurred on the brothers' first trip.
23. *Zhenzhou*: Now Yizheng in Jiangsu province. The city actually lies to the south-west of Yangzhou. [Singiu]
24. *120 days' journey*: Z gives this figure; F has 100 days. As before, Marco gives a version of 'Jiang' ('River') as the name of the Chang Jiang or Yangtze.
25. *15,000 boats*: F gives this figure; other versions say 5,000 or 10,000. Z and several other texts omit the sentence.
26. *afloat on this river*: FB⁴ adds: 'And it is said that Messer Marco Polo related the information he had had from the collectors of the Great Khan's customs in this city, namely that they swore that more than 200,000 craft passed by each year, only counting those going upstream and not those coming back.'
27. *4,000 to 12,000 cantars*: Roughly equivalent to 200–600 tons. The cantar was a weight used in southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean; its value varied in different places.
28. *Guazhou*: Formerly stood at the junction of the Grand Canal's second channel with the Yangtze; the river has shifted course and the modern city is not in the same spot. [Caigiu]
29. *the Great Khan has transformed the waterways*: The Grand Canal predated Khubilai by several centuries, but he restored and enlarged the canal network.
30. *Zhenjiangfu*: Now Zhenjiang in central Jiangsu province, the city is located at the junction of the Yangtze and the Grand Canal. [Cinghianfu]

31. *Changzhou*: Still the name of this city, now in southern Jiangsu province. The massacre took place in 1275/6; Bayan was infuriated when the Song commander's submission was disregarded by other commanders who continued to withstand the Mongol siege for several months. [Ciangu]
32. *these Alans captured the city*: R says the city had two rings of walls and the attackers forced their way through into the outer city only to get drunk and be massacred by the men in the inner city.
33. *Suzhou*: Still the name of this city, now adjacent to Shanghai in southeastern Jiangsu province. Suzhou and the three cities that follow all stand round the shores of Lake Taihu. [Sugiu]
34. *sixty pounds*: Different versions give figures ranging from forty to eighty pounds.
35. *Wujiang*: Marco's Vugiu is probably this city, once south of (and now a district of) Suzhou, on the Grand Canal.
36. *Wuxing*: An old name for Huzhou, which is probably Marco's Vughin; now in northern Zhejiang province.
37. *Changxing*: Still the name of this city north-west of Huzhou on Lake Taihu. [Ciangan]
38. *with my own eyes*: R is the sole source for much of the description of Xingzai and adds: 'For Messer Marco Polo visited this city many times and applied himself diligently to observing and understanding the shape of things here; he set all this down in his notes, which will be summarized below.' FB⁴ and VB add that Marco saw and read the queen's letter to Bayan. In pursuit of a degree of coherence, some liberties have been taken with the order of excerpts from the interpolated texts.
39. *the entire city rises from the water*: A Venetian MS (VA) adds: 'like Venice'.
40. *obliged to work with their own hands*: This section is from Z; R suggests that sons were in fact compelled to labour at their father's craft and that the law was later relaxed to allowed them to employ others to do the work.

41. *a wooden drum*: R says that manmade mounds topped with wooden towers are found at intervals of a mile throughout the city and that watchmen are permanently stationed in them to sound the alarm in case of fire, for fear that any delay would run the risk of half the city going up in flames; when the alarm is sounded armed guards come running from all the nearby bridges. The MSS describe the drum as a wooden board.
42. *without getting your feet dirty*: FA adds that the land is very flat and low-lying and turns to deep mud when it rains.
43. *3,000 hot baths*: It is unclear how these relate to the cold baths mentioned above, as described in R. Several versions do not specify that the baths were hot.
44. *Ganpu*: On the northern shore of Hangzhou Bay, it was an important port before the entrance silted up. [Gampu]
45. *a great river*: Known above Hangzhou as the Fuchun and below the city as the Qiantang, this river is the southern terminus of the Grand Canal and discharges into Hangzhou Bay.
46. *consults an astrologer*: This seems to be a brief reprise of information already given in connection with Khanbaliq (see [Chapter 3](#)).
47. *a quick rundown of its main features*: The description of the palace given here is based on R, which gives a much fuller account than F – although a few details are in F and not R. F’s account, which speaks summarily of 1,000 rooms and fails to mention that parts of it were ruined at the time of Marco’s visit, seems like a careless abridgement of the source of R – except that Z, believed to be based on a source related to that of R, closely follows F and not R.
48. *temples of the idols, etc ...*: This paragraph is only found in Z, whose copyist seems to have tired of transcribing the whole of this tall tale.
49. *5,600,000 saggi*: R has 80 *tomans* worth 80,000 *saggi* each, making a total of 6,400,000 *saggi*; other versions give different figures. *Toman* is merely 10,000 and it is unclear which unit of currency is intended, but painstaking scholarship by Hans Ulrich Vogel has established that Marco’s figures both here and below for non-salt revenue accord with

