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*To Natasha with love  
from Tom  
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## MARCO POLO WENT TO CHINA\*

The book under review is the latest attempt to question Marco Polo's credibility in claiming to have spent seventeen years in Mongol-ruled China, and been personally acquainted with events and matters pertaining to that country, which are reported at length in his *Description of the World* (hereafter *DW*).

Dr. Frances Wood's thesis is expounded in fifteen chapters, at the end of which she writes: 'I incline to the view that Marco Polo himself probably never travelled much further than the family's trading post on the Black Sea and in Coşstantinople' (p. 150).

This rather tentative conclusion comes as somewhat of an anticlimax to the reader who, after so many chapters and such displays of knowledge (and after the expectations aroused by the publicity surrounding the book) might have anticipated a more incisive finale such as: 'Marco Polo was a fraud. All the evidence points to the sad, but inescapable conclusion that the Venetian traveller never went to Central Asia and China, nor to South and Southeast Asia as he claims'. After all, if he did not go beyond 40° or 45° longitude east, he did not visit 'the East' at all, let alone China. This is no idle remark, for by not having travelled farther than the Caucasus and present-day Turkey, Marco Polo should have obtained *all* the information in the book — and there is a lot of it — about Iraq, Persia, Central Asia, Mongolia, continental Southeast Asia, Java, Sumatra, Malacca, the Nicobar Islands, Ceylon, Southern India and the coasts and islands of the Indian Sea, from secondary sources, as he should have done about China also. The sheer fact of having been able to gather so much varied and detailed intelligence about most of thirteenth-century Asia without actually going there is, in my view, an even greater feat than that of compiling a genuine eyewitness account of the magnitude of the *DW*. But is this what happened, and can we credit F.W. with having convincingly made the case for Marco Polo as an 'armchair traveller'?

\* This is a review article of: *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* by Frances Wood, London: Secker and Warburg, 1995. Pp. i-x + 182, 1 map. I am very grateful to my friend Prof. H. Franke, Gauting, and to Prof. B. Wehr, Mainz, for supplying valuable information and references. I am solely responsible, however, for the views expressed in this article.

In the Introduction, F. W. describes the genesis of her book, pointing out that 'a very serious challenge to Marco Polo's popular status has been raised by the most eminent of the German Mongolists ... These serious doubts have not, however, had any effect on Marco Polo's popular position, and the legend is repeated endlessly' (p. 2). A little further on, she writes: 'Legend has it that he is responsible for the introduction of noodles to Italy, or spaghetti to China, depending on where you stand, and he has also been credited with the inspiration for Italian ice-cream'.

Now, whereas the story of Marco Polo's involvement in the transfer of noodles and ice-cream from the east is certainly legend — he makes no claim on either count, and we know for sure that he played no part in the noodle migration — the same cannot be said, in the same breath as it were, for his journey to the East which earned him his 'popular position'. F. W. invokes as her authority for demythologising Marco Polo 'the most eminent of German Mongolists', i. e. Emeritus Professor Herbert Franke of Munich. Since Franke's name appears several times in the book, ostensibly in support of F. W.'s thesis, it is appropriate to quote in full what he actually wrote in the source in question (p. 153, Introduction, n. 2): 'There is another passage in a Chinese text which should be mentioned briefly because it concerns the first Europeans who came to China in the Middle Ages. This was some years before the Polos reached China which was in 1265 or 1266 *if* we are to believe that they ever were in China at all — a question which is not yet settled. It has been suggested that in Polo's description of China there are some unsupported boasts about his having been governor in Yang-chou and his taking part in the siege of Hsiang-yang as artillery engineer. It is true that the Chinese sources mention foreign engineers who built stone catapults for attacking the city but their names are Arab and they came from Baghdad. No Po-lo mentioned in the *Yüan-shih* or other sources can be identified with the Italian Polos — all the Po-lo's of the sources have had a good *Altaic* name, Bolod („steel”), because they were of Mongol or Turkish extraction. And there are also a few glaring blanks in Polo's otherwise very detailed account. He never mentions tea, but this may be because he did not like tea or the Mongols in China never offered him any. He never mentions the peculiarity of the Chinese script, and Chinese script is something that would strike even the most casual observer as something different from any other script in Asia or Europe. Even William Rubruk, who had never been in China but only in Mongolia, gives an entirely correct description of the Chinese writing

system. All this has cast some doubt on the contention that the Polo family spent a long time in China. But however that may be, until definite proof has been adduced that the Polo book is a world description, where the chapters on China are taken from some other, perhaps Persian, source (some expressions he uses are Persian), *we must give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he was there after all.*<sup>1</sup>

Prof. Franke goes on to show conclusively that the three Polos (Nicolò, Maffeo and Marco) were not the first Europeans to visit Qubilai's court, for they had been preceded by at least one group of 'Frankish' envoys, whose embassy is recorded in a contemporary Chinese source.<sup>2</sup>

This was written in 1965. In his subsequent work, Franke takes it for granted that Marco Polo *was* in China and, indeed, praises his work for 'the precision of many detailed informations concerning China' which he refers to as 'astonishing', stating that thanks to Marco Polo 'Europe received for the first time reliable information on the far east'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, often repeated arguments against Marco Polo based on certain glaring omissions, on incorrect statements and patently false claims in some of the transmitted texts of the *DW*, are not deemed by Franke to be strong enough in themselves to invalidate Marco Polo's credibility.

