

THE TRAVELS OF
MARCO POLO

TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RONALD LATHAM

PENGUIN BOOKS,

1958

tains and the plains, wherever they know that there is good pasture, because they live off their flocks. They have clothing made of skins, and dwellings of felt or of skins. The country breeds good Turcoman horses and good mules of excellent quality.

The other races are the Armenians and the Greeks, who live intermingled among the Turcomans in villages and towns and make their living by commerce and crafts, besides agriculture. They weave the choicest and most beautiful carpets in the world. They also weave silk fabrics of crimson and other colours, of great beauty and richness, and many other kinds of cloth. Their most celebrated cities are Konya, Kaisarieh, and Sivas; there are also many other cities and towns which I will not enumerate, because the list would run to a wearisome length. They are subject to the Tartar Khan of the Levant, who appoints governors to rule them.*

Let us now leave this province and turn to Greater Armenia.

This is a very large province. Near the entrance to it stands a city called Erzincan, in which is made the best buckram in the world and countless other crafts are practised. Here are the finest baths of spring water to be found anywhere on earth. The inhabitants are Armenians and vassals of the Tartars. There are many towns and cities, of which the most splendid is Erzincan, which is the seat of an archbishop. The other chief cities are Erzerum and Erzis. And on the route from Trebizond to Tabriz is a fortress called Bayburt, where there is a large silver mine.

*The following passage is added in I (see pp. 21 and 26 n.): These Tartars do not care what god is worshipped in their territories. So long as all their subjects are loyal and obedient to the Khan and accordingly pay the tribute imposed on them and justice is well observed, you may do as you please about your soul. They object to your speaking ill of their souls or intermeddling with their practices. But concerning God and your own soul do what you will, whether you be Jew or pagan, Saracen or Christian, who live among the Tartars. They freely confess in Tartary that Christ is a lord; but they say that he is a proud lord, because he will not keep company with other gods but wants to be over all others in the world. So in some places they have a Christ of gold or silver and keep him ensconced within a shrine and say that he is the great lord of the Christians.

LET me begin with Armenia. The truth is that there are actually two Armenias, a Greater and a Lesser. The lord of Lesser Armenia is a king who maintains good and just government in his country under the suzerainty of the Tartars.* It is a land of many villages and towns, amply stocked with the means of life. It also affords good sport with all sorts of wild game, both beast and fowl. The climate, however, is far from healthy; it is, in fact, extremely enervating. Hence, the nobility of the country, who used to be men of valour and stalwart soldiers, are now craven and mean-spirited and excel in nothing except drinking.

On the sea coast lies the town of Ayas, a busy emporium. For you must know that all the spices and cloths from the interior are brought to this town, and all other goods of high value; and merchants of Venice† and Genoa and everywhere else come here and buy them. And merchants and others who wish to penetrate the interior all make this town the starting-point of their journey.

Lesser Armenia is bounded on the south by the Promised Land, now in the hands of the Saracens; on the north by the western district of Turkey, known as Karaman; on the north-east and east by eastern Turkey, with the towns of Kaisarieh and Sivas and many others, all subjects to the Tartars; and on the west by the sea that is crossed by ships sailing to Christendom.

In Turkey there are three races of men. The Turcomans themselves, who worship Mahomet and keep his law, are a primitive people, speaking a barbarous language. They roam over the moun-

*I adds here, and again in the account of Greater Armenia (p. 47) that the inhabitants are imperfect Christians, but could easily be brought back to the true faith if they had proper teachers.

†One MS. (LT) adds: 'and Pisa'.

I can tell you that in summer all the armies of the Tartars of the Levant are stationed in this province, because it has the best summer pasturage for beasts. So the Tartars spend the summer here with their beasts; but they do not winter here, because of the intense cold of the snow, which falls in these regions in prodigious quantities, so that the beasts could not survive it. So the Tartars depart with the onset of winter and withdraw to a warmer region, where they find plenty of grass and good pasturage for their beasts.

In the heart of Greater Armenia is a very high mountain, shaped like a cube,* on which Noah's ark is said to have rested, whence it is called the Mountain of Noah's Ark. It is so broad and long that it takes more than two days to go round it. On the summit the snow lies so deep all the year round that no one can ever climb it; this snow never entirely melts, but new snow is for ever falling on the old, so that the level rises. But on the lower slopes, thanks to the moisture that flows down from the melting snow, the herbage is so lush and luxuriant that in summer all the beasts from near and far resort here to batten on it and yet the supply never fails. This flow of moisture also has the effect of making the hillsides very boggy.†

This province is bounded on the south-east by the kingdom of Mosul and on the north by Georgia, both of which I will describe to you later. Near the Georgian border there is a spring from which gushes a stream of oil, in such abundance that a hundred ships‡ may load there at once. This oil is not good to eat; but it is good for burning and as a salve for men and camels affected with itch or scab. Men come from a long distance to fetch this oil, and in all the neighbourhood no other oil is burnt but this.

*Or 'cup'.

†According to I, the Ark is actually visible as a black patch among the snow on mount 'Boris or Olympus', though it cannot be seen at close quarters; the natives seldom mention it, but on being questioned they answer: 'It is said that the black patch is the ship of the world.'

‡Z says: '1,000 camels' The reference is doubtless to Baku on the Caspian.

In Georgia there is a king who always bears the name of David Malik, that is to say King David. He is subject to the Tartars. In former times all the kings of this province were born with the sign of an eagle on their right shoulder. The Georgians are a handsome race of doughty warriors, good archers and good fighters on the battlefield. They are Christians and observe the rule of the Greek church.* They wear their hair cropped in clerical fashion.

This is the province through which Alexander could not pass when he wanted to go to the west,† because the way is narrow and dangerous. On one side is the sea, on the other are high mountains and forests impassable on horseback. This narrow pass between the mountains and the sea runs for more than four leagues, so that a few men could hold it against all comers. This is why Alexander could not pass. And I should let you know that Alexander had a tower and fortress built here, so that the natives could not sally out to attack him. This was called the Iron Gates. It is the place where the *Alexander Book* relates that he shut in the Tartars between two mountains. In fact they were not Tartars, but people called Comanians and various other races besides, because there were no Tartars at that time.

