

# MORTALS

## 16 The fabulous fabulist

*Did Marco Polo really make it to China?*

BY LEWIS LORD

The moviegoers of 1938 who absorbed *The Adventures of Marco Polo* could see that the storied Italian was a bold and suave globetrotter. Otherwise, Gary Cooper, in the title role, would never have discovered China, fireworks, and an emperor's daughter, whom he taught how to kiss in the best European manner. The question today in-

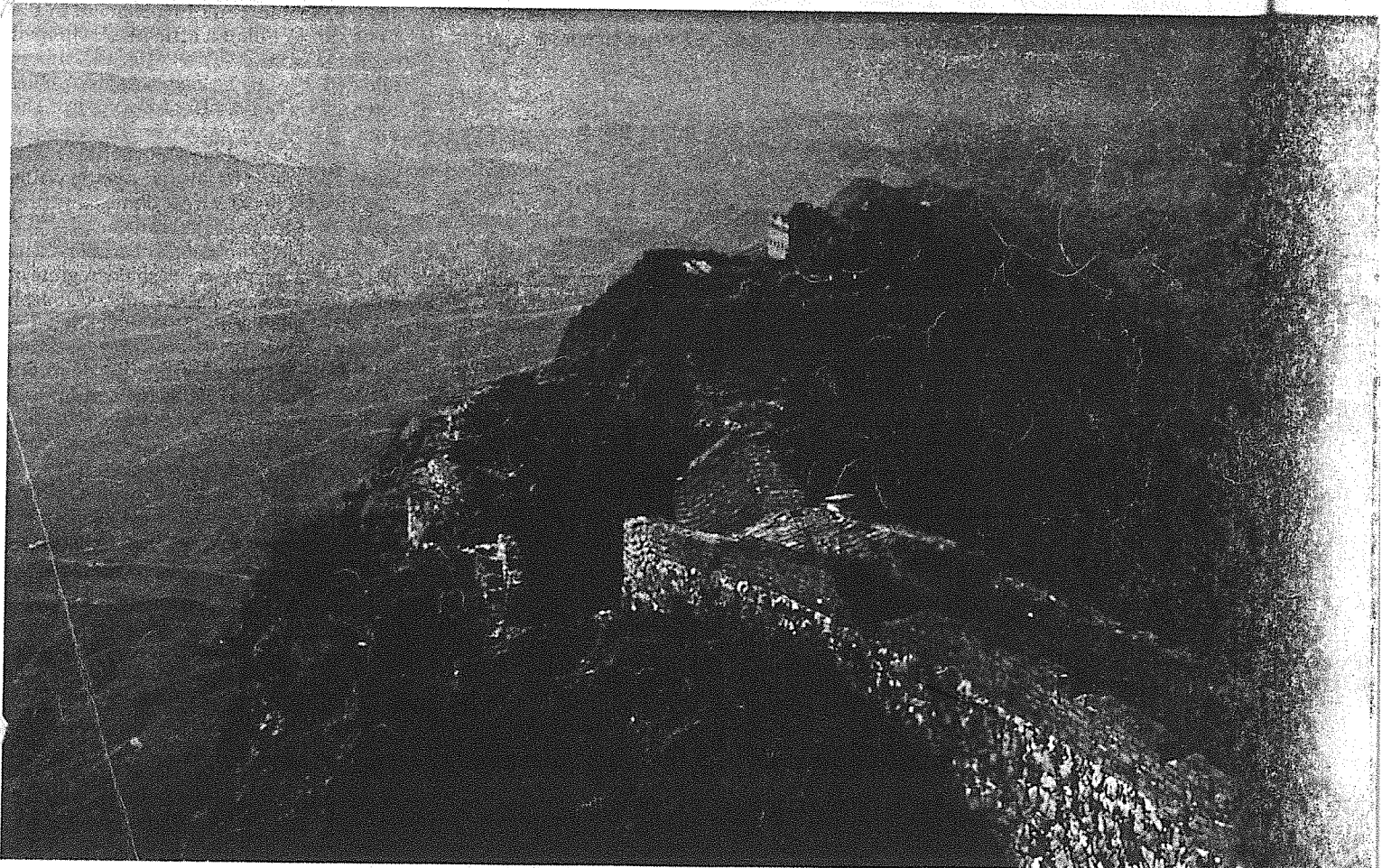
volves another character trait: Could Marco Polo tell the truth?

