

# Paths to the East: first by land, then by sea

The land-faring pioneers of Europe's first Age of Discovery who went eastward in the mid-thirteenth century needed resources quite different from those of the later, the seafaring, age.

## By Sea:

Columbus would have to raise a large sum of money via the crown or rich merchants, find ships, enlist and organize crews, secure supplies, keep the crews happy and un-mutinous, and navigate a trackless ocean.

## By Land:

Quite other talents were required of the earlier overland travelers such as Marco Polo. They could go with one or two companions along main-traveled roads—though the roads had not been frequented by Europeans before them. They could live off the land, finding food and drink along the way. While they did not need to be fund-raisers or master organizers, they had to be adaptable and affable.

# Paths to the East: The Crusades

**The Normans**, descendants of the Norsemen who had swept in the tenth century into "Normandy" on the northern coast of France, were converted to Christianity, and sent their conquering force in all directions. William the Conqueror led them north to England in 1066. They roamed the Mediterranean, overran southern Italy and by 1130 had set up the Kingdom of Sicily, where Christians, Jews, and Arabs exchanged knowledge, arts, and ideas.

When **Pope Urban II** became pope in 1088, his Church was in dire need of reform—rotten with the buying and selling of pardons and church offices, and split by the claims of an anti-Pope. A muckraking reformer, he used his organizing talents and his eloquence to cleanse and to heal.

Alexius Comnenus, the Eastern Emperor, seeing the capital of his Byzantium Empire threatened by militant Islam, sent envoys to Urban appealing for military aid.

Boorstin p 118

***Thus, The Crusades were born...***

## Urban saw his opportunity to unite the Churches of East and West

To a historic **Council at Clermont** in south-central France he summoned French bishops and representatives of the faith from across Europe. When the Council met on **November 18, 1095**, it became a mass meeting, too large for the cathedral, and moved to a field outside the eastern gates of the city. There in the open air the Pope stirred the crowd with an eloquence we can still savor from the report by Robert the Monk, who was there: ...



*“Jerusalem is the navel of the world, a land which is more fruitful than any other, a land which is like another paradise of delights. This is the land which the Redeemer of mankind illuminated by his coming, adorned by his life, consecrated by his passion, redeemed by his death, and sealed by his burial. This royal city, situated in the middle of the world, is now held captive by his enemies and is made a servant, by those who know not God, for the ceremonies of the heathen. It looks and hopes for freedom; it begs unceasingly that you will come to its aid. It looks for help from you, especially, because God has bestowed glory in arms upon you more than on any other nation. Undertake this journey, therefore, for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of glory which cannot fade in the kingdom of heaven.” - Pope Urban II*



# Paths to the East: Missionaries

People on the move could not help becoming discoverers. But, for the most part, they did not find what they went to seek; and they found much they had not imagined.

