THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY RONALD LATHAM

PENGUIN BOOKS
CHAPTER TWO • The Road to Cathay

When the traveller leaves this castle, he rides through a fine plain and a fine valley and along fine hillsides, where there is rich herbage, fine pasturage, fruit in plenty, and no lack of anything. Armies are prone to loiter here because of the abundance of supplies. This country extends for fully six days' journey and contains villages and towns whose inhabitants worship Mahomet. Sometimes the traveller encounters stretches of desert fifty or sixty miles in extent, in which there is no water to be found. Men must carry it with them; the beasts go without drinking till they have come out of the desert into the places where they find water.

After these six days he reaches a city called Shibarghan, plentifully stocked with everything needful. Here are found the best melons in the world in very great quantity, which they dry in this manner: they cut them all round in slices like strips of leather, then put them in the sun to dry, when they become sweeter than honey. And you must know that they are an article of commerce and find a ready sale through all the country round. There are also vast quantities of game, both beasts and birds. We will now leave this city and tell you of another whose name is Bakh.

Balkh is a splendid city of great size. It used to be much greater and more splendid; but the Tartars and other invaders have sacked and ravaged it. For I can tell you that there used to be many fine palaces and mansions of marble, which are still to be seen, but shattered now and in ruins. It was in this city, according to local report, that Alexander took to wife the daughter of Darius. The inhabitants worship Mahomet. They are an ill-conditioned and murderous folk. They devote a great deal of their time to tippling; for they have an excellent boiled wine, to which they are much addicted. They wear nothing on the head but a cord ten palms in length, which they wind round it. They are very good huntsmen and catch any amount of game. They wear no clothes but the skins of the beasts they catch, which they cure and make into clothing and footwear. They all know how to cure the skins of these beasts.

At the end of the three days' journey lies a city called Ishkasham, which is ruled by a count; his other cities and towns are in the mountains. Through the midst of this city flows a river of considerable size. In this district there are a lot of porcupines. When hunters set their dogs on them in hopes of a kill, the porcupines curl up and then shoot out the quills with which their backs and flanks are armed and so wound the dogs in several places.
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

This city is in a big province of the same name, which has a language of its own. The country folk, who are herdsmen, live among the mountains, where they provide themselves with fine and spacious abodes; these are caves, which are easily made because the mountains are of earth.

When he leaves this city, the traveller goes three days' journey without finding habitation or food or drink; he must take his own provisions with him, but there is enough grass for horses. After this he reaches the province of Badakhshan which I will describe to you.

Badakhshan or Balashan is a country whose inhabitants worship Mahomet and have a language of their own. It is a large kingdom, twelve days' journey in length, ruled by hereditary kings of a lineage descended from King Alexander and the daughter of Darius, the Great King of Persia. In honour of Alexander the Great, all its kings still bear the title Zulkarmeins, the Saracen equivalent of our name Alexander.

In this country originate the precious stones called balass rubies, of great beauty and value. They are dug out of rocks among the mountains by tunnelling to great depths, as is done by miners working a vein of silver. They are found in one particular mountain called Sighinan. And I would have you know that they are mined only for the king and by his orders; no one else could go to the mountain and dig for these gems without incurring instant death, and it is forbidden under pain of death and forfeiture to export them out of the kingdom. The king sends them by his own men to other kings and princes and great lords, to some as tribute, to others as a token of amity; and some he barters for gold and silver. This he does so that these balass rubies may retain their present rarity and value. If he let other men mine them and export them throughout the world, there would be so many of them on the market that the price would fall and they would cease to be so precious. That is why he has imposed such a heavy penalty on anyone exporting them without authority.

And it is a fact that in this same country, in another mountain, are found the stones from which is made lapis lazuli, of the finest quality in the world. These stones originate among the mountains as a vein like the veins of other minerals. There are also mountains here in which are found veins yielding silver, copper, and lead in great abundance.

