CHAPTER FIFTY

THE MONGOLS IN THE EYES OF THE PAPAL AND ROYAL MISSIONS TO MONGOLIA AND CHINA (C. 1245–1370)

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Since the middle of the thirteenth century, the Franciscans and the Dominicans belonged to the religious-intellectual elite of the Catholic Church. They were not monks but wandering friars, called mendicants. The mendicants (Lat. mendicare = to beg) were a new entity. The monks (Lat. monachus) lived in monasteries, often in distant places, but wandering friars (Lat. frater) were open to the world, moving between convents (Lat. conventum), i.e., dwelling communities. In the Middle Ages, the two mendicant orders carried out missionary work and executed diplomatic functions outside the borders of Western Christendom. In practice, the orders usually co-operated harmoniously when they came into contact, but the Catholic Church granted exclusive rights to one order in each territory to prevent rivalry and competition.1 The Franciscans succeeded in taking over the Mongol mission and managed to keep it in their control for the entire thirteenth century. The mendicants travelled through Mongolia (c. 1245–1260), the Jochid Ulus, the Ilkhanate,2 and the Chaghadaid Ulus as missionaries, but their ultimate destination was the Mongol Yuan Empire of East Asia (c. 1271–1370).

THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN–MONGOL ENCOUNTERS

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Islamic world had separated Europe and Asia from each other for hundreds of years, and in the Latin West, knowledge of Asia, for instance China and India, was received mainly through the authors of classical antiquity and biblical history. The known world ended at Jerusalem and the river Don. Crossing these borders was a jump into the unknown.3 The Crusades disturbed this situation; however, only the expansion of the Mongols, their invasion of Europe in 1241–1242, and their subsequent appearance in the Middle East brought significant change.
For the West, the Mongol invasion of Europe (Hungary, Poland, Moravia, Bohemia, and the Balkans) was a physical and intellectual shock. Fear of the Mongols conjured up an apocalyptic atmosphere which was expressed by the chroniclers of those days, such as Roger of Torre Maggiore and Thomas of Spalato. The Mongols might have even been seen as cannibals. They were often associated with the troops of the Antichrist, anticipating the end of the world, or they were seen according to the prophecies of the Old Testament as God’s trial of sinful Christians. A crusade was planned against the Mongols and authorized by Pope Gregory IX in June 1241, but there was not enough time to realize it.4

Those earlier unknown “barbarians” were mostly called Tartars (Tartari). The name was derived from the Latin word Tartarus (the Underworld of Greek mythology), in which case the Mongols would have come, of course, ex Tartaro. Usually Tartarus was regarded more as a moral classification than an actual abode of the Mongols.5

In this new situation, the Western powers – popes and secular rulers – tried to make contact with the Mongols as well as discover their empire. There existed a strong fear of a new invasion but also curiosity.

THE MENDICANTS AND THEIR WRITINGS

The early Franciscans and a few Dominicans wrote travel accounts and shorter reports of their experience in Mongol-held territory. After returning, they always had to write a report for their principals. In these sources, they described their encounters with the Mongols as well as their worldwide empire and revealed their attitudes towards the Mongols. They also carried letters from both sides. The mendicants in China usually stayed there until the end of their life and sent letters from there to the popes and papal curia. These are the only Western eye-witness narratives of this area, besides some merchant accounts, such as Marco Polo’s Description of the World (1298), not in Latin but in vernacular. Most of those writers were of Italian origin.

There exist about 20 mendicant sources: five are monographs by John of Plano Carpini (1247), Simon of Saint-Quentin (1248, dom. Caucasus), William of Rubruck (1255), Odoric of Pordenone (1330), and John of Marignolli (1355–58). These texts tell us much about the Mongol rulers, and their attitudes as well as their imperial administration and warfare. The first accounts of Mongolia, in particular, offer a lot of ethnographical information: how the Mongols lived and married, what and how they ate and drank, in which spiritual powers they believed, and how they practiced their faith. William of Rubruck even described traditional Mongol dances and the trance of a Mongol shaman.6

