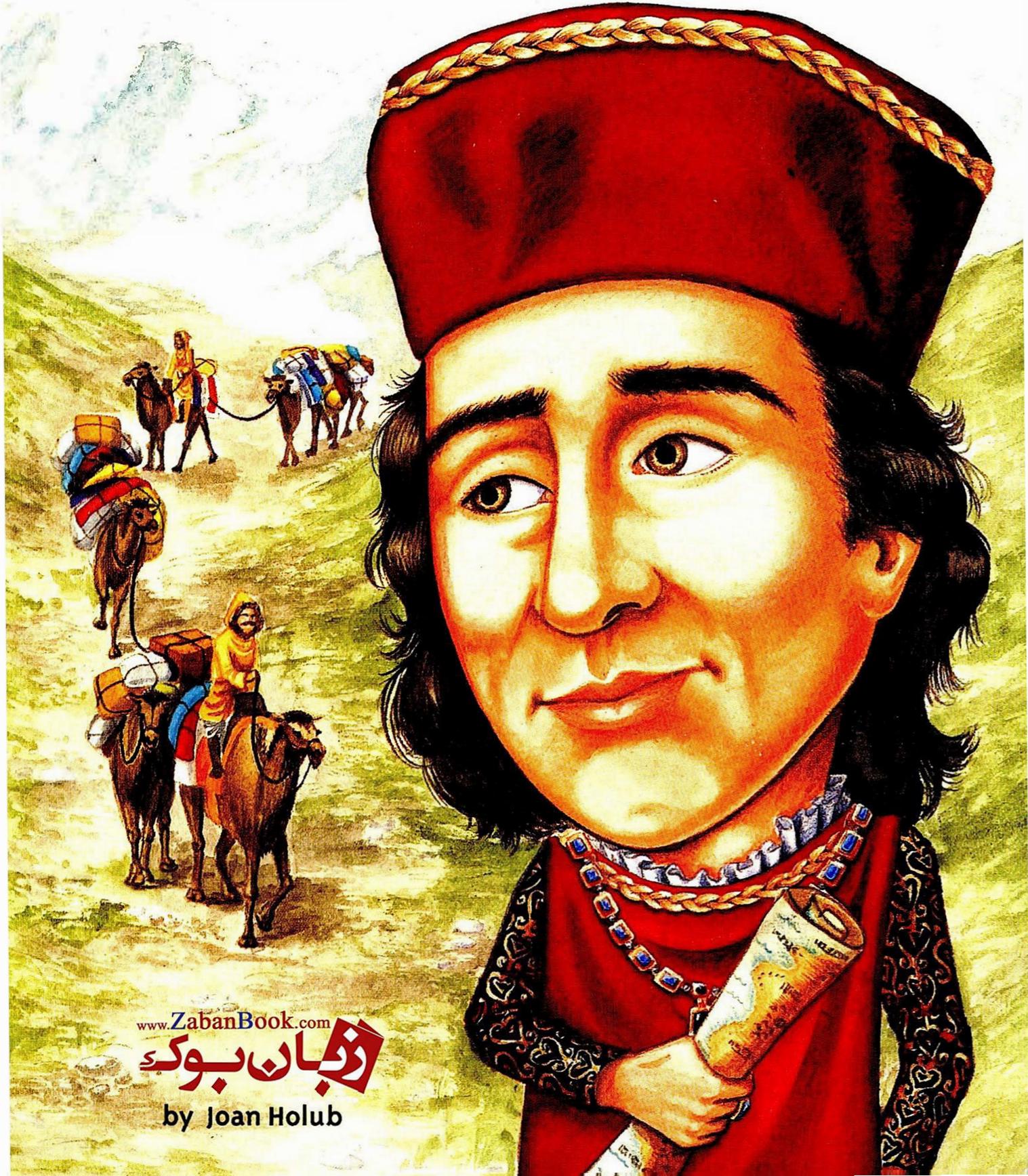


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Who Was Marco Polo?



