Marco Polo 'never went to China and picked up tales of the Orient from other travellers'
By Mail Foreign Service
August 10, 2011

Marco Polo, one of history's greatest explorers, may in fact have been a conman, it was claimed yesterday.

Far from being a trader who spent years in China and the Far East, he probably never went further east than the Black Sea, according to a team of archaeologists.

They suspect the Venetian adventurer picked up stories about the mysterious lands of the Orient from fellow traders around the Black Sea who related tales of China, Japan and the Mongol Empire in the 13th century.



Travelling trickster? Marco Polo may have fabricated his experiences by using other people's stories.

He then put the stories together in a book which purports to be his account of his travels between 1271 and 1291. It details his relations with Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler.

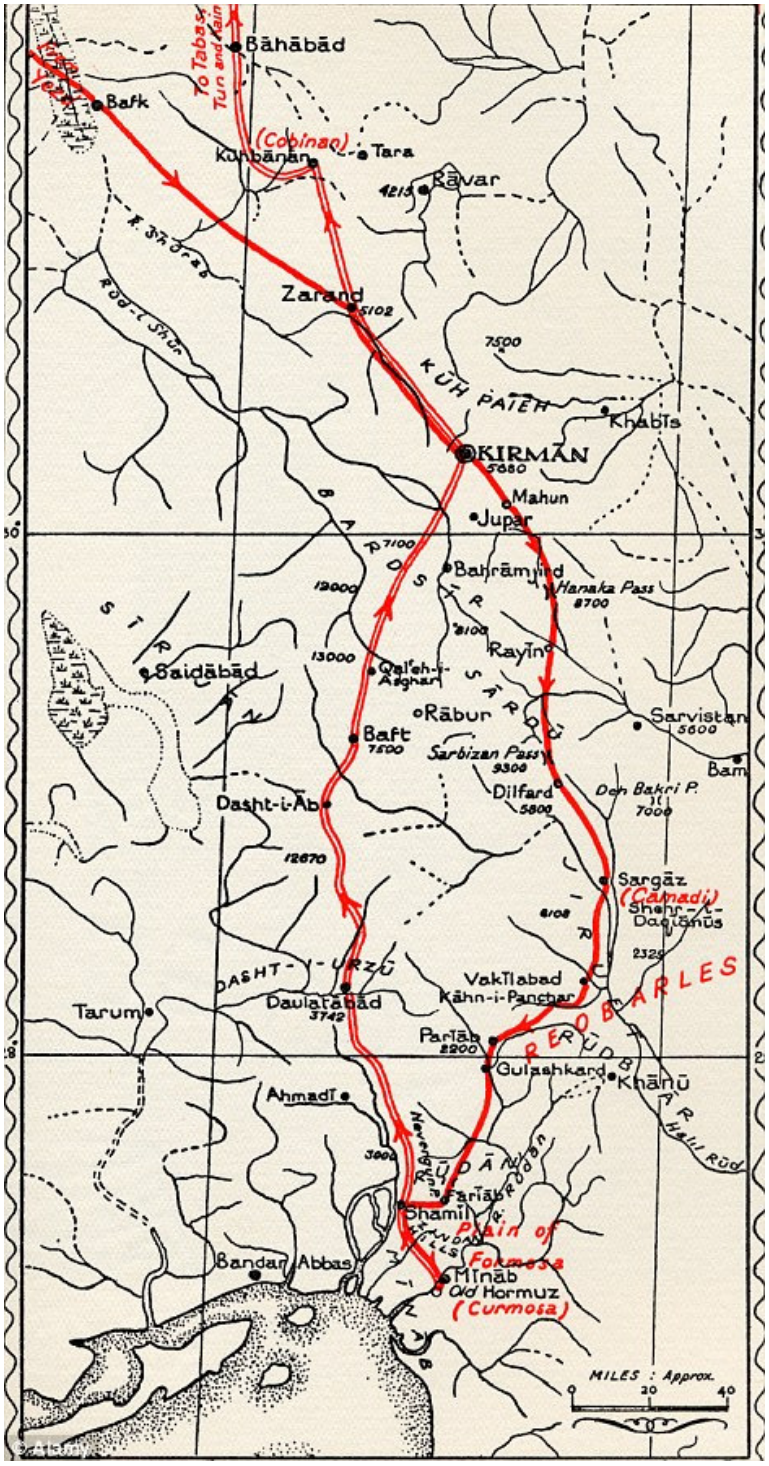
But now an Italian team of archaeologists studying in Japan have cast doubts about one of their country's national heroes - although there have been competing claims to him from Croatia, which argues he was born there.

Following the research, Professor Daniele Petrella of the University of Naples told Italian history magazine Focus Storia there were many inconsistencies and inaccuracies in Marco Polo's description of Kublai Khan's invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281.

'He confuses the two, mixing up details about the first expedition with those of the second,' Professor Petrella said.

'In his account of the first invasion, he describes the fleet leaving Korea and being hit by a typhoon before it reached the Japanese coast,' said Professor Daniele Petrella of the University of Naples, the leader of the archaeology team.

'But that happened in 1281 – is it really possible that a supposed eye witness could confuse events which were seven years apart?'



Extraordinary trip: Hailed as one of the greatest explorers of history, archeologists are suspicious of how genuine Marco Polo's tales are

Polo’s description of the Mongol fleet did not square with the remains of ships the archaeologists excavated in Japan, as he had written of ships with five masts, while those which had been found had only three.

‘It was during our dig that doubts began to emerge about much of what he wrote,’ added Professor Petrella.

'When he describes Kublai Khan’s fleet he talks about the pitch that was used to make ships’ hulls watertight. He used the word 'chunam’, which in Chinese and Mongol means nothing.

'In fact, it is the Persian word for pitch. It’s also odd that instead of using, as he does in most instances, local names to describe places, he used Persian terms for Mongol and Chinese place names.'

The explorer claimed to have worked as an emissary to the court of Kublai Khan, but his name does not crop up in any of the surviving Mongol or Chinese records.

The famous travel book was said to have been dictated by Polo to a fellow prisoner named Pisa while he was in jail after returning from his adventures, and to be fair to Polo, it is thought Pisa embellished many of the stories.

But the latest claims back those made in a book by British academic Frances Wood in 1995 entitled 'Did Marco Polo go to China?'. She argued he never got beyond the Black Sea and that his famed account was a collection of travellers’ tales.