THE MENDICANTS TO MONGOLIA (C. 1245–1260) AS ENVOYS AND SPIES

The Mongols were a central theme in the First General Council of Lyons convoked by Pope Innocent IV in the summer of 1245. Who were they really, what were their plans, and how should they be treated in the future? Some experts, mostly Eastern
Europeans, related both their experiences and their views concerning the Mongols. The Council decided to send four separate papal embassies, two Franciscan and two Dominican, to the Mongols.7

As a result of the Mongol invasion, one might expect that there was an irreconcilable conflict between the Western Christians and the Mongols. However, the intellectual culture of the Mongols and the character of their empire included many elements, which promoted peaceful interaction as well as communication with different cultures. The territory of the Mongols had always been very open to acculturation, and they were in contact with almost all the major religions of their days. The eastern branch of Christianity, Nestorianism, had even gained a foothold among them due to many of the earliest and most trusted allies of the Mongols being Nestorian, such as the Kereit and the Önggüt. Further, the pluralistic and syncretic Mongols both accepted and respected all religions, which was guaranteed by their law code, the jasaq. The Mongol postal relay system, the jam, also provided Western mendicants a hard but fairly safe route into the Empire.

Of all the embassies, the one led by an Italian Franciscan, John of Plano Carpini (c. 1190–1252), an early follower of St Francis, was the most authoritative. Its task was to contact the king of the Mongols (rex Tartarorum) directly with two papal letters.8 The multi-national embassy left Lyons on September 16, 1245, its members being John of Plano Carpini, Stephen and possibly Ceslaus of Bohemia, and an interpreter of Slavonic languages, Benedict the Pole. The envoys travelled through Southern Russia via the ravaged Kiev to Batu’s encampment on the lower Volga. From there John of Plano Carpini and Benedict the Pole were ordered to make their way to Mongolia. After four months they arrived near Qaraqorum, where they witnessed the enthronement of the new Great Khan Güyük. The envoys returned to Lyons carrying the haughty response of Güyük on November 13, 1247.

John of Plano Carpini wrote about his experiences in a travel account, the Historia Mongalorum (1247/1248). The journey of his embassy was also described briefly by his companion Benedict the Pole in his Relatio, dictated in Cologne in 1247. The Historia Tartarorum (discovered only in 1958), written by Polish Franciscan C. de Bridia, is mostly based on information which John of Plano Carpini, Benedict, and Stephen gave him on their return journey.9 Nothing is known about the journey of the other Franciscan embassy led by Lawrence of Portugal. Probably his embassy never left Europe.10

The two Dominican embassies sent to the Muslim regions of Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria were more successful. They were led by Andrew of Longjumeau and Ascelin (probably from Cremona). Both the letters carried by them and their copies have disappeared. Only a summary in the Chronica majora by Matthew Paris has survived from the journey of Andrew of Longjumeau.11

The travel account of Ascelin’s embassy, Historia Tartarorum, was written by its member, Simon of Saint-Quentin. Ascelin left Lyons in the spring of 1245 and returned only in the autumn of 1248. His party also consisted of Albert, Alexander, and Guichard of Cremona. These five Dominicans arrived at last, through the Levant and Tiflis, in Armenia close to Sisian. There he encountered a great military encampment of Mongols under the leadership of Baiju, the commander of the Mongol army in Persia. On its return, the embassy was accompanied by two Mongol envoys carrying a letter from Baiju to the Pope as well as an edict from Güyük.12
All the sources mentioned previously are dated between 1245 and 1248. They were written soon after the Mongol invasion of Europe and are closely connected with each other. Their counterpart is the large and famous travel story *Itinerarium* of 1255 and other sources associated with it. The *Itinerarium* was written by the Flemish Franciscan William of Rubruck (b. c. 1215–1230 – alive in 1256–1257), a missionary and envoy of Louis IX. His journey took place between 1253 and 1255.

