

# Marco Polo's Serpent

## Was it a Crocodile or Some Kind of Now Extinct Reptile?

Marco Polo's account of a huge serpent seen in China is truly remarkable. It is found in *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated by Ronald Latham (Penguin Books), pages 178-180. I have reproduced these pages at the end of this paper.

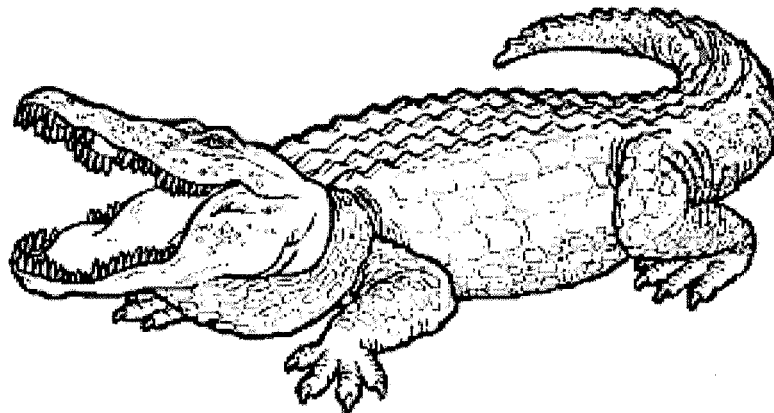
The editor suggests that this creature was a crocodile but the data does not seem to fit this identification. Marco Polo describes this creature with remarkable detail.

Marco Polo refers to this giant creature as a serpent but seems to distinguish it from a snake: "In this province live huge snakes and serpents."

Consider first the size. He says that the creature is of "such a size that no one could help being amazed even to hear of them." "Some of them [are] ten paces in length." I'm not sure exactly what he meant by a "pace," but I paced off 10 normal paces and measured a length of 21 feet. It could indicate a longer length. One writer discussing this passage said, "I would think that ten paces would be either 25 or 50 feet (depending on whether the pace in question is a single step -- ca. 30 inches since Roman times -- or the double step the Romans themselves used." Although a Saltwater Crocodile can grow to a length of 23 feet, most large species of crocodiles grow to only about 17 feet at the most.

Its thickness: "As thick as a stout (bulky in body) cask (barrel): for their girth runs to about ten palms (almost four feet)." I'm not sure exactly what this measurement refers to. A snake four feet in diameter would be huge. But a crocodile that measures four feet around its waist would not be that big. If by girth it means four feet from the ground to the top of its body, that would be very large. No crocodile is that big.

Its legs: "They have two squat (short and thickset) legs in front near the head, which have no feet but simply three claws, two small and one bigger, like the claws of a falcon or a lion." This description is detailed and very descriptive. This creature had front legs which had claws attached to them. A crocodile has front legs which have feet with toes, not claws, and it has more than three toes. See picture below:

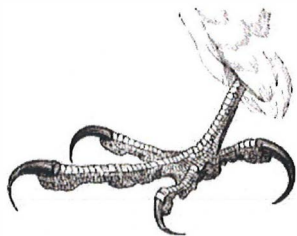


I don't think anyone would describe the crocodiles' feet as having claws. There are several kinds of dinosaurs that had claws on their front appendages. Marco Polo's description is that there were three claws, two small and one bigger (probably the middle one being the bigger).



Its claws were compared to the claws of a falcon and the claws of a lion:

Falcon  
Claws →



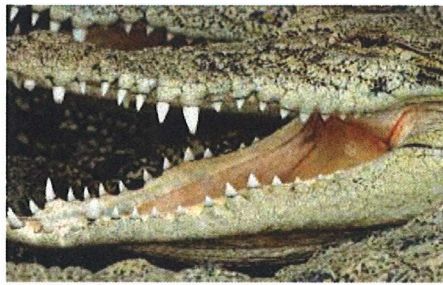
Lion  
Claws →



Its head: “They have enormous heads and eyes so bulging that they are bigger than loaves.” One writer surmises: “In 1290 a fourpenny loaf was in the neighborhood of at least 3 lbs. Homemade loaves of that time were usually round; 3-pound loaves were certainly as big as large dinner plates or medium pizzas and high. So the creature’s eyes were enormous—far, far larger than crocodile eyes.”<sup>1</sup> A crocodile head is an extension of its slender body and actually is small compared to its belly or midsection. A crocodile’s eyes are not huge, certainly not the size of a loaf of bread, but they do bulge up a bit and stand up from the head, so that the crocodile can see things while submerged in water.

