

THE TARTARS

from

TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

about 1300

Marco Polo

In 1271, a young Venetian merchant named Marco Polo set out for Asia with his father and his uncle. Polo's journey would last over two decades, including 17 years in China in the employ of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan. Later in life, Polo told the story of his travels to a writer, and they created the book *Travels of Marco Polo*. It became widely read and helped to broaden Europeans' understanding of the world. In the excerpt below, Polo describes the Tartars—the Turks and Mongols of Central Asia who composed most of Kublai Khan's armies.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Summarizing

How would you describe the Tartars' way of life?

Of the Wandering Life of the Tartars / Of Their Domestic Manners / Their Food / And the Virtue and Useful Qualities of Their Women

Now that I have begun speaking of the Tartars, I will tell you more about them. The Tartars never remain fixed, but as the winter approaches remove to the plains of a warmer region, in order to find sufficient pasture for their cattle; and in summer they frequent cold situations in the mountains, where there is water and vegetation, and their cattle are free from the annoyance of horse-flies and other biting insects. During two or three months they progressively ascend higher ground, and seek fresh pasture, the grass not being adequate in any one place to feed the multitudes of which their herds and flocks consist.

Their huts or tents are formed of rods covered with felt, and being exactly round, and nicely put together, they can gather them into one bundle, and make them up as packages, which they carry along with them in their migrations, upon a sort of car with four wheels. When they have occasion to set them up again, they always make the entrance front to the south. Besides these cars they have a superior kind of vehicle upon two wheels, covered likewise with black felt, and so effectually as to protect those within it from wet, during a whole day of rain. These are drawn by oxen and camels, and serve to convey their wives and children, their utensils, and such provisions as they require. It is the women who attend to their trading concerns, who buy and sell, and provide everything necessary for their

husbands and their families; the time of the men being entirely devoted to hunting, hawking, and matters that relate to the military life. They have the best falcons in the world, and also the best dogs.

They subsist entirely upon flesh and milk, eating the produce of their sport, and a certain small animal, not unlike a rabbit, which, during the summer season are found in great abundance in the plains. But they likewise eat flesh of every description, horses, camels, and even dogs, provided they are fat. They drink mares' milk, which they prepare in such a manner that it has the qualities and flavour of white wine.

Their women are not excelled in the world for chastity and decency of conduct, nor for love and duty to their husbands. Infidelity to the marriage bed is regarded by them as a vice not merely dishonourable, but of the most infamous nature. It is also admirable to observe the loyalty of the husbands towards their wives, amongst whom, although there are perhaps ten or twenty, there prevails a degree of quiet and union that is highly laudable. No offensive language is ever heard, their attention being fully occupied with their own affairs and their several domestic employments, such as the provision of necessary food for the family, the management of the servants, and the care of the children, which are amongst them a common concern.

The men are allowed the indulgence of taking as many wives as they choose. Their expense to the husband is not great, and on the other hand the benefit he derives from their training and from the occupations in which they are constantly engaged, is considerable. On this account he makes payment to the mother. The wife who is the first espoused has the privilege of superior attention, and is held to be the most legitimate, which extends also to the children borne by her. In consequence of this unlimited number of wives, the offspring is more numerous than amongst any other people. Upon the death of the father, the son may take to himself the wives he leaves behind, with the exception of his own mother. They cannot take their sisters to wife, but upon the death of their brothers they can marry their sisters-in-law. Every marriage is solemnized with great ceremony.

Of the God of the Tartars / And of Their Modes of Worship / Of Their Dress

The doctrine and faith of the Tartars are these: They believe in a deity whose nature is Sublime and Heavenly. To him they burn incense, and offer up prayers only for the enjoyment of intellectual and bodily health.

They worship another likewise, named Natigay, whose image, covered with felt or other cloth, every individual preserves in his house. To this deity they associate a wife and children, placing the former on his left side, and the latter before him. Him they consider as the divinity who presides over the Earth, protects their children, and guards their cattle and their grain. They show him great respect, and at their meals they never omit to take a fat morsel of the flesh, and with it to grease the mouth of the idol, and at the same time the mouths of its wife and children.

They then throw out of the door some of the liquor in which the meat has been dressed, as an offering to the other spirits. This being done, they consider that their deity and his family have had their proper share, and proceed to eat and drink without further ceremony.

The wealthy Tartars dress in cloth of gold and silks, with skins of the sable, the ermine, and other animals, all in the richest fashion.