The French King Louis IX started his crusade to Egypt in 1248, but at first he landed with his troops in Cyprus. William of Rubruck was already there. In December 1248 two Nestorian envoys sent by the Mongol commander Eljigidei, the successor of Baiju, arrived in Nicosia. They carried a letter in Persian, which expressed great “sympathy” for Christianity, reported the good state of the Christians in the Mongol Empire, and wished the king well in his fight against those who despise the cross (*contemnentibus crucem*). This letter differed a great deal from previous Mongol ultimatums delivered during the Mongol invasion of Europe or the correspondence between Innocent IV and the Great Khan Güyük. Negotiations with the Nestorian envoys were mediated by the aforementioned traveller Andrew of Longjumeau, who was probably skilled in Persian.

In January 1249 the French King Louis IX sent a seven-man embassy, led by Andrew, to the Mongols. It has usually been thought that a mutual effort to create a coalition against the Muslims lay behind these contacts. The Mongols were planning to besiege the Abbasid capital, Baghdad (eventually conquered in 1258), and hoped that the Franks would prevent the Sultan of Egypt from coming to the aid of the Caliph.13

In 1250 King Louis IX at last invaded the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, where the Crusaders suffered total defeat. Louis himself was taken prisoner. However, the enormous ransom of the King was soon paid, and he was released before moving to Palestine for nearly four years. At that time Andrew’s embassy was already on its way back from Qaraqorum, having travelled through Persia via Eljigidei’s encampment. The embassy did not encounter Güyük Qa’an (d. 1248), but his widow Oghul Qaimish, and had to return with regrettable news to Palestine in April 1251. Oghul Qaimish sent a very belligerent letter to Louis IX, possibly to heighten her prestige in the struggle for power among the Mongol aristocracy. Her letter demanded that Louis pay tribute to the Mongols henceforth, otherwise the King would be destroyed.14

In March 1253, Louis IX once more tried to contact the Mongols, sending William of Rubruck from Palestine to Batu’s son Sartaq, whom it was thought was a Christian. To Friar William’s party belonged a Franciscan, Bartholomew of Cremona, a clerk called Gosset, an interpreter known as “Homo Dei”, and a slave boy, Nicholas, as a servant. The embassy travelled first by ship to Constantinople and from there to the Crimea. Sartaq’s encampment was reached on the lower Volga. Because Friar William was regarded as a representative of the French king, Sartaq sent him to Batu’s encampment nearby, from which Friar William had to travel to Mongolia, to the Great Khan Möngke. Bartholomew was now his only companion. They reached Möngke when the Great Khan was moving to Qaraqorum. For the following six months Friar William and Bartholomew stayed in Qaraqorum and its surroundings. Friar William returned alone to the Near East in the spring of 1255.
The Franciscan provincial minister of the Holy Land ordered Friar William to become a teacher of theology in the Franciscan convent of Acre, where he finished his travelogue called *Itinerarium*. The letter of Louis IX to Sartaq as well as the reply and an edict from Möngke have disappeared, but William of Rubruck quotes them in his work.\textsuperscript{15}

**RESULTS: A REALISTIC VIEW OF THE MONGOLS AS A PART OF GOD’S CREATION**

These first mendicant embassies had significant effects. They established diplomatic relations with the Mongols; began the exchange of letters between the popes, the Western monarchs, and the Mongol khans; and started missionary work among them.

The name *Mongol/Mongal* became known among the Western Christians. John of Plano Carpini’s work starts: “Here begins the History of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars.”\textsuperscript{16} Much more important was that through the newly detailed ethnographic knowledge the picture of the Mongols sharpened and became realistic. The Mongols were both humanized and given their own place as a part of mankind and God’s order of creation. It is noteworthy that only the leader of the Dominican embassy, Ascelin, as recorded by Simon of Saint-Quentin, had strong hatred towards the Mongols. Ascelin’s embassy fell into dangerous situations because of the uncompromising attitude of its leader. The worst thing was that he categorically refused to genuflect thrice (a Christian Trinitarian act) in front of Baiju, the delegate of Great Khan Güyük. According to Ascelin, the Mongols considered their khan as a son of God. Thus, this rite would have been pagan idolatry but also would have shown the subordination of the Roman Church to the qa’an. Three times Baiju ordered the envoys to be executed, and their lives were saved only because of their diplomatic status. There was a question of Ascelin’s own personality and fanaticism. The other embassies did not refuse these kind of rituals.\textsuperscript{17}