For the benefit of the reader unacquainted with the background of the controversy, it should be pointed out that the arguments against Marco Polo have a long history. Leaving aside the generations of incredulous readers (and listeners) from Marco's own time onwards who took the *DW* simply as

1 H. Franke, 'Sino-Western Contacts Under the Mongol Empire', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6:1966, pp. 53-54. The content of this article was delivered as the Hume Memorial Lecture at Yale University on 5 February 1965. See *ibid.*, p. 49, note. It has been reprinted in H. Franke, *China under Mongol Rule*, Variorum Collected Studies Series, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1944, No. VII. The emphasis is mine.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

3 H. Franke and R. Trauzettel, *Das Chinesische Kaiserreich, Fischer Weltgeschichte*, Band 19, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg: Fischer Bücherei, 1968, p. 236 (my translation). In the 1969 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. 13, p. 502, s.v. 'Kublai Khan'), Franke wrote: 'An account of the splendour of his [i. e., Kublai's - I. R.] court and entertainments, of his palaces and hunting expeditions and of his postal services is given by Marco Polo (q.v.) through whom Europe received for the first time *reliable information on the far east*' (my emphasis). Cf. also the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1974, p. 346a, s.v. 'China, History of'; and the references to Marco Polo in *China under Mongol Rule*, especially No. VII, p. 71.

a book of *merveilles*,<sup>4</sup> most of the specific issues hotly debated today had already been raised early last century. Sir Henry Yule, the learned editor and commentator of the *DW*, noted already in 1866 that 'the editors of the *Histoire Générale des Voyages* ... express doubts whether Polo ever was really in China or Tartary, because he says nothing of the Great Wall, of tea, of the compressed feet of ladies, etc'.<sup>5</sup> Yule was referring to comments made by G. Baldelli-Boni and Sir William Marsden forty years before. And he also noted that the German medievalist Karl Dietrich Ullmann claimed in 1829 that Marco Polo never went beyond 'Great Bucharia' (= Bolgary near Kuibyshev, south of Kazan'), i. e. *not further than 50° longitude east*, thus reaching a conclusion remarkably close to that of F.W. over 150 years before her.<sup>6</sup> *Nihil sub sole novum!*

From then on, doubts and reservations have been expressed from time to time for the obvious reason that the questions that had been asked by the sceptics had not been properly answered. In 1961, a few years before Franke's article rekindled the controversy, another German scholar (whose contribution has also apparently escaped F. W.'s attention) stated that there

4 A typical attitude is that expressed by the Florentine Amelio Bonaguasi, the copyist of the TA<sup>3</sup> MS. in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, in 1392: 'Qui finisce il libro di messere marcho polo da vinegia il quale scrissi io ... per passare tempo e malinconia come che mi paiano cose incredibili e paionomi il suo dire non bugie anzi più che miracoli. E bene potrebbe essere vero quello di che ragiona ma io non lo credo ...' See Marco Polo, *Il Milione*, prima edizione integrale a cura di Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1928, p. lxxxiv. For further references to contemporary attitudes towards Marco Polo and his book, see L. Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia. An Introduction to His 'Description of the World' Called 'Il Milione'*, tr. by J. A. Scott, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960, p. 124, n. 80.

5 H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither, Being a Collection of Medieval Notices on China*, first issued in 1866 by the Hakluyt Society, London. New Edition, revised by H. Cordier, Vol. I (= Hakluyt Society, Ser. II, Vol. 38, 1915), p. 165, n. 1. See also *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Translated and Edited, with Notes, by Colonel Sir Henry Yule ..., 3rd edition revised by H. Cordier, London: John Murray, 1903, and New York: Scribner, 1929, I, pp. 292-293, n. 5.

6 See Yule, *The Book*, I, p. 116, note.

is no definite proof that Marco Polo was himself in China, without however elaborating the point.<sup>7</sup>

Franke's re-airing of a number of puzzling questions concerning the *DW*, and his suggestion that Marco Polo may have used an unknown Persian work on China as one of his sources, prompted F. W. to write, in an article which appeared in *The Times* in 1981, that Marco Polo should perhaps not be numbered amongst the early visitors to China.<sup>8</sup> This generated a certain commotion. The controversy that followed took a sharper turn when Dr. Craig Clunas of the Far Eastern Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum published in 1982 a short article, also in *The Times*, in which he strongly attacked both Marco Polo and his book, reviving the old arguments and adducing some of his own, and referring for authority to Franke's 'Persian Baedeker' theory – an inaccurate reference this, since Franke mentioned only a 'Persian source'.<sup>9</sup>

A few months later, the noted Chinese Yüan historian and leading Polan scholar Yang Chih-chiu replied with an article countering Clunas' arguments point by point.<sup>10</sup>

7 H.O.H. Stange, 'Ein Kapitel aus Marco Polo', in H. Franke (ed.), *Studia Sino-Altaica. Festschrift für Erich Haenisch zum 80. Geburtstag*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1961, p. 194. Stange made this comment within the context of his discussion on Marco Polo's description of Quelinfu (= Quenlinfu), i. e. Chien-ning fu (Ch. 156). For other examples of doubts raised about Marco Polo's journey to China in modern works, see the references in J. Critchley, *Marco Polo's Book*, Aldershot: Variorum, 1992, p. xi, n. 12.

8 See Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 4, for the reference to her article.

9 C. Clunas, 'The Explorer's Tracks', *The Times* of London of 14 April 1982, Special Report, p. 1. Dr Clunas claims that Franke suggested 'that Polo may have had access to „some sort of Persian 'Baedeker'". There is no such suggestion in Franke's article, see 'Sino-Western Contacts', p. 54 (quoted above). Unfortunately, F. W. has also misquoted Franke by referring in her book (pp. 143, 146, 149) to the so-called 'Persian guidebook(s)'. We shall return to that later.