Ask his 13th-century contemporaries, and the answer would be a resounding no. They expected visitors to the unknown East to bring back tales of people born with one leg or one eye, or with the head beneath the shoulders. Polo's 1298 book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, offered no such oddities. Instead, it told Europeans something they refused to believe. The civi-

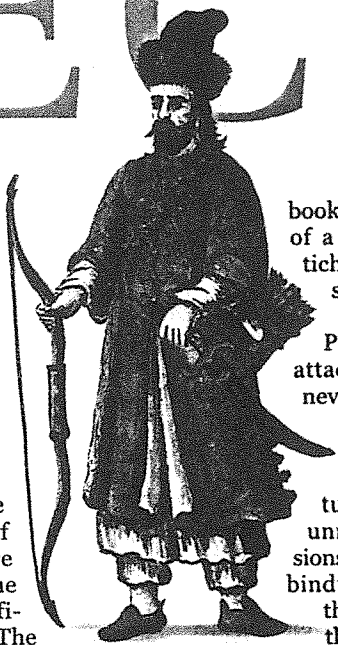
lization of the West, Polo implied, was second-rate. China, by contrast, was a place with its act decidedly together, a country with hundreds of thriving towns and cities far richer in goods, services, and technology than any place in Europe.

**Priestly request.** But rather than reject Polo's account, Westerners embraced it—as a romantic fantasy. It became Europe's most widely read book, thanks to such details as Polo's description of China's Kublai Khan as the world's strongest leader, a chivalrous "Lord of Lords" who employed 10,000 falconers and 20,000 dog handlers and hosted banquets with 40,000 guests. In 1324, as Polo lay on his deathbed, a priest beseeched him to re-

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# SECRETS



tract his "fables." His reply: "I have not told half of what I saw."

Polo started seeing the world at 17, when he left Venice with his father and his uncle for China to visit Kublai Khan, whom the two older men had met on a Chinese trading mission. The three Polos were gone 24 years, 17 of which, they said, were spent in China, where the khan sent Marco on official tours of his empire. The

book Polo produced, with the help of a fiction writer named Rustichello, gave Europe its first description of China.

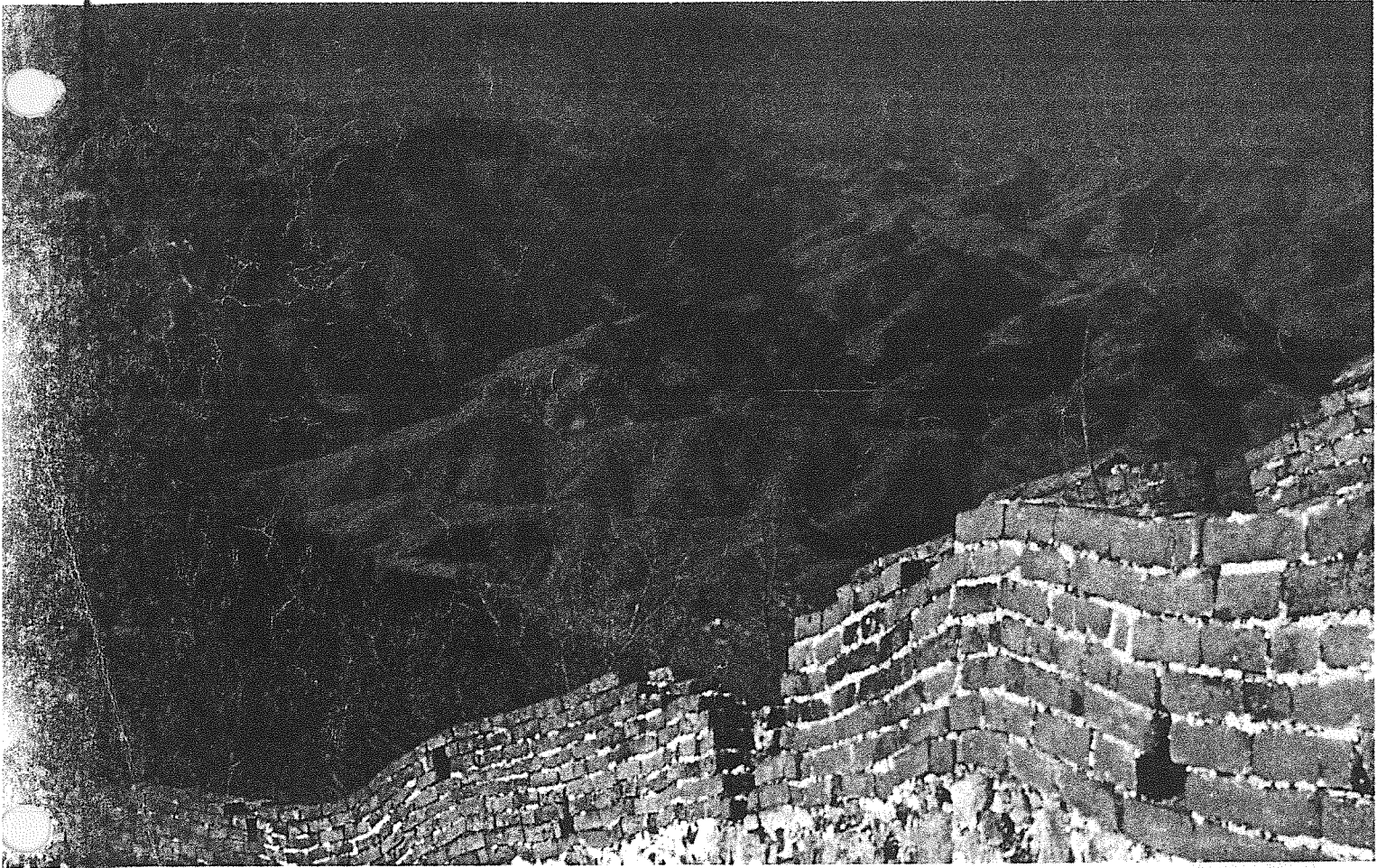
Now, seven centuries later, Polo's credibility again is under attack. According to critics, he never even set foot in China. Had he been there, they argue, he would have reported important aspects of 13th-century Chinese life that went unmentioned. Among his omissions: tea drinking, calligraphy, the binding of women's feet to keep them small, and, most glaring, the Great Wall of China.