Its mouth: “Their mouth is big enough to swallow a man at one gulp.” As frightening as a crocodile can be, I’ve never heard of one swallowing a man with one gulp.

Its teeth: “Their teeth are huge.” Crocodile teeth are impressive and very sharp and destructive, but I’m not sure I’d describe them as huge.



Some dinosaur teeth can be impressive:



Its fearsome description: “All in all, the monsters are of such inordinate bulk and ferocity that there is neither man nor beast but goes in fear of them.” “They go to the dens where lions and bears and other beasts of prey have their cubs and gobble them up—parents as well as young—if they can get at them.” Men do not normally live in fear of crocodiles unless their canoe should capsize where these creatures feed! But as long as we keep our distance from the river or from the river banks where crocodiles live, we do not have cause for worry. Who ever heard of crocodiles leaving the water and going on hunting missions into the dens of lions and bears?

The trapping of these monsters is described in detail by Marco Polo (see the account which follows). He

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<sup>1</sup><https://biblescienceguy.wordpress.com/2011/08/12/marco-polo-meets-dinosaurs/>

says that “by day they remain underground (in caves??) because of the great heat; at nightfall, they sally out [set out] to hunt and feed and seize whatever prey they can come by.” This does not appear to be the normal behavior of crocodiles which normally catch their prey in the water or near the water.

These monsters “are so bulky and heavy and of such a girth that when they pass through sand on their nightly search for food or drink they scoop out a furrow through the sand that looks as if a butt full of wine had been rolled that way.” This description fits an animal that is “bulky and heavy” and travels low to the ground, even with its belly pushing along the ground. This fits a crocodile somewhat but could also describe other massive reptiles or dinosaurs.

Marco Polo’s overall description of this creature seems to be a description of a land animal that goes to the water to drink. Nothing is said about the animal swimming in the water. It doesn’t seem to fit a crocodile which is known to be largely aquatic. Even when not in the water, it is close by.

Marco Polo’s account of how these animals are trapped and killed is fascinating. His next paragraph about the medicinal uses of “the gall” from this animal is equally intriguing.

What can we conclude from Marco Polo’s account of these monster creatures? There are really only four possibilities:

1. He was describing an animal which still lives in our world today, such as a crocodile. The problem with this view is that his description does not fit what we know about crocodiles.
2. He was describing an animal which once roamed in China but which is now extinct. The animal’s gall was valued for medicinal purposes and its meat was highly desired for food, which meant that the animal was hunted and trapped as described by Marco Polo; this could have been a major factor in its extinction.
3. He could have presented a fictional account describing an animal which never really existed. But this runs counter to the general tenor of Marco Polo’s entire book which seems to be an honest reporting of the things he observed in his travels.
4. Some skeptics deny that Marco Polo ever traveled to China and if that be the case, can we really trust anything he says about a place he merely pretended to visit? I am not an expert on Marco Polo and cannot make a judgment on this last point, except to say that his writings seem to have a ring of truth to them, and appear to be written by an eyewitness. The following author makes a good case for the fact that Marco Polo was indeed in China: Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013).

