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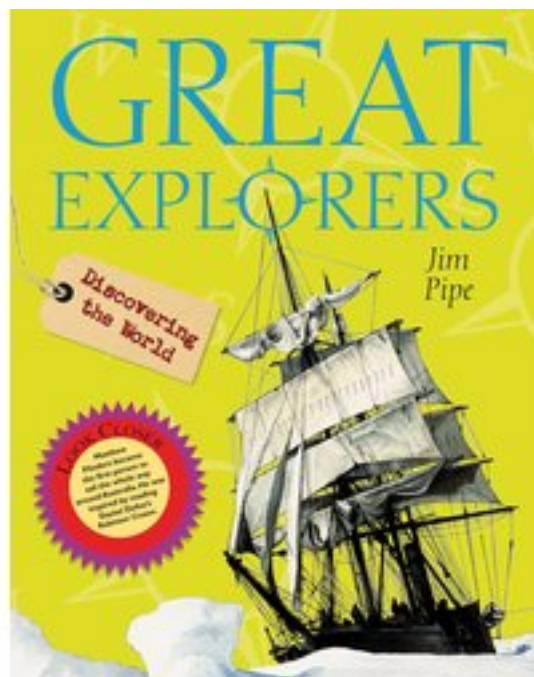
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Pipe, J. (2008). *Great explorers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



# MARCO POLO

**I**N 1266, TWO ITALIAN MERCHANTS, NICCOLÒ AND MAFFEO POLO, TRAVELLED TO CHINA. THEY SO IMPRESSED THE MONGOL LEADER KUBLAI KHAN THAT HE ASKED THEM TO RETURN TO ITALY ON A MISSION TO SEE THE POPE.

In 1271, the Polos set off again, but this time Niccolò took his 16-year-old son, Marco. They sailed to the east coast of the Mediterranean and then trekked overland to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. The Polos planned to sail to China, but were horrified by the leaky boats on offer. Instead, they plodded on through Persia (Iran) and Afghanistan. They crossed the Pamir Mountains and skirted the Takla Makan Desert. After four years, they reached the court of Kublai Khan in 1275. They presented the emperor with a gift of holy oil they had carried from Jerusalem.



Name: Marco Polo

Born: 15 September, 1254, Venice, Italy

Died: 9 January, 1324, Venice Italy

Notable achievements: In 1271, teenager Marco Polo set off for China. One of the very first Europeans to visit the region, he spent many years working for the Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan. He gathered information for the Khan on trading trips around China, which took him to the borders of Burma and Tibet. Polo returned to Venice in 1295, having covered some 39,000 km (24,240 miles). Three years later, he fought in a war against Venice's rival city Genoa, and was captured. While in prison, Marco dictated his travel stories to another prisoner, Rustichello. These were later made into a book called *Il Milione* (c.1299), also known as *The Travels*.

