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# MARCO POLO

BIOGRAPHY

1310L



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

# MARCO POLO

ITALIAN TRADER AT  
THE COURT OF KUBLAI KHAN

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

**Born**  
1254  
Venice, Italy

**Died**  
January 8, 1324  
Venice, Italy

At the height of the Mongol Empire, Marco Polo served Emperor Kublai Khan in China and returned to Venice to write an account of his experiences that would give Europeans some of their earliest information about China.

## Background

In the thirteenth century, people who lived in Venice, Italy, believed that the Sun revolved around the Earth and that creation occurred exactly 4,484 years before Rome was founded. As Christians, they considered Jerusalem, the place of Jesus's crucifixion, to be the so-called navel of the world, and their maps portrayed this.

Marco Polo was born in Venice, or possibly Croatia, in 1254. Located on the eastern coast of Italy, Venice served as a gateway to the riches of Asia during this era of increasing trade. Goods flowed like water through the city. Ships from around the eastern Mediterranean Sea docked at its port. Merchants and traders set sail from Venice for Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the Black Sea to fetch goods from Russia and from merchants who traveled the Silk Roads, a system of trading routes to and from China that crossed the mountains and deserts of Central Asia.

At the time of Marco's birth, his father, Niccolo, and two uncles, all merchants, were away trading. Supposedly they were visiting cities on the Black Sea, but their adventures had actually taken them all the way to the Mongol capital of China, Khanbaliq (city of the Khan). There they had an audience with the most powerful ruler of the day, Kublai Khan, grandson of the founding emperor, Genghis Khan. When the three Polo men returned to Venice after an absence of 16 years, Niccolo found that his wife had died and that he had a 15-year-old son, Marco, whom he did not know existed.

## Travels

Two years later, in 1271, Niccolo Polo and his brother, Maffeo, set off again, taking the 17-year-old Marco with them. This time they aimed directly for the court of Kublai Khan, to bring him documents from the pope and holy oil from Jerusalem that he had requested. Even with a gold passport from Kublai Khan, which enabled the travelers to use lodgings and horses posted by the Mongols along the Silk Road routes, they took three and a half years



Fifteenth-century illustration showing the Polos sailing from Venice in 1271

to arrive. Upon reaching the summer palace of Kublai Khan in 1275, Niccolo presented his son and offered him in service to the emperor.

A talented young man, Marco had learned several languages along the way, including Mongolian (though not Chinese), and had mastered four written alphabets. Two years before Marco's arrival, Kublai Khan had completed the conquest of all parts of China and needed non-Mongol administrators in areas that resisted having Mongol authorities. Marco took on various sorts of diplomatic and administrative roles for the emperor from his base in Dadu, which Kublai Khan built next to Khanbaliq. Both Dadu and Khanbaliq stood at what is now Beijing.

After more than 16 years in China, the Polos begged permission from Kublai Khan to return home to Venice. Apparently they had proved so useful to the khan that he did not want them to leave. Finally, he agreed for them to escort a Mongolian princess, Cogatin, to become the bride of a Persian khan; thus they headed back west.



A painting of Marco Polo at the court of Kublai Khan

This time they traveled by sea in Chinese ships and, after many difficulties, succeeded in delivering the princess. Before they could reach Venice, however, Kublai Khan died on February 18, 1294, which allowed local rulers to reassert themselves and demand payment from traders. Consequently, the Polos were forced to hand over 4,000 Byzantine coins, a significant portion of their fortune, to the local government of a city on the Black Sea.

## Return

The Polos returned to Venice in 1295, having been away 24 years. Their enthusiastic biographer told stories, which may have been gossip, that when they returned they were wearing Mongolian clothing and could hardly remember their native language. Their relatives had thought them long dead.

But when they produced a small fortune in gems (rubies, sapphires, garnets, diamonds, and emeralds), which had been sewn into the hems of their Mongolian garments, they were warmly welcomed.

Soon Venice was at war with its rival city-state, Genoa, on the west coast of Italy. As was custom for a wealthy merchant, Marco Polo financed his own war galley. He was captured during a naval battle and ended up in prison in Genoa.

By chance, one of his cellmates, Rusticello from Pisa, had experience writing romantic novels. As Polo entertained everyone with his tales of traveling to China, Rusticello wrote them down in a French dialect. This is how Polo's accounts, Europe's primary source of information about China until the nineteenth century, came into existence.

In 1299, Genoa and Venice declared peace; Polo was released and returned to Venice to marry Donata Badoer. The couple had three daughters in quick succession. He spent his remaining days as a businessman, working from home. He died there at almost 70 years of age, on January 8, 1324, and was buried under the Church of San Lorenzo, though his tomb has now vanished.