10 Prof. Yang's reply in 'Huan-ch'iu' (1982:10) was reprinted in Yü Shih-hsiung (ed.), *Ma-k'o Po-lo chieh-shao yü yen-chiu* [An Introduction to, and investigation of, Marco Polo], *Shu-mu wen-hsien ch'u-pan-shê*, Peking, 1983, pp. 52-58, as well as in Yang Chih-chiu, *Yüan shih san lun* [Three Discussions on Yüan History], Peking, 1985, pp. 127-132, under the title of 'Ma-k'o Po-lo yü Chung-kuo' ['Marco Polo and China']. This is one of six important articles by Yang on the subject of Marco Polo which have been published in the book edited by Yü Shih-hsiung. (For a profile of Yang Chih-chiu, see Matt Forney, 'Defender of the Faith', in the *Far Eastern*

Finally, in 1993, the senior Chinese historian and Yüan specialist Ts'ai Meipiao published an important article in English on Marco Polo, complementing and supplementing Yang's contribution.<sup>11</sup>

F. W., and no doubt Clunas, were acquainted with Yang's rejoinder and his other fundamental contributions to the problem,<sup>12</sup> but F.W. may have missed Ts'ai's paper as it is not cited in her Bibliography. In any event, a projected collaboration between F.W. and Clunas did not eventuate, and F.W. set out to write the book on her own, as she explains at the end of the Introduction (p. 4).

Her book has attracted, and continues to attract, a good deal of attention from the press and from academic institutions because, for the first time, all the criticisms of Marco Polo and the *DW* have been brought together in a volume which deals also with the historical background, as well as with popular tales associated with Marco Polo. Moreover, in the last decade or so, there has been a renewal of interest in Marco Polo and his journey as a result of the numerous 'Silk Route' projects, exhibitions and publications sponsored by UNESCO and other organizations, and on account of the lavish Italian-Chinese-American joint television production 'Marco Polo', aired in 1982.

What matters to us here is, of course, the originality and validity of F. W.'s contribution: I propose therefore to review her arguments in the light of earlier and contemporary criticism, and of my own research. I shall also deal with some problems of form, and correct a number of mistakes in her book.

*Economic Review* of 22 August 1996, pp. 44-45). In the present article, following the practice of *The Cambridge History of China*, *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia*, and virtually all the major Western sinological works on the Yüan (including those of P. Pelliot, L. Olschki, F.W. Cleaves and H. Franke), I use the Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese. For a quick conversion into the *Pinyin* system (and vice versa), please note with regard to the consonants that W.-G. *ch/ch(i) = P. zh/j(i)*; *ch'ch'(i)ch'(ü) = ch/q(i)q(u)*, *hs = x*, *j = r*, *k = g*, *k' = g*, *p = p*, *p' = b*, *p, t, t' = d*, *t, ts, tz = z*, *tš, tž = c*. For the transcription of Mongolian, I follow the standard system used in N. Poppe, *Grammar of Written Mongolian*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1964 (several reprints), except that I substitute *ġ* for *γ* to represent the deep velar stop (a sound articulated further back than the *g* in *gun*).

11 Cai Meibiao, 'Marco Polo in China', *Social Sciences in China* 14, 2: Summer 1993, pp. 171-179.

12 F. W. refers several times to Yang Chih-chiu in her book (pp. 132, 137-9, 147), and the volume edited by Yü Shih-hsiung is cited in her Bibliography (p. 174, where 'Xu' is a misprint for 'Yu'); however, Yang's review is absent from that Bibliography.

The first four chapters of F.W.'s book can be regarded as introductory, dealing as they do with the contents of the Prologue of the *DW* (Ch. 1); medieval trade between Italy and the Far East, and the reason for the journey of Nicolò and Maffeo Polo (Ch. 2); contemporary travellers to the Mongol court and to China, viz. the Franciscan papal envoys and missionaries of the 13th and 14th c. (Ch. 3); and the medieval legends concerning Prester John and his mythical kingdom, Gog and Magog, and the Three Magi in relation to Eastern Christianity (Nestorianism) and other religions, as they are reported in the *DW* (Ch. 4).

What F. W. says on these topics is generally correct: most of the facts have been amply researched in the past and are well established. However, some of her statements and interpretations call for comment.

On p. 7, F. W. says that 'the Mongols had taken north China in 1260'. Actually, north China had been conquered by the Mongols between 1215 and 1234, when they brought to an end the Chin (Jurchen) state and incorporated its territory.<sup>13</sup>

On pp. 14-15, F. W. mentions the presence of Italian merchants in Yang-chou and, in particular, that of the Vilioni family. She refers to the discovery of the inscribed tombstone of Catherine Vilioni (Katerina de Vilionis), dated 1342, but she is apparently not aware that a second tombstone was found at Yang-chou, also with an inscription in Latin. The latter was erected for Catherine's brother Anthony (Antonius de Vilionis), who died in November 1344.<sup>14</sup> The Vilioni family was Venetian, not Genoese, as a somewhat ambiguous statement by F.W. on p. 14 makes it appear.<sup>15</sup> With reference to Marco Polo's supposed claim to have governed the city of Yang-chou for three years, F.W. correctly points out that 'whilst there is absolutely no record of Marco Polo in the Yangzhou gazetteers, there is equally no mention of other resident Italian merchants and their families'.

13 See H. Franke and D. Twitchett (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6: *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 352, 370-372, 405ff.

14 See R.C. Rudolph, 'A Second Fourteenth-Century Italian Tombstone in Yangchou', *Journal of Oriental Studies* 13: 1975, pp. 133-136 (with reproductions of both tombstones).

15 See L. Petech, 'Les marchands italiens dans l'empire mongol', *Journal asiatique* 250: 1962, p. 557. Cf. 'Testamento di Pietro Vioni', in *Archivio Veneto*, ser. 1, vol. 26 (Venice, 1883), pp. 161-165, cited by Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 135, n. 19.

