

Unit 8: The Legend of Marco Polo

Narrator: Italy 1296 A.D., the explorer Marco Polo is in jail. He is afraid he will die there, alone and unknown. With the help of a fellow prisoner, Polo writes a book to tell the world about his amazing adventures prior to his time in jail. Polo tells of the journey he undertook to Cathay, modern day China, a civilization so advanced, they could predict the movement of the moon and stars. According to historian Valerie Hansen, China then was a very foreign place to Europeans.

Valerie Hansen: Maybe like the South Pole is to us today. That you can go, but it's a huge journey; not many people go.

Narrator: Polo's tale has become one of the most famous adventure stories ever written. But some wonder, could this incredible story really be true? According to his story, Marco Polo set off for China in 1271 A.D., traveling as a merchant. His unparalleled journey took him over 8,000 kilometers along the routes of the old Silk Road. Eventually, he reaches the remote Taklamakan Desert. Modern day explorer Charles Blackmore knows how dangerous the Taklamakan can be.

Charles Blackmore: The temperature of the desert is formidable in the summer. The temperature can reach up to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. There's no water in the desert, there's no wells, so you're walking through a sea of sand, and it's very difficult to think that you might come out the other end.

Narrator: Polo claims he did just that, and made it all the way to Shangdu and the summer palace of Kublai Khan. But some people have their doubts.

Valerie Hansen: The reason I don't think Marco Polo went to China is that there are basic factual inaccuracies in the book. He says he's at a battle that took place in 1273, and we know the battle took place in 1268, which is before he gets there.

Narrator: One of the things Marco Polo describes in his book, is a fish that was a hundred feet long that had fur on it. Others, who believe Polo's claims, point to details that could not have been invented in Europe. Marco Polo, for example, was the first European to write about coal.

Marco Polo: Throughout the province of Cathay there are large black stones dug from the mountains, which burn and make flames, like logs.

Morris Rossabi: Marco Polo was definitely in China, I am absolutely convinced of it because of the tremendous detail in his book.

Narrator: In it, Marco Polo describes Kublai Khan's great summer palace.

Marco Polo: The hall is so vast that it could sit six thousand for one banquet.

Morris Rossabi: The city was excavated in the 1930s, and they found that the placement of the buildings and the style of the buildings was exactly the way Marco Polo had described them.

Narrator: Whether Marco Polo did make it to China or not, his tale would be translated into many languages, and inspire many more explorers. As it will for a long time to come.