This district, and the whole country, is very cold. You should know that very good horses are bred here. They are great runners and are not shy with iron, though they are in constant use on mountain trails. There used to be horses in this country that were directly descended from Alexander's horse Bucephalus out of mares that had conceived from him and they were all born like him with a horn on the forehead. This breed was entirely in the possession of one of the king's uncles, who, because he refused to let the king have any, was put to death by him. Thereupon his wife, to avenge her husband's death, destroyed the whole breed, and so it became extinct. These mountains are also the home of saker falcons — fine birds and good fliers — and of lanner falcons. They abound in game, both beast and bird, and in wild sheep. The sheep sometimes roam in flocks of four to six hundred; and however many of them are taken, their numbers never grow less. There is good wheate here, and barley without a husk. There is no olive oil, but oil is made of sesame and nuts.

The kingdom has many narrow passes and natural fortresses, so that the inhabitants are not afraid of any invader breaking in to molest them. Their cities and towns are built on mountain tops or sites of great natural strength. It is a characteristic of these mountains that they are of immense height, so that for a man to climb from the bottom to the top is a full day's journey, from dawn till dusk. On the top are wide plateaux, with a lush growth of grass and trees and copious springs of the purest water, which pour down over the crags like rivers into the valley below. In these streams are found trout and other choice fish. On the mountain tops the air is so pure and so salubrious that if a man living in the cities and houses built in the adjoining valleys falls sick of a fever, whether tertian, quartan, or hectic, he has only to go up into the mountains, and a few days rest will banish the malady and restore him to health.

THE ROAD TO CATHAY

* There are also mountains here in which are found veins yielding silver, copper, and lead in great abundance.

This district, and the whole country, is very cold. You should know that very good horses are bred here. They are great runners and are not shy with iron, though they are in constant use on mountain trails. There used to be horses in this country that were directly descended from Alexander's horse Bucephalus out of mares that had conceived from him and they were all born like him with a horn on the forehead. This breed was entirely in the possession of one of the king's uncles, who, because he refused to let the king have any, was put to death by him. Thereupon his wife, to avenge her husband's death, destroyed the whole breed, and so it became extinct. These mountains are also the home of saker falcons — fine birds and good fliers — and of lanner falcons. They abound in game, both beast and bird, and in wild sheep. The sheep sometimes roam in flocks of four to six hundred; and however many of them are taken, their numbers never grow less. There is good wheate here, and barley without a husk. There is no olive oil, but oil is made of sesame and nuts.

This kingdom has many narrow passes and natural fortresses, so that the inhabitants are not afraid of any invader breaking in to molest them. Their cities and towns are built on mountain tops or sites of great natural strength. It is a characteristic of these mountains that they are of immense height, so that for a man to climb from the bottom to the top is a full day's journey, from dawn till dusk. On the top are wide plateaux, with a lush growth of grass and trees and copious springs of the purest water, which pour down over the crags like rivers into the valley below. In these streams are found trout and other choice fish. On the mountain tops the air is so pure and so salubrious that if a man living in the cities and houses built in the adjoining valleys falls sick of a fever, whether tertian, quartan, or hectic, he has only to go up into the mountains, and a few days rest will banish the malady and restore him to health.
vouches for this from his own experience.* Two or three of the mountains consist largely of sulphur, and springs of sulphurous water issue from them.

The people here are good archers and keen huntsmen and most of them wear costumes of skin, because they are very short of cloth. The ladies of the nobility and gentry wear trousers, such as I will describe to you. There are some ladies who in one pair of trousers or breeches put anything up to a hundred ells of cotton cloth, folded in pleats. This is to give the impression that they have plump hips, because their menfolk delight in plumpness.

Ten days' journey south of Badakhshan is a country called Pashai. The inhabitants, who have brown skins and speak a language of their own, are idolaters. They are adepts in enchantment and diabolic arts. The men wear ear-rings and brooches of gold and silver and pearls and precious stones in profusion. They are very crafty folk and artful in their own way. The climate is very hot. The stock diet is flesh and rice.

So much for Pashai. Let us deal next with another country, distant some seven days' journey to the south-east, whose name is Kashmir.

The people of Kashmir are also idolaters, speaking a language of their own. Their knowledge of devilish enchantments is something marvellous. They make their idols speak. They change the weather by enchantment and bring on thick darkness. They accomplish such marvels by magic and craft that no one who has not seen them could believe them. I may say that they are the past masters of idolatry and it is from them that idols are derived.