On p. 16, F. W. writes: 'in the official history of the Mongol era (*Yuan shi*), the first European to be mentioned by name was John of Marignolli, a papal envoy to the Khans between 1330 and 1340'. Not so. John's name — like those of *all* the other missionaries and papal envoys — is nowhere mentioned in the *Yüan shih*, although his 'Frankish' embassy is duly recorded in the imperial annals (*pen-chi*) s. a. 1342.<sup>16</sup>

On pp. 19-20, F. W. refers to Marco Polo's description of the first Mongol capital Qaraqorum and his mention of 'a very large castle' outside the city. She writes: 'This reference, considered „obscure” by one commentator,<sup>17</sup> could perhaps be a confusion with or version of an encampment visited by Friar John of Plano Carpini, the temporary „city of tents” erected to honour the appointment of the new Khan in 1246'. This is certainly not the case, since the temporary encampment south of Qaraqorum was set up especially in order to accommodate the great number of participants at the *qurilta(i)*, or general assembly, that elected Güyüg. This 'tent city' would have been dismantled some time after the election. Moreover, the 'very great castle' was just outside the mound-wall of Qaraqorum, whereas, according to John of Pian di Carpine, the tent city was about half-a-day's journey from the city.<sup>18</sup> The relevant passage in the *DW* (Moule-Pelliot ed.) says: 'The city indeed is surrounded with a strong mound, because they have no supply of stones, near to which on the outside is a very large castle, and in that is a most beautiful palace where the ruler of it dwells'.<sup>19</sup> I think that the imposing building to which Marco Polo refers is the imperial residence built by Činggis Qan's successor Ögödei Qagan (r. 1229-41) in 1235-1236. We

16 See Franke, 'Sino-Western Contacts', p. 57.

17 See R. Latham (tr.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958 (several reprints; hereafter referred to as Latham), p. 92, n. †.

18 See Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, a cura di P. Daffinà, C. Leonardi, M.C. Lungarotti, E. Menestò, L. Petech, Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1989, pp. 230, 339, 391, 410. Güyüg's encampment is referred to as the 'Syra Orda', i. e. *Sira ordo*, lit., 'Yellow (= Golden > Imperial) Camp'. Cf. I. de Rachewiltz in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 64: 1990, pp. 425-426. See also C. Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission. Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, translated by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, London and New York: Sheer & Ward, 1955, p. 5.

19 A. C. Moule & Paul Pelliot (eds), *Marco Polo. The Description of the World*, I, London: Routledge & Sons, 1938, p. 161. (The abbreviation *DW* refers always to this composite edition.)

know from the Chinese sources that Ho-lin, i. e. Qaraqorum, was walled (*ch'eng*), and that the imperial palace, known in Chinese as the Wan-an kung ('Palace of the Myriad Tranquillities'), was built in the spring of 1235.<sup>20</sup> The construction was completed in February-March 1236, and it was followed by other important buildings erected by Chinese and Muslim architects.<sup>21</sup> The construction of the palace is, therefore, contemporary with that of the wall encircling the city. There is no doubt in my mind that the *magnum palatium* described by William of Rubruck in his *Itinerarium* is the palace originally built by Ögödei.<sup>22</sup> This consisted of several buildings or structures, the most important of which was the throne hall. The site of these structures was excavated by the joint Soviet-Mongolian archeological expedition led by S.V. Kiselev in 1948-1949.<sup>23</sup> The excavations revealed the areas occupied by

- 20 *Yüan shih* [*History of the Yüan*], *Po-na* ed., repr. Taipei: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1981, ch. 2, p. 5a. (I cite the original Hung-wu [1370] edition of the *Yüan shih* in preference to the revised and occasionally faulty Chung-hua shu-chü edition of 1976.) Cf. P. Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols., Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1959-73, I, pp. 165, 167. In a Sino-Mongolian inscription of 1346, Ögödei's palace is referred to simply as his *ordo*. See F.W. Cleaves in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 14: 1951, p. 95, n. 110; cf. also *op. cit.* 15: 1952, pp. 25, 27, nn. 31, 79. The Chinese name Wan-an kung was probably given to the palace by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai (1189-1243), who at the time was in charge of Chinese affairs at the Mongol court. On him see I. de Rachewiltz, H.-L. Chan, C.-C. Hsiao and P.W. Geier (eds) with the assistance of M. Wang, *In the Service of the Khan. Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yüan Period (1200-1300)*, *Asiatische Forschungen* 121, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993, pp. 136-175. For Qaraqorum under Ögödei, see Ču. Dalai, 'Ögedei Xaan ba Xarxorum Xot' ['Ögedei Qaan and the City of Qaraqorum'], *Mongolica* (Ulan-Bator) 5(26):1994, pp. 18-23.
- 21 See *Yüan shih*, *loc. cit.* Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, who witnessed the construction of the palace, wrote a short but elegant piece in classical Chinese on the occasion of 'the setting up of the beams', which is found in his *Collected Works*. See *Chan-jan chü-shih wen-chi* [*The Collected Works of Chan-jan chü-shih (= Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai)*], *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* ed., ch. 13, pp. 25b-26b.
- 22 See A. Van Den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I: Itinera et relationes fratrum minorum saeculi XIII et XIV*, Quaracchi-Firenze: Collegium S. Bonaventura, 1929, p. 276; P. Jackson (tr. and ann.) with D. Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck. His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke (1253-1255)*, London: The Hakluyt Society, 1990, pp. 209, 210, nn. 1 and 2. Friar William gives an excellent description of the palace as it was some twenty years after its construction.
- 23 See S.V. Kiselev (ed.), *Drevnemongol'skie goroda*, Moscow: 'Nauka', 1965, pp. 6-7, 138-167.