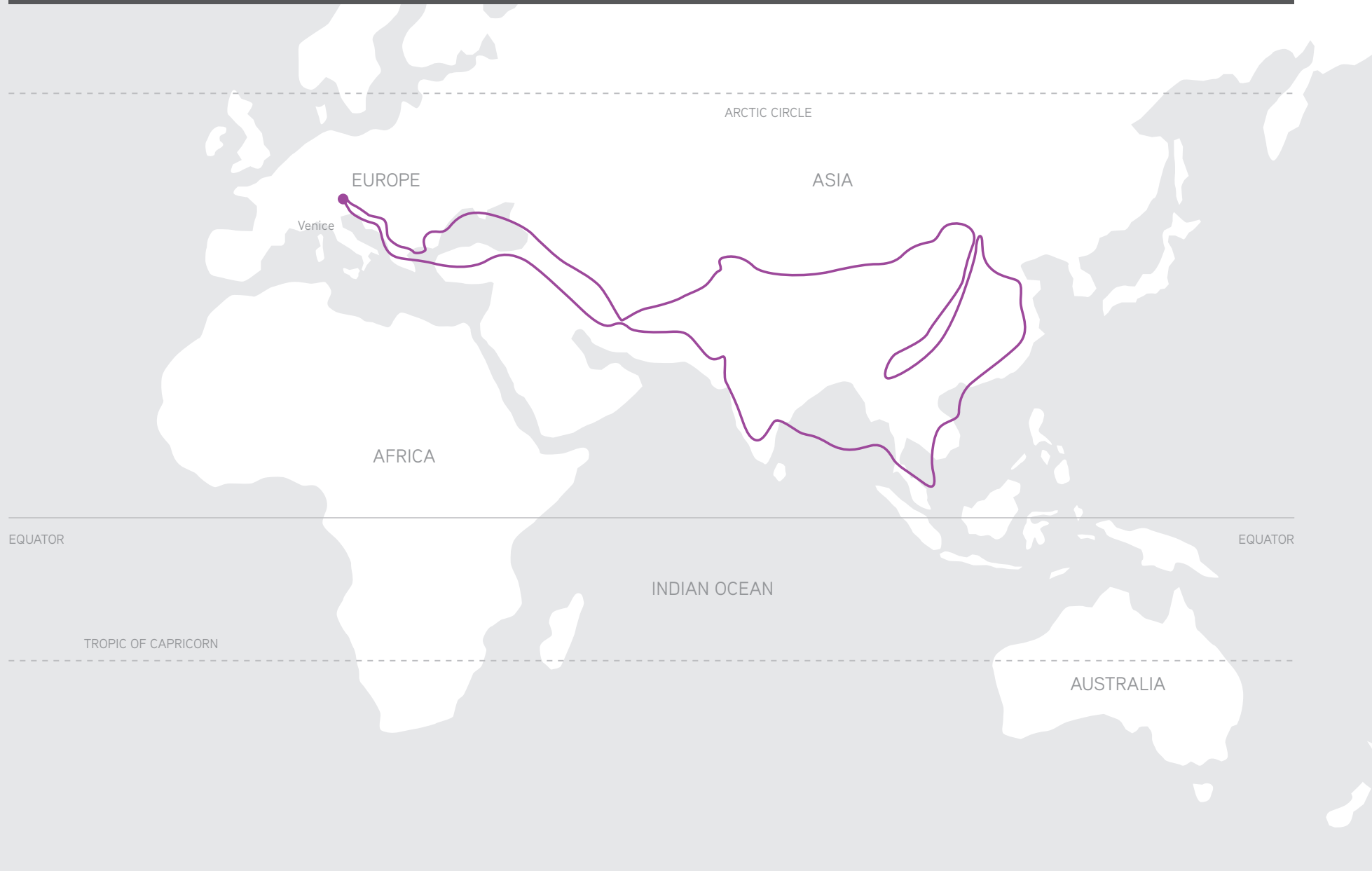
## Marco Polo's book

Polo might have been forgotten had his book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, not engaged widespread interest. It could be circulated only one copy at a time, since printing in Europe did not begin until almost 200 years later. About 120 to 140 early manuscripts — hand-printed and fragmentary versions of *The Travels* — survive, and every one of them is different. The earliest readers were scholars, monks, and noblemen. Soon translations of *The Travels* appeared, in Venetian, German, English, Catalan, Argonese, Gaelic, and Latin. It took more than a century for the book to become part of mainstream European consciousness.