## LOOK CLOSER

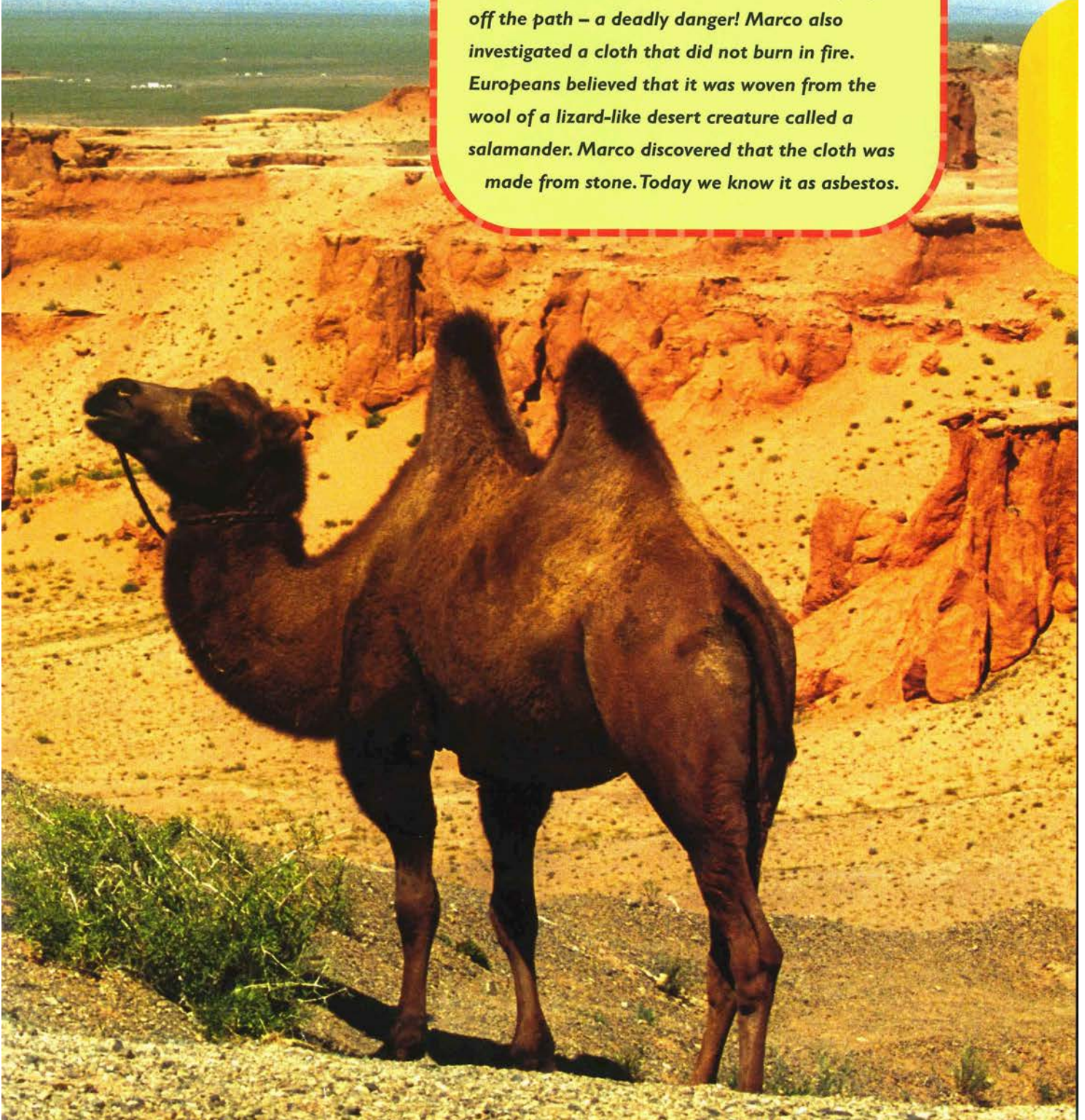
When Marco Polo crossed the mountains in Afghanistan, he suffered from altitude sickness – an illness caused by the lack of oxygen in high places.

◀ The Polos presented Kublai Khan with a letter from the Pope in reply to the khan's request for teachers in Christianity and Western customs.

▼ The Polos crossed the Gobi Desert as part of a camel caravan. Although the landscape was harsh, the route through the desert was well established.

### TRAVELLER'S TALES

**M**arco Polo warned of 'spirit voices' that called to travellers as they crossed the Gobi Desert. He said that the voices drew people off the path – a deadly danger! Marco also investigated a cloth that did not burn in fire. Europeans believed that it was woven from the wool of a lizard-like desert creature called a salamander. Marco discovered that the cloth was made from stone. Today we know it as asbestos.



Kublai Khan trusted the Polos and asked them to work for him. As they travelled around East Asia, Marco wrote down the local customs and sent reports to the emperor. Marco described a black rock that burned for hours (coal) and an amazing postal system: relay riders on horseback could carry messages 185 km (115 miles) in a single day.

