

The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East

Concerning the Twelve Barons who are set over all the Affairs of the Great Kahn

You must know that the Great Kaan hath chosen twelve great Barons to whom he hath committed all the necessary affairs of thirty-four great provinces; and now I will tell you particulars about them and their establishments. You must know that these twelve Barons reside all together in a very rich and handsome palace, which is inside the city of Cambaluc, and consists of a variety of edifices, with many suites of apartments. To every province is assigned a judge and several clerks, and all reside in this palace, where each has his separate quarters. These judges and clerks administer all the affairs of the provinces to which they are attached, under the direction of the twelve barons.

Howbeit, when an affair is of very great importance, the twelve barons lay in before the Emperor, and he decides as he thinks best. But the power of those twelve barons is so great that they choose the governors for all those thirty-four great provinces that I have mentioned, and only after they have chosen do they inform the Emperor of their choice. This he confirms, and grants to the person nominated a tablet of gold such as is appropriate to the rank of his government.

Those twelve barons also have such authority that they can dispose of the movements of the forces, and send them whither, and in such strength, as they please. This is done indeed with the Emperor's cognizance, but still the orders are issued on their authority. They are styled *Shieng*, which is as much to say "The Supreme Court," and the palace where they abide is also called *Shieng*. This body forms the highest authority at the Court of the Great Kaan; and indeed they can favour and advance whom they will.