Few texts have provoked more controversy than *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The authorship is not clear — is it Polo or Rusticello? Sometimes the text is in the first-person voice, sometimes in the third-person narrative. How much of the text is based on Polo's firsthand experience and how much did the author(s) insert secondhand accounts by others? Certainly it's a mix. What was reported seemed so bizarre to stay-at-home Europeans that the

# THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

1271 TO 1295





A 14th-century illuminated map depicting the Polos

readers often assumed that everything was made up. Yet historians have largely confirmed the facts in Polo's account of the height of the Mongol dynasty.

Polo proved an engaging storyteller. He found Mongolian customs fascinating and reported them enthusiastically, such as the use of paper for money and the burning of coal for heat (see excerpts below). Paper money had been used in China for several hundred years, and coal had been burned in parts of China since the beginning of agriculture.

Polo also missed a few unfamiliar practices, notably the books being sold in Quinsa (now Hangzhou), the capital city of the earlier Song dynasty in southern China. Books were widely available there because they were printed with movable type made of wood, clay, or tin. Movable type was missing in Europe until 1440, when Johannes Gutenberg, a German printer, invented it there.

When Christopher Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492, hoping to find a route by sea to China, he carried with him a heavily annotated copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, expecting it to be useful. He discovered what came to be called the Americas instead.

From *The Travels of Marco Polo*:

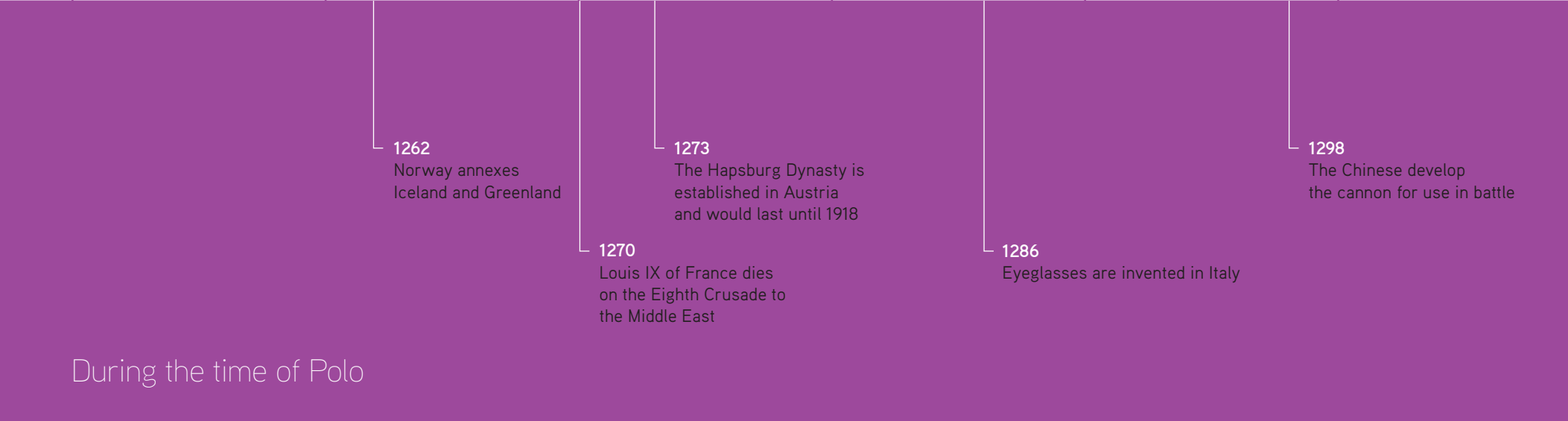
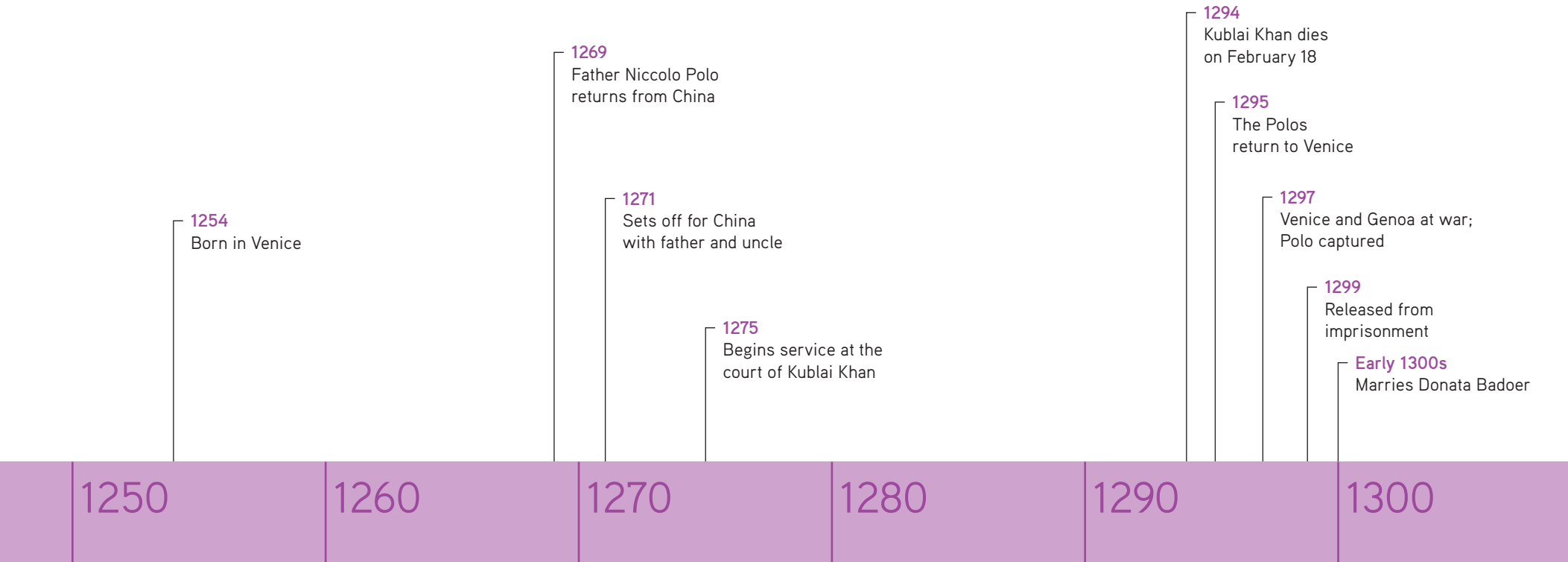
## Book 2, Chapter 18