known data from the period. See Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 368–389.

50. *the various spices*: Sugar was classed as a spice in medieval Europe.
51. *14,700,000 saggi of gold*: F in fact gets its sums wrong and gives 15,700,000. R sticks to its 80,000 *saggi* per *toman*, giving a total of 16,800,000.
52. *Tonglu*: The identification is not certain. Tonglu is on the Fuchun River and is still administered from Hangzhou. [Tapingiu]
53. *south-eastward*: From Hangzhou (Xingzai) to Quzhou, assuming that the cities have been correctly identified, the route in fact leads to the south-west following the course of the Fuchun River.
54. *paper money*: Only Z gives this information here, as well as in and before reaching Suichang.
55. *Wuzhou*: Now Jinhua in central Zhejiang province. [Vugiu]
56. *Quzhou*: Still the name of this city in south-western Zhejiang province. [Ghiugiu]
57. *south-eastward for four days*: From Quzhou the route finally tends to the south-east, following the Daning River (formerly the Wuxi) towards Suichang.
58. *Suichang*: Now part of the city of Lishui in south-western Zhejiang province. [Cianscian]
59. *Chuzhou*: Now Lishui. [Cugiu]
60. *Fuzhou*: The kingdom called Fuzhou [Fugiu] here and Choncha below is most likely Jiangzhe province, which was created in 1285. Its capital was at Hangzhou, not Fuzhou as Marco says, but it included Fujian, which under the Song had its seat at Fuzhou, and between 1281 and 1285 Fuzhou was also twice the capital of the Yuan province of Quanzhou. The situation was evidently equally confusing to Marco. Under the Ming Dynasty Jiangzhe was split into Zhejiang and Fujian provinces; the city of Fuzhou is today the capital of Fujian.
61. *Jianningfu*: Now Jian'ou in Fujian province. [Quenlinfu]
62. *Houguan*: Now Minhou; also known as Ganzhe or 'sugar-cane'. [Vuguen]

63. *Fuzhou is the capital of the kingdom called Choncha*: See note to *Fuzhou* above.
64. *Zayton*: Now Quanzhou, on the bay of the same name facing the Taiwan Strait; at the time one of the world's largest seaports, it was the departure point for fleets headed to the Indian Ocean and the start of the so-called Maritime Silk Road. *Zayton* comes from the Arabic name for the city, which derived from *Citong*, the Chinese name for the trees that were planted around the city walls. [Çaiton]
65. *followed this rule*: The 'Christians' were Manichaeans, who borrowed some elements of Christian worship, possibly including the Psalter of the Old Testament; the three figures on the altar, though, were probably not apostles but a Buddhist trinity also adopted by the eclectic Manichaeans. If Marco's advice was really followed, his misplaced kindness led to more than 700,000 families of Manichaeans being classified by the Mongols as Christians.
66. *Tingzhou*: Now Changting, in Fujian province near the border with Jiangxi province. [Tingiu]
67. *an azure tint*: R says that the potters add colours to the bowls before baking them in ovens.
68. *Lombards, Provençals, Frenchmen*: Or, in R's version, 'in the same manner as Genovese, Milanese, Florentines and Apulians, who though they speak differently can nevertheless understand one another'. As elsewhere, the copyist or translator freely adapted the text to suit his local audience. Z (the version used here) refers to 'laymen' to differentiate between the various vernaculars and the Latin spoken by clergymen.
69. *no less duty and revenue, if not more*: Z says that the revenues from Fuzhou are only exceeded by those from Xingzai.
70. *a man more qualified to tell the truth*: R adds that Marco first went to India on the Great Khan's business and later returned with his father and uncle bringing the bride for Arghun; and that his information came partly from first-hand observation, partly from reliable informants and