the different structures, wooden pillars, a wooden floor of beams and a roof of glazed tiles belonging to the main palace. The palace complex was surrounded by an enclosure which touched the town wall on the western corner. The latter was an earthen mound two metres high with a wattle fence along its top. The main building and the subsidiary structures have been reconstructed from the scanty remains, the detailed description of Friar William, and also 'from the analogy of Chinese and later Mongol buildings'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the reference in the *DW* is no longer 'obscure' and Marco Polo's indication, although very succinct, cannot be faulted. The fact that the description of Qaraqorum in the *DW* is so 'disappointingly brief' is simply due to the fact that Marco almost certainly did not visit that city which was the Mongol capital until 1260, when Qubilai had himself elected emperor in China, thereby transferring his residence to Yen-ching (Chung-tu, Ta-tu, Peking) and Shang-tu (To-lun, Inner Mongolia).<sup>25</sup>

The question of what Marco Polo actually saw and what he described second-hand is intimately related to that of his itinerary, and this is of course one of the major problems that confront the reader of the *DW*. It is also the main topic of Chapter Five of F. W.'s book, with which the real critique of Marco Polo's credibility begins.

- 24 E.D. Phillips, *The Mongols*, New York and Washington: F. A. Praeger, 1969, p. 102. Phillips (*op. cit.*, pp. 94-103) sums up the results of the exploration of the site by Kiselev and his team. See also his reproduction of the map of the palace (and its proximity to the city mound) on p. 101.
- 25 See Olschki, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Personally, I exclude it. Had Marco Polo been at Qaraqorum, he would not have dismissed it in such a fashion. He does not say that he was there. The reasons for not going were, in my view, the following: 1) Qaraqorum was no longer the capital and, after 1260, it fell first into the orbit of Qubilai's rival brother Ariq Böke (d. 1264), then into that of his rebel nephew Toq Temür (d. ca. 1279), and ultimately into that of his hostile cousin Qaidu (d. 1301). In between rebellions, the city which consisted largely of tents with a few edifices (such as the palace complex and a few temples) was neglected and fell into disrepair despite occasional economic help from the south; 2) the journey from north China to Qaraqorum (and return) across the Gobi and the grassland of Mongolia would have discouraged the traveller unless he had some compelling reason for undertaking it. The troubled political situation in that region, its remoteness, and the steady decline of Qaraqorum virtually rule out this possibility. For Qaraqorum under Qubilai, see provisionally M. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan. His Life and Times*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 113-114.

Entitled 'Not an itinerary', this chapter criticizes the *DW* for 1) not providing a clear and coherent itinerary of localities seen by Marco Polo; 2) not providing dates even when the sections (as with the Near East, Central Asia and China) 'are generally arranged in a geographical manner' (p. 30); 3) the unsatisfactory account of the return journey, with a suggestion that the famous story of the Mongol princess taken from China to Persia to marry the Il-Khan Argun (r. 1284-91), as related by Marco 'was borrowed from another source' (p. 32); and 4) the fact that the *DW* 'contains remarkably few references to the Polo themselves' (p. 32), leaving 'an impersonal tone with a strong flavour of the guidebook' (pp. 36-37). F. W. mentions in this connection several instances of Marco Polo's descriptions of localities, with details of distances, dates and events which are difficult to reconcile with reality. The chapter concludes with the statement that 'much of Marco Polo's account of the East does consist of tons of salt and distances' and that 'even without following a logical itinerary, the book serves more as a merchant's view of the world than that of a creative writer' (pp. 37, 38).

It is certainly true that Marco Polo is no John of Pian di Carpine or William of Rubruck, whose accounts are a faithful, accurate and detailed record of their journeys; and it is also true that he is interested in commercial activities, but this does not make him a Pegolotti either. His book is neither an *Itinerarium à la Rubruck*, nor a *Pratica della Mercatura*. Criticisms like those of F. W. concerning the itinerary of his journeys, dates and lack of them, impersonal style of narration, and inconsistencies and errors in the *DW*, ultimately stem from an incorrect appraisal of the man and the nature of his book. Both these central questions of the Polan *Problematik* have been addressed by Leonardo Olschki and John Critchley, and they have been discussed *in extenso* in their works.<sup>26</sup> It is, therefore, surprising that F. W. should have chosen to ignore the results of these scholars' painstaking investigation, and that she should again ask questions that have already been competently and comprehensively dealt with.

Marco Polo may still be something of an enigma (there are, alas, so many blanks in his life), but two things about him are clear: he was not an official envoy sent by a European potentate on a specific mission, with a detailed report to present to his master upon his return; and he was not merely a merchant (in the professional sense of the word), although he came from a line of merchants, had obviously an eye for valuable goods and trade

26 See Olschki, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 97-146; Critchley, pp. 30-76.

opportunities, and may well have engaged in commercial activities during his long sojourn in Asia.<sup>27</sup>

He has been aptly described as a literate layman with no literary pretensions; a good, in fact a keen observer, but lacking in imagination; an unsophisticated mind unable to draw general conclusions from the facts described.<sup>28</sup> Hence the blandness, often dullness of the narrative, only occasionally relieved by some wild statement or tale of marvels — the stock in trade of all medieval travellers. Hence also the abundance of literary clichés and stereotyped characterizations.<sup>29</sup> The 'personal' element is virtually disposed of in the Prologue of the *DW*, and on purpose. The main body of the work was to be devoted to *Le divisament dou monde*, not to the Polos' travels and adventures. The description of places and peoples is what matters: outside the Prologue, the Polos' involvement is purely incidental. If the itinerary and chronology of the *DW* lack coherence and precision, and at times are indeed utterly unreliable, it is because the individual episodes that Marco relates are for him far more important than strict adherence to topographical and chronological accuracy. The result is that while the main events described and the names are generally correct, the details are not.<sup>30</sup> We must not overlook the fact that it may have not been possible to check many of the details, especially concerning figures (distances, quantities, etc.), after Marco's return to Venice. One must take into account also factors like lapses of memory and blurred recollections concerning things seen, or done, or heard many years before in the course of an eventful life; Marco's obvious biases in the choice of matters to relate given the enormous mass of information on a great variety of subjects which he clearly had at his disposal; an obvious and only too human tendency to exaggerate his role;

27 Olschki, *op. cit.*, p. 98. Cf. Critchley, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-50. Given the times and circumstances, it seems unrealistic to think that the Polos, as a group, did not engage in some commercial or financial enterprise in China, or during their travels. Nicolò and Maffeo were merchants by profession, and unless otherwise employed in China, they would as a matter of course have continued their professional activity. This is what Ts'ai, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176, thinks, speculating further that Marco would have joined them in their commercial enterprises. However, it should be pointed out that Marco, although obviously observant of commercial matters, never claims having been himself involved in 'mercatura'.