Concerning the Mongols, there were negative (e.g., their cruelty, greediness, dirtiness, ugliness of their females) as well as positive (e.g., their poor and humble lifestyle, endurance, living in mutual harmony, obedience to their superiors) ethnocentric stereotypes in all early mendicant writings – but not at all racist elements. Further, the Mongol religion seemed to include monotheistic elements, chiefly because of the central position ascribed to Eternal Heaven in their divine hierarchy.\textsuperscript{18}

The Mongol khans, e.g., Batu, Güyük, and Möngke, were not demonized. They were encountered with respect but also disgust and fear: the khans might often be portrayed as arrogant because of their hegemonic position in the world, but they were human beings who showed respect for diplomatic etiquette and also benevolence to envoys from distant lands.

In general, there existed various attitudes towards the Mongols. According to Simon of Saint-Quentin, the Mongols regarded other people – including the Pope and the Christians – as cattle and dogs.\textsuperscript{19} On the other hand, William of Rubruck describes a developing friendship between his embassy and its Mongol guide. The hour of parting between the embassy and its guide has been described in detail:
and he left us in a conciliatory fashion, asking for our hand and acknowledging his fault if he had let us go hungry or thirsty on the journey. We forgave him, and similarly sought pardon from him and all his company for any bad example we might have set them.\textsuperscript{20}

The Franciscan scholar, Roger Bacon, who had read William of Rubruck’s \textit{Itinerarium} and consulted its author, stated in his \textit{Opus majus} (c. 1267): “There is one God and there is one mankind.”\textsuperscript{21} The Mongols, who were also descended from Adam and Eve, had souls and indeed belonged to the common unity of mankind. On the other hand, this statement, in its monotheism, was against the religious world view of the polytheistic Mongols for whom the whole world was full of supranormal forces, and it would have been foolish to insult them. Möngke Qa’an revealed his faith to Friar William:

We Moal’s [Mongols] believe that there is only one God [the Eternal Heaven], through whom we have life and through whom we die, and towards him we direct our hearts. . . . But just as God has given the hand several fingers, so he has given mankind several paths. . . . So, then, God has given you the \textit{Scriptures} . . . whereas to us he has given soothsayers [at that time, mainly shamans], and we do as they tell us and live in peace.\textsuperscript{22}

In any case, peaceful and rational dialogue between Europeans and Mongols was now possible.

\textbf{THE MENDICANT MISSIONARIES AND YUAN DYNASTY CHINA (1271–1370)}

The contacts with Ilkhanid Persia were an important stimulus for the Mongol mission to China – in particular, the letter of Ilkhan Arghun and the journey of the aforementioned Rabban Sauma’s embassy (1287–1288) to the West, and also the earlier visit of Qubilai’s official Isa Kelemechi (1285), also sent by Arghun.\textsuperscript{23} Further, Qubilai’s request for 100 learned Latin Christians through Marco Polo’s father and uncle, Niccolò and Matteo, had been significant (1269). Later there were plenty of Venetian and Genovese traders in China.\textsuperscript{24}

Most Franciscan missionaries in China were Italians, such as John of Montecorvino (in China 1294–1328, Archbishop of China and Patriarch of the Orient in 1313, letters in 1305, 1306), Peregrine of Castello (d. 1322?, letter in 1318), Andrew of Perugia (1313–1332, letter in 1326), and two \textit{Relatios} (travel accounts) written by Odoric of Pordenone (1330) and John of Marignolli (in his \textit{Cronica Boemorum} from 1338 to 1358, which describes, among other things, his years in China from 1342 to 1346). Further, there were also two Dominican Archbishops of Sultantiyya (Soldaia) in Persia with their chronicles: John of Cora (possibly visited China around 1330, his chronicle in 1330) and John III (his chronicle in 1404 contains a brief account of the Christians after the fall of the Yuan dynasty).\textsuperscript{25} Several papal letters to the missionaries as well as an exchange of letters between them and the Mongol rulers of China have also been preserved.\textsuperscript{26}
These mendicants usually sailed by the sea route, often via India to China, and travelled then to the Mongol Yuan capital Khanbaliq (modern Beijing). The Mongol Empire had dissolved into four distinct khanates in 1264. Their hostility to each other brought an end to the so-called *Pax Mongolica*. Due to various conflicts along the land route, sailing was now safer.