partly from mariners' charts that he was shown. The rubric to the next chapter in F starts with the words: 'Here begins the book of India'.

SIX

1. *the ships in which the merchants travel to and from India*: These are, of course, Chinese junks, which had been regular visitors to the Indian Ocean for several centuries.
2. *the ship is scrapped*: FB⁴ says the older ships are retired from ocean-going duties but are still used on coasting voyages in good weather.
3. *Japan*: Marco's *Cipangu*, from the Chinese *Riben-guo*, the pronunciation of Japanese *Nippon-koku*.
4. *1,500 miles*: The shortest distance between the two countries is in fact a little over 500 miles; Marco's overestimate would later encourage Christopher Columbus to believe that he could reach the East by sailing west.
5. *palace belonging to the ruler of the island*: Z adds: 'according to the reports of men who know the country'. Unlike R and Z, F does not mention that some of Marco's information came second-hand; hence, perhaps, the over-insistence here on a purported first-person narrator.
6. *Abacan ... Vonsamchin*: The former is the Mongol general Alaqaan. The latter is Fan Wenhui, a Song general who defected to the Mongols; *samchin* represents 'counsellor', so Vonsamchin is 'Counsellor Fan'.
7. *the year 1269*: The first Mongol expedition to Japan took place in 1274; the second, which Marco has described, was in 1281. The wide range of dates given in different versions suggests multiple clerical errors.
8. *in the way you have heard*: In fact one general, Fan Wenhui, led the remaining ships back to China, while the other, Alaqaan, seems to have fallen ill and died in Japan. All the prisoners were enslaved or executed apart from three who were sent back to China to deliver the terrible news.
9. *Ciorcia*: I.e. Manchuria. The reference is probably to a peninsula (not island) in the far north-east of China where offenders were deported.

10. *China*: The name comes from Persian via Sanskrit *Cina* and derives from the name of the Qin Dynasty. Marco's account of its use is supported by other sources. [Cin]
11. *pepper*: White pepper is produced by removing the red skin and flesh of the ripe pepper fruit to leave the seed; black pepper is made by drying the unripe green fruit.
12. *Gulf of Cheynam*: A largely imaginary gulf between China and Indochina, described only in R and Z. 'Cheynam' probably comes from the name of Hainan Island, meaning 'South of the Sea'.
13. *Champa*: A Hindu kingdom that ruled what is now central Vietnam from the seventh century AD. [Ciamba]
14. *the year 1285*: So says F; other versions give dates ranging from 1275 to 1288.
15. *On leaving Champa*: All versions say 'On leaving this island of Java'. But this scarcely fits with the course subsequently charted, and Marco's account of Java gives no indication that he visited it. The error would wreak havoc with some European maps.
16. *Sondur and Condur*: At least one of these is Con Son Island, the largest of the Con Dao islands off the south-east coast of Vietnam.
17. *Lochac*: Probably Thailand; again there is no suggestion that Marco visited in person, and the sailing direction is clearly inaccurate.
18. *brazilwood*: The word *berzi* (brazil) puzzled the early translators. R speaks of 'fruit called *berci*, which are domesticated and as big as lemons and very good to eat'. Wilder constructions include 'tame bears as big as lions', 'domesticated animals resembling men', 'domestic gold' and 'Turks who are domestic'.
19. *Bintan*: An island off Singapore now belonging to Indonesia. [Pentan]
20. *Malayu*: Marco's *Malaiur* is probably this ancient kingdom in south-east Sumatra. Most versions call the island Pentan (i.e. Bintan); presumably an early copyist was confused by the reference to Bintan at the beginning of the next chapter and made the 'correction'.
21. *Lesser Java*: I.e. Sumatra.

