

FROM *The Travels of Marco Polo*, c.1300

CHAPTER XXIV. HOW THE GREAT KHAN CAUSETH THE BARK OF TREES, MADE INTO SOMETHING LIKE PAPER, TO PASS FOR MONEY OVER ALL HIS COUNTRY.

Now that I have told you in detail of the splendor of this City of the Emperor's, I shall proceed to tell you of the Mint which he hath in the same city, in the which he hath his money coined and struck, as I shall relate to you. . . The Emperor's Mint then is in this same City of Cambaluc, and the way it is wrought is such that you might say he hath the Secret of Alchemy in perfection, and you would be right! For he makes his money after this fashion.

He makes them take of the bark of a certain tree, in fact of the mulberry tree, the leaves of which are the food of the silkworms, these trees being so numerous that whole districts are full of them. What they take is a certain fine white skin which lies between the wood of the tree and the thick outer bark, and this they make into something resembling sheets of paper, but black. When these sheets have been prepared they are cut up into pieces of different sizes. The smallest of these sizes is worth a half tornesel; the next, a little larger, one tornesel; one, a little larger still, is worth half a silver groat of Venice; another a whole groat; others yet two groats, five groats, and ten groats. There is also a kind worth one Bezant of gold, and others of three Bezants, and so up to ten. All these pieces of paper are issued with as much solemnity and authority as if they were of pure gold or silver; and on every piece a variety of officials, whose duty it is, have to write their names, and to put their seals. And when all is prepared duly, the Khan's chief officer smears the Seal entrusted to him with vermilion, and impresses it on the paper, so that the form of the Seal remains printed upon it in red; the money is then authentic. Any one forging it would be punished with death. And the Khan causes every year to be made such a vast quantity of this money, which costs him nothing, that it must equal in amount all the treasure in the world.

With these pieces of paper, made as I have described, he causes all payments on his own account to be made; and he makes them to pass universally over all his kingdoms and provinces and territories, and where ever his power and sovereignty extends. And nobody, however important he may think himself, dares to refuse them on pain of death. And indeed everybody takes them readily, for wheresoever a person may go throughout the Great Khan's dominions he shall find these pieces of paper current, and shall be able to transact all sales and purchases of goods by means of them just as well as if they were coins of pure gold. And all the while they are so light that ten bezants' worth does not weigh one golden bezant.

Commented [CR1]: highlighted and below - - - words and phrases I searched for on the internet to learn more

Commented [CR2]: Who is the great Khan? Kublai Khan who ruled from 1260 to 1294

Commented [CR3]: old name for the winter capital of the Yuan dynasty and founded by Kublai Khan. Today it is Beijing, China's capital.

Commented [CR4]: the belief that a secret could be discovered to turn cheap metal into gold

Commented [CR5]: a silver coin used in Europe in the late Middle Ages

Commented [CR6]: a coin

Commented [CR7]: a gold coin used in the Middle Ages - according to this 1 bezant = 20 groats = 133 tornesel

Commented [CR8]: the color red

Commented [CR9]: I found a map showing that his kingdom stretched from China all the way to eastern Europe and the Middle East and this paper money system helped trade along what we call the Silk Road

SAMPLE Time Travel POSTCARD

from Marco Polo's 13th century trip to the 21st century

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm sure glad my smart phone works in the past so I can do internet searches or I would never be able to figure out what Marco Polo is talking about sometimes! Today, we visited the mint in the city we call Beijing where the emperor Kublai Khan makes paper money. We are so used to paper money in the 21st century that I wasn't all that impressed. But Marco went a little nuts he was so excited to see it and keeps talking as if this was really alchemy, that magic formula people used to believe could turn cheap metal into gold. Evidently no one in Europe in the 1200s used paper money! Marco has worked out how many of his silver and gold coins called tornesel, groats and bezants equal the Chinese paper money.

Marco keeps talking about how nice it would be if he didn't have to carry a bunch of heavy coins and keeps saying that paper money worth 10 bezants doesn't even weight as much as just one bezant coin. I would really blow everyone's minds if I tried to explain how credit cards and PayPal work! I'm not sure the value of the Chinese paper

money in American dollars and cents because when I traveled in time, my American money turned into the medieval coins Marco uses.

Marco is also impressed that the government of Kublai Khan issues all the paper money and makes everyone use it across his huge kingdom that stretches from China to eastern Europe and the Middle East. Just like in the USA, counterfeit money is illegal. The Chinese have a special red mark that shows it is real thing. Kublia Khan's paper money system isn't really all that different from our federal money system that promotes trade. Marco just keeps talking about how this centralized system of money makes trade so much easier along what we now call the Silk Road. Evidently, back in Europe in the Middle Ages, all the different kings and countries make their own coins which got get VERY confusing and made it harder to trade. I wish could tell him about the European Union formed in 2002 when they all start using the same money – the Euro paper money and coins. The Euro certainly made trade easier across those nations!

More soon! Cynthia