The province has villages and towns in plenty. Silk is produced here in abundance, and the silken fabrics and cloth of gold woven here are the finest ever seen. There are also the best goshawks in the world. There are ample supplies of everything, and commerce and industry flourish. The whole country is full of high mountains and narrow passes which are easily defensible, so that I can assure you that the Tartars have never been able to achieve complete dominion over it. Among these mountains are woods in which the only trees are box-trees.

There is a monastery here called St Leonard's, notable for the following miraculous occurrence. You must know that there is a great lake formed of water that issues from a mountain just beside the church of St Leonard. And in this water no fish is found, big or little, at any season of the year, except that they begin to appear on the first day of Lent and continue every day

*I adds that they are losing their Christianity for lack of preachers.

†R etc.: 'north'. Cf. p. 23.

throughout Lent till Holy Saturday, that is, the eve of Easter. During all this period there are fish in plenty; but at every other season there is not one to be found.

This country looks out over two seas. To the north lies the Black Sea, to the east that called the sea of Baku or of Ghel or Ghelan, which is some 2,800 miles in circumference and is strictly speaking a lake, because it is completely surrounded by mountains and land and has no connexion with the main sea – which lies in fact twelve days' journey away. It contains many inhabited islands, with fine cities built on them. The inhabitants are refugees from the power of the Great Tartar, when he rode as a conqueror through the kingdom or province of Persia, whose cities and districts then had a system of government by the community; they sought refuge in these islands and among the mountains, in the hope of finding safety there. This sea is well stocked with fish, especially sturgeon, salmon, and other big fish. Many rivers run into it, including the Euphrates.* In recent years Genoese merchants have taken to launching ships on this sea and sailing on it. This is the source of the silk called *ghilan*.

In this province is a fine city of great size named Tiflis, surrounded by subordinate towns and townships. The inhabitants are Christians (that is, Armenians and Georgians) besides a few Saracens and Jews, but not many. Silk and many other fabrics are woven here. The inhabitants live by their industry and are subject to the Great Khan of the Tartars.

You must know that we mention only the two or three principal cities of each province. There are many others which it would be tedious to enumerate, unless they are remarkable for some special curiosity. But some that we have omitted, which are situated in the places above mentioned, will be dealt with more fully below.†

So much for what lies north of Armenia. Let us now turn to the lands lying south and east of it.

*Presumably the Araxes. Z and V add the Tigris and Gihon, two others of the four rivers that flowed out of Paradise (Genesis ii, 11–14). Polo applies the name Gihon to the Oxus (p. 313).

†This paragraph occurs only in R.

Mosul is a large kingdom inhabited by the following different nations. First, there are those called Arabs, who worship Mahomet. Then there are people who observe the law of Christ, but not according to the ordinances of the Roman Church, for they are at fault in several points. They are called Nestorians and Jacobites.* They have a patriarch, whom they call Catholicus.† This patriarch makes archbishops and bishops and abbots and prelates of every degree and sends them out everywhere, into India and Cathay and Baghdad, just like the Roman Pope. You must understand that all the Christians you will meet in the countries I am describing are Nestorians and Jacobites.

Here are made all the clothes of silk and gold called *mosulin*.‡ And from this kingdom hail the great merchants, also called *Mosulin*, who export vast quantities of spices and other precious wares.

In the mountains of this kingdom live the people called Kurds; some of them are Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, others are Saracens who worship Mahomet. They are lusty fighters and lawless men, very fond of robbing merchants.

Next to this province is one named Mus and Mardin, which produces abundance of cotton. Its industries include the manufacture of buckram. The inhabitants are craftsmen and traders and are subject to the king of the Tartars.

Let us now leave Mosul and turn to Baghdad.

In Baghdad, which is a very large city, the Caliph of all the Saracens in the world has his seat, just as the head of all the Christians in the world has his seat at Rome. Through the midst of the city flows a very large river, by which travellers may go to the Indian Sea. By this route merchants come and go with their merchandise. You should know that from Baghdad to the sea is a journey of fully eighteen days. Merchants travelling to India follow this river to a city called Kais, where they enter the Indian Sea. On the river between Baghdad and Kais there is

*Z adds: 'and Armenians'.

†The Jacobite patriarch had his seat near Mosul, the Nestorian at Baghdad; cf. below p. 297.

‡I.e. muslin, though evidently not in the modern sense.

a large city named Basra; and in groves all round Basra grow the best dates in the world.

It is in Baghdad that most of the pearls are pierced that are imported from India into Christendom. Here too are woven many fabrics of cloth of gold and silk, known as *nasich* and *nakh* and *cramoisy*, very richly decorated with beasts and birds. It is a great centre for the study of the law of Mahomet and of necromancy, natural science, astronomy, geomancy, and physiognomy. It is the largest and most splendid city in all these parts.

To the Caliph of Baghdad belonged the greatest treasure of gold and silver and precious stones that ever belonged to any man. Let me tell you about it. It happened in the year of Our Lord 1255* that the Great Khan of the Tartars, whose name was Hulagu, assembled a huge army and came against Baghdad. Hulagu was one of four brothers, lords of the Tartars, of whom the eldest was named Mongu. These brothers, after conquering Cathay and other adjoining countries, were not content with what they had won, but made up their minds to conquer the whole world. So they divided it into four quarters: one was to go eastwards on a career of conquest, one southwards, and the others towards the other two quarters. The portion that fell by lot to Hulagu was the south. He set out first of all and started manfully to conquer these southern provinces till he came to Baghdad. Knowing the great strength of the city, due to the immense numbers of its occupants, he resolved to capture it by a ruse rather than by force. Having about 100,000 cavalry, without counting infantry,† he wished to give the Caliph and his followers in the city the impression that they were only a few. So, before drawing near, he posted part of his force in hiding on one side and another part on the other side among the woods. With the rest he charged full tilt up to the gates. The Caliph, seeing this force was a small one, did not take much account of it. Putting his trust only in the banner of Mahomet, he planned to destroy it utterly and sallied out headlong with his following. Seeing this, Hulagu made a pretence of flight and so lured him

*Actually 1258.