22. *Ferlec*: Not all of the Sumatran states have been positively identified, and the original forms have been retained. Ferlec is certainly Perlak in northern Sumatra. Basman and Sumatra may jointly be the sultanate of Samudera-Pasai on the island's north coast; alternatively Sumatra may represent that state, while Basman may be Pasaman in western Sumatra. Dagroian remains elusive. Lambri was in north-western Sumatra near Banda Aceh. Fansur is Barus on the island's west coast.
23. *attach long hairs to their chins*: So says Z. F says the monkeys' natural hair is left on the chin and chest; other versions say 'groin' instead of chin.
24. *roots and all*: R explains that it was used as a dye.
25. *they get flour from trees*: This account of sago trees is based partly on Z. VB and R add that the flour tastes like barley meal and that Marco brought back a sample to Venice.
26. *pastries*: F's '*mengier de paste*'; R substitutes 'lasagne and various pasta dishes'.
27. *Gauenispola*: Possibly Pulau Breueh off Banda Aceh; the name is mentioned in other sources but has since disappeared. So has the section of the text dealing with this island, if it ever existed.
28. *Nicobar*: The Andaman and Nicobar islands are about 100 miles north of Aceh. [Necuveran]
29. *Ceylon*: Marco does not mention that the island was famous for its prized cinnamon, a fact that first reached Europe in a letter written by the missionary John of Montecorvino from the Coromandel Coast at around the same time that Marco was here. [Seilan]
30. *not as big as it once was*: FA adds: 'You should also know that, on the side where the north wind blows, the island is very low and completely flat, so that a voyager approaching it by ship from the high seas cannot see the land until he is upon it.'
31. *Maabar*: From Arabic *Ma'bar*, 'passage' or 'crossing point'; this was the Islamic world's name for a region approximating to the Coromandel Coast of south-east India.

SEVEN

1. *Greater India*: Greater India as defined at the end of this chapter encompasses many provinces and kingdoms besides Maabar.
2. *five kings*: Z and R speak of four kings throughout this section.
3. *Sundara Pandya Devar*: The ancient Pandya Dynasty had ruled in Tamil Nadu since the sixth century BC and was at the height of its prosperity when Marco visited. The current ruler was Maravarman Kulasekhara; Sundara Pandya (a common royal name) may have been one of his brothers. [Senderbandi Devar]
4. *at night they break the charm*: VB adds that this is done to deter unlicensed pearl-fishing by night.
5. *Pauca, Pauca, Pacauca*: So says Z; R, the only other version to give the invocation, has *Pacauca, Pacauca, Pacauca*. Possibly from a Tamil pronunciation of *Bhagavat*, 'the Lord'.
6. *wives or concubines*: F says '500 women, these are wives'; Z 'at least 1,000, counting concubines and wives'.
7. *takes two of the knives*: This account of self-sacrifice is based on Z, which alone mentions the two-handled knife. F has a briefer version in which the condemned man repeatedly stabs himself in the arms and stomach until he is dead.
8. *June, July and August*: In fact the Southwest Monsoon lashes the Malabar Coast of south-west India during these months; the Northeast Monsoon brings rain to the Coromandel Coast around November and December.
9. *choiach*: This paragraph and the following one about tarantulas are found only in Z (and in abridged form in R). F's similar version of the story comes later in this chapter and is also reproduced at that point in Z, suggesting that the copyist of F has excised another instance of Marco (or Rustichello) repeating himself.
10. *Motupalli*: Now a village, this was the port of a Telugu kingdom ruled by the Kakatiya Dynasty that covered most of modern-day Andhra Pradesh; its capital was at Warangal, north-east of Hyderabad. [Mutifili]
11. *about 1,000 miles*: R says '500 miles', which is nearer the mark.