28 See Olschki, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120. Cf. Critchley, *op. cit.*, p. xi; Latham, p. 18ff.

29 See Critchley, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26, 58, 84ff., 95.

30 See Pelliot's apt remarks in *Notes on Marco Polo*, I, p. 3, also quoted by F. W. (pp. 59-60).

and our total ignorance concerning the 'data base' he used, i. e. personal recollection with or without outside help, travel notes or other records, books, etc.<sup>31</sup>

In her 'Conclusions' (pp. 140-142), F. W. returns to the subject of the lack of a coherent itinerary in the *DW*, and asks herself whether this may not be due to 'the form of the text' as determined by Marco's 'ghost writer' Rustichello of Pisa. We shall discuss the role of Rustichello later in connection with F. W.'s Chapter Six. However, as to coherence, Critchley has already noted that the 'order' set out in the Prologue is actually adhered to 'until the very last chapters ... land out and sea home. India is twice left to its „proper" place. The subordinate organization within this scheme is that of an itinerary; there is little leapfrogging to and fro'.<sup>32</sup> It is after the journey is over, i. e. in the section covering the last fourteen pages in Latham's edition of the *DW*, that the 'coherent' itinerary is abandoned.<sup>33</sup> This very last section or certainly part of it, is undoubtedly a later addition.<sup>34</sup>

F. W.'s implied comparison of Marco Polo with 'the armchair guidebook writer Pegolotti' (see pp. 13, 14, 149) does not stand a close examination. Although Marco's 'mercantile' remarks are frequent, the style, structure and organization of his book are completely different from Pegolotti's work. Olschki has correctly noted that 'in Pegolotti there is no fictional hint of distant treasure, no interest in the nature and civilization of exotic peoples, no description of landscapes, cities, ports or customs — not even any mention of the curious or salacious stories diffused from time immemorial by merchants, together with their goods, as is attested by both Marco and Giovanni Boccaccio'.<sup>35</sup> The occasional 'undisciplined' way in which Marco

31 These and other factors are exhaustively discussed by Olschki and Critchley in the works already cited.

32 Critchley, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

33 Latham, pp. 329-343; *DW*, pp. 469-490. As far as China is concerned, it should be noted that an important contribution to the reconstruction of Marco's itinerary, and the dates pertinent to it, which appeared ten years ago has been overlooked by F. W. I refer to Ch'en Te-chih's article 'Ma-k'o Po-lo tsai Chung-kuo ti lü-ch'eng chi ch'i nien-tai' ('Marco Polo in China, The Itineraries and the Dates'), in *Yüan shih chi pei-fang min-tsu shih yen-ch'ü chi-k'an* (*Studies in the History of the Yuan Dynasty and of the Northern Nationalities*) 10: July 1986, pp. 1-9, 47.

34 See Critchley, *op. cit.*, p. 11; B. Wehr, 'A propos de la genèse du „Devisement dou Monde" de Marco Polo', in M. Selig *et al.* (eds), *Le passage à l'écrit des langues romanes*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993, pp. 306-307.

35 Olschki, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

tells his story — examples of which are given by F. W. — is precisely due to the fact that the author lacked the constraints of a diarist, a chronicler or a compiler of a travel or commercial guide.

Finally, the way F. W. handles the story concerning the Polos' return journey and the delivery of Lady Kökečin deserves special attention for 1) it cannot be disposed of so easily, and 2) Marco's account is crucial in determining his presence in China at the time and, consequently, in establishing the credibility of the author and of the book as a whole. Therefore, it is important to look closely at this event to which F. W. returns in Chapter Fifteen (pp. 137-139), only to dismiss it once again as non conclusive.

The story has been quoted often enough, but its real significance has been generally missed, lost (as it is often the case) in technicalities.<sup>36</sup>

In the Prologue of the *DW*, Marco Polo describes how he, his father and uncle, took leave from Qubilai and 'the good fortune' that led to their departure from China.<sup>37</sup> The principal wife of Arġun, Il-Khan of Persia (r. 1284-91), had died, and Arġun, who was Qubilai's grand-nephew, sent three envoys to Qubilai requesting a spouse from her own tribe to take her place.<sup>38</sup> Qubilai obliged and chose as the new bride for Arġun the young Lady Cocacin, i. e. Kökečin.<sup>39</sup> Arġun's envoys tried to return to Persia by land, but because of warfare in Central Asia, the party was forced to retrace its steps

36 See also, recently, Latham, pp. 15-16.

37 *DW*, pp. 87-93 (cf. also *ibid.*, p. 490); Latham, pp. 42-45 (cf. also p. 344).

38 Arġun's wife (the widow of his father Abaġa, who had died in 1282) was Buluġan Qatun — Marco Polo's 'Queen Bolgana' (*DW*, p. 88) — who died in 1286. She belonged to the Baya'ut tribe. See Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 392-393.