-Daniel Boorstin, p 119

## **Christian Missions vs Muslim Jihad** (pp 122-123)

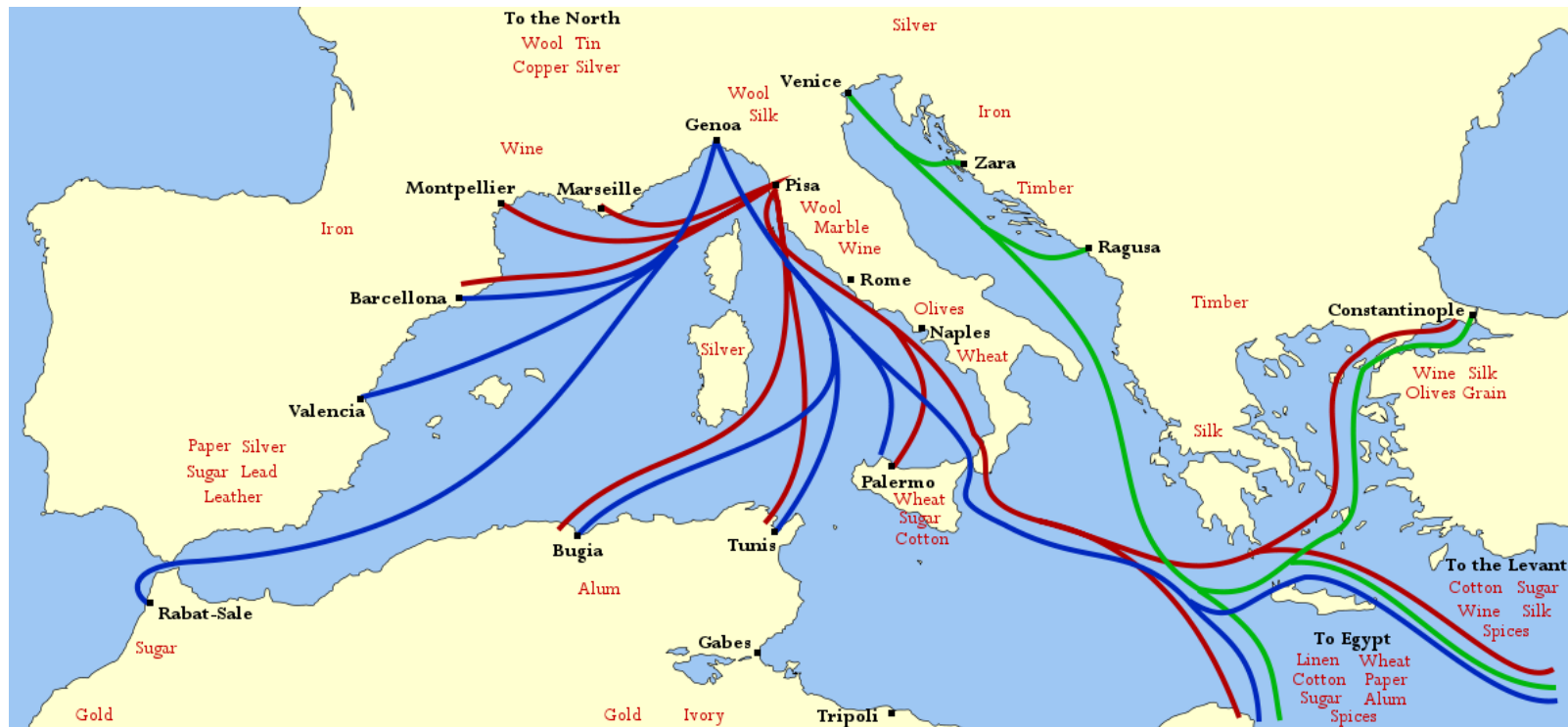
Both religions had the “Great Commission” from their leaders (Jesus and Muhammad) - to spread their religions across the globe

**THE SMALL SCALE:** “The missions reached out to the stranger even in unknown lands. Outposts of the frontier. Returning crusaders brought back tales of Oriental splendor, along with tastes for spices, silks, and perfumes, which gave Venice the exotic charm still visible.”

**THE BIG SCALE:** Jihad was the religious duty to spread Islam by waging war, was long the primary authorized way of extending the empire of the Prophet.

“While Muslim sword-men conquered for the faith, Christian missionaries were willing to explore tentatively on the frontiers of empire, hoping to bring the good news to even a few more souls.”

While Europeans were still plunged in the darkness of dogmatic geography, they had long been entertained by legends of the mysterious East. A few men and women enjoyed the exotic luxuries from that other end of the earth — **sleek silk from China and sparkling diamonds from Golconda**. In rooms draped with costly carpets from Persia, they feasted on dishes spiced from Ceylon and Java, and passed the hours with ebony chessmen from Siam. - Boorstin p 125



By 1200, Venice and Genoa were in highly competitive business of trading with the Arabs in the Mid-East.

The merchants of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa who prospered by selling these exotic Eastern commodities had themselves, of course, never seen India or China. Their Eastern contact was in the ports in the eastern Mediterranean. **Their precious stock had been brought by one of two main routes.**

One, the fabled **Silk Road**, was an all-land route from eastern China through central Asia, by way of Samarkand and Baghdad, finally reaching the coastal cities of the Black Sea or the eastern Mediterranean.

The other came through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea, either up the Persian Gulf to Basra or up the Red Sea to Suez. To reach the European market these goods would still have to go overland, across Persia and Syria or else through Egypt.

