

## THE DEPARTURE OF NICOLO & MAFFEO POLO ≠ MARCO POLO

### II. THE LIFE AND TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

“In the year from the incarnation of the Lord 1252[two] noble and honourable and prudent brothers, inhabitants of the famous city of the Venetiae, went up by common consent in the harbour of the Venetiae into their own ship which was loaded with riches and merchandise, and, with a fair wind blowing, by God's guidance reached Constantinople.”<sup>1</sup> So began a journey which was to last for fifteen or sixteen years. The two brothers, Nicolò and Maffeo Polo, went first to Constantinople where perhaps they may already have had a business house in charge of the third brother Marco, who in his will (dated at Venice on 27 August 1280) describes himself as “formerly of Constantinople”.<sup>2</sup> Having spent “a short time”, which may have been several years, at Constantinople, they proceeded to Soldaia in the Crimea where too, in 1280 at any rate, the family had a business house. All that is known of this first journey is told us in the Prologue to the book itself and need not be anticipated here. But neither the dates nor the facts there related can be accepted without some caution. Between the start from Constantinople and the return to Venice eight or nine years of travel or of delays are mentioned in the narrative. The one date which may be accepted with confidence is the return to Acre in 1269, and there seems to be no reason to doubt that it was in April. Then, taking the statements as they stand, the brothers must have left Qubilai's capital early in 1266, and must have left Bukhara outward bound in the early spring of 1265 if not in 1264 or earlier. If they really stayed three years at Bukhara they cannot have reached it later than 1262. “King of it was one who had the name Barac.” (p.76). But modern authorities tell us

<sup>1</sup> P<sup>48</sup> (Brit. Mus. Reg. 14 C. XIII 7.) fol. 226 (237)r<sup>o</sup>. The original reads *anno mcc.lij.nobiles . . . germani*. It seems to be likely that *ij* has dropped out between *mcc.lij.* and *nobiles*, and that the almost universal but impossible 1250 of the shorter forms of the sentence (in F, FG, TA, &c.) is a false correction of the resultant *mcc.lij.nobiles*. P<sup>48</sup> actually reads *m<sup>o</sup>cc<sup>o</sup>l<sup>o</sup> duo nobiles . . . germani* and VB<sup>2</sup> *nel 1250 do nobel . . . fradellj*. In any case no manuscript that I know of says that the brothers left Constantinople at this date, and there is no reason to change 1250 to 1255 (PAUTHIER) or 1260 (YULE, BENEDETTO, &c.); though, in view of what we are told about Marco's birth, 1253 would be preferable to 1252 for the year in which his father left Venice, for, as will be seen on p. 81, Marco is said to have been fifteen years old in 1269 so that he must have been born in 1254. The suggestion (*Encycl. Brit.* 11th ed. XXII p. 7c.) that Nicolò's wife was with him at Constantinople is contradicted by the manuscripts LT and VA. See pp. 74, 81 below.

<sup>2</sup> Or. d.1: *condam de constantinopoli nunc habitator in confinio sancti seueri*. See p. 523.