OF THE KIND OF PAPER MONEY ISSUED BY THE GRAND KHAN,  
AND MADE TO PASS CURRENT THROUGHOUT HIS DOMINIONS

In this city of Cambalu [another spelling for Khanbaliq] is the mint of the grand khan, who may truly be said to possess the secret of the alchemists, as he has the art of producing money by the following process. He causes bark to be stripped from those mulberry-trees the leaves of which are used for feeding silk-worms, and takes from it that thin inner ring which lies between the coarser bark and the wood of the tree. This being steeped, and afterwards pounded in a mortar, until reduced to a pulp, is made into paper, resembling that which is made from cotton, but quite black. When ready for use, he has it cut into pieces of money of different sizes, nearly square, but somewhat longer than they are wide...

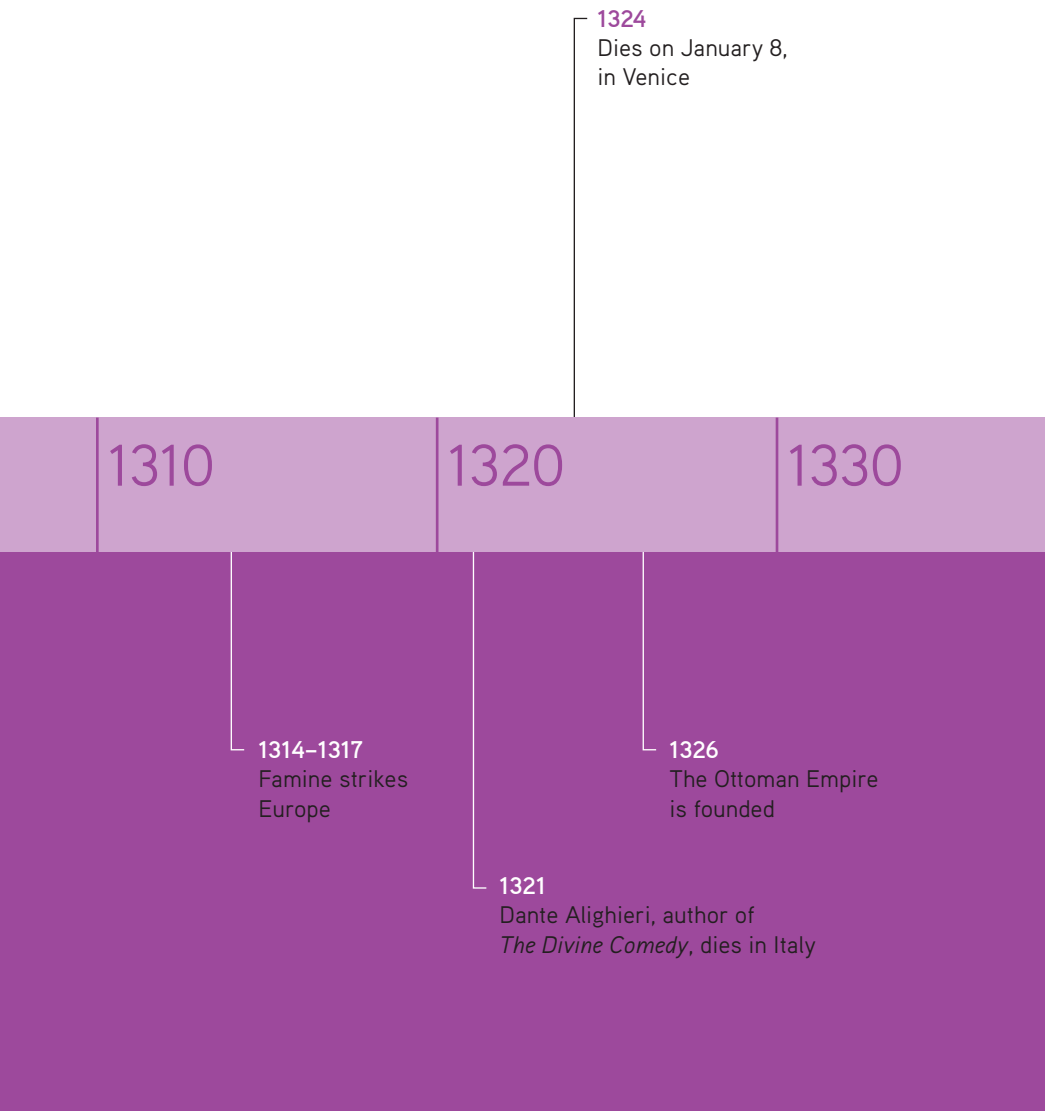
The coinage of this paper money is authenticated with as much form and ceremony as if it were actually of pure gold or silver; for to each note a number of officers, specially appointed, not only subscribe their names, but affix their signets also; and when this has been regularly done by the whole of them, the principal officer, deputed by his majesty, having dipped into vermilion the royal seal committed to his custody, stamps with it the piece of paper, so that the form of the seal tinged with the vermilion remains impressed upon it, by which it receives full authenticity as current money, and the act of counterfeiting it is punished as a capital offence. When thus coined in large quantities, this paper currency is circulated in every part of the grand khan's dominions; nor dares any person, at the peril of his life, refuse to accept it in payment. All his subjects receive it without hesitation, because wherever their business may call them, they can dispose of it again in the purchase of merchandise they may have occasion for; such as pearls, jewels, gold, or silver. With it, in short, every article may be procured...All his majesty's armies are paid with this

# Timeline of Marco Polo's life



During the time of Polo