**On either of these routes, Frankish and Italian merchants found their way blocked as soon as they tried to advance eastward from the Mediterranean ports.** Muslims gladly traded with them at Alexandria or even in Aleppo or Damascus, but the Muslim Turks would not allow Europeans to advance a step farther. **This was the Iron Curtain of the late Middle Ages.**  
– Boorstin p125

## The **Silk Road** and the Iron Curtain (p 125)



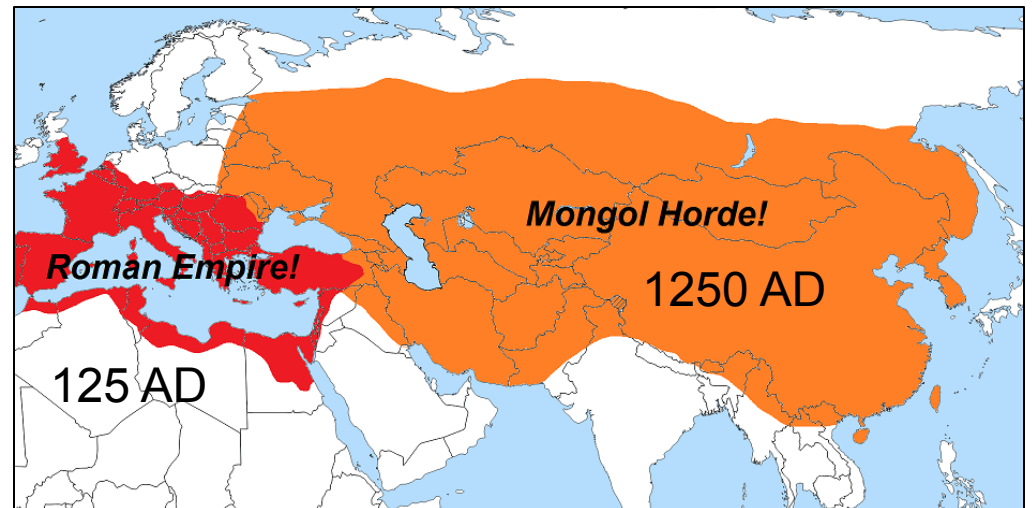
The intercontinental Silk Road (red) as it extends westwards from the ancient commercial centers of China, the overland. The southern sea route (blue).

## How the Mongols Opened the Way

It was not the march of Christian soldiers, nor the maneuvers of European statesmen, that lifted the iron curtain. Like many other world-awakening events, it was a by-product of other events in far away places.

