Information about Kubla Khan is sketchy. Most of what we know comes from reports of people brutally conquered by the Mongols. Until Genghis Khan, there was no written Mongolian language, so Mongols were not used to keeping records. The main source of information is Marco Polo, who some historians believe is not always reliable. And the famous poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge about Xanadu, Kubla Khan’s summer palace. (It begins: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree.”) It was written much later, in 1797, and was pure fiction. In this book I have tried to make sense of the known facts. Of the many spellings of Kubla’s and other names, I have chosen the simplest.

Who was Kubla Khan? He may be the least known, most mysterious of history’s great leaders. He ruled over almost all of Asia and beyond. Never before had there been an empire of this size. Before his death in 1294, he had extended the Mongol Empire of his warlord grandfather, Genghis Khan, far beyond its former borders. Kubla Khan’s realm was so vast that it included Russia, Korea, Tibet and large parts of the Middle East (present-day Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and most of Turkey). With Mongol attacks on Hungary and Poland, Europe was almost within reach. He had his eye on Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia and Egypt, and although he’d already inherited part of China, he craved all of it. Kubla Khan didn’t know about the Americas, or he might have figured out a way to conquer them as well.

For thirty-four years Kubla Khan held his extraordinary empire together. How did he do it? Mongolia, the land where Kubla Khan was born in 1215, is unique, beautiful, and cruel—blisteringly hot in summer, fearfully cold in winter, always hostile to human life. In between its towering mountains there is nothing but a vast arid plain.

Like all Mongolian children, at age three Kubla Khan started riding horses. Legend has it that when he shot his first rabbit, he placed it at the feet of his proud grandfather. The great Genghis Khan pricked Kubla’s finger, mixed his blood with meat and blood from the
hare, then gave it to the young boy to eat. The ritual was meant to bring luck to Kubla—and to show he was officially worthy of the hunt.

By age fourteen, boys were trained for battle. They remained warriors until they were sixty, even seventy. With their bows and long-distance arrows, they were trained to shoot with perfect accuracy in any direction while at full gallop. The scariest sight in the entire world was a horde of Mongol warriors racing on horseback, beating large kettle drums, blowing horns, ringing bells.

Warriors would swoop down on a town in a hit-and-run raid, screaming, killing and destroying all in their path—then vanish like smoke back to their remote desert and mountain camps. It would take years, even decades for a town to rebuild itself afterward.

At first the Mongols from different tribes fought each other. The nobles of each tribe, in a sometimes violent process, elected the strongest man as leader, or khan. But there was no single leader....Then came Genghis Khan. Brilliant and ruthless, he rose from warrior to khan, and finally in 1206 to the great Khan of all Khans, uniting the warring Mongol tribes.

Mongolians were nomads, roaming in search of water and grass for their precious horses, goats, yaks, camels and sheep. People carried little besides their tents—clever portable houses that could be put up or taken down in less than an hour. The round tents, covered in felt, were cool in summer, warm in winter and kept out sand and bugs. Their carved wooden doors faced south for good luck, according to Mongolian spiritual beliefs. Nights were spent singing and storytelling. Meals were meat—all parts of all animals. And when there was no meat, people trained themselves to go without eating, for days if necessary. Such brutal life made Mongolians—men, women, children—very tough.

Horses were the key to their success as warriors. Mongolian ponies were small, but so fast, so hardy they could travel long distances without tiring. In the worst of times, when there was absolutely no food, a pony even provided nourishment. A rider would cut into the skin of his mount and drink a bit of blood, then continue on the journey.

All the accounts of the time describe Kubla’s mother as a woman nobody messed with. She took charge of his education, making sure he could read and write in the new Mongol script. Fostering her son’s natural curiosity, she taught him about Chinese culture. Mongolians greatly admired the Chinese—with their beautiful cities and rich farmland—safely enclosed within walls that kept out foreigners (like Mongolians.)

After the death of her husband, who’d been passed over as khan, Kubla’s mother chose not to remarry. Instead she requested land to rule as her own. Now her mission was to mold all four of her sons into great leaders. She taught the teenaged Kubla and his brothers to value the well-being of their subjects, the importance of protecting them. She was tolerant of all religions—a tolerance she passed on to her son.

At twenty-one, Kubla was given a territory to govern. As the years passed, he earned a reputation as a brilliant military leader whose goal was to enlarge the Mongol empire. He would take up to a year to prepare for a battle, considering every angle of his
strategy. Like his grandfather, he would first order a town to submit without a fight. But if there was resistance, he massacred the people.