†In the shorter version, found in F, this is given as the number of the defending garrison. The version given here is found only in R.

back past the woods and thickets where his troops lay in ambush. Here he trapped his pursuers and crushed them. So the Caliph was captured together with the city. After his capture a tower was discovered, filled with gold. When Hulagu saw this he was amazed and ordered the Caliph to be brought before him. 'Caliph,' said he, 'why have you heaped up all this treasure? What did you mean to do with it? Did you not know that I was your enemy and was coming against you with all this host to despoil you? Knowing this, why did you not take your treasure and give it to knights and hired soldiers to defend you and your city?' The Caliph made no answer, because he did not know what to say. Then Hulagu said: 'Caliph, since I see that you love treasure so dearly, I will give you your own to eat.' Next he ordered that the Caliph should be taken and put in the treasure tower and that nothing should be given him to eat or to drink. 'Now, Caliph,' he said, 'eat your fill of treasure, since you are so fond of it; for you will get nothing else.' After that he left him in the tower, where at the end of four days he died. So it would have been better indeed for the Caliph if he had given away his treasure to defend his land and his people rather than die with all his people and bereft of everything. And since then there has been no other Caliph.

Before we go on to Tabriz, there is much else I might have told you about happenings and customs in Baghdad; but, as this would run to a tedious length, I have cut short my account. Instead, I will tell you of a great miracle, as you will hear.

The miracle which I will relate to you took place between Baghdad and Mosul. In the year of the Incarnation of Christ 1225* there lived a Caliph at Baghdad who was very ill-disposed towards the Christians. Day and night he was for ever thinking how he could convert all the Christians in his country into Saracens or, failing that, have them all put to death. And on this problem he continually sought the advice of his men of religion and his counsellors. For they all joined with him in wishing ill to the Christians; indeed, it is a fact that all the Saracens in the

*So Z. F has '1275', which cannot be reconciled with the preceding chapter.

world are agreed in wishing ill to all the Christians in the world. Now it happened that the Caliph and his advisers hit upon the following text. They found it written in one of the Gospels that, if there were a Christian who had faith as great as a grain of mustard seed, then by praying to the Lord his God he could make two mountains join together. When they found this, they were overjoyed: here, they declared, was a pretext for converting the Christians into Saracens or else putting them all to death. Thereupon the Caliph sent for all the Christians, Nestorian and Jacobite, that were in his country, who amounted to a very great number. When they had come before him, he showed them this passage and had it read to them. After they had read it, he asked them if it was true. They replied that it was most certainly true. 'Then do you affirm,' said the Caliph, 'that a Christian whose faith is as great as a grain of mustard seed is able by praying to his God to make two mountains join together?' 'Certainly we do,' said the Christians. 'Then,' said the Caliph, 'I will set you a test. Among so many Christians, there must surely be one who has a little faith. Therefore I tell you this: either you will move this mountain, which you see there,' and he pointed to a mountain not far away, 'or I will make you all die an evil death. For, if you do not make it move, you will show that you have no faith. So you will all be put to death; or else you will be converted to the good law that Mahomet our prophet has given us, and will have true faith and be saved. To do this I will allow you ten days' grace. And if at the end of that time you have not done it, I will have you all put to death.' After that the Caliph spoke no more and gave the Christians leave to depart.

When the Christians heard the Caliph's words, they were greatly perturbed and very much afraid of death. All the same, they had good hope that their Creator would deliver them from this great peril. A council was held of all the learned Christians who were their prelates; for they had bishops and archbishops and priests in plenty. But they could see no way out of it but to pray to the Lord their God that He of His pity and mercy would send them guidance and deliver them from such a cruel death as the Caliph would inflict upon them if they did not do as he commanded. What more shall I say? You may be sure that

the Christians spent day and night in prayer, and earnestly besought the Saviour, God of heaven and earth, that He of His pity would deliver them from the great peril that they were in.

In this solemn prayer and supplication the Christians continued eight days and eight nights, male and female, great and small. While they were thus occupied, it happened that an angel came in a vision bringing a message from God to a certain bishop, who was a man of very holy life. 'O bishop,' he said, 'go now to such-and-such a shoe-maker, a man with one eye, and tell him to pray that the mountain may move; and the mountain will move forthwith.'

Now, as to this shoe-maker, I will tell you what sort of man he was and what life he led. You may be well assured that he was a man of great probity and chastity. He fasted much and committed no sin. Every day he went to Church and to Mass. Every day he gave away some of his daily bread for God's sake. He was a man of such virtuous character and such holy life that you could find none better, near or far. I will tell you of one thing he did that will convince you that he was a good man of good faith and good life. He had often heard the lesson read from the Holy Gospel that if thine eye offend thee thou shouldst pluck it out of thy head or blind it, so that it may not cause thee to sin. It happened that one day a beautiful woman came to the house of this shoe-maker to buy shoes. He wished to see her leg and foot, so as to see which shoes would fit her. So he asked her to show her leg and foot, and she promptly did so. And without doubt she had a beautiful leg and a beautiful foot, so that you could not ask for greater beauty. And when the master of the shop, who was as virtuous a man as I have described him, saw this woman's leg and foot, he was forthwith tempted, because his eyes looked on them with pleasure. He let the woman go and would not sell her the shoes. When the woman had gone, the master said to himself: 'Ah, false traitor that you are, what are you thinking of? Surely I will take heavy vengeance on these eyes of mine which offend me so.' There and then he took a little awl and made it very sharp and thrust it into the midst of one of his eyes in such a way that he burst the eye inside his head, so

that he never saw with it again. So he was certainly a very holy and virtuous man. And now to return to our story.