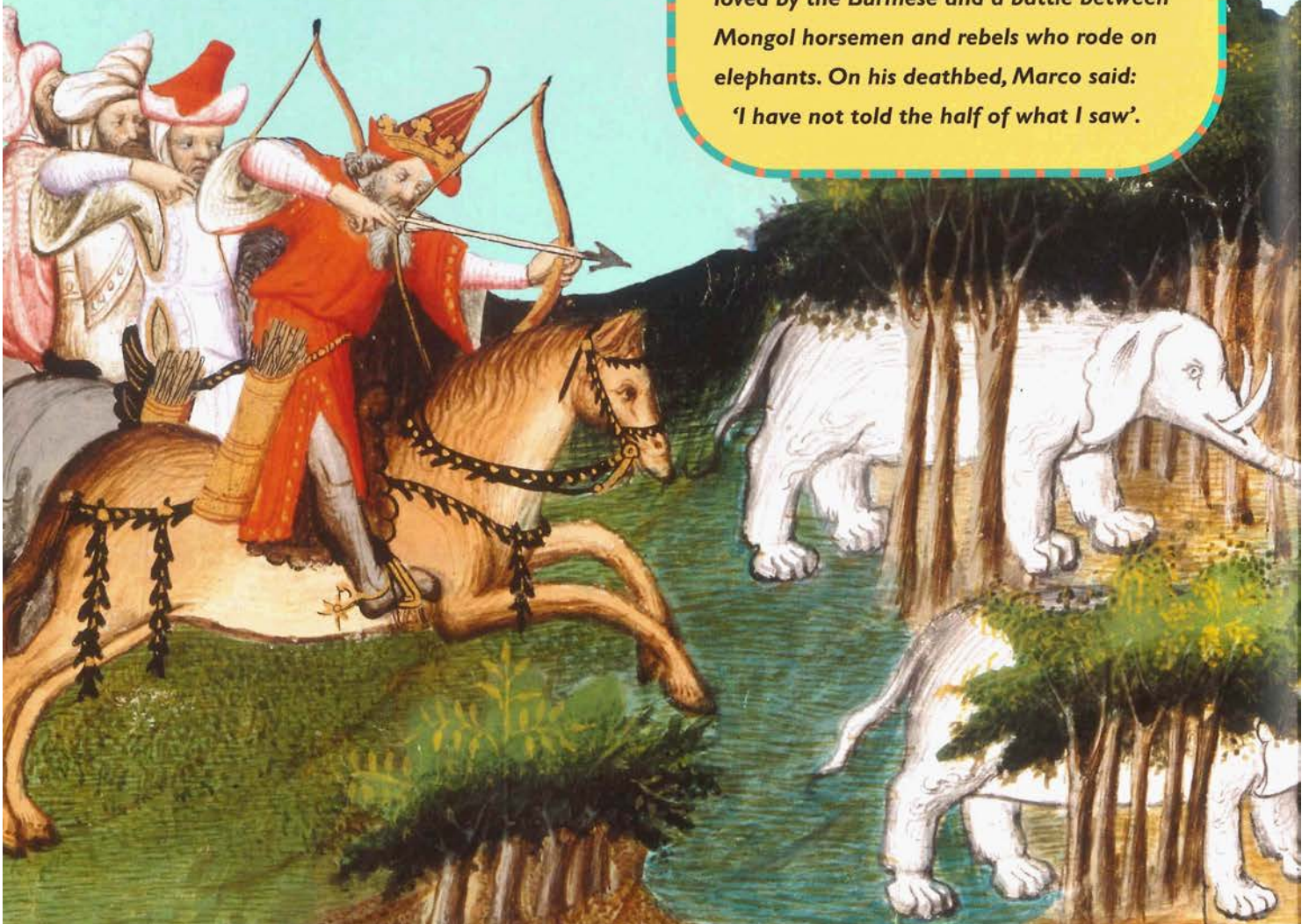
Marco also marvelled at how Kublai Khan lived. His dining hall was covered in gold and silver and

▼ When Kublai Khan went hunting, he took 10,000 riders and 5,000 dogs with him. In his private park, tigers were trained to chase deer.

could hold 6,000 guests. After 17 years, the Polos got homesick. Kublai Khan asked them to carry out one last mission on their way home. They escorted a Mongol princess to marry a prince in Persia. Finally, the Polos returned to Venice in the winter of 1295.