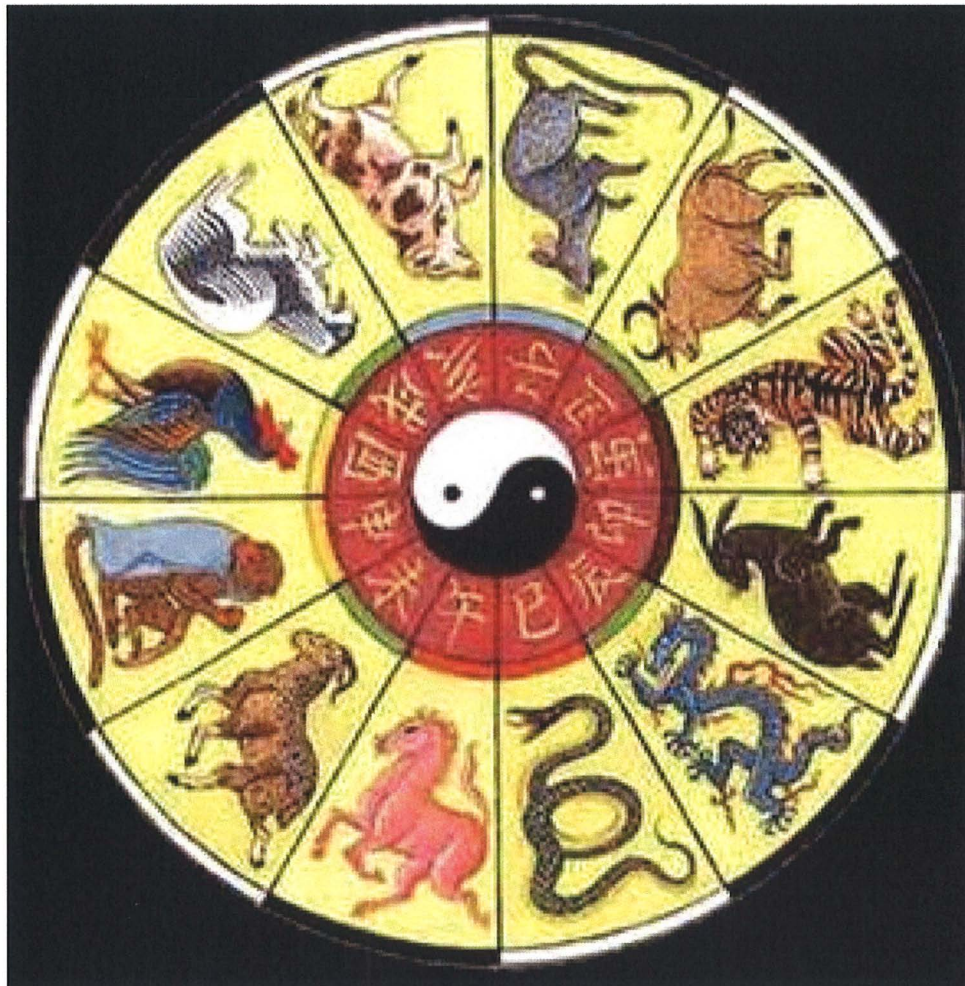
The animal he described does not seem to match any animal living on earth today, and he could be describing a huge animal, perhaps a giant reptile, which once lived in China but which became extinct.

Evolutionists have a huge problem with the idea that dinosaurs lived at the same time as men, and the idea that Marco Polo was describing a dinosaur would be unthinkable to them. The reason for this is that evolutionary dogma states that dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago, long before man ever evolved. Evolutionists reject or reinterpret any data which does not fit their theory.

Young earth creationists accept the Biblical account that dinosaurs and men were created at the same time and that dinosaurs lived contemporaneously with man until most of their species became extinct. Evidence for this view is as follows: 1) Scientists have recently discovered soft tissue in dinosaur bones and it is

highly unlikely that such soft tissue could have lasted even a million years, not to speak of 65 million years! 2) There are “dragon” legends in almost every culture in the world, especially the Chinese culture, and these dragon stories could have been based on ancient recollections of animals that actually roamed the earth. Many legends are based on fact. 3) There are numerous historical records, similar to this account of Marco Polo, which describe dragons or other dinosaur-like creatures. 4) The book of Job, one of the most ancient books in the Bible, describes two animals which do not seem to match any animals living today, but which may be descriptive of a land dinosaur (Job chapter 40) and a huge aquatic dinosaur (Job chapter 41). 5) Cave drawings and other ancient drawings or carvings yield examples of dinosaur-like creatures.