Now you may be sure that when this apparition had come several times to the bishop, bidding him send for the shoe-maker so that he by his prayer might make the mountain move, the bishop gave a full account of it to his fellow Christians. And they were all in favour of summoning the shoe-maker to come before them. And so they did. When he had come, they told him that they wished him to pray to God to move the mountain. At first he declared that he was not such a good man that the Lord God would do so great a thing in answer to his prayer. But the Christians begged him and coaxed him. And what need of more words? They begged him to such purpose that he promised to do as they wished and make this prayer to his Creator.

When the last of their days of grace had come, the Christians rose early in the morning, male and female, great and small, and went to church and chanted the Holy Mass. After they had chanted and performed all the service of our Lord God, they set out all together towards the plain at the foot of this mountain, carrying the Cross of the Saviour before them. When the whole company, who numbered fully 100,000 souls, had come to this plain, they stationed themselves before the Cross of the Lord. The Caliph was there, with such a great multitude of Saracens that it was a marvel to behold; they had come to kill the Christians, because they did not in the least believe that the mountain would move. And all the Christians, great and small alike, were filled with fear and doubt; but all the same they had good hope in their Creator. And when all these people, Christians and Saracens, were in this plain, then the shoe-maker fell on his knees before the Cross and lifted his hands to heaven and besought his Saviour that the mountain might move and that such a multitude of Christians as were there assembled might not be put to a cruel death. When he had finished his prayer, he cried: 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I command thee, mountain, by the virtue of the Holy Ghost, to depart thence.' He had barely ceased speaking when the mountain began to crumble and to move. When the Caliph and the Saracens saw this, they were dumbfounded, and many of them turned

Christian. The Caliph himself became a Christian, but in secret; for when he died, a cross was found round his neck. For this reason the Saracens did not bury him among the tombs of the other Caliphs, but put him in another place.

Now you have heard just how the miracle happened. Out of reverence to the shoe-maker and the grace vouchsafed to him, the anniversary of this miracle has been celebrated ever since by the Christians, both Nestorian and Jacobite, who regularly observe a solemn fast on the eve of the day. But in general, since Armenians, Nestorians, and Jacobites differ in certain points of doctrine, they repudiate and abhor one another.*

Tabriz is a large city in a province called Iraq, which has many cities and towns. Since Tabriz is the most splendid city in the province, I will tell you about it.

The people of Tabriz live by trade and industry; for cloth of gold and silk is woven here in great quantity and of great value. The city is so favourably situated that it is a market for merchandise from India and Baghdad, from Mosul and Hormuz, and from many other places; and many Latin merchants† come here to buy the merchandise imported from foreign lands. It is also a market for precious stones, which are found here in great abundance. It is a city where good profits are made by travelling merchants. The inhabitants are a mixed lot and good for very little. There are Armenians and Nestorians, Jacobites and Georgians and Persians; and there are also worshippers of Mahomet, who are the natives of the city and are called Tabrizis. The city is entirely surrounded by attractive orchards, full of excellent fruit. The Saracens of Tabriz are wicked and treacherous. The law which their prophet Mahomet has given them lays down that any harm they may do to one who does not accept their law, and any appropriation of his goods, is no sin at all. And if they suffer death or injury at the hands of Christians, they are accounted martyrs. For this reason they would be great wrong-doers, if it were not for the government. And all the other Saracens in the world act on the same principle. When they are on the point of

*This passage occurs only in Z.

†FB adds: 'especially Genoese'.

death, up comes their priest and asks whether they believe that Mahomet was the true messenger of God; if they answer, 'Yes', then he tells them that they are saved. That is why they are converting the Tartars and many other nations to their law, because they are allowed great licence to sin and according to their law no sin is forbidden.*

Within the confines of Tabriz is a monastery named in honour of the Venerable St Barsamo. Here there is an abbot with many monks who wear a habit in the style of Carmelites. These monks, so as not to give themselves up to idleness, are continually weaving woollen girdles, which they afterwards lay on the altar of St Barsamo when they celebrate Mass. When they go through the province begging (like the friars of the order of the Holy Ghost), they give some of them to their friends and to noblemen, because they are efficacious in relieving the body of pain; and for this reason everyone devoutly wishes to have one.

Now let us leave Tabriz and turn to Persia,† a very great province and at one time a very splendid and powerful one, but now ravaged and devastated by the Tartars.

In Persia is the city called Saveh, from which the three Magi set out when they came to worship Jesus Christ. Here, too, they lie buried in three sepulchres of great size and beauty. Above each sepulchre is a square building with a domed roof of very fine workmanship. The one is just beside the other. Their bodies are still whole, and they have hair and beards. One was named Beltasar, the second Gaspar, and the third Melchior. Messer Marco asked several of the inhabitants who these Magi were; but no one could tell him anything except that they were three kings who were buried there in days gone by. But at last he learnt what I will tell you.

Three days farther on, he found a town called Kala Atash-parastan, that is to say Town of the Fire-worshippers. And that is no more than the truth; for the men of this town do worship

*The last sentence is only in V and R. The following paragraph is peculiar to R.

†In L, V, and R, the distance from Tabriz to Persia is given as twelve days' journey.

fire. And I will tell you why they worship it. The inhabitants declare that in days gone by three kings of this country went to worship a new-born prophet and took with them three offerings – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – so as to discover whether this prophet was a god, or an earthly king or a healer. For they said: 'If he takes gold, he is an earthly king; if frankincense, a god; if myrrh, a healer.' When they had come to the place where the prophet was born, the youngest of the three kings went in all alone to see the child. He found that he was like himself, for he seemed to be of his own age and appearance. And he came out, full of wonder. Then in went the second, who was a man of middle age. And to him also the child seemed, as it had seemed to the other, to be of his own age and appearance. And he came out quite dumbfounded. Then in went the third, who was of riper years; and to him also it happened as it had to the other two. And he came out deep in thought. When the three kings were all together, each told the others what he had seen. And they were much amazed and resolved that they would all go in together. So in they went, all three together, and came before the child and saw him in his real likeness and of his real age; for he was only thirteen days old. Then they worshipped him and offered him the gold, the frankincense, and the myrrh. The child took all three offerings and then gave them a closed casket. And the three kings set out to return to their own country.