39 For Kökečin see *ibid.*, pp. 392-394; F. W. Cleaves, 'A Chinese Source on Marco Polo's Departure from China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 36:1976, pp. 202-203. While I agree with Cleaves that the meaning of the name is 'Dark Complexioned' rather than 'Azure (or Céleste)', I do not share his view that it should actually be read Kökejin. Marco's 'Cogacin' represents an original form Kökečin. The Mongolian ethnic and name suffix *-jin* sometimes becomes *-cin*, as in *uyigurčün* 'Uighur', *sartaġčün* 'Muslim, Turkestanian', etc. The reading 'Kükäjin' which is found in Rašid al-Din's work quoted by Cleaves is not reliable, for the Persian historian regularly confuses *č* with *j*. For example, he always writes Tāijīūt (the name of a Mongol clan and tribe) instead of Tāičiūt, which is the correct form. See P. Pelliot *et al.* Hambis (ed. and tr.), *Histoire des campagnes de Gengis Khan. Cheng-wou ts'in-tcheng lou*, I, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1951, pp. 13, 25, 151, 253. I think that in 'Cogacin' we have an instance of \*Kökejin > Kökečin.



and arrange to return home by sea. At this juncture the Polos wanted also to go back to Venice after seventeen years spent in China. They met the envoys and decided to join them. Qubilai charged them with a mission to the Pope and the kings of Europe, gave them two tablets of authority to facilitate their journey and – so Marco claims – entrusted the princess to their care. The ships were fitted out and the emissaries, Lady Kōkečīn and the three Polos embarked for Persia. The voyage was long and arduous: many people died, including two of the three envoys. On arrival at Hormuz, the Polos found that Arġun had already died and that his brother Ġaiġatu (r. 1291-95) had succeeded him. Ġaiġatu decided that the princess should be given as wife to Ġasan (r. 1295-1304), Arġun's eldest son. After delivering her to Ġasan, the Polos returned to Ġaiġatu and eventually resumed their journey overland. Ġaiġatu supplied them with further tablets of authority, and with horses, provisions, etc. for the journey. They reached Trebizond (Trabzon, in Turkey), and thence sailed to Constantinople, Negropont (Khalkis, in Greece) and Venice, where they arrived in 1295.

The story is told with a wealth of details in the *DW*. Regarding the date of the Polos' departure from China, for a long time it was assumed that it took place at the beginning of 1292.<sup>40</sup> However, in the late 1930s, by ingenious deduction, Paul Pelliot was able to work out on the basis of Marco's account

40 See, e. g., Yule, *op. cit.*, I, p. 23; Latham, p. 15. The year of departure has been usually calculated starting from 1275, the year of the Polos' supposed arrival in China, and adding 17, the years Marco says they spent there. See Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 21 and note. Now, the three Polos met Qubilai at Chemeinfu, i. e. K'ai-p'ing fu, also called Shang-tu ('Upper Capital'; see Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-240, 256-257), as is told in the *DW*, p. 84. In 1275, Qubilai arrived in K'ai-p'ing on 27 March (see *Yüan shih*, ch. 8, p. 20b). The Polos could have easily taken three months to cross north China from west to east, i. e. from Tangut to Chemeinfu, since we do not know how long they halted in the towns along the route described by Marco (*DW*, pp. 158-185) – the land journey from Ayas on the Gulf of Iskenderon (Alexandretta) to K'ai-p'ing having taken altogether *three and half years* (*DW*, p. 84). It is, in fact, more than likely that they still reached northwest China in 1274. If so, and if the Polos left China at the beginning of 1291 (as it will become evident), Marco may be excused for saying 'quite seventeen years' (*loc. cit.*), although this is not strictly accurate, his stay in the country having lasted between sixteen and seventeen years. Marco, as is known, was not very good at figures – another feature of the man that militates against the claim that he was a merchant.

that the Polos must have left China early in 1291.<sup>41</sup> Until 1941, the whole story of Arġun and his bride, the princess' voyage and the Polos' return was known to us solely through the *DW*. Not only is there no mention of the Polos in Chinese sources, but the entire episode concerning Qubilai, Kōkečīn and Arġun is totally ignored by them: the *Yüan shih* – the official history of the Yüan dynasty – does not even allude to it in the 'Basic Annals' (*pen-chi*) or anywhere else.

Now, in his account Marco gives the names of the three envoys of Arġun as follows: 'the first Oulatai, the second Apusca, and the third Coja' – listed, of course, in order of seniority.<sup>42</sup> He also informs us that the one who survived the voyage was Coja.<sup>43</sup> The transcriptions of the names of the envoys as given by Marco are very accurate. 'Oulatai' corresponds to Mongolian Ulatai ~ Uladai; 'Apusca' to Turkic Abušqa ~ Abišqa; and 'Coja' to Persian Xōja (Turkic Qoča, Qoya).<sup>44</sup> Ulatai is mentioned again in the *DW* in connection with the part he is supposed to have played in aiding Arġun to ascend the throne after Abaġa's death.<sup>45</sup> The Persian sources ignore him. The *Yüan shih* mentions one (or two?) Uladai, one Ulutai and one Uludai – all these being variants of the same name as borne by different

41 Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 393. Pelliot actually followed a method of inverse reasoning which led him to the conclusion 'that the travellers crossed the western Indian Ocean in the winter-monsoon of 1292-1293. Since it took them three months to sail from Zaitun [i. e., the Chinese port of Ch'üan-chou on the Fu-chien coast – I.R.] to Sumatra, where they waited five months before crossing the Indian Ocean, they must have left China not in 1292 as is generally stated, but early in 1291'. Pelliot wrote this note before World War II, but it was published only in 1959.

42 *DW*, p. 88. Cf. Latham, p. 42, where the spelling of the names has been somewhat altered by the editor.

43 *DW*, p. 91; Latham, p. 44.