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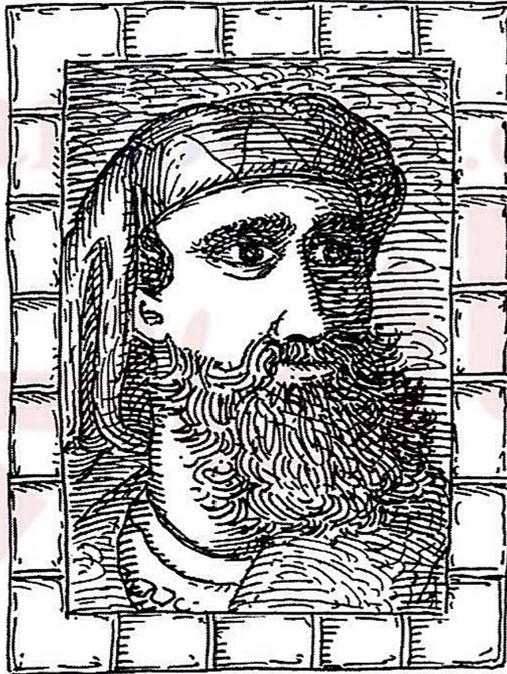
by Joan Holub

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by Joan Holub

illustrated by John O'Brien

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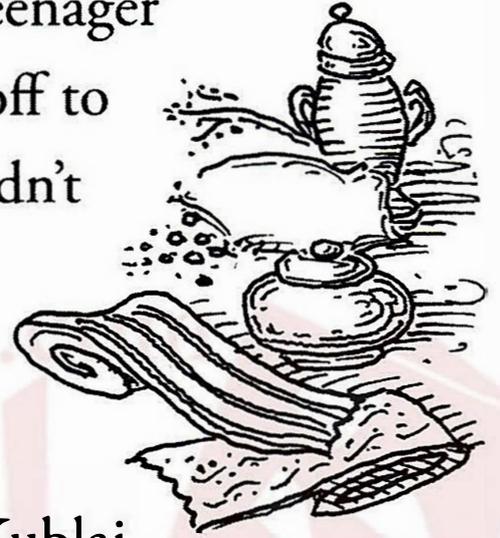


MARCO POLO

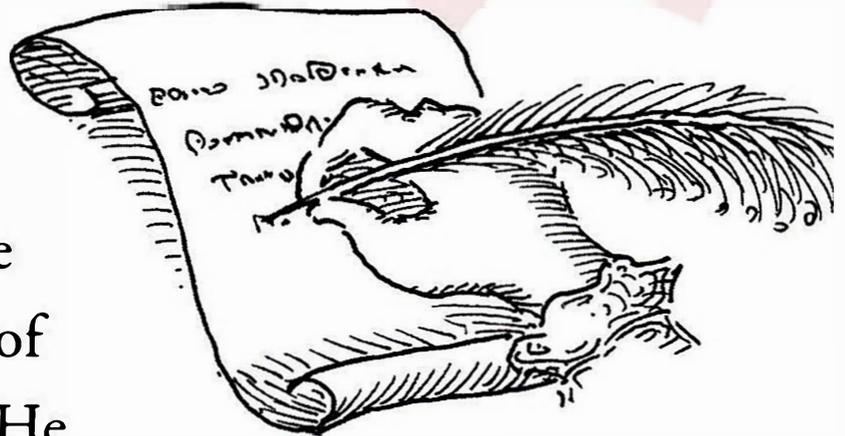
Marco Polo lived in Venice, Italy, more than seven hundred fifty years ago. Back then, in the 1200s, most people spent their whole lives right where they were born. But not Marco. He made an eleven-thousand-mile trip to China and back. And he became the most famous traveler in Europe. Not just because he made such a long and dangerous trip (although hardly anyone else in Europe had done this at the time), but because he wrote a book about his adventure.



Like his father and uncle, Marco was a merchant. The Polos wanted to go to Asia to bring back silk, spices, and other expensive goods to sell in Europe. Marco was a teenager when he went off to China. He didn't return to Italy for twenty-four years!



China's ruler was named Kublai Khan (KOO-bluh kahn). He liked Marco and sent him to nearby countries to spy. Marco took notes about the places he saw and the customs of the people he met. He used these notes to write a book about his travels.



Reading his book was the way many Europeans learned about Asia.