As a ruler he was considered unusually fair. True, he captured towns by force, but once in control, he wanted to govern wisely (not just make himself richer). His mother hovered, making sure Kubla was in the right places at the right times, where the right nobles could take notice of her talented son.

Besides an ambitious mother, Kubla had an ambitious wife. Actually, Kubla had four wives and countless concubines. But Chabi, his second wife, was the most powerful. Her goal was to be empress of a vast realm. She was Kubla’s most influential adviser and weighed in on major issues like military campaigns and farming policies. She also redesigned military uniforms for better protection against the heat. And she was bold, yelling at her husband when he acted like a barbarian.

Out of approximately one hundred children, Kubla chose her son Chen-Chin as his favorite and successor. By 1260, having gained the confidence of most Mongol nobles, Kubla was elected the Khan. Khan of all Khans. He was forty-five. Not everyone considered the election proper…but too late: Kubla Khan was in power.

He surrounded himself with those he deemed smart and trustworthy—Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks, Muslims, Turks, Tibetan lamas—a posse of some forty advisers from all parts of his empire. They offered advice in sealed envelopes. Those whose ideas were put into practice received rich rewards, but those whose ideas were rejected weren’t punished.

Kubla tolerated any religion as long as its people revered him as the Great Khan—a rare attitude when in other parts of the world, religions were so often the cause of war. As for his own beliefs, he kept them private. Instead of simply executing everyone who disobeyed him, he often made them pay fines, have their heads shaved, or leave the empire. From everyone he inspired fear. And often respect. But not necessarily love.

Vast as his empire was, he still hungered for all of China. The Chinese were so civilized. They wore soft clothes of fine silk brocade (not the coarse Mongolian outfits of fur and leather); they made beautiful ceramics and textiles and were renowned for exquisite scroll paintings and poetry. The Chinese practiced an ancient form of medicine known as acupuncture and had invented the most advanced printing methods in the world. But all the wonders of China were enclosed within those famous protective walls.

Eventually, though, the walls gave way. Kubla Khan’s army’s battered city after city in China with boulders and flaming torches hurled from catapults. In 1271, he was able to declare himself the first emperor of China’s Yuan, or Mongol, dynasty.

His chances of remaining emperor were slim. An estimated 60 million Chinese vastly outnumbered the several hundred thousand Mongol soldiers living there. To stay in control, Kubla would have to live in the newly occupied area and govern in a Chinese style. He switched to dressing in simple clothes of silk. Then he began consulting the Chinese classic text *I Ching* (The Book of Changes) about what to do next.
Kubla Khan set up the capital of his empire in what became present-day Beijing. It took 28,000 construction workers to build his Imperial City. It was laid out like a chessboard, with streets so wide that nine men on horseback could ride abreast. There were splendid houses (with bathrooms inside), shops, hotels, restaurants, tea houses, all surrounded by lakes, gardens, bridges, and trees. If there was a particularly beautiful tree in another part of China, it was brought to the new capital and replanted.

His palace had four hundred rooms, decorated with dragons and phoenixes, with furnishings of silk and jade, the bedroom walls hung with the skins of ermines. The Khan surveyed his court from a throne covered with the skins of white horses; a tame lion rested at his feet. In the main reception hall, mechanical robotic tigers moved realistically.

During the hot summers, Kubla Khan and his immense family and staff migrated one hundred and twenty-five miles, to the cooler air at his second court, at Xanadu. There he could spend more time outdoors, in his own private park, hunting tame deer. He kept five hundred falcons and eagles trained to hunt cranes and smaller birds. In the middle of the park was a "pleasure dome"—actually a lavish Mongolian tent, a place where he could relax in khan-like style. And at Xanadu he kept some ten thousand white horses; his favorite drink, *koumiss*, was made from the mares’ fermented milk.

On the Khan’s birthday there was a wild party for as many as forty thousand people. That may sound like quite a guest list, but his bodyguards alone numbered twelve thousand. Each carried a special vase to spit in to avoid dirtying the lush gold carpets. He gave each guard thirteen bejeweled robes, each a different color and worn according to what holiday was being celebrated.

One party blended into another. Besides birthday bashes for his wives and children, other relatives and various Mongol leaders, plus the parties for all religious holidays, there were celebrations for each of the thirteen lunar months. Most over-the-top was the New Year’s festival. Everyone dressed in robes of white and watched the spectacle of five thousand elephants carrying in precious gifts for the Khan from all over his realm.

