

This is the first reliable account ever written on Tibet by a European. As Marco Polo approached the inaccessible country much nearer than Friar John and Friar William, and probably got information from natives on the trade roads between Tibet and western China, he has more to tell, both of the inhabitants, their customs and their country. Though he never visited Tibet proper, only its eastern borderland, his description of Tibet is in many respects very characteristic, and certain portions of it could as well have been written in our own days. While the Arab geographers moved in almost complete darkness, Marco Polo has firmer ground under his feet and deals with realities, and speaks of a nation with whom he has been in contact. And still, if we compare his store of Tibetan information with that of the Chinese of his time and earlier, we must confess that he knew very little indeed.

He knew, however, that Tibet was a country of very great extent, embracing eight kingdoms, subject to the Great Kaan, a fact that was completely unknown to cartographers even some 400 years later. Richthofen is of the opinion that Marco Polo's description of the rude natives applies only to the inhabitants towards the Chinese frontier, and Yule agrees with him that Marco Polo's Tibet commences with the mountainous region near Ya-chau, situated north of the country of the Lolos, and that his 20 days' journey took him to Ning-yuan fu, from where he travelled to Yunnan fu.<sup>1</sup> From personal experience he certainly knew only those eastern regions, which are now parts of Szechuan and Yunnan. But there are indications in his account pointing to a wider knowledge, perhaps embracing the great westward portions of Tibet. He knows the situation of Kashmir in relation to Badakshan, India and the sea of India,<sup>2</sup> and, as we have seen, he mentions Kashmir in connection with Tibet. In fact he approached what we call Tibet both from the west, Pamir and Bolor, the north, Khotan, and the east, Yunnan. From the south he did not touch Tibet at all, as his knowledge of India, as a whole, was very inexact.<sup>3</sup> He does not mention the Himalaya, nor the Indus nor the Ganges, and is in this respect far behind the Greeks 1600 years earlier, and Ptolemy a thousand years before his time, though, of course he never had the intention to write a geography as the classic scholars did. But he must have heard of Tibet from so many sources that he felt convinced of its great extent.

When he says of Tibet that it contains *lakes in several quarters*, this can hardly apply to anything but the vast interior plateau land and southern Tibet. On the other hand it is surprising that he has not heard of the capital of Tibet, though Lhasa must have been in trade connection with the limitroph districts visited by

<sup>1</sup> Yule's Marco Polo, Book II, p. 48 and 70; map of the route II, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. Book I, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. Book II, p. 426.