The first mendicants to visit the Mongols (1245–1260) were not well prepared. They were diplomats and spies with missionary aims in a world not seen and only a little known. Their accounts were written quite autonomously and independently of each other. The mendicants who departed for China (1271–1370) had much better knowledge about their destination, probably competence in a few languages (usually Persian, Armenian, and even Turkic), and were oriented expressly to missionary work. They had often been trained in their convents in Asia, especially in the region of the Black Sea.

Above all, those Franciscans who went to China were expressly missionaries, rather than diplomats or collectors of information. They did not encounter the Mongol nomads, but rather the Mongol ruling elite of China, hence why their writings include little, if any, ethnographical information concerning the nomadic Mongols. As missionaries they reported much about the religious circumstances of Mongol China, particularly their Eastern Christian rivals, the Nestorians, whose first co-religionists arrived in the region in the middle of the seventh century during the Tang dynasty.27

China under Mongol rule was a place of various religions and religious views competing against each other, most notably the Buddhist–Daoist controversy and rivalry. Christianity was only a small minority religion there, even though the Mongols in China knew the Nestorians well. Mongol rule gave the Franciscans freedom to carry out their missionary work, but the field of that work differed entirely from Europe or its pagan borders. The mendicants succeeded in their mission best with Eastern Christian Armenians and Iranian Alans from Caucasia as well as with the Önggüt already connected with the Nestorian church. It is clear that a strong Nestorian–Catholic controversy developed. For instance, John of Montecorvino had nothing positive to say about the Nestorians.

Among the Chinese population the missionary work was very challenging. The Chinese language and its writing were difficult to learn,28 and preaching had to be done through interpreters. Baptism, which was so important for missionary workers, was usually seen more as a ritual bath without any commitments – and not only among the Chinese.29

Further, it was disappointing that the Mongol ruling elite was not at all interested in Catholic conversion. They were benevolent towards the mendicant missionaries, protected and supported them due to their role as envoys of the Latin West, but were much more interested in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as their traditional folk religion. The mendicant attitude towards the Mongol rulers in their letters was, however, all the time correct and respectful. They highlighted the wealth of the qa’an and his realm too.

The missionary work of the Franciscans declined during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), following the collapse of the Yuan dynasty and China’s separation from the West. The last Franciscan archbishop, Andrew of Perugia, died in 1332, and the last Franciscan embassy to China departed in 1370 but never reached its destination,
and its fate is unknown. Cut off from the West, the Catholic convents, churches, and parishes seem to have gradually begun to disappear prior to the Yuan–Ming transition.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

How did the mendicants see the Mongols? Their attitudes towards the Mongols were informed by their circumstances. Some of them had probably studied at university (William of Rubruck at the University of Paris). At least in their convents all of them had learned about their times, foreign languages, and methods of missionary work. They were, no doubt, in high positions in their religious orders. Going to the Mongol Empire was an important task, which was not entrusted to just anyone.

The time span of their missions is wide: 130 years. Thus, there were historical developments and changes: for instance, John of Plano Carpini and John of Montecorvino already lived in different worlds. However, between their attitudes were many similarities – much more than differences. First of all, all the Franciscans were *homines religiosi* (religious men), who had the world view and ethos of their order (poverty and following Christ, *imitatio Christi*) and a strong vocation for missionary work.

As literati they shared the common Western scholarly view of humanity and the moral principles of natural law (*ius naturale*) – moral values given by God to all mankind. Further, they were much more interested in the inner moral qualities of the Mongols than their outer appearance. In particular, the religious world of the Mongols and the whole empire was brought into focus. They did not favour luxuries and precious articles as the Western traders, such as Marco Polo. On the other hand, the works of Odoric of Pordenone and John of Cora resemble the book of Marco Polo in their admiration for the wealth and riches of the qa’an and Mongol China.