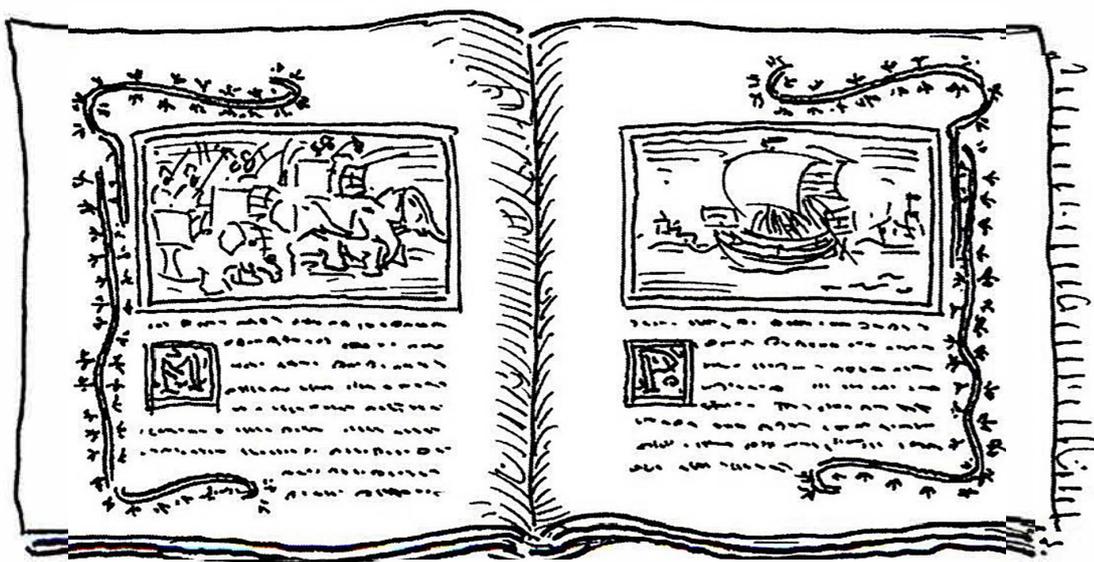
Two hundred years later, explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama read Marco's book. It made them want to reach Asia, too. But they hoped to find an easier route.



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Was everything in Marco's book true? Historians think he exaggerated here and there. Some even think he never went to China at all. Still, his book made him famous around the world.

What is the true story of Marco Polo?



