

THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO: THE VENETIAN CONCERNING  
KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST, CHAPTER XIII: THE  
FASHION OF THE GREAT KAAAN'S TABLE AT HIS HIGH FEASTS

### 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 XIII. THE FASHION OF THE GREAT KAAAN'S TABLE AT HIS HIGH FEASTS

And when the Great Kaan sits at table on any great court occasion, it is in this fashion. His table is elevated a good deal above the others, and he sits at the north end of the hall, looking towards the south, with his chief wife beside him on the left. On his right sit his sons and his nephews, and other kinsmen of the Blood Imperial, but lower, so that their heads are on a level with the Emperor's feet. And then the other Barons sit at other tables lower still. So also

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with the women; for all the wives of the Lord's sons, and of his nephews and other kinsmen, sit at the lower table to his right; and below them again the ladies of the other Barons and Knights, each in the place assigned by the Lord's orders. The tables are so disposed that the Emperor can see the whole of them from end to end, many as they are. [Further, you are not to suppose that everybody sits at table; on the contrary, the greater part of the soldiers and their officers sit their meal in the hall on the carpets.] Outside the hall will be found more than 40,000 people; for there is a great concourse of folk bringing presents to the Lord, or come from foreign countries with curiosities.

In a certain part of the hall near where the Great Kan holds his table, there [is set a large and very beautiful piece of workmanship in the form of a square coffer, or buffet, about three paces each way, exquisitely wrought with figures of animals, finely carved and gilt. The middle is hollow, and in it] stands a great vessel of pure gold, holding as much as an ordinary butt; and at each corner of the great vessel is one of smaller size [of the capacity of a firkin], and from the former the wine or beverage flavoured with fine and costly spices is drawn off into the latter. [And on the buffet aforesaid are set all the Lord's drinking vessels, among which are certain pitchers of the finest gold,] which are called *verniques*, and are big enough to hold drink for eight or ten persons. And one of these is put between every two persons, besides a couple of golden cups with handles, so that every man helps himself from the pitcher that stands between him and his neighbor. And the ladies are supplied in the same way. The value of these pitchers and cups is something immense; in fact, the Great Kan has such a quantity of this kind of plate, and of gold and silver in other shapes, as no one ever before saw or heard tell of, or could believe.

[There are certain Barons specially deputed to see that foreigners, who do not know the customs of the Court, are provided with places suited to their rank; and these Barons are continually moving to and fro in the hall, looking to the wants of the guests at table, and causing the servants to supply them promptly with wine, milk, meat, or whatever they lack. ...

And you must know that those who wait upon the Great Kan with his dishes and his drink are some of the great Barons. They have the mouth and nose muffled with fine napkins of silk and gold, so that no breath nor odour from their persons should taint the dish or the goblet presented to the Lord. And when the emperor is going to drink, all the musical instruments, of which he has vast store of every kind, begin to play. When he takes the cup all the Barons and the rest of the company drop on their knees and make the deepest obeisance before him, and then the Emperor doth drink. But each time he does so the whole ceremony is repeated.

... And when all have dined and the tables have been removed, then come in a great number of players and jugglers, adepts at all sorts of wonderful feats, and perform before the Emperor and the rest of the company, creating great diversion and mirth, so that everybody is full of laughter and enjoyment. And when the performance is over, the company breaks up and every one goes to his quarters.