In the early encounters and letters (1245–1260) the Mongols were perceived as arrogant and aggressive. The Mongol rulers had the superior position in the world, and the Western powers were hierarchically under them. In China the Mongols were more equal. The Latin West was far away, and they wanted to contact it, without the aim of invasion or taxation. In any case, the Mongols were always the stronger party in the encounters outside Western Christendom. For the mendicants, their own superiority was based on Christian religion. In this sense, the Mongols could only have redeemed themselves by adopting the Christian faith in its Roman Catholic mode and acculturating themselves to Christendom, to *Corpus Christianorum*. However, the Mongol ruling class seemed to be religiously indifferent. How could the Mongol rulers, in their multi-cultural and multi-religious empire, have chosen such a small *post-mortem* salvation religion (Catholic Christianity) as their only faith?

In sum, during their invasion of Europe (1241–1242) the Mongols were often considered a monstrous race or even an eschatological phenomenon. In later mendicant accounts they were both humanized, incorporated into the historiography, and put in their own place as a part of mankind and God’s order of creation. The information was reliable and very useful for the Christian West. The mendicant travellers were in no way responsible for the later bad reputation of the Mongols.

Many old myths, pictures, and stereotypes about the world beyond Christendom now took new forms when projected onto reality. Furthermore, the beginning of the
Western examination and exploration of Asia and other lands, the Age of Discovery, can, in a way, be found in the Mongols and their worldwide empire.

NOTES

5 While the Tatars were quite powerful in Eastern Mongolia, it also served as a generic term for nomads in the Chinese sources and eventually became used as such by Islamic sources as well, eventually creeping into European literature.
6 Rubruc 1929, 176, 305.
7 Tanner et al. 1990, 297, 278–301. See Bezzola 1974, 110–118; de Rachewiltz 1971, 84–88; Ruotsala 2001, 40, 60. The information delivered by a Russian archbishop, Peter, has been preserved; edited in Dörrie 1956, 187–194. See Ruotsala 2001, 40, 153–155. The council probably knew also the (second) travel account of Hungarian Dominican Julian (1237/1238), which has been regarded the first comprehensive and realistic Western description of the Mongols; edited in Dörrie 1956, 165–182. See Bezzola 1974, 37–53, 41; Ruotsala 2001, 51–52.
8 The original destination of Plano Carpini’s embassy was obviously Batu because the great khan was not yet known in Europe.
12 Guzman 1968, passim.; Lupprian 1981, 53–56; Pelliot 1924, 262–335; de Rachewiltz 1971, 115–119; Ruotsala 2001, 43–44; Bezzola 1974, 123–149. The articles by Paul Pelliot have formed the background of all research concerning Andrew’s and Ascelin’s embassies. Simon’s account survived only because the Dominican, Vincent of Beauvais, included it in his encyclopedic historical work Speculum historiale (1248–1253); Guzman 1974, 300; Ruotsala 2001, 33, 43.
16 “Incipit Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus”, Carpine 1989, 277, also 316; cf. Rubruc 1929, 205; Simon of Saint-Quentin 1965, 92.
17 Simon of Saint-Quentin 1965, 98–107; see more detailed Ruotsala 2001, 80–84.
18 E.g., Carpine 1989, 236; Andrew of Longjumeau in CM, VI, 114; Rubruc 1929, 232, 233, 298.
21 “. . . unus est Deus, et unum est genus humanum”, Bacon 1964, II, 386. On Bacon and Rubruck; see Bacon 1964, I, 305; Ruotsala 2001, 44; Ruotsala 2013, 350.
22 Rubruck 1929, 298; Rubruck, 236–237.
23 See note 3.
24 Marco Polo in Yule 1914, 7–8; see de Rachewiltz 1971, 160–161; Standaert 2001, 68–70.
25 Standaert 2001, 47–49. Folkler E. Reichert has listed all the known Latins who went to East or Central Asia in 1242–1448; Reichert 1992, 287–293.
26 Sources especially in Lupprian 1981; Moule 1930; Wadding 1733; Yule 1914.
27 The origin of Nestorianism in China; see especially Moule 1930, 27–77. Standaert 2001, 1–2, 43.
29 Andrew of Perugia in van den Wyngaert 1929, 78, 89.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Rubruck, See List of Abbreviations.


TR, See List of Abbreviations.