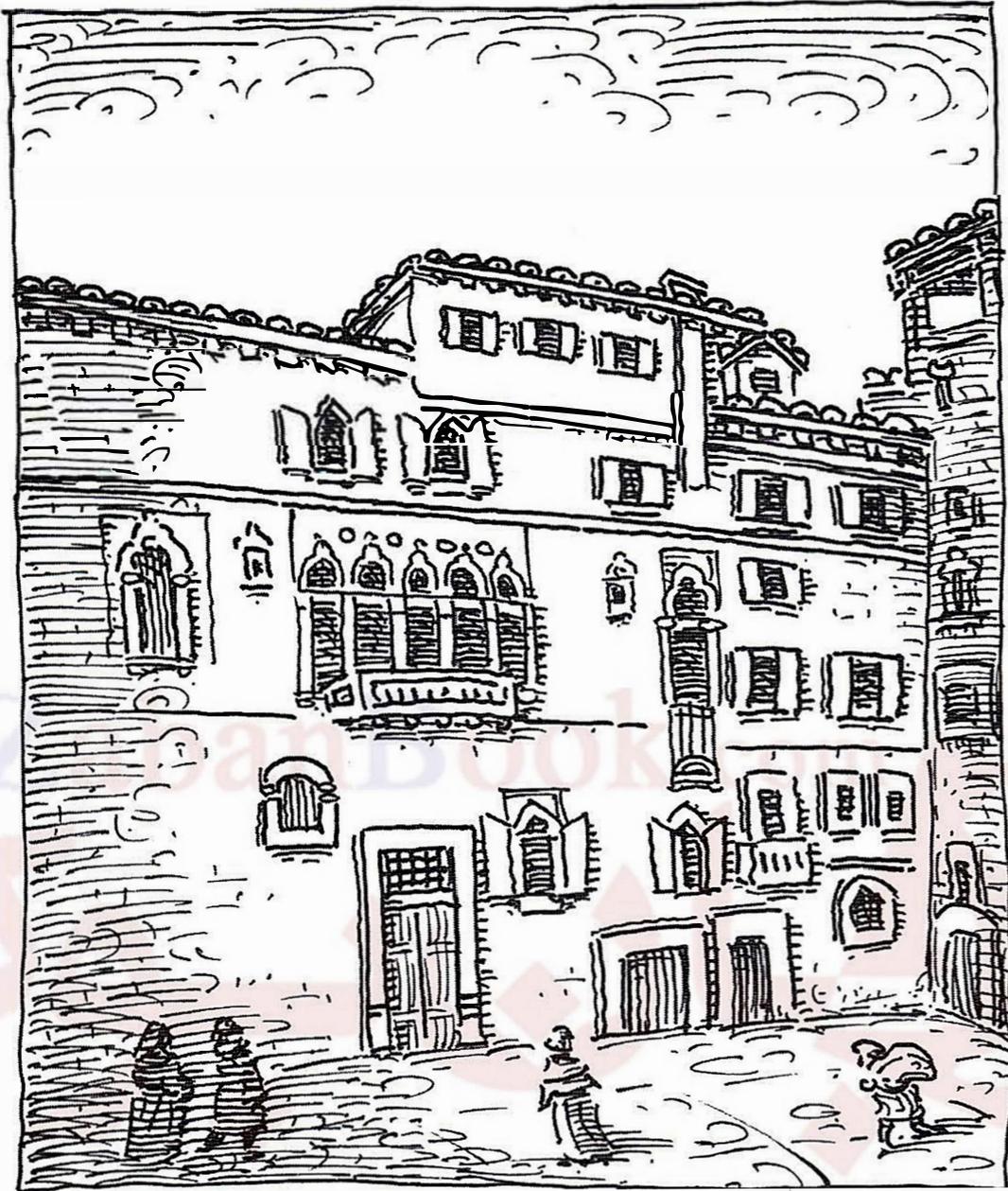
Chapter 1

A Family of Merchants

Two things made the year 1254 important in Marco Polo's life. First, it was the year he was born. And second, it was the year his father, who was named Niccolo, and his uncle Maffeo left Venice on a trading trip to Asia. Marco's father was gone so long that Marco was fifteen years old when they met for the first time!

Soon after Marco was born, his mother died. He was sent to live with relatives. As a boy, he didn't spend much time in school. Instead, his family taught him things he needed to know to become a merchant.

For instance, Venetians used coins such as silver grossos and gold ducats (DUK-ets). Marco needed to know how to weigh the coins correctly.



A HOUSE IN VENICE

Venetians had their own measuring system. It was based on using their hands and feet. For instance, one palm was about nine and a half inches. Cloth would have been measured in



palms. Other countries used different kinds of money and measurements. Marco needed to learn about them, too. Otherwise, merchants could cheat him.

The sailors and merchants Marco met on Venice's docks also taught him about trading. Venice was the most powerful trading city in the world. Its busy port, with ships constantly coming and going, was on the Adriatic Sea.

Venice was not like most cities. It was actually a group of 118 tiny islands connected by canals.





Marco and his family traveled the canals in long canoelike boats called gondolas (GAHN-doh-lahz).

Back then Italy was not a country. It was a group of city-states. Each city-state ruled itself. Venice was one of the largest, with as many as one hundred thousand people.

Venice sold its products—wood, wheat, and salt—to foreign lands. Salt was very valuable in those days. And lots of it washed up on Venice's shores. Since there were no refrigerators, salt was used to keep fish and meat from rotting. Without salt, they rotted within a week. But salted, these foods



could last for months. This was very important on long trips at sea.

While Marco was growing up, his father and uncle kept traveling. By 1260, they were in Constantinople (which is now Istanbul, Turkey). There, they traded the goods they'd brought from Venice. They were paid in jewels.