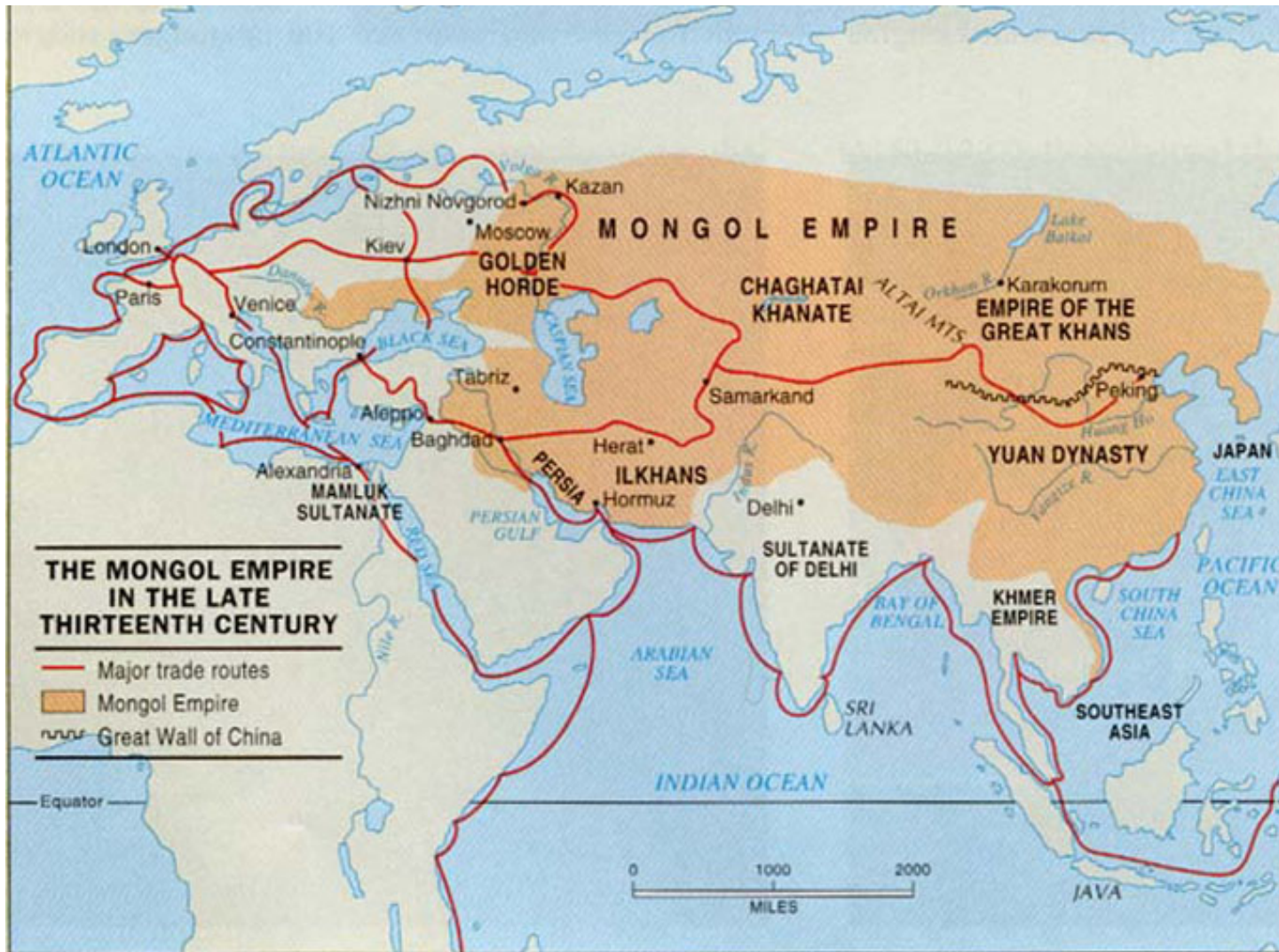
If credit must be given for opening the way to China, it must go, surprisingly, to a people of the same stock as those Turks who so long blocked the way for Europeans—to a **Mongol people from central Asia, the Tartars.**

A threat to Europe in the Middle Ages, they have been much maligned. Featured in our European historical pantheon as reckless destroyers, their very name has become an English synonym for barbarian.