The controversy bubbled up in a 1995 book—*Did Marco Polo Go to China?*—by Frances Wood, head of the British Library's Chinese department. Wood notes Polo's omissions and argues that he probably never got beyond Persia. His China stay, she suggests, was fabricated with the help of Arabs and Persians who had visited China. She also points out that Polo is not mentioned in any Chinese records.

But if past is prologue, Polo's reputation will emerge in fine shape. A century after he was ridiculed as "the man of a million lies," a Renaissance geographer hailed him

**If Marco Polo spent years in China, why didn't he write about the Great Wall?**

FROM TOP: MUSEO CORRER, VENICE, ITALY—GIRAUDON/ART RESOURCE; VCG—FPG



“the most diligent investigator of eastern shores.” Another reader, Christopher Columbus, sailed west in hopes of finding a better route to the riches Polo described in the East.

Today, reference books state flatly that Polo went to China, even though flaws in his story have been known for centuries. In 1747, the British book *Astley's Voyages* asked: “Had our Venetian been really on the Spot . . . how is it possible he could have made not the least Mention of the Great Wall: the most remarkable Thing in all China or perhaps in the whole World?”

The answer, Polo's supporters say, is simple: In his day, the Great Wall wasn't all that great.

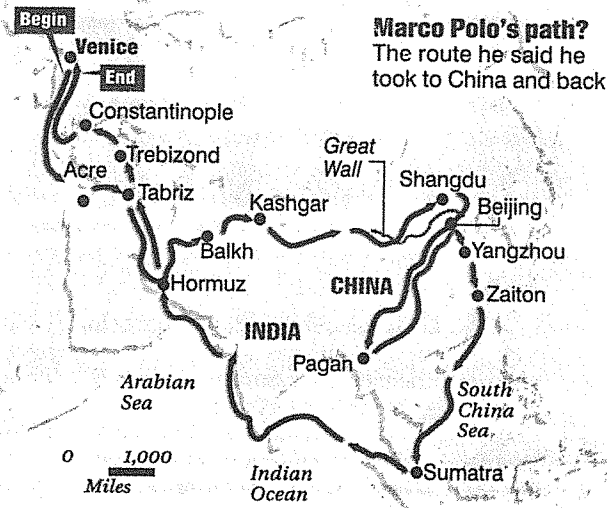
First built 300 years before the birth of Christ, much of it had crumbled by the 13th century. “Almost everything the tourist is normally shown today was built in the 16th century,” notes historian John Larner, author of the new book *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*.

**Ton timo?** Larner also downplays other omissions. Tea drinking was popular in southern China in Polo's time, he says, but had yet to catch on in the north and central regions, where Polo resided. Foot binding, Larner reports, was limited “to upperclass ladies . . . confined to their houses.” Only rarely would anyone see them except kin.

To Polo's backers, what's most telling is what he did say. His main point—that a

rich urban civilization existed in the East—was precisely on target. In the 19th century, British explorers followed his Silk Road route and were amazed at how many details he got right. Their trip, one wrote, threw “a promise of light even on what seemed the wildest of Marco's stories.”

One bizarre report from the Silk Road told of a giant sand dune that made rumbling sounds. Today, in a Chinese desert, guides point to what Polo apparently saw—the Mingsha Dune—and explain that when the wind blows, the dune whistles because solid granite is just below the shifting sand. At another Silk Road site, locals still cross a river on rafts of inflated pigskins, just as described by Polo 700 years ago.