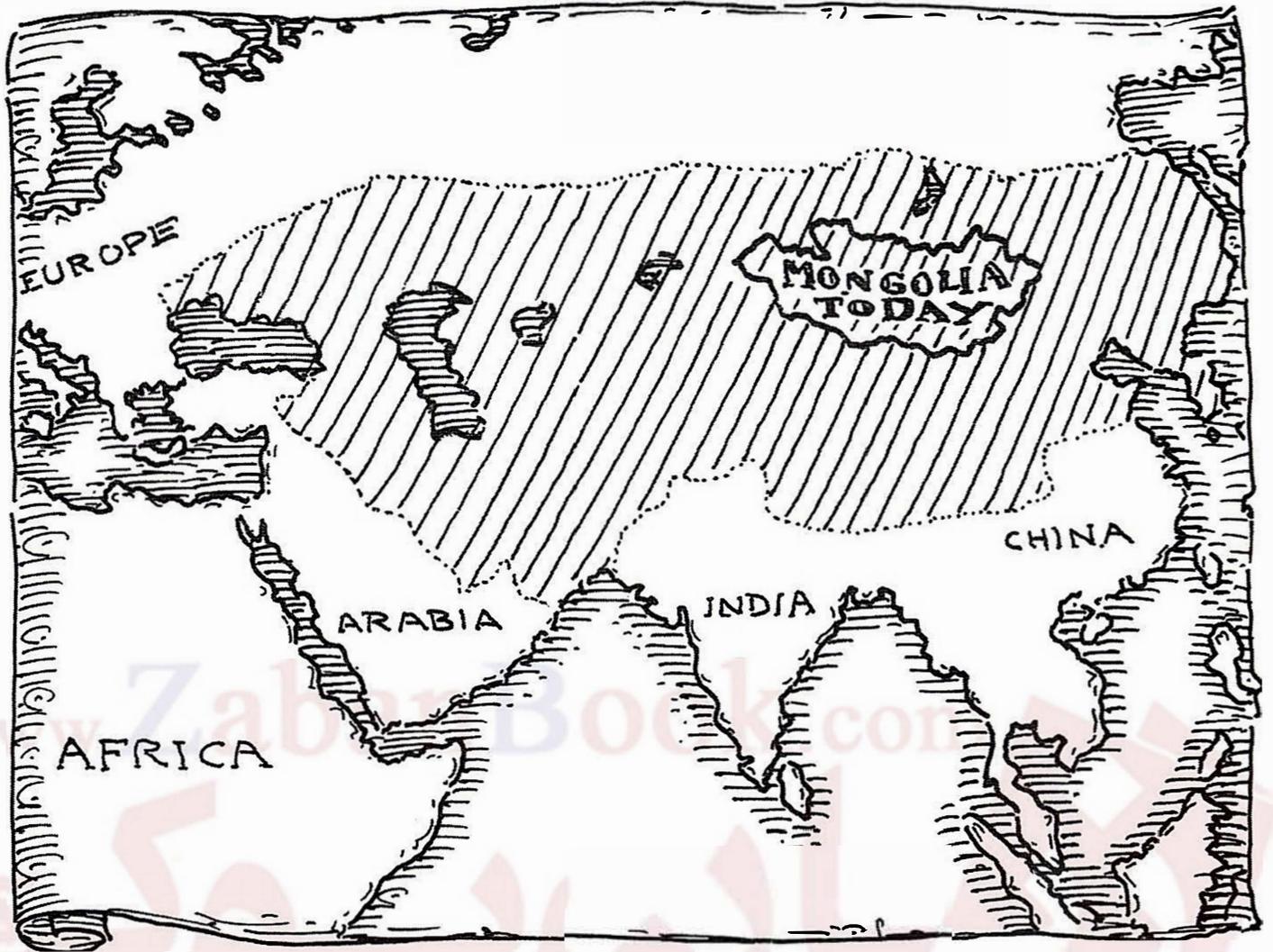


After crossing the Black Sea, they traveled eastward along the Volga River. In the trading city of Bolgara, they visited a Mongol ruler named Berke Khan. The word *khan* means “ruler.” In return for their jewels, Berke gave the Polos goods worth twice as much. Things were going well.

Unfortunately, a war began between Berke and another Mongol ruler named Hulagu. Both were grandsons of a warlord named Genghis Khan, who had died over thirty years earlier.

The Polos were ready to return home. But the route back to Venice was blocked by the war. Since they couldn't go west, they decided to go east to the city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan. They were trapped there for three years.

Then in 1265, Hulagu sent some messengers to China to visit his brother, Kublai Khan. Kublai and the other khans came from the area marked in stripes on the map—Mongolia. The people of Mongolia were called Mongols.