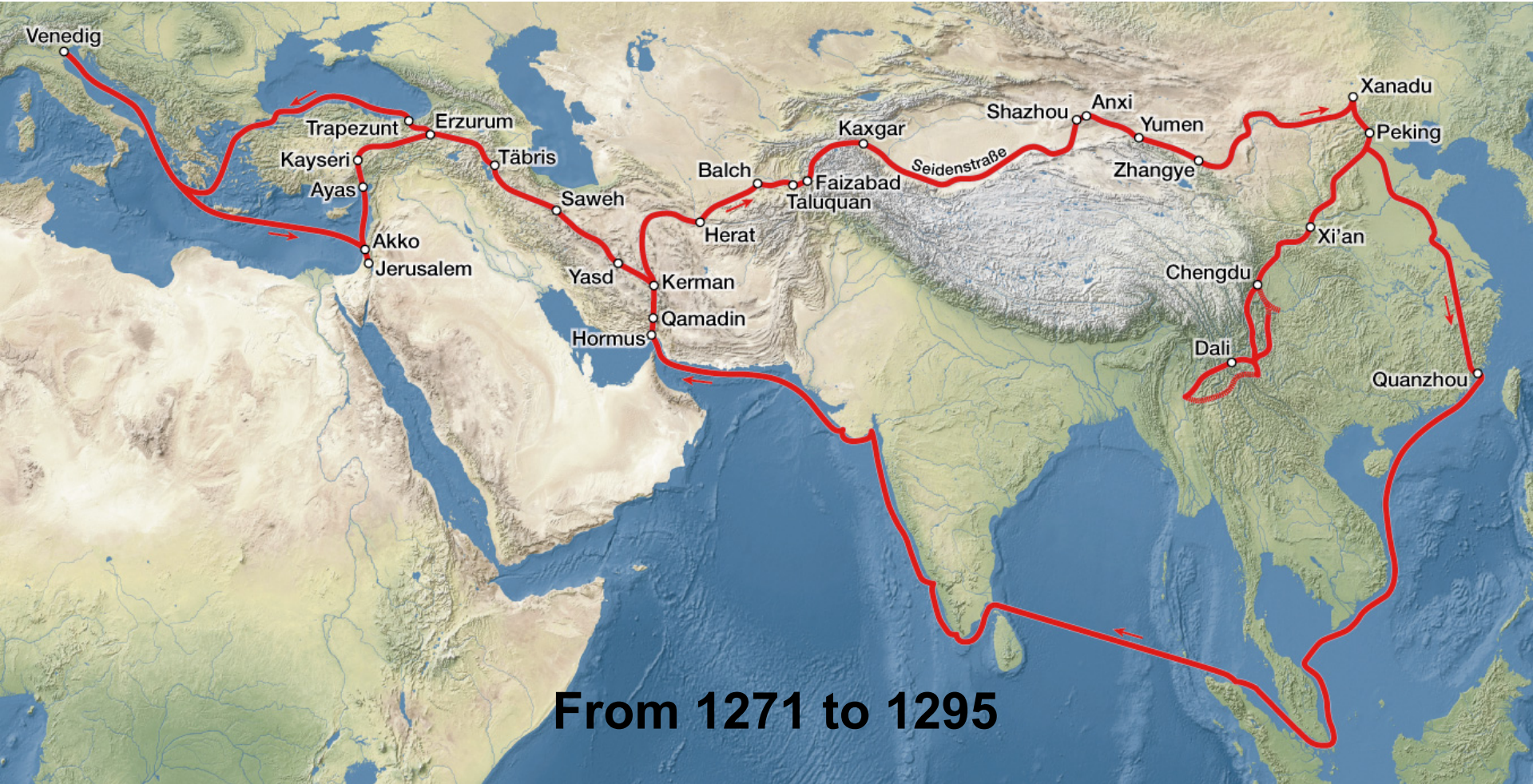
The Mongolian Empire was the largest contiguous empire in history!

“For a single century, from **CE 1250 to 1350**, the iron curtain was lifted, and there was **direct human contact between Europe and China.**” (p 125; pp 126-127)

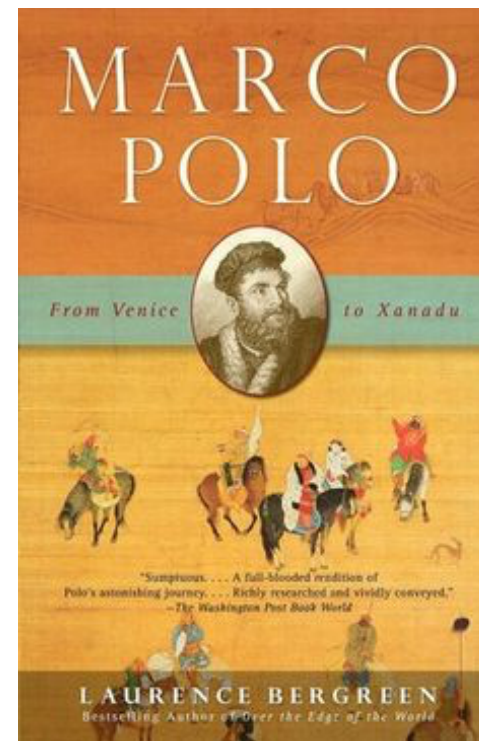


*The Mongols extended their hegemony over a major part of the Eurasian landmass, from the Danube to the Pacific for the better part of two centuries.*

# The Travels of Marco Polo - The Discovery of Asia (pp 134-135)



**MARCO POLO** excelled all other known Christian travelers in his experience, in his product, and in his influence. Marco Polo's journey lasted **twenty-four years**. He reached farther than any of his predecessors, beyond Mongolia to the heart of Cathay. **He traversed the whole of China all the way to the Ocean, and he played a variety of roles, becoming the confidant of Kublai Khan and governor of a great Chinese city.** He was at home in the language, and immersed himself in the daily life and culture of Cathay. For generations of Europe, his copious, vivid, and factual account of Eastern ways was the discovery of Asia.