currency, which is to them of the same value as if it were gold or silver. Upon these grounds, it may certainly be affirmed that the grand khan has a more extensive command of treasure than any other sovereign in the universe. (pp. 145–147)

## Book 2, Chapter 23

OF THE KIND OF WINE MADE IN THE PROVINCE OF CATHAY — AND OF THE STONES USED THERE FOR BURNING IN THE MANNER OF CHARCOAL

The greater part of the inhabitants of the province of Cathay [now China] drink a sort of wine made from rice mixed with a variety of spices and drugs. This beverage, or wine as it may be termed, is so good and well flavoured that they do not wish for better. It is clear, bright, and pleasant to the taste, and being made very hot, has the quality of inebriating sooner than any other.

Throughout this province there is found a sort of black stone, which they dig out of the mountains, where it runs in veins. When lighted, it burns like charcoal, and retains the fire much better than wood; insomuch that it may be preserved during the night, and in the morning be found still burning. These stones do not flame, excepting a little when first lighted, but during their ignition give out a considerable heat. It is true there is no scarcity of wood in the country, but the multitude of inhabitants is so immense, and their stoves and baths, which they are continually heating, so numerous, that the quantity could not supply the demand; for there is no person who does not frequent the warm bath at least three times in the week, and during the winter daily, if it is in their power. Every man of rank or wealth has one in his house for his own use; and the stock of wood must soon prove inadequate to such consumption; whereas these stones may be had in the greatest abundance, and at a cheap rate. (p. 155)

# Sources

Bergreen, Laurence. *Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2007.

Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. Edited by Peter Harris. Introduction by Colin Thubron. New York: Alfred Knopf (Everyman's Library), 2008.

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A miniature painting of Marco Polo before Kublai Khan  
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A detail from the 1375 *Carta Catalana*  
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