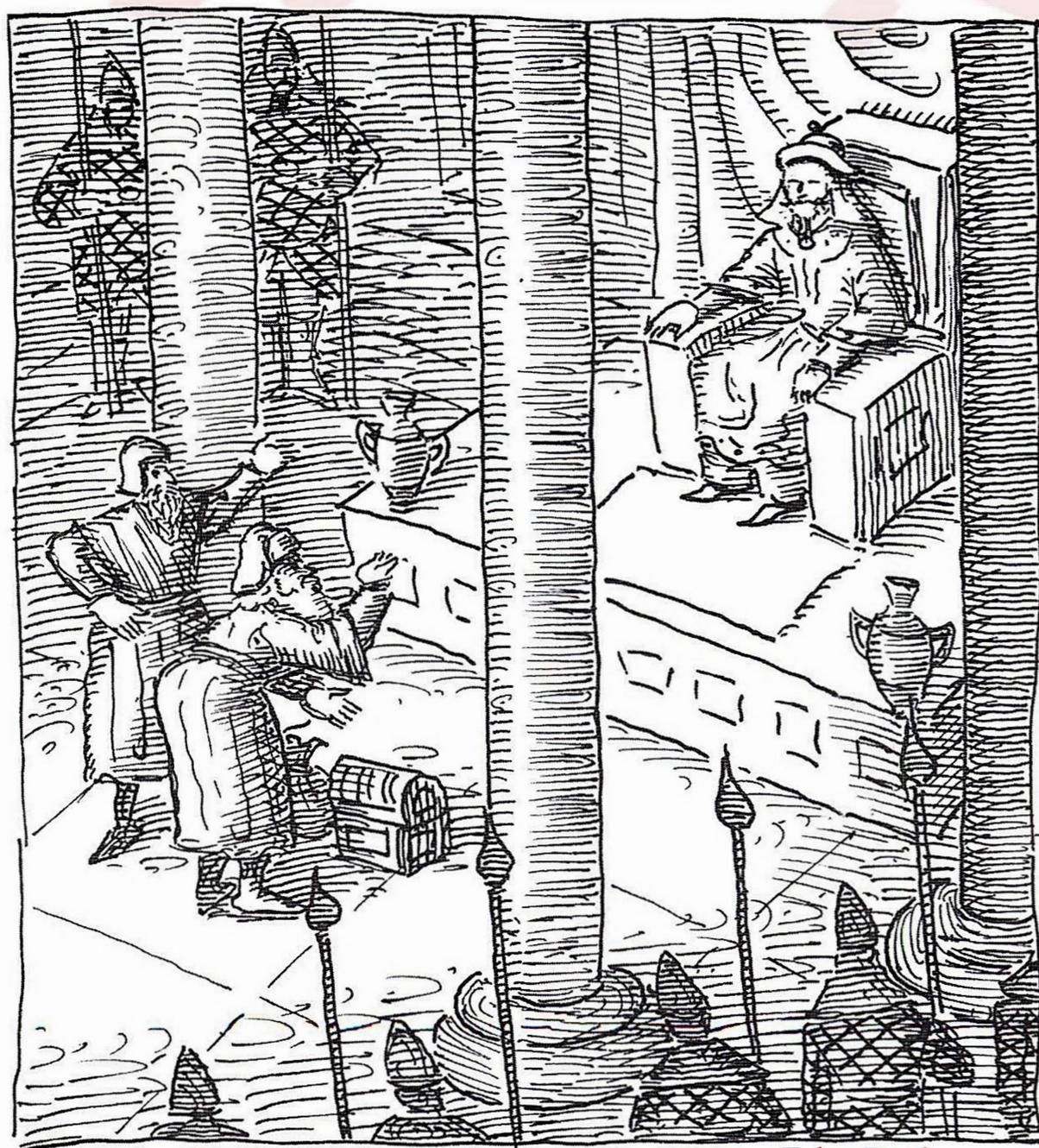


THE MONGOL EMPIRE WAS MUCH BIGGER THAN MONGOLIA IS TODAY. THE STRIPED AREA SHOWS HOW BIG IT WAS BY 1259.

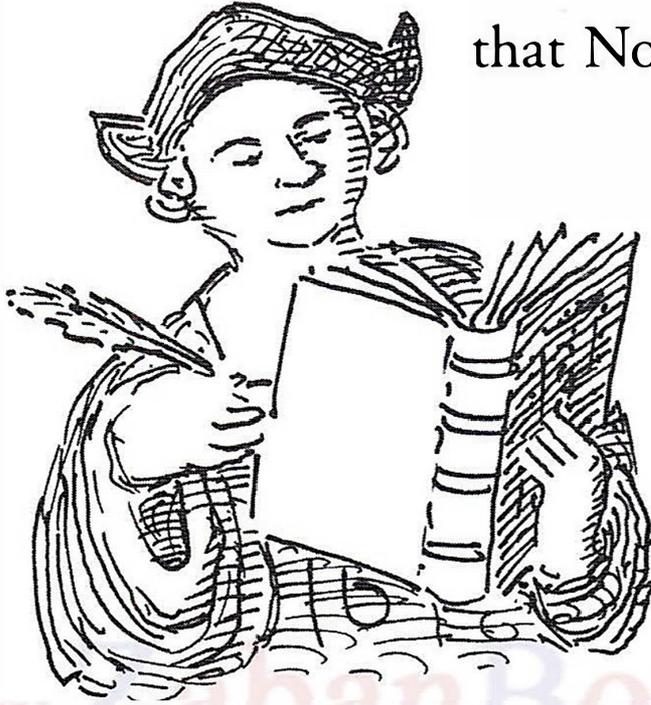
Hulagu's messengers met the Polos and invited them to go along. The Polos agreed. This was a brave decision. Few Europeans had ever been to China, which they called Cathay. Back then, they thought there were only three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. They believed that China