Kublai Khan received the Venetians with great honor. Sensing the talents of the twenty-one-year-old Marco, the Khan at once enlisted him in his service, and sent him on an embassy to a country six months away. When we read Marco Polo's travels today, we all reap the fruits of the voracious curiosity of that thirteenth-century Mongol emperor:

Now he had taken note on several occasions that when the Prince's ambassadors returned from different parts of the world, they were able to tell him about nothing except the business on which they had gone, and that the Prince in consequence held them for no better than fools and dolts, and would say: "I would far more care to hear about the strange things, and the manners of the different countries you have seen, than hearing of the affairs of strange countries." Marco therefore, as he went and returned, took great pains to learn about all kinds of different matters in the countries which he visited, in order to be able to tell about them to the Great Khan. . . . Thereafter, Marco abode in the Khan's employment some seventeen years, continually going and coming, hither and thither, on the missions that were entrusted to him. . . . And, as he knew all the sovereign's ways, like a sensible man he always took much pains to gather knowledge of anything that would be likely to interest him, and then on his return to Court he would relate everything in regular order, and thus the Emperor came to hold him in great love and favor. . . . And thus it came about that Marco Polo had knowledge of, or had actually visited, a greater number of the different countries of the World than any other man; the more that he was always giving his mind to get knowledge, and to spy out and enquire into everything in order to have matter to relate to the Lord.

The Polos, returning home overland finally reached Venice in the winter of 1295, after their absence of twenty-four years. The Polo family had long since given them up for dead.

A plausible story reports that when these three shabby strangers appeared, looking more like Tartars than Venetians, their noble relatives would have nothing to do with them. But the relatives' memories were quickly jogged when the unkempt wanderers ripped open the seams of their sordid garments and produced their secret treasure—a shower of rubies, diamonds, and emeralds.

The returned travelers were affectionately embraced, and then entertained at a luxurious party.

# Some comparative travels in 1200s through the 1400s.



## **The Iron Curtain Comes Back Down** (pp 141-142)

**The land paths to the East that were so abruptly opened in the mid-thirteenth century were closed no less abruptly only one century later.**

By the mid-fourteenth century famine in the north and disastrous flooding of the Yellow River in China multiplied problems for the ruling Mongols. There were outbreaks of rebellion all over the country. Toghon Temür Khan (1320-1370), the last of the Mongol emperors, a man of Caligulan dissoluteness, came to his insecure throne in 1333. He took ten close friends into the "palace of deep clarity" in Peking, where they adapted the secret exercises of Tibetan Buddhist tantra into ceremonial sexual orgies.

But the Chinese people resisted. The climax came in 1368, when Hung Wu (Chu Yüan-chang, 1328-1398), a self-made man of great talents, emerged as the leader of Chinese rebellion and then became Emperor of China while founding the Ming dynasty.

## HOW THE MONGOLS FELL

The Chinese ingeniously organized rebellion under the very noses of the Mongols. In these last years of Mongol rule, the nervous Khans placed an informer in nearly every family, and forbade people to gather in groups. The Chinese were not allowed to carry arms; only one family in ten was permitted to possess a carving knife.

But the Mongols had forgotten to suppress the Chinese custom, at the coming of the full moon, of exchanging little round full-moon cakes, decorated with pictures of the moon hare and which, like a fortune cookie, carried a piece of paper inside. The wily rebels, we are told, used these innocent-looking moon cakes for their messengers.

**Inside were instructions for the Chinese to rise and massacre the Mongols at the time of the full moon in August 1368.**



By 1405, the great cities along the Silk Road were ruins and rubble. The Chinese went into isolation.

The weapon that brought down an empire and ultimately led to the sea race, the discovery of a new continent, and the globalization of humanity.

The stage is now set.

The Arabic Iron Curtain is re-established starting in 1350 and slammed shut in 1405.

Europeans, who have now had their eyes opened and their culture transformed, are cut off from direct contact with the East. The sudden change was a shock to the European economy and way of life.

Not being able to traverse the land for direct trade of goods and commodities, Europeans looked for ways to bypass the Arabic middle men.

It would take a rejection of Christian Dogma about the earth, a revival of scientific geography, and bold individuals.