After they had ridden for some days, they resolved to see what the child had given them. They opened the casket and found inside it a stone. They wondered greatly what this could be. The child had given it to them to signify that they should be firm as stone in the faith that they had adopted. For, when the three kings saw that the child had taken all three offerings, they concluded that he was at once a god, and an earthly king, and a healer. And, since the child knew that the three kings believed this, he gave them the stone to signify that they should be firm and constant in their belief. The three kings, not knowing why the stone had been given to them, took it and threw it into a well. No sooner had it fallen in than there descended from heaven a burning fire, which came straight to the well into which it had been thrown. When the three kings saw this miracle, they were

taken aback and repented of their throwing away the stone; for they saw clearly that its significance was great and good. They immediately took some of this fire and carried it to their country and put it in one of their churches, a very fine and splendid building. They keep it perpetually burning and worship it as a god. And every sacrifice and burnt offering which they make is roasted with this fire. If it ever happens that the fire goes out, they go round to others who hold the same faith and worship fire also and are given some of the fire that burns in their church. This they bring back to rekindle their own fire. They never rekindle it except with this fire of which I have spoken. To procure this fire, they often make a journey of ten days.

That is how it comes about that the people of this country are fire-worshippers. And I assure you that they are very numerous. All this was related to Messer Marco Polo by the inhabitants of this town; and it is all perfectly true. Let me tell you finally that one of the three Magi came from Saveh, one from Hawah, and the third from Kashan.

Now that I have told you of this matter at full length, I will go on to tell you the facts about many other cities in Persia and the customs of the inhabitants.

You must know that in Persia there are eight kingdoms, because it is a very large country. Here is a list of them by name: the first kingdom, at the entrance to the country, is called Kasvin; the second which lies towards the south, is Kurdistan; the third, Luristan; the fourth, Shulistan; the fifth, Isfahan; the sixth, Shiraz; the seventh, Shabankara; the eighth, Tun and Kain, situated at the extremity of Persia. All these kingdoms lie south of Kasvin, except that of Tun and Kain, which adjoins the region of the Solitary Tree.

In these kingdoms there are many fine steeds, and many are exported to India for sale. As an indication of the great value of these horses, you may take it that some, indeed the great majority, are sold for fully 200 pounds of Touraine apiece. There are also the finest asses in the world, worth fully 30 marks of silver apiece. This is because they eat little, carry heavy loads, and travel long distances in a single day, enduring toil beyond the power of

horses or mules. For the merchants of these parts, when they travel from one country to another, traverse vast deserts, that is to say dry, barren, sandy regions, producing no grass or fodder suitable for horses; and the wells and sources of fresh water lie so far apart that they must travel by long stages if their beasts are to have anything to drink. Since horses cannot endure this, the merchants use only these asses, because they are swift coursers and steady amblers, besides being less costly to keep. So they fetch a better price than horses. They also use camels, which likewise carry heavy loads and are cheap to maintain. The men of these kingdoms drive the horses of which I have spoken to Kais and Hormuz, two cities on the coast of the Indian Ocean. There they find traders who buy them and transport them to India, where they are sold for the high prices I have mentioned. Note that in India the climate is so hot that horses cannot be bred and are not born, or, if they are, they are monstrosities, blemished and misshapen in their limbs and quite worthless.

Among the people of these kingdoms there are many who are brutal and bloodthirsty. They are for ever slaughtering one another; and, were it not for fear of the government, that is, the Tartar lordship of the Levant, they would do great mischief to travelling merchants. The government imposes severe penalties upon them and has ordered that along all dangerous routes the inhabitants at the request of the merchants shall supply good and efficient escorts from district to district for their safe conduct on payment of two or three groats for each loaded beast according to the length of the journey. Yet, for all that the government can do, these brigands are not to be deterred from frequent depredations. Unless the merchants are well armed and equipped with bows, they slay and harry them unsparingly. And I can assure you that they all observe the law of Mahomet their prophet.

In the cities there are merchants and craftsmen in plenty, living by trade and industry. They make cloth of gold and silk of every sort. Cotton grows there in abundance. They have no lack of wheat, barley, millet, panic-grass, and every type of corn, besides wine and all kinds of fruit. Someone may object that the Saracens do not drink wine; for their law forbids it. My answer

is that they gloss the text of their law thus: if wine is boiled over a fire, so that it is partly consumed and turns sweet, they are free to drink it without breach of commandment or law; for they no longer call it wine, since the change of flavour carries with it a change of name.

Among the cities of Persia is one called Yazd, a very fine and splendid city and a centre of commerce. A silken fabric called *yazdi* is manufactured here in quantity and exported profitably to many markets. The inhabitants worship Mahomet.

The traveller who leaves this city to proceed farther rides for seven days over a plain in which there are only three inhabited places where he can get shelter. Along the route there are many fine groves of date-palms, which are pleasant to ride through, and abundance of wild game, including partridges and quail, a great boon to merchants travelling that way. There are also fine wild asses. And at the end of this seven days' journey lies a kingdom called Kerman.

Kerman is a kingdom on the edge of Persia. It used to be governed by an hereditary ruler; but, since the Tartars conquered it, the lordship no longer goes by inheritance, but the Tartar suzerain grants it at his own pleasure. In this kingdom originate the stones called *turquoises*; they are found in great abundance in the mountains, where they are dug out of the rocks. There are also veins producing steel and *ondanique* in great plenty. The inhabitants excel in the manufacture of all the equipment of a mounted warrior – bridles, saddles, spurs, swords, bows, quivers, and every sort of armour according to local usage. The gentlewomen and their daughters are adepts with the needle, embroidering silk of all colours with beasts and birds and many other figures. They embroider the curtains of nobles and great men so well and so richly that they are a delight to the eye. And they are no less skilful at working counter-panes, cushions, and pillows.

In the mountains hereabouts are bred the best falcons in the world, and the swiftest in flight; they are red on the breast and under the tail between the thighs. And you may take my word that they fly at such incalculable speed that there is no bird that can escape from them by flight.

