

Marco Polo's Description of Crossing the Desert in Western China



ABOUT THE READING When Marco Polo returned to Italy after more than 30 years of traveling, he wrote an account of his journeys. His book achieved such wide popularity that it was even translated into many other languages. The book's large readership seems even more impressive when you remember that it was authored well before the invention of the printing press, when every copy of a book had to be written out by hand.

VOCABULARY

brackish salty and undrinkable

loiter stand about

perished died

cavalcade line, procession

plight difficulty



As you read try to determine which parts of Marco Polo's account were experienced firsthand and which parts might have been based on reports from others.

The city I have mentioned, which stands at the point where the traveler enters the Great Desert, is a big city called Lop, and the desert is called the Desert of Lop. The city is subject to the Great Khan, and the inhabitants worship Mahomet. I can tell you that travelers who intend to cross the desert rest in this town for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts. At the end of the week they stock up with a month's provisions for themselves and their beasts. Then they leave the town and enter the desert.

This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end; and at

The area Marco Polo describes is on the eastern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. It is a plain that was the bed of an ancient sea.

The Great Khan was Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and founder of the Mongol Dynasty.

Mahomet is an alternative spelling of Muhammad.

From *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Penguin Classics, 1958), translated by Ronald Latham. Copyright © 1958 by Ronald Latham. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

Marco Polo's Description, *continued*

Primary Source

the narrowest point it takes a month to cross it. It consists entirely of mountains and sand and valleys. There is nothing at all to eat. But I can tell you that after traveling a day and a night you find drinking water—not enough water to supply a large company, but enough for fifty or a hundred men with their beasts. And all the way through the desert you must go for a day and a night before you find water. And I can tell you that in three or four places you find the water bitter and **brackish**; but at all the other watering-places, that is, twenty-eight in all, the water is good. Beasts and birds there are none, because they find nothing to eat. But I assure you that one thing is found here, and that a very strange one, which I will relate to you.

Travelers in the desert find water at an oasis—an area where groundwater reaches the surface and plants grow.

The truth is this. When a man is riding by night through this desert and something happens to make him **loiter** and lose touch with his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again. And in this way many travelers have been lost and have **perished**. And sometimes in the night they are conscious of a noise like the clatter of a great **cavalcade** of riders away from the road; and, believing that these are some of their own company, they go where they hear the noise and, when day breaks, find they are victims of an illusion and in an awkward **plight**. And there are some who, in crossing this desert, have seen a host of men coming towards them and, suspecting that they were robbers, have taken flight; so, having left the beaten track and not knowing how to return to it, they have gone hopelessly astray. Yes, and even by daylight men hear these spirit voices, and often you fancy you are listening to the strains of many instruments, especially drums, and

Marco Polo's Description, *continued*

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the clash of arms. For this reason bands of travelers make a point of keeping very close together. Before they go to sleep they set up a sign pointing in the direction in which they have to travel. And round the necks of all their beasts they fasten little bells, so that by listening to the sound they may prevent them from straying off the path.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How do you think readers of this account in Italy and elsewhere in Europe would have reacted to Marco Polo's story?

2. What do you think Marco Polo is describing in the third paragraph? Explain your answer.

3. If you were a historian studying Marco Polo's travels, which parts of this account would you treat as being less reliable? Why?