Concerning the Tartar Customs of War / Of Their Arms and Obedience to Their Leaders

Their arms are bows, iron maces, and in some instances, spears; but the first is the weapon at which they are the most expert, being accustomed, from children, to employ it in their sports. They wear defensive armour made from buffalo and hides of other beasts, dried by the fire, and thus rendered extremely hard and strong. They are brave in battle, almost to desperation, setting little value upon their lives, and exposing themselves without hesitation to all manner of danger. Their disposition is cruel.

They are capable of supporting every kind of privation, and when there is a necessity for it, can live for a month on the milk of their mares, and upon such wild animals as they may chance to catch. Their horses are fed upon grass alone, and do not require barley or other grain. The men are trained to remain on horseback during two days and two nights, without dismounting; sleeping in that situation whilst their horses graze. No people upon earth can surpass them in fortitude under difficulties, nor show greater patience under wants of every kind. They are most obedient to their chiefs, and are maintained at small expense. From these qualities, so essential to the formation of soldiers, it is, that they are fitted to subdue the world, as in fact they have done in regard to a considerable portion of it.

When one of the great Tartar chiefs proceeds on an expedition, he puts himself at the head of an army of an hundred thousand horse, and organizes them in the following manner. He appoints an officer to the command of every ten men, and others to command an hundred, a thousand, and ten thousand men, respectively. Thus ten of the officers commanding ten men take their orders from him who commands a hundred; of these, each ten, from him who commands a thousand; and each ten of these latter, from him who commands ten thousand.

By this arrangement each officer has only to attend to the management of ten men or ten bodies of men. Every company of a hundred men is denominated a *Tuc*, and ten of these constitute a *Toman*. When the army proceeds on service, a body of two hundred men is sent two days' march in advance, and parties are stationed upon each flank and in the rear, in order to prevent its being attacked by surprise.

When the service is distant they carry but little with them, and that, chiefly what is requisite for their encampment, and utensils for cooking. They subsist for the most part upon milk, as has been said. They are provided with small tents made of felt, under which they shelter themselves against rain. Should circumstances render

it necessary, in the execution of a duty that requires despatch, they can march for ten days without lighting a fire or taking a meal. During this time they subsist upon the blood drawn from their horses, each man opening a vein, and drinking from his own cattle.

They make provision also of milk, thickened and dried to the state of a paste, which is prepared in the following manner. They boil the milk, and skimming off the rich or creamy part as it rises to the top, put it into a separate vessel as butter; for so long as that remains in the milk, it will not become hard. The latter is then exposed to the sun until it dries. Upon going on service they carry with them about ten pounds for each man, and of this, half a pound is put, every morning, into a leathern bottle, with as much water as is thought necessary. By their motion in riding the contents are violently shaken, and a thin porridge is produced, upon which they make their dinner.

When these Tartars come to engage in battle, they never mix with the enemy, but keep hovering about him, discharging their arrows first from one side and then from the other, occasionally pretending to fly, and during their flight shooting arrows backwards at their pursuers, killing men and horses, as if they were combating face to face. In this sort of warfare the adversary imagines he has gained a victory, when in fact he has lost the battle; for the Tartars, observing the mischief they have done him, wheel about, and renewing the fight, overpower his remaining troops, and make them prisoners in spite of their utmost exertions. Their horses are so well broken-in to quick changes of movement, that upon the signal given, they instantly turn in any direction; and by these rapid manoeuvres many victories have been obtained.

All that has been here related is spoken of the original manners of the Tartar chiefs; but at the present day they are much degenerated. Those who dwell in Cathay,¹ forsaking their own laws, have adopted the customs of the people who worship idols, and those who inhabit the eastern provinces have adopted the manners of the Saracens.²

Source: Excerpt from *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated by William Marsden and edited with an introduction by Manuel Komroff (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), pp. 90–95. Copyright 1926 by Boni & Liveright, Inc., renewed 1953 by Manuel Komroff. Copyright 1930 by Horace Liveright, Inc., renewed © 1958 by Manuel Komroff. Reprinted by permission of Liveright Publishing Company.

1. **Cathay:** north China

2. **Saracens:** a north Arabian people

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

The Tartars moved from place to place seeking fresh pastures for their herds and flocks. Their shelters were portable. They ate mostly meat and milk. The men devoted most of their time to hunting and soldiering, and they were allowed to have several wives. Wealthy Tartars dressed in silks and sable skins. Tartar warriors showed great obedience, fortitude, and bravery.