From this country there is a route leading to the Indian Sea. The inhabitants are brown-skinned and thin; the women are very beautiful, with such beauty as goes with a brown skin. Their diet is flesh and rice. They enjoy a temperate climate, without extremes of heat and cold. They have cities and towns in plenty, as well as forests and deserts and fastnesses so strong that

*According to R, he was ill in these parts for a year (perhaps since his stay at Hormuz), but recovered immediately after acting on the advice to go up into the mountains.

they have no fear of any foe. They maintain their independence under their own kings, who are the upholders of justice. They have hermits according to their own usage, who dwell in their hermitages, practising strict abstinence in eating and drinking and avoidance of all unchastity and taking the utmost pains to commit no sin that is contrary to their law. They are accounted very holy by their own people, and I assure you that they live to a great age; and this avoidance of sin is all exercised for love of their idols. They also have abbeys and monasteries in plenty of their own faith, where the brethren live an austere life and wear tonsures like Dominican and Franciscan friars. The men of this country do not kill animals or shed blood; but certain Saracens who live intermingled with them kill their animals to provide them with food. The coral that is exported from our country for sale is sold more here than anywhere else.

We shall now leave this district without going any further,* because that would mean entering India, which I do not wish to do at present; on our return journey we shall tell you all about India in due order. We shall therefore retrace our steps as far as the province of Badakhshan, because there is no other route by which we can proceed on our way.

When the traveller leaves Badakhshan, he goes twelve days' journey east-north-east up a river valley belonging to the brother of the lord of Badakhshan, where there are towns and homesteads in plenty, peopled by a warlike race who worship Mahomet. After these twelve days he reaches a country called Wakhan of no great size, for it is three days' journey across every way. The people, who worship Mahomet and speak a language of their own, are doughty warriors. They have no ruler except one whom they call none, that is to say in our language 'count', and are subject to the lord of Badakhshan. They have wild beasts in plenty and game of all sorts for the chase.

When the traveller leaves this place, he goes three days' journey towards the north-east, through mountains all the time, climbing so high that this is said to be the highest place in the

*L adds that twelve days' journey farther on lie the regions where pepper grows, near the kingdom of Brabaman (i.e. the Brahmans?).
world. And when he is in this high place, he finds a plain between two mountains, with a lake from which flows a very fine river. Here is the best pasturage in the world; for a lean beast grows fat here in ten days. Wild game of every sort abounds. There are great quantities of wild sheep of huge size. Their horns grow to as much as six palms in length and are never less than three or four. From these horns the shepherds make big bowls from which they feed, and also fences to keep in their flocks. There are also innumerable wolves, which devour many of the wild rams. The horns and bones of the sheep are found in such numbers that men build cairns of them beside the tracks to serve as landmarks to travellers in the snowy season.

This plain, whose name is Famir, extents fully twelve days' journey. In all these twelve days there is no habitation or shelter, but travellers must take their provisions with them. No birds fly here because of the height and the cold. And I assure you that, because of this great cold, fire is not so bright here nor of the same colour as elsewhere, and food does not cook well.

Now let us pursue our course towards the north-east and east. At the end of this twelve days' journey, the traveller must ride fully forty days more east-north-east, always over mountains and along hillsides and gorges, traversing many rivers and many deserts. And in all this journey he finds no habitation or shelter, but must carry his stock of provisions. This country is called Belor. The inhabitants live very high up in the mountains. They are idolaters and utter savages, living entirely by the chase and dressed in the skins of beasts. They are out and out bad.

We shall now leave this country and tell you of the province of Kashgar, which lies towards the east-north-east.

Kashgar was once a kingdom, but now it is subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns in plenty. The biggest city, and the most splendid, is Kashgar. The inhabitants live by trade and industry. They have very fine orchards and vineyards and flourishing estates. Cotton grows here in plenty, besides flax and hemp. The soil is fruitful and productive of all the means of life. This country is the starting-point from which many merchants set out to market their wares all over the world. The folk here are very close-fisted and live very poorly, neither eating well nor drinking well. There are some Nestorian Christians in this country, having their own church and observing their own religion. The inhabitants have a language of their own. The province is five days' journey in extent.