was at the far end of the world. Bandits, wars, slow transportation, and bad roads made it dangerous to reach.

It took the Polos and the messengers over a year to reach Kublai Khan's palace in the Mongol capital (now Beijing, China). Niccolo

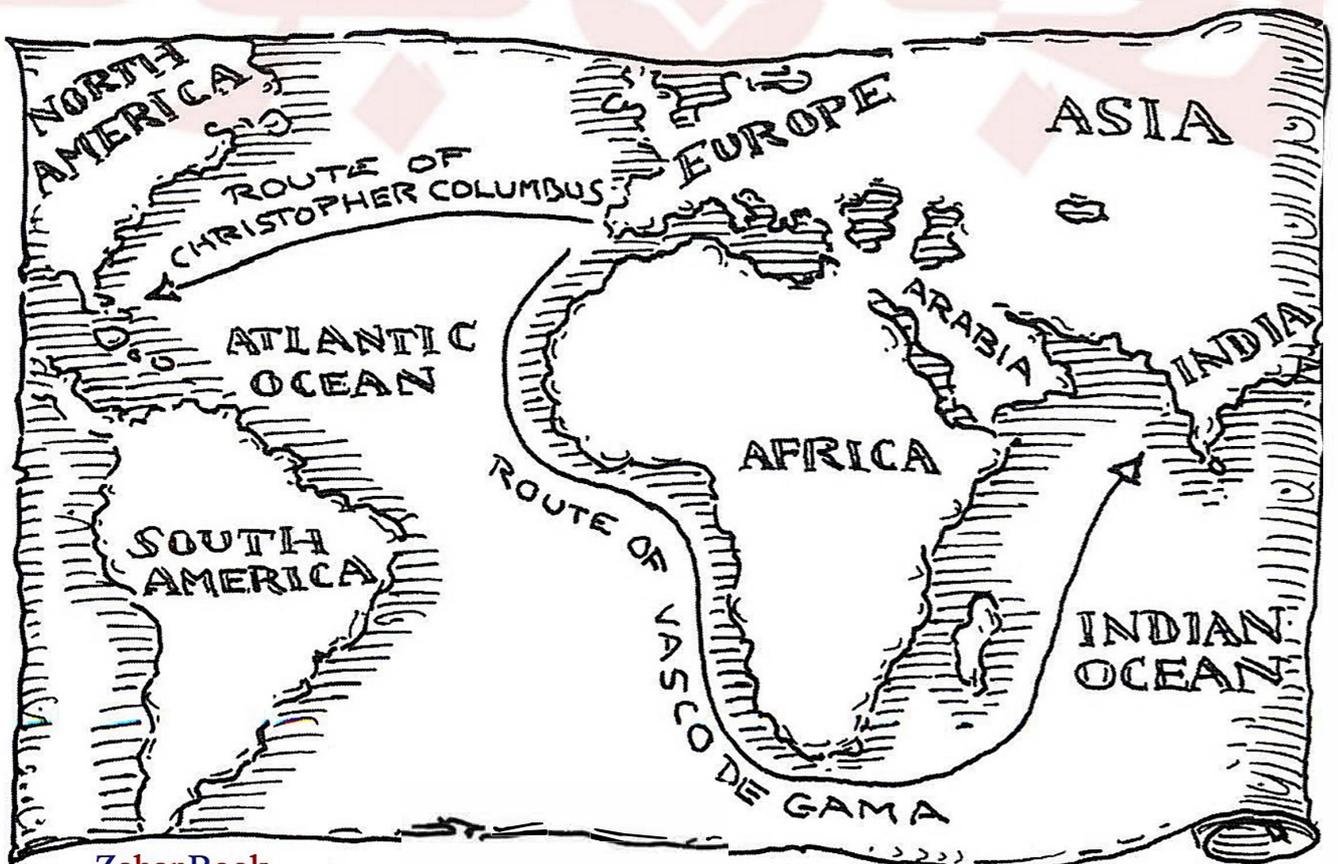


to find China. He didn't realize that North America and South America blocked his way.