44 See Pelliot, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 798-799; I, pp. 44 and 402.

45 *DW*, p. 464; Latham, p. 325. As noted by Pelliot, *op. cit.*, II, p. 798, Ulatai's role in relation to Arġun's enthronement is no doubt exaggerated, since Ulatai is not mentioned at all in Rašīd al-Dīn's *Collection of Histories* (*Jāmi' al-Tavārīx*, completed in 1310-11).

personages.<sup>46</sup> None of these can be identified with our Ulatai, who was obviously an official in Argun's service, not in that of Qubilai's.

As for the second envoy Abušqa, we know from the Persian historian Rašīd al-Dīn that there was a high official called Abišqa under Ġasan who was sent on a mission from Persia to Qubilai, but as we lack details it is impossible to say whether this is our Abušqa, and if so whether the mission to Qubilai is the one we are concerned with. There were several officials by this name at the time.<sup>47</sup>

The third envoy, Xōja, has such a common name that it is virtually impossible to identify him with the many homonymous individuals mentioned in the *Yüan shih* and other Chinese sources.<sup>48</sup>

We are extremely fortunate, however, to have the copy of a contemporary official document in Chinese which not only mentions the three envoys, but also indicates that the mission they led was *preparing* to sail from Ch'üan-chou for Persia in September 1290. We owe the discovery of this precious new material to the earlier mentioned Yang Chih-chiu, who found it cited in the famous 15th-century encyclopedia *Yung-lo ta-tien* and who published it in 1941.<sup>49</sup>

46 See Tamura Jitsuzō (ed.), *Genshi goi shūsei* [*A Terminological Repertory of the Yüan shih*], Kyōto: Kyōto Daigaku Bungaku-bu, 1961-63, I, pp. 163a, 165a, 166a. The 'Uludai' listed on p. 163a with two entries of the *Yüan shih* may, in fact, be two homonymous personages. A Prince Uludai is mentioned also in the *Ching-hsien chi* of Yen Fu (1236-1312). See I. de Rachewiltz and M. Wang, *Repertory of Proper Names in Yüan Literary Sources*, Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1988, III, p. 2154. He must be identified with the Uludai of the *Yüan shih* (= Tamura, *op. cit.*, p. 166a). For other personages called Uludai, see *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, translated from the Persian of Rašīd al-Dīn by J.A. Boyle, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971, p. 371a (Index). For the name Uludai and its variants, see Cleaves, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-202. Cleaves (*ibid.*, p. 201 and n. 144) says that the form Uludai 'though not attested, must surely have existed'. As a matter of fact, Uludai is well attested in the *Yüan shih* (ch. 11, p. 3a; 12, p. 13b).

47 See Pelliot, *op. cit.*, I, p. 44, also for the name's variant Abišqa (= Abišqa > Abušqa). For other personages called Abišqa, see *The Successors*, p. 349a (Index); Tamura, *op. cit.*, II, p. 1270b, 1271a; de Rachewiltz and Wang, *op. cit.*, I, p. 12.

48 The name Xōja (< Xvājah) is extremely common and appears in various transcriptions in Chinese. As Pelliot (*op. cit.*, p. 402) remarked, 'the name is not characteristic enough to support an attempt at identification'. (The letter *x* is pronounced as *ch* in the Scottish *loch*.)

49 See Cleaves, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-192.

The document in question is a memorial dated 21 September 1290. It refers to an earlier directive issued by Qubilai in April-May 1290 to the effect that the three 'Uludai, Abišqa and Qoje be sent to the domain of the Prince of the Blood Argun by way of Ma'bar'. The new directive contained in the document is to the effect that rations and provisions for the voyage should not be purchased with government moneys for seventy of the 160 'co-travellers' who did not belong to the official mission, but to officials who were responsible for their provisioning.<sup>50</sup>

This is the only text in Chinese that we possess concerning Argun's embassy's return voyage. Neither Lady Kōkečin nor the Polos are mentioned, but there can be no doubt, also in view of the dates, that we are dealing with the mission described so vividly by Marco. As we have seen, according to the independent calculations of Pelliot, who was unaware of the discovery and publication of the memorial during the war, the embassy left China a few months later.

By dint of luck, we possess also a text that records the arrival of the embassy in Persia. This is a passage in Rašīd al-Dīn's *Collection of Histories* to which J. A. Boyle drew the attention of the scholarly world in 1970 and which was further elucidated by F. W. Cleaves in 1976.<sup>51</sup>

The relevant passage contains a brief account of the arrival in Abhar (near Kazvin) of Xvājah (i. e., Xōja) and a party of envoys who had been sent to the Qa'an (Qubilai), with the bride sought by Argun in the person of Kūkājīn Xātūn (i. e., Lady Kōkečin), in the spring or early summer of 1293. Argun's son Ġasan halted at Abhar and took Kōkečin as wife for himself.<sup>52</sup>

Rašīd's brief notice confirms Marco's account in its essentials, including the name of the surviving envoy Xōja, now leading the party.

50 For an annotated literal translation of the document, see *ibid.*, pp. 186-187. As noted by Cleaves (p. 188), 'It could hardly be expected that the government should pay the cost of feeding 70 persons who were passengers only by virtue of the fact that they had either been donated or purchased by officials whose sole interest in putting them on board the ships was probably to enrich themselves by having them bring back goods from Persia to China, which, because of the official character of the mission, could be brought in duty-free and sold at a handsome profit'. By 'Ma'bar' is meant the Coromandel Coast. From the *Yüan shih* we learn that the ships bound for Ma'bar sailed from Ch'üan-chou. See *ibid.*, p. 191.

51 J.A. Boyle, 'Rašīd al-Dīn and the Franks', *Central Asiatic Journal* 14:1970, pp. 62-67; Cleaves, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-203.

52 For the date of the arrival of Ġasan at Abhar, see Boyle, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