12. *belongs to a queen*: Rudrama Devi, among the most successful of the few female rulers in medieval South Asia; she ruled from 1262 to 1289 and died in battle.
13. *mountains in which diamonds are found*: The famous Golconda diamond mines were concentrated around the Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh; the centre of the trade was the city of Golkonda, east of Hyderabad.
14. *great fat serpents*: The ancient legend of the valley of diamonds with its snakes, meat and birds is most famously found in The Second Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor.
15. *a little town*: Traditionally believed to be Mylapore, now part of Chennai (Madras).
16. *a baron of this country*: Z says ‘the above-named king’ and adds that the church as well as the adjoining houses was filled. In this version the king is told to stop levying taxes on the Christians’ trees and duly obeys.
17. *Lar*: An ancient name for Gujarat in north-west India, which hardly lies west of Chennai (i.e. in the region of Bangalore). Marco may possibly have confused Banyans (‘merchants’) from Gujarat with Brahmins he encountered on the Coromandel Coast.
18. *turn back*: FB⁴ adds that with all these superstitions they are worse than Patarins.
19. *Yogis*: Marco’s *ciugui*.
20. *a delightful story*: R says that Marco heard this account of the beginnings of Buddhism on his homeward journey.
21. *Sakyamuni Burqan*: The Uyghur and Mongolian *Burqan* (used earlier by Khubilai) is retained here in place of the Sanskrit *Buddha*.
22. *the year 1284*: Chinese sources confirm that Khubilai did send an embassy to Ceylon with instructions to examine or obtain the Buddha’s alms bowl and mortal remains, though the year was 1282. Other manuscripts, including R, give 1281.
23. *Kayal*: Now Kayalpattinam; an ancient port near Tirunelveli in southern Tamil Nadu. [Cail]

24. *their mother ... intervenes*: Marco (or Rustichello) apparently forgot that he gave us a briefer version of this story near the beginning of his description of India.
25. *tambur*: Betel leaves, usually combined with areca nuts together with spices and slaked lime to make paan.
26. *each will have a knife*: R, which briefly mentions these grudge matches, says that each combatant is provided with a sword and shield by the king and that it is forbidden to use the point of the sword. Only Z has the full version given here.
27. *Kollam*: Formerly known as Quilon; an ancient port on India's south-west coast. [Coilum]
28. *Kollam brazil*: FB adds 'Kollam ginger', which was known in the West as Columbine ginger.
29. *palm sugar*: So says R. F says 'sugar'. V and Z say 'dates'. The sap of the date palm was used to make alcoholic drinks as well as palm sugar.
30. *Kanyakumari*: Formerly known as Cape Comorin, the town is at the southernmost point of India and, if sailing from the east, is reached before Kollam. To add to the confusion, Polaris is naturally visible from the Coromandel Coast to the north of here, and for that matter from the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Perhaps, as has been suggested, this was Marco's first port of call on his second voyage to India and the records of his two visits were not properly correlated. [Comari]
31. *Ezhimala*: Or Elimala, north of Kannur in Kerala. [Eli]
32. *Malabar*: Not a kingdom but a term for the whole of India's south-western coast including Kollam and Ezhimala. Once ruled by the Chera Dynasty, it was at this time a series of independent city-states dominated by Calicut (Kohzicode). [Melibar]
33. *Gujarat*: Marco appears to suggest that Gujarat comes directly after Malabar and is independent from Khambhat and Somnath, whereas it in fact includes them. [Goçurat]
34. *Thane*: Now adjacent to Mumbai; for centuries capital of the Shilahara Dynasty, which was overthrown in 1265. [Tana]

35. *lying towards the west*: Z adds: ‘ “West” should be understood in the sense that Messer Marco Polo was coming from the east and the directions we are given relate to his movements and routes.’
36. *Khambhat*: Formerly Cambay, in Gujarat; long a busy and important port until its harbour silted up. [Cambaet]
37. *towards the west*: V and Z say ‘north-west’.
38. *gold and silver and brass*: Z adds: ‘and *tutty*’.
39. *Somnath*: The ruined capital of the former state and the much-rebuilt temple it was named after are in south-western Gujarat. [Semenat]
40. *Kesh-Makran*: Coastal region of Pakistan on the Gulf of Oman, stretching from Karachi to the Iranian border. [Kesmacoran]