When the traveller leaves the city of Kerman, he rides for seven days across a plateau, finding no lack of towns and villages and homesteads. It is a pleasant and satisfying country to ride through, for it is well stocked with game and teems with partridges. After this he comes to a great escarpment, from which the road leads steadily downhill for two days through a country abounding all the way in fruits of many kinds. There used to be homesteads here; but now there is not one, but nomads live here with their grazing flocks. Between the city of Kerman and this escarpment the cold in winter is so intense that it can scarcely be warded off by any number of garments and furs.

Now let me tell you about an experiment that was made in the kingdom of Kerman. It so happens that the people of this kingdom are good, even-tempered, meek, and peaceable, and miss no chance of doing one another a service. For this reason the king once observed to the sages assembled in his presence: 'Gentlemen, here is something that puzzles me, because I cannot account for it. How is it that in the kingdoms of Persia, which are such near neighbours of ours, there are folk so unruly and contentious that they are for ever killing one another, whereas among us, who are all but one with them, there is hardly an instance of provocation or brawling?' The sages answered that this was due to a difference of soil. So the king thereupon sent to Persia, and in particular to Isfahan aforementioned, whose inhabitants outdid the rest in every sort of villainy. There, on the advice of his sages, he had seven ships loaded with earth brought to his own kingdom. This earth he ordered to be spread out like pitch over the floors of certain rooms and then covered with carpets, so that those who entered should not be dirtied by the soft surface. Then a banquet was served in these rooms, at which the guests had no sooner partaken of food than one began to round on another with opprobrious words and actions that soon led to blows. So the king agreed that the cause did indeed lie in the soil.

At the foot of the two days' descent lies a wide plain, on the verge of which stands a city called Kamadin. This was once a great city, of remarkable splendour; but now it is neither so great nor so fine, for invading Tartars have ravaged it several

times. And I can assure you that in this plain it is very hot indeed.

The country that I am now describing is called Rudbar. It produces wheat and other cereals. Its fruits are dates, apples of paradise, and pistachios, besides others which do not grow in our chilly climate. Turtle-doves flock here in multitudes because of the quantities of berries which they find to eat. There is no end to their numbers. The Saracens never eat them, because they hold them in abhorrence. There are also pheasants and many other birds. In the plain there is a race of birds called francolins, which are different from the francolins of other lands. Their plumage is a mixture of black and white, and the feet and beak are red. The beasts also are different. Let me tell you first about the oxen. They are of great size and pure white like snow. Their hair is short and smooth because of the heat. Their horns are thick and stumpy and not pointed. Between their shoulders they have a round hump fully two palms in height. They are the loveliest things in the world to look at. When you want to load them, they lie down like camels; then, when they are loaded, they stand up and carry their loads very well, because they are exceedingly strong. There are also sheep as big as asses, with tails so thick and plump that they weigh a good thirty pounds. Fine, fat beasts they are, and good eating.

In this plain there are many towns and villages with earthen walls of great height and thickness to protect them against the Karaunas, bands of marauders who infest this country. They are called Karaunas, that is mongrels, because they are the offspring of Indian mothers and Tartar fathers. These robbers, when they are bent on raiding and pillage, work an enchantment by diabolic art so that the day turns dark and no one can see more than a very short distance. This darkness they spread over an extent of seven days' journey. They know the country very well. When they have brought on the darkness, they ride side by side, sometimes as many as 10,000 of them together, sometimes more, sometimes less, so that they overspread all the region they mean to rob. Nothing they find in the open country, neither man nor beast nor goods, can escape capture. When they have taken captives who cannot pay a ransom, they kill all the old, and the young

they lead away and sell them as bondsmen and slaves. Their king is called Nigudar. This Nigudar went to the court of Chaghatai, a brother of the Great Khan, with fully 10,000 men of his own race and stayed with him, because Chaghatai was his uncle and a very great lord. And, while he was staying with him, Nigudar planned and perpetrated a shameful outrage, as I shall tell you. He took his 10,000 followers, a villainous band of cut-throats, and leaving his uncle Chaghatai in Greater Armenia he passed through Badakhshan and a country called Pashai and another country named Kashmir, where he lost many men and beasts because the roads were narrow and bad, and finally entered a province of India called Dilivar.* They captured a fine city, also named Dilivar, and in this city Nigudar remains as ruler, having ousted the former ruler, a great and wealthy king named Asidin Sultan. There he still remains with his followers and pays no heed to anyone. He makes war on the other Tartars who live round about his kingdom. In their marauding expeditions, which may extend to thirty or forty days' journey, they usually ride towards Rudbar. This is because in the winter all the merchants who come to do business in Hormuz, while they are awaiting the arrival of the merchants from India, send their mules and camels, which have grown thin with the long journey, to the plain of Rudbar to fatten on the rich pasturage; and here the Karaunas are on the look out to seize them.

I assure you that Messer Marco himself narrowly evaded capture by these robbers in the darkness they had made. He escaped to a town called Kamasal; but many of his companions were taken captive and sold, and some put to death. Now let us turn to other matters.

The plain of which I have been speaking extends southwards for two days' journey. At its southern rim is another downward slope, where the road drops steadily for twenty miles. It is a bad and dangerous road, being infested by robbers. When the traveller has accomplished this descent, he finds another very

*Probably Lahore. According to R, which has a full but rather confused version of this story, the Karaunas learnt their black art in Malabar.

fine plain called the plain of Hormuz, two days' journey across, where there are fine rivers and date-palms in plenty and a variety of birds, including francolins and parrots and many others quite unlike ours.

After two days' ride he reaches the Ocean. Here on the coast stands a city called Hormuz, which has an excellent harbour. Merchants come here by ship from India, bringing all sorts of spices and precious stones and pearls and cloths of silk and of gold and elephants' tusks and many other wares. In this city they sell them to others, who distribute them to various customers through the length and breadth of the world. It is a great centre of commerce, with many cities and towns subordinate to it, and the capital of the kingdom. Its king is named Ruemedan Ahmad. The climate is torrid, owing to the heat of the sun, and unhealthy. If a merchant dies here, the king confiscates all his possessions.