And now to speak of Samarkand, a very large and splendid city lying towards the north-west. It is inhabited by Christians and Saracens. They are subject to the nephew of the Great Khan,* who is no friend of his but is often at enmity with him. Let me tell you of a great miracle that occurred in this city.

It happened not long ago that Chaghatai, who was a brother of the Great Khan and lord of this country and many others, became a Christian. When the Christians of Samarkand saw that their lord was a Christian, they were overjoyed. They built a big church in the city to the honour of St John the Baptist and called by his name. And to make the base of the column which stood in the centre of the church and supported the roof they took a very beautiful stone belonging to the Saracens. After Chaghatai's death, the Saracens, who had always been very resentful about this stone that stood in the Christian church, resolved to take it by force. And this they could easily have done; for they were ten times as many as the Christians. Then some of the leading Saracens went to the church of St John and told the Christians there that they wanted this stone, which had once belonged to them. The Christians promised to give them all they wanted if they would leave the stone, because its removal would do irreparable damage to the church. The Saracens declared that they did not want gold or treasure, but would have the stone at all costs. What need of more words? The government was now in the hands of the Great Khan's nephew; and he ordered the Christians to hand over the stone to the Saracens within two days. When they received this order they were greatly perplexed and did not know what to do. And then the miracle happened. You must know that, when morning came on the day on which the stone was to be handed over, the column that rested on the stone rose up, by the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, to a height of fully three palms and

*I.e. Kaidu (see below, p. 313).
stayed there as firmly supported as if the stone had still been underneath. And from that day onwards the column has remained in this position, and there it still is. And this was, and still is, accounted one of the greatest miracles that have happened in the world.

Let us turn next to the province of Yarkand, five days' journey in extent. The inhabitants follow the law of Mahomet, and there are also some Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the Great Khan's nephew, of whom I have already spoken. It is amply stocked with the means of life, especially cotton. But, since there is nothing here worth mentioning in our book, we shall pass on to Khotan, which lies towards the east-north-east.

Khotan is a province eight days' journey in extent, which is subject to the Great Khan. The inhabitants all worship Mahomet. It has cities and towns in plenty, of which the most splendid, and the capital of the kingdom, bears the same name as the province, Khotan. It is amply stocked with the means of life. Cotton grows here in plenty. It has vineyards, estates, and orchards in plenty. The people live by trade and industry; they are not at all warlike.

Passing on from here we come to the province of Pem, five days' journey in extent, towards the east-north-east. Here too the inhabitants worship Mahomet and are subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns in plenty. The most splendid city and the capital of the province is called Pem. There are rivers here in which are found stones called jasper and chalcedony in plenty. There is no lack of the means of life. Cotton is plentiful. The inhabitants live by trade and industry.

The following custom is prevalent among them. When a woman's husband leaves her to go on a journey of more than twenty days, then, as soon as he has left, she takes another husband, and

*Z adds that most of the people here have one foot much bigger than the other but can walk perfectly well. V and L refer in addition to the prevalence of a goitre on the throat. R attributes this to a peculiarity of the local water, and speaks simply of swollen legs, without suggesting that one is larger than the other.

†R adds, flax, hemp, and corn.

this she is fully entitled to do by local usage. And the men, wherever they go, take wives in the same way.

You should know that all the provinces I have described, from Kashgar to Pem and some way beyond, are provinces of Turkestan.

I will tell you next of another province of Turkestan, lying east-north-east, which is called Charchan. It used to be a splendid and fruitful country, but it has been much devastated by the Tartars. The inhabitants worship Mahomet. There are villages and towns in plenty, and the chief city of the kingdom is Charchan. There are rivers producing jasper and chalcedony, which are exported for sale in Cathay and bring in a good profit; for they are plentiful and of good quality.

All this province is a tract of sand; and so is the country from Khotan to Pem and from Pem to here. There are many springs of bad and bitter water, though in some places the water is good and sweet. When it happens that an army passes through the country, if it is a hostile one, the people take flight with their wives and children and their beasts two or three days' journey into the sandy wastes to places where they know that there is water and they can live with their beasts. And I assure you that no one can tell which way they have gone, because the wind covers their tracks with sand, so that there is nothing to show where they have been, but the country looks as if it had never been traversed by man or beast. That is how they escape from their enemies. But, if it happens that a friendly army passes that way, they merely drive off their beasts, because they do not want to have them seized and eaten; for the armies never pay for what they take. And you should know that, when they harvest their corn, they store it far from any habitation, in certain caves among these wastes, for fear of the armies; and from these stores they bring home what they need month by month.

