

**Primary Source Document
with Questions (DBQs)**

**THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO: THE VENETIAN CONCERNING
KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST, CHAPTER XXV:
CONCERNING THE TWELVE BARONS WHO ARE SET OVER ALL THE
AFFAIRS OF THE GREAT KAAN**

Introduction

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was born in Venice, an Italian city-state, to a powerful merchant family with extensive trade contacts. Marco Polo had the standard education for a young gentleman of his time—knowledge of classical authors and the basic beliefs of the Catholic church, a good grasp of French and Italian, and skills in accounting.

In 1260, Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled through the Mongol empire, all the way to its capital in China. There they requested trade and missionary contacts. Tradition has it that on a second trip, taken in 1271, on which they carried messages from the Pope, the elder Polos took along young Marco, who was then seventeen. Many years later, Marco Polo, with the assistance of a romance novel writer, composed a book entitled *The Travels of Marco Polo, or, A Description of the World*. If the book is to be believed, Marco Polo spent seventeen years in China, during which time he not only conducted business, but also was hired by the Mongol Yuan emperor to serve as the governor of Yangzhou, a large southern Chinese port city.

The veracity of Marco Polo's account is hotly debated among scholars. Some uphold Polo's claim to have been to China, while others argue that he simply picked up tales of China from Arab traders and compiled them into a book. None dispute, however, that the book does contain descriptions of Yuan-dynasty China, albeit with the embellishments and inaccuracies that one would expect from text that has been copied and recopied since the thirteenth century.

In the excerpts that follow, Marco Polo (or his Arab sources) describes the cities and urban life of Yuan-dynasty China.

Selected Document Excerpt

From *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Volumes I and II, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1903).

**The Book of Ser Marco Polo:
The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East**

BOOK SECOND. PART I.

**CHAPTER XXV. CONCERNING THE TWELVE BARONS WHO ARE SET OVER ALL THE
AFFAIRS OF THE GREAT KAAN**

You must know that the Great Kaan hath chosen twelve great Barons to whom he hath committed all the necessary affairs of thirty-four great provinces; and now I will tell you particulars about them and their establishments.

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You must know that these twelve Barons reside all together in a very rich and handsome palace, which is inside the city of Cambaluc, and consists of a variety of edifices, with many suites of apartments. To every province is assigned a judge and several clerks, and all reside in this palace, where each has his separate quarters. These judges and clerks administer all the affairs of the provinces to which they are attached, under the direction of the twelve barons. Howbeit, when an affair is of very great importance, the twelve barons lay in before the Emperor, and he decides as he thinks best. But the power of those twelve barons is so great that they choose the governors for all those thirty-four great provinces that I have mentioned, and only after they have chosen do they inform the Emperor of their choice. This he confirms, and grants to the person nominated a tablet of gold such as is appropriate to the rank of his government.

Those twelve barons also have such authority that they can dispose of the movements of the forces, and send them whither, and in such strength, as they please. This is done indeed with the Emperor's cognizance, but still the orders are issued on their authority. They are styled *Shieng*, which is as much to say "The Supreme Court," and the palace where they abide is also called *Shieng*. This body forms the highest authority at the Court of the Great Kaan; and indeed they can favour and advance whom they will.