In this country they make date wine with the addition of various spices, and very good it is. When it is drunk by men who are not used to it, it loosens the bowels and makes a thorough purge; but after that it does them good and makes them put on flesh. The natives do not eat our sort of food, because a diet of wheaten bread and meat would make them ill. To keep well they eat dates and salt fish, that is, tunny, and also onions; and on this diet they thrive.

Their ships are very bad, and many of them founder, because they are not fastened with iron nails but stitched together with thread made of coconut husks. They soak the husk till it assumes the texture of horsehair; then they make it into threads and stitch their ships. It is not spoilt by the salt water, but lasts remarkably well. The ships have one mast, one sail, and one rudder and are not decked; when they have loaded them, they cover the cargo with skins, and on top of these they put the horses which they ship to India for sale. They have no iron for nails,* so they employ wooden pegs and stitch with thread. This makes it a risky undertaking to sail in these ships. And you can

*Z offers the alternative explanation that the local wood is hard but brittle, like earthenware, so that it cracks when a nail is driven in.

take my word that many of them sink, because the Indian Ocean is often very stormy.

The people here are black and worship Mahomet. In summer they do not stay in the cities, or they would all die of the heat; but they go out to their gardens, where there are rivers and sheets of water. Here they build harbours of hurdles, resting at one end on the bank and at the other on piles driven in below the water, and covered with foliage to fend off the sun. Even so, they would not escape, were it not for one thing of which I will tell you. It is a fact that several times in the summer there comes a wind from the direction of the sandy wastes that lie around this plain, a wind so overpoweringly hot that it would be deadly if it did not happen that, as soon as men are aware of its approach, they plunge neck-deep into the water and so escape from the heat. To show just how hot this wind can be, Messer Marco gives the following account of something that happened when he was in these parts. The king of Kerman, not having received the tribute due to him from the lord of Hormuz, resolved to seize his opportunity when the men of Hormuz were living outside the city in the open. He accordingly mustered 1,600 horse and 5,000 foot-soldiers and sent them across the plain of Rudbar to make a surprise attack. One day, having failed through faulty guidance to reach the place appointed for the night's halt, they bivouacked in a wood not far from Hormuz. Next morning, when they were on the point of setting out, the hot wind came down on them and stifled them all, so that not one survived to carry back the news to their lord. The men of Hormuz, hearing of this, went out to bury the corpses, so that they should not infect the air. When they gripped them by the arms to drag them to the graves, they were so parched by the tremendous heat that the arms came loose from the trunk, so that there was nothing for it but to dig the graves beside the corpses and heave them in.

In this district they sow their wheat and barley and other grains in November, and they have got in all their harvest before the end of March. And so with all their fruits: by March they are ripened and done with. After that you will find no vegetation anywhere except date-palms, which last till May.

This is due to the great heat, which withers up everything. Another feature of the ships here is that they are not caulked with pitch but anointed with a sort of fish oil.

Let me tell you next that when a man has died here, or a woman, they make a great to-do about mourning. Gentlewomen mourn their dead fully four years after death, at least once a day. They assemble with their kinsfolk and neighbours and give themselves up to loud wailing and keening and lamenting the dead. Since deaths are frequent, they are never done with mourning. There are even women among them who specialize in lamentation and are daily on hire to bewail the lost ones of other men and women.

So much for this city. We shall not touch on India at this point; for I will deal with it later at the appropriate time and place. Now I will turn back towards the north to speak of the countries in that quarter. We shall return by another route to the city of Kerman of which I have spoken, because there is no way of going to these countries except from this city. And you must understand that king Ruemedan Ahmad, whom we have just left, is a vassal of the king of Kerman.

The return journey from Hormuz to Kerman passes through a fine plain amply stocked with foodstuffs. It is blessed with natural hot baths. Partridges are plentiful and very cheap. Fruit trees and date-palms abound. The wheat bread here is so bitter that no one can eat it unless he is accustomed to it. This is due to the bitterness of the water. The baths, of which I have spoken above, are formed from springs of very hot water; they are good for many ailments, especially affections of the skin.

Now let me start my account of the countries lying to the north. When the traveller leaves Kerman, he rides for seven days along a very uninviting road through wild and barren country. I will tell you what it is like. For three days he finds no running water, or as good as none. What water there is is brackish and green as meadow grass and so bitter that no one could bear to drink it. Drink one drop of it and you void your bowels ten times over. It is the same with the salt that is made from it: if you eat one little granule, it produces violent diarrhoea. So the men who

travel this way carry water with them to drink. Animals will drink the brackish water under stress of extreme thirst, and you may take my word that it afflicts them violently with diarrhoea. And in all these three days' journey there is no habitation; it is all a desolate and arid waste. There are no beasts at all, because they could find nothing to eat.

At the end of this time the traveller arrives at a stream of fresh water which runs underground. In certain places there are caverns carved and scooped out by the action of the stream; through these it can be seen to flow, and then suddenly it plunges underground. Nevertheless, there is abundance of water, by whose banks wayfarers wearied by the hardships of the desert behind them may rest and refresh themselves with their beasts.

Then begins another stretch of four days' duration, just as desolate and arid, where the water is just as bitter and there are no trees or beasts, excepting only asses. At the end of this stretch we leave the kingdom of Kerman and reach the city of Kuh-banan.

This is a large city. Its inhabitants worship Mahomet. There is iron and steel and *ondanique* in plenty, and they make steel mirrors of large size and excellent quality. They also make tutty, which is a very good salve for the eyes, and *spodium*. Let me explain how they do it. They take a vein of earth that is suited for the purpose and heap it in a furnace with a blazing fire, above which is an iron grid. The fumes and vapour given off by this earth and trapped by the grid constitute tutty; the residue remaining in the fire is *spodium*. Now let us continue our journey.

