

Chapter 13 Primary Source Activity

Marco Polo's book about his adventures in China so amazed Europeans that many thought he had made up the stories about the immense splendor of the court of the Great Khan—Kublai Khan (textbook pages 316–317). As a member of a merchant family from Venice, Marco Polo first made the long overland trip in 1272, when he was just 19 years old. Because he had a talent for languages and diplomacy, he stayed to work for the Khan until the 1290s. ♦ *As you read Marco Polo's description of the New Year's celebration, think about the power the Khan held. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Great Khan Celebrates the New Year

It is well ascertained that the Tartars date the commencement of their year from the month of February, and on that occasion it is customary for the Great Khan, as well as all who are subject to him, in their several countries, to clothe themselves in white garments, which, according to their ideas, are the emblem of good fortune. This is done in the hope that, during the whole course of the year nothing but what is fortunate may happen to them. . . .

Upon this day the inhabitants of all the provinces and kingdoms who hold lands. . . under the Great Khan, send him valuable presents of gold, silver, and precious stones, together with many pieces of white cloth, which they add, with the intent that his Majesty may experience throughout the year uninterrupted enjoyment and possess treasures adequate to all his expenses. . . . On this occasion great numbers of beautiful white horses are presented to the Great Khan; or if not perfectly white, it is at least the prevailing color. . . .

It is moreover the custom in making presents to the Great Khan, for those who have it in their power to furnish nine times nine of the article of which the present consists. Thus, for instance, if a province sends a present of horses, there are nine times nine, or eighty-one head in the drove. And so also of gold, or of cloth, nine times nine pieces. His Majesty receives at this festival no fewer than a hundred thousand horses.

On this day it is that all his elephants, amounting to five thousand, are exhibited in procession, covered with housings of cloth, fancifully and richly worked with gold and silk, in figures of birds and beasts. Each of these supports upon his shoulders two coffers filled with vessels of plate [silver] and other apparatus for the use of the court. Then follows a train of camels.

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Source: *The Travels of Marco Polo*, rev. and ed. Manuel Komroff (Limited Editions Club, 1934).

Questions to Think About

1. What color was considered lucky by the Great Khan and his people? What part did this play in the New Year's celebration?
2. What kinds of gifts did his subjects give the Great Khan for the New Year? What details does Marco Polo include to show the richness of the Khan's court?
3. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** What seems to be Marco Polo's attitude toward the Khan? Do you think this made his stories more or less believable to readers in Europe?
4. **Activity** Try to put yourself in Marco Polo's place—a young trader from Venice in a new and exciting culture. The Khan offers you a job in China. Would you stay? Explain why or why not.