After leaving Charchan, the road runs for fully five days through sandy wastes, where the water is bad and bitter, except in a few places where it is good and sweet; and there is nothing worth noting in our book. At the end of the five days' journey towards the east-north-east, is a city which stands on the verge of the Great Desert. It is here that men take in provisions for
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

crossing the desert. Let us move on accordingly and proceed with our narrative.

The city I have mentioned, which stands at the point where the traveller 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 travellers 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 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 travelling 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.

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 travellers 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,

*L adds: 'in winter'.

THE ROAD TO CATHAY

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 the clash of arms. For this reason bands of travellers 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.

That is how they cross the desert, with all the discomfort of which you have heard. Now that I have told you all about it, let us take our leave of it and speak of the provinces you find when you emerge from it.

When the traveller has ridden for these thirty days of which I have spoken across the desert, he reaches a city called Sa-chau, lying towards the east-north-east, which is subject to the Great Khan. It lies in a province called Tangut, whose inhabitants are all idolaters, except: that there are some Turks who are Nestorian Christians and also some Saracens. The idolaters speak a language of their own. They do not live by trade, but on the profit of the grain which they harvest from the soil. They have many abbeys and monasteries, all full of idols of various forms to which they make sacrifices and do great honour and reverence.

You must know that all the men here who have children rear a sheep in honour of the idols; and at the new year, or on the feast of their particular idol, those who have reared the sheep bring it with their children before the idol, and both they and the children perform a solemn act of devotion. This done, they have the sheep cooked whole. Then they bring it before the idol with great reverence and leave it there till they have recited their service and their prayer to the idol to save their children; and
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

they say that the idols eat the substance of the flesh.* When they have done this, they take the flesh that has lain before the idol and carry it home, or wherever else they may wish, and send for their kinsfolk and eat it with great reverence and great festivity. When they have eaten the flesh, they collect the bones and preserve them very carefully in a chest. The priests of the idols, however, have the head, feet, entrails and fleece and part of the flesh.

You should know also, what is true of all the idolaters in the world, that when they die their bodies are cremated. When the dead man is being carried from his house to the place where he is to be cremated, then at some point on the route his kinsfolk have erected in the middle of the road a wooden house draped with silk and cloth of gold. On arriving in front of this house, thus adorned, the cortège halts; and the mourners fling down wine and food in plenty before the dead. This they do because they say that he will be received with like honour in the next world. When he is brought to the place where he is to be cremated, his kindred provide images cut out of paper representing horses and camels and pieces of money as big as bezants;† and all these they burn with the body. And they say that in the next world the dead will have as many slaves and beasts and coins as the paper images that are burnt. Lastly, let me tell you that when a body is being taken to the pyre, all the instruments in the land go in front of it making music. And all this is done in proportion to the rank of the deceased and the requirements of his station.

Now let me tell you something else. When one of these idolaters is dead, they send for their astrologer and tell him the nativity of the deceased, that is, the month, day, and hour of his birth. Armed with this knowledge, the astrologer makes his divination by diabolical art and afterwards declares on what day the corpse must be cremated. In some cases he prescribes a delay of a week before cremation, in others of a month, in others of six months. Then the relatives must keep the body in their house for this length of time; for they would never think of burning it till the diviners tell them that the time has come. While the body remains

THE ROAD TO CATHAY

unburnt in the house, they preserve it in this manner. They take a coffin of boards of the thickness of a palm firmly joined together and all splendidly painted, and put the body inside, embalmed with camphor and other spices. Then they stop the chinks in the coffin with pitch and lime, so that it does not cause a stench in the house, and cover it with silken shrouds. Meanwhile, so long as the body remains in the house, the relatives, that is the inhabitants of the house, lay a table every day for the deceased and serve food and drink for him just as if he were alive; they set it in front of the coffin and leave it long enough to be eaten, and say that the soul has eaten some of this food. This is how they keep it till the day when they take it away for cremation. And here is another thing that they do. It often happens that these diviners tell the relatives that it is not auspicious to carry the corpse out of the house by way of the door, on the pretext that some star or other power is adverse to this door. Then the relatives have the body carried out by another door or even, on occasion, have the walls broken open and the body carried out through the breach.