EIGHT

1. *fourteen*: So says F; Z says twelve.
2. *sends an archbishop*: Z adds: ‘or else the islanders elect him, and the catholicus confirms the election’. The catholicus was patriarch of the Nestorian Church of the East.
3. *Madagascar*: Spelt *madeigascar* or similar in F and many versions but *mogdaxo* in Z, which (along with much of the description) seems to indicate Mogadishu in Somalia. Marco’s great ‘island’ may in fact be the Horn of Africa, and the name of Madagascar itself may well derive from Marco’s error compounded by those of his copyists.
4. *Zanzibar*: Again, this is probably not the island (which is vastly smaller than Marco says) but the large part of coastal East Africa known by the Arabs as Zanj. Marco almost certainly never visited East Africa and was relying on hearsay. [Çanghibar]
5. *camel meat*: Z says the inhabitants eat many other kinds of flesh as well, though camel meat is their favourite because it is particularly good in this region.
6. *the boar that had such tusks*: Presumably a hippopotamus. VB (followed by R) adds that the envoys also brought back a gryphon feather, which Marco himself measured and found to be ninety of his hands long and two palms thick. This is probably a later flourish added

to make good on Marco's promise to tell us what he personally saw of the birds.

7. *Abyssinia*: The Ethiopian Empire, which covered modern Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Marco's *Abasce*, from the Arabic term for Abyssinia.
8. *St Thomas*: Z in contrast says: 'Apostles certainly converted them to Christianity, but we do not know who they were.' There is no tradition of St Thomas preaching in either Nubia or Abyssinia.
9. *twenty men apiece*: Z says the elephants ordinarily carried as many as twenty men but in battle limited themselves to twelve or fourteen. This is more ingenious but barely more credible, and most likely the whole notion of war elephants in Abyssinia and Zanzibar was a misunderstanding or a tall story.
10. *merchants who live by trade*: R adds that many foreign merchants visit Abyssinia and that it is exceptionally rich in gold.
11. *along a river*: I.e. the Red Sea; Marco is evidently unaware that the sea separates Africa and Abyssinia from Arabia and Aden. VB (followed by R) adds that the Nile boats are called *zerme* and that from Cairo to Alexandria they go along a canal called the Calizene.
12. *Shihr*: Now Ash Shihr, in southern Yemen. [Scier]
13. *400 miles from the port of Aden*: Other versions give the distance between the two Yemeni ports as four or forty miles, suggesting the geographical difficulties that could potentially arise from errors of transcription.
14. *Dhofar*: Now a province of Oman; Salalah was and still is its capital and main port. It was once the world's primary source of frankincense. [Dufar]
15. *500 miles north-west of Shihr*: Z says 200 miles; R says twenty miles to the south-east. Other versions range as low as five miles.
16. *the gulf of Qalhat*: That is, the Gulf of Oman. The ruins of the ancient city of Qalhat, the second city of the kingdom of Hormuz, are south-east of Muscat. [Calatu]