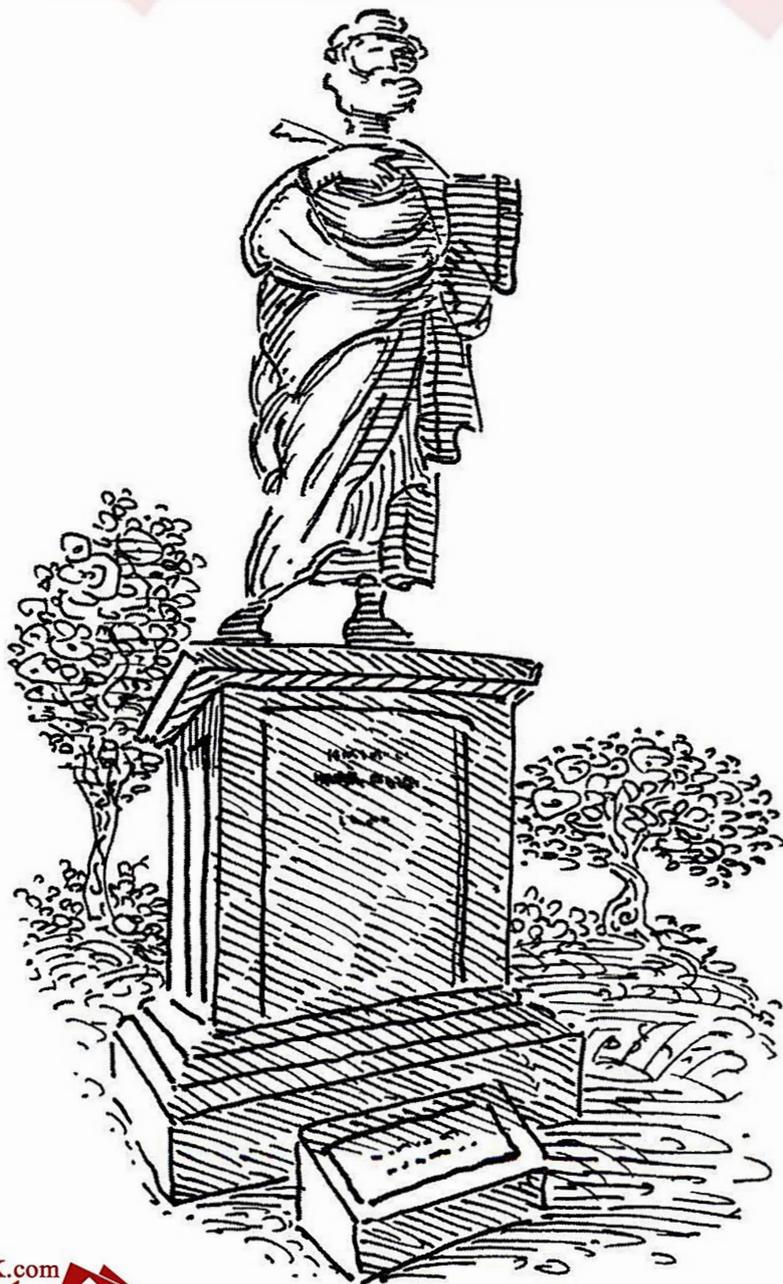


Vasco de Gama was also very interested in the book. Eventually, he found a new

sea route from Europe to Asia by sailing around the southern tip of Africa in 1497. The Silk Road wasn't used as much after that.



Marco was sixty-nine years old when he died in 1324. At that time, most people had decided he had made up the stories in his book. As he was dying, his friends begged him to confess the truth and say that he'd been lying. He refused. His answer to them is now famous. He told them, "I never told half of what I saw."



Ross, Jr., Frank. **Oracle Bones, Stars, and Wheelbarrows.** Houghton Mifflin Company, Massachusetts, 1982.

Rossabi, Morris. **Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times.** University of California Press, California, 1988.

Who Was Marco Polo?

- A boy who lived in Venice, Italy, seven hundred years ago
- A teenager who traveled to China—and came back twenty-four years later
- The author of a travel book that inspired Christopher Columbus
- ✓ **All of the above!**

Find out more in this illustrated book!

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HEADQUARTERS
FOR HISTORY



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