All this they do for fear of offending the spirits of the dead. And if it happens that some member of the household meets with some mischance or dies, the astrologers say that the spirit of the dead has done this because he was not carried out during the ascendency of the planet under which he was born, or of one not contrary to it, or on the proper side of the house.*

So much, then, for this matter. Now I will tell you of some other cities, which lie towards the north-west near the edge of this desert.

The province of Kamul, which used to be a kingdom, contains towns and villages in plenty, the chief town being also called Kamul. The province lies between two deserts, the Great Desert and a small one three days' journey in extent. The inhabitants are all idolaters and speak a language of their own. They live on the produce of the soil; for they have a superfluity of foodstuffs and beverages, which they sell to travellers who pass that way. They are a very gay folk, who give no thought to anything but

---

*Z adds: 'or suck up its savour'.
†Z adds that clothing is burnt with the body, and L describes this as 'linen of various colours and fabrics'.

*This paragraph is taken from R (partly based on V and L).
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

making music, singing and dancing, and reading and writing according to their own usage, and taking great delight in the pleasures of the body. I give you my word that if a stranger comes to a house here to seek hospitality he receives a very warm welcome. The host bids his wife do everything that the guest wishes. Then he leaves the house and goes about his own business and stays away two or three days.* Meanwhile the guest stays with his wife in the house and does what he will with her, lying with her in one bed just as if she were his own wife; and they lead a gay life together. All the men of this city and province are thus cuckolded by their wives; but they are not the least ashamed of it. And the women are beautiful and vivacious and always ready to oblige.

Now it happened during the reign of Mongu Khan, lord of the Tartars, that he was informed of this custom that prevailed among the men of Kamul of giving their wives in adultery to outsiders. Mongu thereupon commanded them under heavy penalties to desist from this form of hospitality. When they received this command, they were greatly distressed; but for three years they reluctantly obeyed. Then they held a council and talked the matter over, and this is what they did. They took a rich gift and sent it to Mongu and entreated him to let them use their wives according to the traditions of their ancestors; for their ancestors had declared that by the pleasure they gave to guests with their wives and goods they won the favour of their idols and multiplied the yield of their crops and their tillage. When Mongu Khan heard this he said: 'Since you desire your own shame, you may have it.' So he let them have their way. And I can assure you that since then they have always upheld this tradition and upheld it still.†

Another province, also subject to the Great Khan, is Uighuristan. It is a large province containing many cities and towns. The chief city, which is called Kara Khoja, has many other cities and towns dependent on it. The people are idolaters, but they include many Christians of the Nestorian sect and some Saracens.

*R adds that he sends in provisions to meet all the guest's needs, but expects payment.
†The following paragraph is found in Z only.

THE ROAD TO CATHAY

The Christians often internarr with the idolaters. They declare that the king who originally ruled over them was not born of human stock, but arose from a sort of tuber generated by the sap of trees, which we call esca; and from him all the others descended. The idolaters are very well versed in their own laws and traditions and are keen students of the liberal arts. The land produces grain and excellent wine. But in winter the cold here is more intense than is known in any other part of the world.

Another province on the edge of the desert* towards the north-north-east is Ghinghtalas, sixteen days in extent, which is also subject to the Great Khan. It has cities and towns in plenty. The inhabitants consist of three groups, idolaters, Mahometans, and Nestorian Christians.†

Towards the northern boundary of this province is a mountain with a rich vein of steel and ondanique. In this same mountain occurs a vein from which is produced salamander. You must understand that this is not a beast as is commonly asserted; but its real nature is such as I will now describe. It is a well known fact that by nature no beast or other animal can live in fire, because every animal is composed of the four elements.‡ For lack of any certain knowledge about salamander, men spoke of it, and still do, as a beast; but this is not true. I will now tell you the real facts. First, let me explain that I had a Turkish companion named Zuricar, a man of great intelligence, who spent three years in this province, in the service of the Great Khan, engaged in the extraction of this salamander and ondanique and steel and other products. For the Great Khan regularly appoints governors every three years to govern this province and supervise the salamander industry. My companion told me the true facts and I have also seen them for myself. When the stuff found in this vein of which you have heard has been dug out of the mountain and crumbled into bits, the particles cohere and form fibres like