1. *brother-german to the Great Khan Khubilai*: Chagatai was Khubilai's uncle and was not a Christian.
2. *Nomuqan*: Khubilai sent his fourth son to Central Asia to deal with Qaidu. [Numughan]
3. *George, the grandson of Prester John*: Prince George of the Öngüt tribe, previously mentioned in [Chapter 2](#).
4. *two-stringed instruments*: Z and V give the instruments two extra strings.
5. *Aiyurug*: Also known as Qutulun. Qaidu had fourteen sons but relied on his daughter for advice and assistance in military matters. Qutulun is thought to be the inspiration for the fictional and operatic character Turandot.
6. *the principal pavilion of the palace*: Z places the trial in the king's tent on the plain – 'for the Tartars always dwell on plains' – and dresses the contestants in deerskins.
7. *king of Pumar*: The king's name only appears in one Tuscan manuscript.
8. *his son Arghun*: Arghun was twelve or thereabouts in 1270 and can scarcely have led the army into battle. Marco evidently confused him with Arghun Aqa, a Mongol noble who was governor in Persia prior to the founding of the Ilkhanate and played a leading role in the war with Baraq.
9. *his brother Baraq*: Baraq was not Qaidu's brother but his rival for control of the Chagatai Khanate. The two patched up their differences in the interest of launching an attack on the Ilkhanate; Qaidu supplied troops to Baraq's invading force.
10. *the field of battle*: The battle took place on 22 July 1270 near Herat. Baraq had won a previous engagement.
11. *Ahmad Sultan*: Also known as Ahmed Tegüder (r. 1282–4); having converted from Christianity to Islam, he turned the Ilkhanate into a sultanate. His nephew Arghun, a Buddhist, declared war on him with Khubilai's backing.
12. *Buqa ... Elchidei, Toghan, Tegene, Taghachar, Ulaatai and Samaghar*: Marco's originals are Boga, Elcidai, Togan, Tegana, Tagaciar, Oulatai

and Samagar.

13. *Qonichi*: Ruler of the Blue Horde or eastern part of the Golden Horde founded by Orda, Batu's older brother. [Conci]
14. *These dogs transport the messengers*: Two versions (LT and P) say that two men seat themselves in each sledge atop a pile of bearskins: the driver of the dog team and the trader to whom the skins belong.
15. *Land of Darkness*: The subarctic regions of north Russia and western Siberia.
16. *Russia*: Under Mongol rule since Batu's onslaught of 1237–8 and neither as independent nor as lightly taxed as Marco suggests. [Rosie]
17. *Toqta*: Khan of the Golden Horde, 1291–1312 (see below). [Toctai]
18. *Lac*: The country of the Lezgian tribes in the eastern Caucasus; in modern Azerbaijan and Dagestan.
19. *mead*: Z says 'cerbesia', which generally meant 'ale', but the drink is clearly a kind of mead.
20. *Khazaria*: Lands of the Turkic Khazars north of the Caucasus. [Gaçarie]
21. *Sain*: From Mongol *sayin*, 'excellent'. This was a title given to Batu, founder of the Golden Horde, but Marco is presumably referring to his father, Genghis Khan's oldest son Jochi.
22. *Cumania*: Lands of the Cumans and Kipchaks, north-west of the Caucasus. [Comanie]
23. *Alania*: The kingdom of the Alans in the northern Caucasus. [Alanie]
24. *Mengiar*: The region of the city of Majar on the Kuma River; the ruins lie south-west of Astrakhan.
25. *Circassia*: In the north-western region of the Caucasus, on the east coast of the Black Sea. [Çic]
26. *Gothia*: Lands of the Gothic tribes of Crimea. [Gutia]
27. *Mengu-Temur*: Khan of the Golden Horde, 1266–80. [Mongutemur]
28. *Tode-Mengu*: Khan of the Golden Horde, 1280–87. [Totamongu]
29. *a great battle*: As explained in the Prologue, it was the Berke–Hülegü war that prevented the elder Polos from returning west and drove them on to Bukhara and eventually to Khubilai's court.
30. *Iron Gates and the Sea of Sarai*: I.e. the Caucasus and the Caspian.

31. *Tode-Mengu ... killed Tele-Buqa*: In fact Tode-Mengü succeeded his brother Mengü-Temür but later abdicated in favour of his nephew Tele-Buqa (r. 1287–91). With Noghai's help, Mengü-Temür's son Toqta murdered Tele-Buqa and took the throne. Toqta soon turned on Noghai and after an unsuccessful campaign against him in 1293/4 (as related below) defeated and killed him in 1299.
32. *Noghai*: A powerful prince of the imperial family and descendant of Genghis Khan who virtually ruled the western territories of the golden Horde and vied for control with the khans.
33. *plain of Nerghi*: Probably near the river Don.
34. *defeated and killed him*: In the autumn of 1299. Z is the sole source for this paragraph; the text it was based on was presumably updated some time after Marco's release from prison in August 1299.



THE BEGINNING

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