It’s interesting that China’s twelve-year calendar cycle has an animal for each year. Eleven of these are common today (dog, rat, monkey, etc.), so why assume that the twelfth (a dragon) was mythological? It’s more logical to assume that all twelve were animals that lived on earth, but of the twelve, the dragon was the only one which became extinct.



**Conclusion:**

Marco Polo, in his famous book, described an amazing animal, a “serpent” or “monster” of gigantic proportions, which was greatly feared by humans, although carefully hunted by them for food and medicinal purposes.

The description of this animal does not seem to match a crocodile or any other animal alive on earth today, nor does the account seem to be fictional. He seems to be describing a huge animal that once lived in China but has since become extinct. It is possible that he may have been describing some kind of giant carnivorous reptile or dinosaur.

# THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

TRANSLATED AND  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
RONALD LATHAM

Note: Marco Polo lived  
1254-1324 A.D.

PENGUIN BOOKS

In this province live huge snakes and serpents\* of such a size that no one could help being amazed even to hear of them. They are loathsome creatures to behold. Let me tell you just how big they are. You may take it for a fact that there are some of them ten paces in length that are as thick as a stout cask: for their girth runs to about ten palms. These are the biggest. They have two squat legs in front near the head, which have no feet but simply three claws, two small and one bigger, like the claws of a falcon or a lion. They have enormous heads and eyes so bulging that they are bigger than loaves. Their mouth is big enough to swallow a man at one gulp. Their teeth are huge. All in all, the monsters are of such inordinate bulk and ferocity that there is neither man nor beast but goes in fear of them. There are also

\*Evidently crocodiles.

178

p. 179

#### FROM PEKING TO BENGAL

smaller ones, not exceeding eight paces in length, or six or it may be five.

Let me tell you now how these monsters are trapped. You must know that by day they remain underground because of the great heat; at nightfall, they sally out to hunt and feed and seize whatever prey they can come by. They go down to drink at streams and lakes and springs. They are so bulky and heavy and of such a girth that when they pass through sand on their nightly search for food or drink they scoop out a furrow through the sand that looks as if a butt full of wine had been rolled that way. Now the hunters who set out to catch them lay traps at various places in the trails that show which way the snakes are accustomed to go down the banks into the water. These are made by embedding in the earth a stout wooden stake to which is fixed a sharp steel tip like a razor-blade or lance-head, projecting about a palm's breadth beyond the stake and slanting in the direction from which the serpents approach. This is covered with sand, so that nothing of the stake is visible. Traps of this sort are laid in great numbers. When the snake, or rather the serpent, comes down the trail to drink, he runs full-tilt into the steel, so that it pierces his chest and rips his belly right to the navel and he dies on the spot. The hunter knows that the serpent is dead by the cry of the birds, and then he ventures to approach his prey. Otherwise he dare not draw near.

When hunters have trapped a serpent by this means, they draw out the gall from the belly and sell it for a high price, for you must know that it makes a potent medicine. If a man is bitten by a mad dog, he is given a drop of it to drink – the weight of a halfpenny – and he is cured forthwith. And when a woman is in labour and cries aloud with the pangs of travail, she is given a drop of the serpent's gall and as soon as she has drunk it she is delivered of her child forthwith. Its third use is when someone is afflicted by any sort of growth: he puts a drop of this gall on it and is cured in a day or two. For these reasons the gall of this serpent is highly prized in these provinces. The flesh also commands a good price, because it is very good to eat and is esteemed as a delicacy.

Another thing about these serpents: they go to the dens where

179

THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO p. 180

lions and bears and other beasts of prey have their cubs and gobble them up – parents as well as young – if they can get at them.