*V: 'the small desert'. This province has not been identified with certainty.
†Z adds that the Nestorians are Turks.
‡F calls them (rather happily) the quatre alimens. Polo's salamander is, of course, asbestos.
wool. Accordingly, when the stuff has been extracted, it is first dried, then pounded in a large copper mortar and then washed. The residue consists of this fibre of which I have spoken and worthless earth, which is separated from it. Then this wool-like fibre is carefully spun and made into cloths. When the cloths are first made, they are far from white. But they are thrown into the fire and left there for a while; and there they turn as white as snow. And whenever one of these cloths is soiled or discoloured, it is thrown into the fire and left there for a while, and it comes out as white as snow. The account I have given you of the salamander is the truth, and all the other accounts that are put about are lies and fables. Let me tell you finally that one of these cloths is now at Rome; it was sent to the Pope by the Great Khan as a valuable gift, and for this reason the sacred napkin of our lord Jesus Christ was wrapped in it.*

Let us now leave this province and turn to others lying towards the east-north-east.

When the traveller leaves the province of which I have spoken, he journeys for ten days east-north-east. And all this way there is no habitation, or none to speak of, and nothing worthy of mention in our book. At the end of the ten days he reaches a province called Su-chau, in which there are cities and towns in plenty, the chief city being also called Su-chau. The inhabitants are Christians and idolaters, subject to the Great Khan. This province, together with the two last-named, forms part of the major province of Tangut. In all the mountains of this region, rhubarb grows in great abundance; it is bought here by merchants, who export it far and wide. Travellers passing this way do not venture to go among these mountains with any beast except those of the country, because a poisonous herb grows here, which makes beasts that feed on it lose their hoofs; but beasts born in the country recognize this herb and avoid it. The climate of this province is healthy, and the inhabitants are brown-skinned. They

*Z adds that it bore the inscription: 'Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' In V the inscription is in letters of gold and the cloth is one of the gifts brought back by the elder Polos.

live by the produce of the soil and have little dealing with trade. Let us now pass on to Kan-chau, a large and splendid city in Tangut proper and the capital of the whole province. The inhabitants are idolaters, with some Mahometans. There are also some Christians, who have three fine large churches in the city. The idolaters have many monasteries and abbeys according to their own usage. They have a vast quantity of idols; and I can assure you that some are as much as ten paces in length. Some are of wood, some of earthenware, some of stone, and they are all covered with gold and of excellent workmanship. These huge idols are recumbent, and groups of lesser ones are set round about them and seem to be doing them humble obeisance.

Since I have not told you of the customs of the idolaters, I will do so here.

First, you should know that those idolaters who live under a religious rule lead more virtuous lives than the others. They avoid lechery, but do not regard it as a major sin. Their principle of conduct is that, if a woman makes love to them, they may accept her overtures without sin; but, if they make the first advances, they account that a sin. If they find that any man has had unnatural intercourse with a woman, they condemn him to death.* They distinguish lunar cycles as we distinguish the months. There is one such cycle in which for five days all the idolaters in the world kill neither beast nor bird; nor do they eat the flesh of animals killed during these days. And for these five days they live more virtuously than at other times. And some of them, that is the monks, abstain from flesh all their lives out of reverence and piety; but the laity do not observe this rule. They marry anything up to thirty wives, more or fewer according to what each man can afford. The men give their wives a marriage-portion in cattle, slaves, and money proportionate to their means. You should understand that they treat the first wife as having the highest status. Moreover, if the husband finds that one of his wives misbehaves or displeases him, he is free to put her away and do as he likes. Men marry their own cousins and also their

*I adds: 'And they observe festivals of their idols at special seasons, as we do of our saints; and they have a sort of calendar, in which the feasts of their idols are assigned to particular days.'