**Marco Polo's path?**  
The route he said he took to China and back

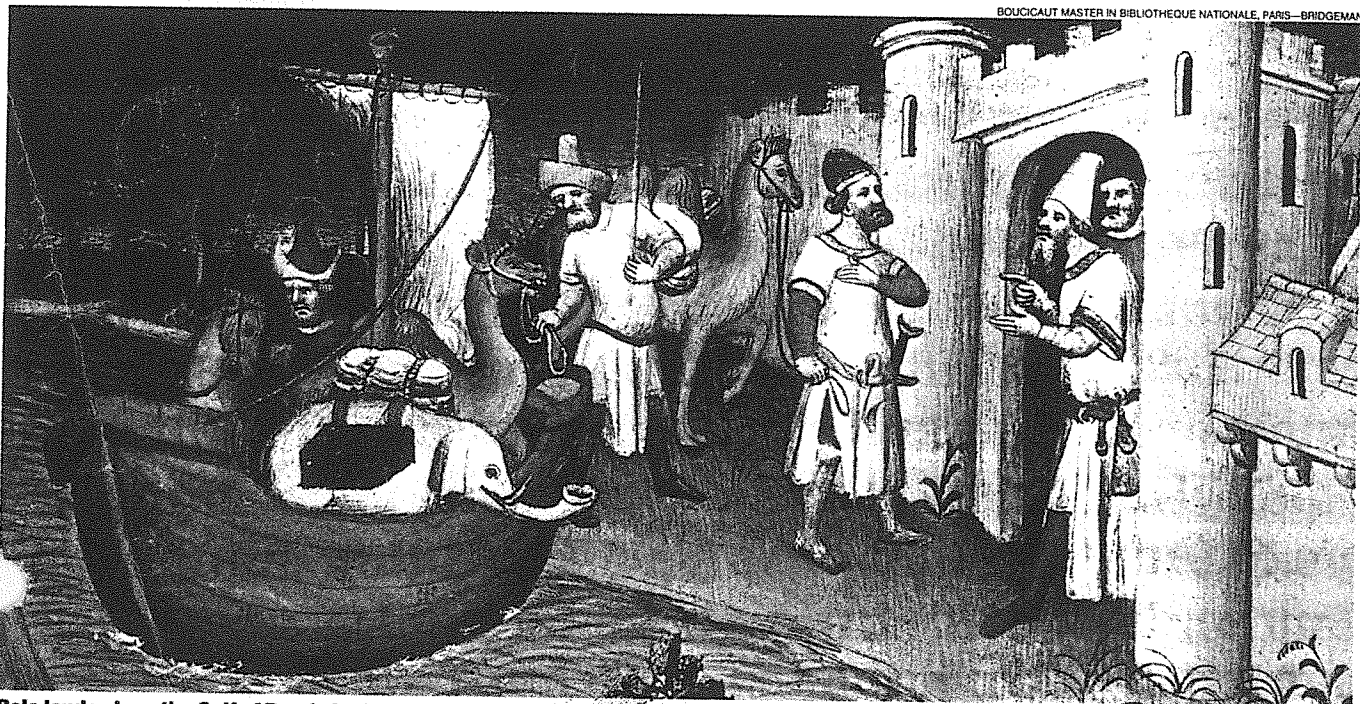
While Polo said nothing about calligraphy, he did tell the West about paper money, which China had used for centuries. From Polo, the West learned of China's “large black stones which . . . burn away like charcoal.” Centuries later, Europeans would come to know the substance as coal.

Polo also told quite a few whoppers—so many that English schoolboys used to greet exaggerations with the words: “It's a Marco Polo.” Although he never visited Japan, he reported its royal palace roofed in gold. He claimed to have been Kublai Khan's military adviser in a Chinese siege that occurred, it turns out, before his reported time in China. In fact, Polo may have

done much less for the khan than he claimed. Perhaps that's why Chinese records ignore him.

But even Polo's No. 1 critic, Wood, deems him a useful “recorder of information,” similar to the Greek historian Herodotus, “who did not travel to all the places he described and who mixed fact with fantastic tales.” Historians consider Herodotus “the father of history.”

Polo, scholars agree, opened vistas to the medieval mind and stirred the interest in exploration that prompted the age of the European ocean voyages. Whether he told only half of what he saw, or saw merely half of what he told, the fact remains: He made history happen. ●



Polo lands along the Gulf of Persia in this 15th-century illustration. On his deathbed, the adventurer said, “I have not told half of what I saw.”