Marco Polo and the Mongol Empire

Quaestio: ___________________________________________

Nunc Agenda: Read the following passage and answer the questions below:

Early in the thirteenth century a powerful Mongol chieftain, Genghis Khan, mounted an attack against northern China and its ruling Jin dynasty. This marked the beginning of a long process that led eventually to the occupation of China by the Mongols, a process that was completed only toward the end of the century when the grandson of Genghis, Kublai Khan, finally broke the resistance of the Song dynasty, which had dominated southern China, and proclaimed the Yuan dynasty, which then ruled China for the next hundred years. The center of Chinese civilization in the Yuan period became the city of Cambaluc (now Beijing), where the emperor had his winter palace. To this imperial city came merchants from all parts of the civilized world, to trade goods and merchandise. Among the thousands of traders to arrive about the year 1275 were two brothers from Venice, Maffeo and Niccolo Polo. Accompanying them was Niccolo’s son Marco, who was then a teenager. Marco Polo was to remain in China for nearly a quarter of a century. During this time he entered the Chinese bureaucracy, later performing a number of tasks for the emperor that led him to travel extensively throughout China and thus become well acquainted with the land and its people. The Book of Ser Marco Polo, which is an account of his travels, paints a vivid picture of Chinese civilization in the thirteenth century, a civilization significantly more advanced than that of Europe. The origin of the book is an interesting story. When he finally returned home in 1295 Polo became involved in a war between the Venetians and the Genoese. He was captured in battle and thrown into prison. While incarcerated he passed the time telling stories of his travels and adventures to his cellmate, who in turn transcribed them.

Which Mongol leader began the conquest of China? ________________

Which Mongol leader completely conquered China? ________________

What was the name of the Mongol dynasty in China? ________________

How did Marco Polo end up in China? ________________

How were his accounts recorded? ________________

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Book II – Chapter 24: How the Great Kaan Causeth the Bark of Trees, Made Into Something Like Paper, to Pass for Money All Over his Country

The Emperor's Mint (where money is made) then is in this same City of Cambaluc, and the way it is made is such that you might say he has the Secret of Alchemy* in perfection, and you would be right! For he makes his money [in this way].

He makes them take of the bark of a certain tree, in fact of the Mulberry Tree, the leaves of which are the food of the silkworms, - these trees being so numerous that whole districts are full of them. What they take is a certain fine white skin, which lies between the wood of the tree and the thick outer bark, and this they make into something resembling sheets of paper, but black. When these sheets have been prepared they are cut up into pieces of different sizes. The smallest of these sizes is worth a half tornesel; the next, a little larger, one tornesel; one, a little larger still, is worth half a silver groat of Venice; another a whole groat; others yet two groats, five groats, and ten groats. There is also a kind worth one Bezant of gold, and others of three Bezants, and so up to ten. All these pieces of paper are issued with as much solemnity and authority as if they were of pure gold or silver; and on every piece a variety of officials, whose duty it is, have to write their names, and to put their seals. And when all is prepared duly, the chief officer deputed by the Khan smears the Seal entrusted to him with [ink], and impresses it on the paper, so that the form of the Seal remains printed upon it in red; the Money is then authentic. Any one forging it would be punished with death. And the Khan causes every year to be made such a vast quantity of this money, which costs him nothing, that it must equal in amount all the treasure in the world.

With these pieces of paper, made as I have described, he causes all payments on his own account to be made; and he makes them to pass current universally over all his kingdoms and provinces and territories, and whithersoever his power and sovereignty extends. And nobody, however important he may think himself, dares to refuse them on pain of death. And indeed everybody takes them readily, for wheresoever a person may go throughout the Great Khan's dominions he shall find these pieces of paper [in use], and shall be able to transact all sales and purchases of goods by means of them just as well as if they were coins of pure gold. And all the while they are so light that ten bezants' worth does not weigh one golden bezant.

According to Marco Polo, how was money minted in Yuan Dynasty China under Mongol rule?

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How was this system different from the type of money used among Europeans at the time?

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The *Secret of Alchemy that Polo mentions refers to a the sought after ability to turn lead, or other worthless material, into gold. Why does he say that Kublai Khan has discovered the Secret of Alchemy?