When the traveller leaves Kuh-banan he goes for fully eight days through a desert in which there is utter drought and neither fruit nor trees and where the water is as bitter and as bad as before. He is obliged to carry with him all that he needs to eat and drink, except the water that the beasts drink very reluctantly — they may be tempted to drink by mixing flour with it. After these eight days he reaches a province called Tun and Kain, where there are cities and towns in plenty. It is situated on the northern borders of Persia. There is an immense plain here, in which stands the Solitary Tree, which the Christians call the

Dry Tree. Let me describe it to you. It is of great size and girth. Its leaves are green on one side, white on the other. It produces husks like chestnut husks; but there is nothing in them. Its wood is hard and yellow like box-wood.* And there are no trees near it for more than 100 miles, except in one direction where there are trees ten miles away. It is here, according to the people of the country, that the battle was fought between Alexander and Darius. The villages and towns hereabouts enjoy great abundance of good things of every sort; for the climate is admirably tempered, neither too hot nor too cold. The people all worship Mahomet. They are a good-looking race and the women in particular are of outstanding beauty.

Now let us proceed farther, and I will tell you about a country called Mulehet.

Mulehet, which means 'heretics' according to the law of the Saracens, is the country where the Sheikh of the Mountain used to live in days gone by. I will tell you his story just as I, Messer Marco, have heard it told by many people.

The Sheikh was called in their language Alaodin. He had made in a valley between two mountains the biggest and most beautiful garden that was ever seen, planted with all the finest fruits in the world and containing the most splendid mansions and palaces that were ever seen, ornamented with gold and with likenesses of all that is beautiful on earth, and also four conduits, one flowing with wine, one with milk, one with honey, and one with water. There were fair ladies there and damsels, the loveliest in the world, unrivalled at playing every sort of instrument and at singing and dancing. And he gave his men to understand that this garden was Paradise. That is why he had made it after this pattern, because Mahomet assured the Saracens that those who go to Paradise will have beautiful women to their hearts' content to do their bidding, and will find there rivers of wine and milk and honey and water. So he had made this garden made like the Paradise that Mahomet promised to the Saracens, and the Saracens of this country believed that it

*V adds (no doubt quite unwarrantably) that balsam is made from it.

really was Paradise. No one ever entered the garden except those whom he wished to make Assassins. At the entrance stood a castle so strong that it need fear no man in the world, and there was no other way in except through this castle. The Sheikh kept with him at his court all the youths of the country from twelve years old to twenty, all, that is, who shaped well as men at arms. These youths knew well by hearsay that Mahomet their prophet had declared Paradise to be made of such a fashion as I have described, and so they accepted it as truth. Now mark what follows. He used to put some of these youths in this Paradise, four at a time, or ten, or twenty, according as he wished. And this is how he did it. He would give them draughts that sent them to sleep on the spot. Then he had them taken and put in the garden, where they were awakened. When they awoke and found themselves in there and saw all the things I have told you of, they believed they were really in Paradise. And the ladies and damsels stayed with them all the time, singing and making music for their delight and ministering to all their desires. So these youths had all they could wish for and asked nothing better than to remain there.

Now the Sheikh held his court with great splendour and magnificence and bore himself most nobly and convinced the simple mountain folk round about that he was a prophet; and they believed it to be the truth. And when he wanted emissaries to send on some mission of murder, he would administer the drug to as many as he pleased; and while they slept he had them carried into his palace. When these youths awoke and found themselves in the castle within the palace, they were amazed and by no means glad, for the Paradise from which they had come was not a place that they would ever willingly have left. They went forthwith to the Sheikh and humbled themselves before him, as men who believed that he was a great prophet. When he asked them whence they came, they would answer that they came from Paradise, and that this was in truth the Paradise of which Mahomet had told their ancestors; and they would tell their listeners all that they had found there. And the others who heard this and had not been there were filled with a great longing to go to this Paradise; they longed for death

so that they might go there, and looked forward eagerly to the day of their going.

When the Sheikh desired the death of some great lord, he would first try an experiment to find out which of his Assassins were the best. He would send some off on a mission in the neighbourhood at no great distance with orders to kill such and such a man. They went without demur and did the bidding of their lord. Then, when they had killed the man, they returned to court — those of them that escaped, for some were caught and put to death. When they had returned to their lord and told him that they had faithfully performed their task, the Sheikh would make a great feast in their honour. And he knew very well which of them had displayed the greatest zeal, because after each he had sent others of his men as spies to report which was the most daring and the best hand at murdering. Then, in order to bring about the death of the lord or other man which he desired, he would take some of these Assassins of his and send them wherever he might wish, telling them that he was minded to dispatch them to Paradise: they were to go accordingly and kill such and such a man; if they died on their mission, they would go there all the sooner. Those who received such a command obeyed it with a right good will, more readily than anything else they might have been called on to do. Away they went and did all that they were commanded. Thus it happened that no one ever escaped when the Sheikh of the Mountain desired his death. And I can assure you that many kings and many lords paid tribute to him and cultivated his friendship for fear that he might bring about their death. This happened because at that time the nations were not united in their allegiance, but torn by conflicting loyalties and purposes.

I have told you about the Sheikh of the Mountain and his Assassins. Now let me tell you how he was overthrown and by whom. But first I will tell you something else about him that I had omitted. You must know that this Sheikh had chosen as his subordinates two other Sheikhs, who adopted all his practices and customs. One of these he dispatched to the neighbourhood of Damascus, the other to Kurdistan. Let us now turn to the subject of his overthrow. It happened about the year of Our Lord's

nativity 1262 that Hulagu, lord of the Tartars of the Levant, knowing of all the evil deeds this Sheikh was doing, made up his mind that he should be crushed. So he appointed some of his barons and sent them against this castle with a powerful force. For fully three years they besieged the castle without being able to take it. Indeed they never would have taken it so long as the besieged had anything to eat, but at the end of the three years they had no food left. So they were taken, and the Sheikh, Aladdin, was put to death with all his men. And from that time to this there have been no more of these Sheikhs and no more Assassins; but with him there came an end to all the power that had been wielded of old by the Sheikhs of the Mountain and all the evil they had done.

Let us now change the subject.