### STRANGE LAND

**M**arco Polo's tales are full of dragons, unicorns and strange men with tails! However, he also talks about real people and places. He says that Kublai Khan was a plump man with a face 'fair and ruddy like a rose'. Marco describes the explosive bang made by bamboos as they burn, the tattoos loved by the Burmese and a battle between Mongol horsemen and rebels who rode on elephants. On his deathbed, Marco said: 'I have not told the half of what I saw'.





The Khan had many wives. New wives were chosen by scouts from 400 to 500 women.

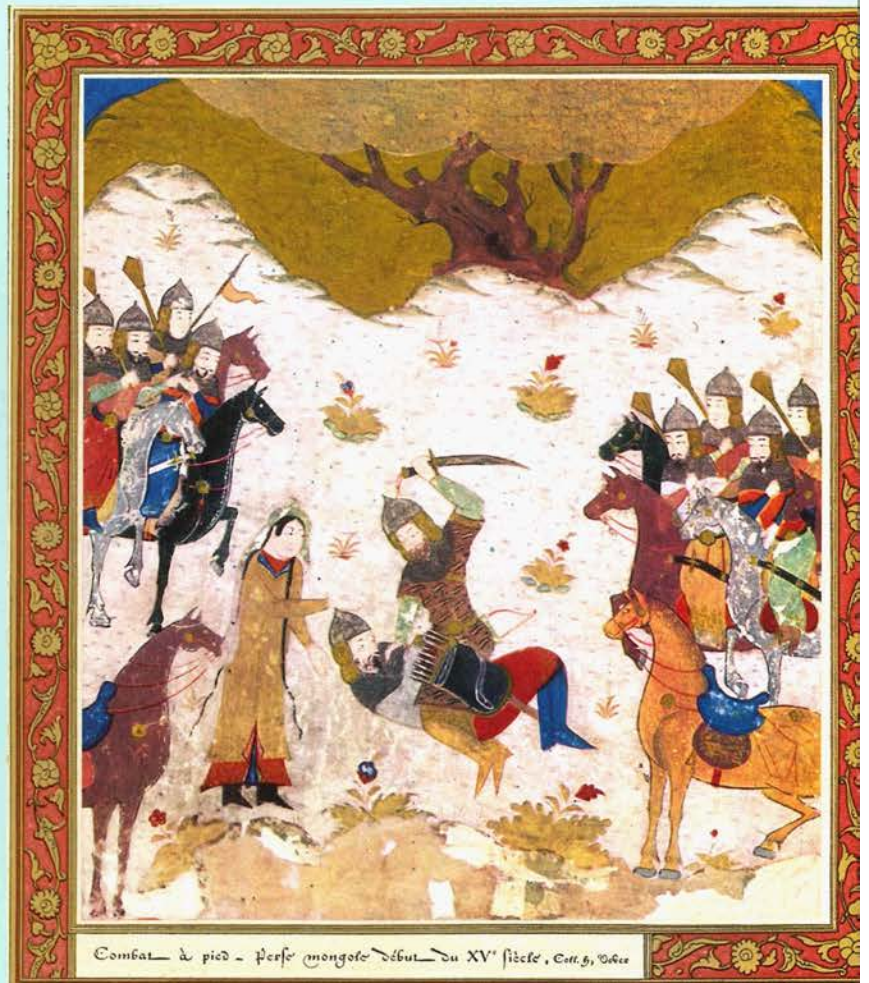
Polo admired Chinese paper money and their beautifully painted china bowls.

◀ The Great Wall was built to keep invaders out of China, but it did not stop the Mongol armies. Kublai Khan's kingdom was part of a Mongol empire that stretched across Asia to Europe.

► The Mongols fought on horseback and were fierce warriors. At Nishapur in Persia they made a huge pyramid out of the skulls of their victims.

## SURVIVAL SKILLS

The Polos thought Persian ships were 'wretched affairs only stitched together with twine'. When they went home to Venice, Kublai Khan gave them a fleet of giant junks.



Combat à pied - Perses mongoles début du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, Coll. G. Cohen