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The personal appearance of the Great Khan, Lord of Lords, whose name is Cublay (Kublai), is such as I shall now tell you. He is of a good stature, neither tall nor short, but of a middle height. He has a becoming (large) amount of flesh, and is very shapely in all his limbs. His complexion is white and red, the eyes black and fine, the nose well formed and well set on. He has four wives, whom he retains permanently as his legitimate consorts; and the eldest of his sons by those four wives ought by rights to be emperor... when his father dies. Those four ladies are called empresses, ...each of them has a special court of her own... [and] each of these ladies has not less than 10,000 [servants] attached to her court.

When the Emperor desires the [company] of one of these four consorts, he will sometimes send for the lady to his apartment and sometimes visit her at her own. He has also a great number of concubines (women of lesser status than wives who are retained by the Emperor for companionship), and I will tell you how he obtains them. You must know that there is a tribe of Tartars (another term for Mongols) called Ungrat, who are noted for their beauty. Now every year an hundred of the most beautiful maidens of this tribe are sent to the Great Khan, who [gives] them to the charge (responsibility) of certain elderly ladies dwelling in his palace. And these old ladies make the girls sleep with them, in order to ascertain if they have sweet breath [and do not snore], and are sound in all their limbs. Then such of them as are of approved beauty, and are good and sound in all respects, are appointed to attend on the Emperor by turns. Thus six of these damsels take their turn for three days and nights, and wait on him when he is in his chamber and when he is in his bed, to serve him in any way, and to be entirely at his orders. At the end of the three days and nights they are relieved by other six. And so throughout the year, there are reliefs of maidens by six and six, changing every three days and nights.

According to Marco Polo, what does Kublai Khan look like?

Why do you think the wives needed so many servants?

Why did the Emperor have old ladies sleep next to his potential concubines before accepting?

You must know that it is forbidden to bury any dead body inside the city. If the body be that of an Idolater it is carried out beyond the city and suburbs to a remote place assigned for the purpose, to be burnt. And if it be of one belonging to a religion the custom of which is to bury, such as the Christian, the Saracen, or what not, it is also carried out beyond the suburbs to a distant place assigned for the purpose. And thus the city is preserved in a better and more healthy state.

Moreover, no public woman resides inside the city, but all such abide outside in the suburbs. And 'tis wonderful what a vast number of these there are for the foreigners; it is a certain fact that there are more than 20,000 of them living by prostitution. And that so many can live in this way will show you how vast is the population.
[Guards patrol the city every night in parties of 30 or 40, looking out for any persons who may be abroad at unseasonable hours, i.e. after the great bell has struck thrice. If they find any such person he is immediately taken to prison, and examined next morning by the proper officers. If these find him guilty of any misdemeanor (minor crime) they order him a proportionate beating with the stick. Under this punishment people sometimes die; but they adopt it in order to [avoid] bloodshed; for their Bacsis say that it is an evil thing to shed man's blood].
To this city also are brought articles of greater cost and rarity, and in greater abundance of all kinds, than to any other city in the world. For people of every description, and from every region, bring things (including all the costly wares of India, as well as the fine and precious goods of Cathay itself with its provinces), some for the sovereign, some for the court, some for the city which is so great, some for the crowds of Barons and Knights, some for the great hosts of the Emperor which are quartered round about; and thus between court and city the quantity brought in is endless.
As a sample, I tell you, no day in the year passes that there do not enter the city 1000 cart-loads of silk alone, from which are made quantities of cloth of silk and gold, and of other goods. And this is not to be wondered at; for in all the countries round about there is no flax, so that everything has to be made of silk. It is true, indeed, that in some parts of the country there is cotton and hemp, but not sufficient for their wants. This, however, is not of much consequence, because silk is so abundant and cheap, and is a more valuable substance than either flax or cotton.

Why were all dead bodies buried outside the city limits? What was the benefit of this practice?

Why were some bodies buried and some cremated?

Why does Marco Polo say that the number of “public women” prove that there is a large population in general?

How were people punished for misdemeanors? Why was it done this way?

What fabric was most often used in China? Why would they use this fabric over any other?