He was a lover of the arts who adored having his portrait painted. Unlike other rulers of the day, he didn’t meddle or censor, allowing freedom of expression. The blue-and-white porcelains that became so famous in later dynasties were actually first created during his rule. He brought to court three entire weaving communities from Central Asia and gave artisans more support than they had ever had. Literacy increased when he found a government printing press to print books and make them more available. The years of his reign represented a golden age for Chinese theater. Hundreds of new plays were written, with courtroom dramas the most popular, also comedies full of acrobats, jugglers, mimes, all in outlandish costumes.

He respected the sciences. Already suffering from the effects of too much rich food and drink, he made sure the best doctors were available. Muslim medicine was the most advanced of the time, so he invited a group of Persian doctors and established an Imperial Academy of Medicine. With them they brought thirty-six volumes of recipes for medicines.
His scholars drew more accurate maps of the known world. And he built a famous observatory, which led to a more accurate calendar. Above all, Kubla Khan wanted to find concrete, practical ways of improving the quality of life for his subjects. His first priority as emperor was establishing the Office for the Stimulation of Agriculture, which provided farmers with oxen and tools and better methods of irrigating their land.

Anyone who was hungry—orphans, widows, the elderly—could come to the palace and receive bread and rice.

The Khan greatly improved the postal system so that messages were relayed quickly and reliably, from one part of the empire to another. With rest stations every twenty miles providing food, fresh horses, and lodging, messengers could cover an impressive two hundred fifty miles a day.

Though he didn’t reach his goal, he is credited as the first ruler who attempted to offer an education to all boys, peasants as well as the rich.

After ordering that all gold and silver coins be turned over to the empire, he had the first standardized paper money printed—bills made from mulberry bark that could be used anywhere in his domain.

He liked to build. His most famous project was extending the Grand Canal from the Yangtze River to Beijing so goods and people could be transported easily to and from the capital. A project so cast it required three million workers; it remains the longest manmade waterway in the world.

He was always looking for ways to encourage trade—to find new customers for spices, ceramics, textiles, carpets, medicines, gold and jewels. So he made it safer for merchants to travel along the Silk Road, the major land trade route between China and Europe. He had new roads built through mountains and bridging rivers, with willow trees planted on both sides to shade travelers.

At court, he welcomed foreigners. Not only was he happy to have them broadcast news of his glorious empire once they were back in their homelands, but also he liked having his own subjects see these outsiders bow down in awe before the great Khan. One of the Europeans he impressed the most was a twenty-one-year-old man from Venice, Italy. His name was Marco Polo.

Three and a half years earlier, young Marco had set out with his father and uncle, both Venetian merchants, For Cathay, as China was called by Europeans of the day. Trekking over dangerous mountains and deserts, enduring harsh weather and attacks bother form wild animals and bandits; the trio finally reached the fabled court of Kubla Khan in 1275.

The emperor warmly greeted his visitors and peppered them with questions about the West—the customs, religions, wars.

Marco Polo was in awe—at the thriving Chinese cities of over a million people, the Khan himself, and the lavish court lifestyle. Of all the marvels he saw over the next
seventeen years, Marco Polo considered paper money the most incredible, a way of creating money out of nothing.

For twenty years, Kubla Khan enjoyed a run of success. But in 1279, his beloved wife Chabi died. Then their son Chen-Chin, who was only in his forties, died. Kubla Khan seemed to lose his way. Some think that his heart was broken, or that without Chabi’s advice, he became reckless. He mounted three expensive naval campaigns to conquer Japan. Each was an embarrassing defeat. (Warfare at sea was not something Mongolians were good at.)

Kubla Khan soldiered on until age eighty. His feet grew so swollen that walking became painful. He had to wear special boots made of soft fish skin sent from Korea. Finally, he grew too large to ride a horse. He would watch the hunt from a couch in a wooden room placed atop elephants. When he died in 1294, a huge caravan conveyed his body to the Mongolian mountains, where he was buried. The exact site remains unknown.

The Yuan dynasty he founded lasted another seventy-four years. In 1368, the new Ming dynasty promptly closed China to foreigners. European traders were no longer welcome. As for the Mongols—they withdrew to their nomadic life in the mountains and deserts of their homeland.

Kubla Khan’s influence lingered on. China had left such a huge impression on Marco Polo that he wrote a book about his years in Cathay. He began *The Travels of Marco Polo* in 1298. Handwritten copies of it became a sensation in Europe, with the first printed edition appearing in 1477. All readers, especially merchants and explorers, fell under the spell of the wonders he described. A lust for Asian goods inspired the search for a sea route to Asia.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed off looking for China, a well-worn copy of Marco Polo’s book with him on the voyage. When the Americas go in his way, the great age of European exploration unfurled. And so a remarkable ruler changed the history of the world. In his own over-the-top way, Kubla Khan introduced the East and West to each other.