

The Age of Self-Discovery: Western Cultural Discourse in Thirteenth- & Fourteenth-Century Travel Narratives

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During the late Middle Ages, Europe experienced an unprecedented amount of contact with the peoples and cultures of East Asia. Travel from Western Europe to the Far East in the late medieval period encompasses a series of topics that intersect social, political, and economic discourses. Beginning with the first Mongol invasions into Europe circa 1238 and lasting until the establishment of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, these two groups experienced an unprecedented amount of direct contact. In order to assert their understanding (and establish notions of power), notable figures of Latin Christendom adopted several approaches to their conceptualization of the geography, demography, and theology of the East. The minutia of such categorizations were entirely saturated in a range of misconceptions, fantasies, and outlandish ideas. For several hundred years prior to the twelfth century, Europeans had projected figures such as Prester John, King David, and Thomas the Apostle into their understandings of the Far East. Alongside men of mythical origins, Europeans integrated more legitimate historical sources such as Alexander the Great and Theophylactus Simocatta from which an inconsistent conflation of histories was devised.¹ Furthermore, Europeans were forced to adapt to cultural changes for the effectiveness of their increasing Eastern mercantile activities. In doing so, these individuals participated in rendering the place of broader European society in contexts of both religious and secular histories. This era is seated in between two distinct periods of mass migration, exploration, and economic globalization: prior to the Mongol conquests, many Christian states partook in the series of religious Crusades against Middle Eastern powers in a frequent struggle for the control of

¹ Adam Knobler. "The Power of Distance: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Self and Other, 1100-1600," *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 479. Not to be confused with King David of Biblical times, this David was thought of as a direct descendant of Prester John residing in India: see Iain Higgins, "Imagining Christendom from Jerusalem to Paradise: Asia in Mandeville," in *Discovering New Worlds: Essays on Medieval Exploration and Imagination*, ed. Scott D. Westrem, (New York: Garland, 1991).

The Age of Self-Discovery

Jerusalem and other important areas; while in the epoch following Mongol control of Eastern Asia, several European states engaged in what came to be known as the Age of Discovery. Each of these phases constituted a need for Western Europeans to incorporate unfamiliar places and peoples into their worldview.² Despite the familiarity of these more widely-studied historical paradigms, the intervening period offers an equally compelling cast of individuals and narratives.

Religion, mainly Christianity, manifested itself as a common thread linking these three scenarios. The Crusades were primarily concerned with a moral, spiritual, and ultimately biblical set of motivations and interpretations. Furthermore, sixteenth-century European expansion into the so-called New World was rich with ecclesiastical politics and the religious indoctrination of indigenous peoples. The Christianization of “new” lands and cultures was a consistent part of colonial rhetoric and action. In both instances, the dominant interpretive framework for medieval life was applied to situations and experiences that challenged the narrow view of the world held by these same people. These realities are mirrored in many ways by the aforementioned contact between Europeans and East Asian societies. The body of primary texts that form our understanding of this history is one frequently supported by an index of Christian imagery and rhetoric, including papal correspondence.³ Consequently, an analysis of such work can assist us in developing a more thorough consideration of how and why European literature contains these consistent and complementary themes. Specifically, identifying a frequent relationship between Europe’s Christian leaders, the ecclesiastical dominance of literature and academia, and the predominantly homogenous cultural symbiosis in relation to this societal structure is an important task. Each component in this system strengthens Christian interpretive rhetoric by means of controlled production and passive, non-critical consumption. As a result, we are better

² Felicitas Schmieder, “Christians, Jews, Muslims – and Mongols: Fitting a Foreign People into the Western Christian Apocalyptic Scenario,” *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 2 (2006): 276-286. Knobler. “The Power of Distance,” *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 479.

³ Shirin Khanmohamadi “Worldly Unease in Late Medieval European Travel Reports” in *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages* (2013): 116.

able to contextualize an important period of not just European but world history. The previously outlined points of inquiry are tools with which to scrutinize the transition of Western history outside and away from the European continent. While the scope of this argumentation is inherently Eurocentric, it is necessary to do so in order to adopt the position of the primary sources. While not nationalistic or patriotic in the modern sense, sources from this period represent a strict adherence to the Western European institutions that dominated their producers' everyday lives. These structures (the Church, various monarchies, guilds, etc.) are representative of a way of life that conditioned the perceptions held by travelers to the East. Additionally, expatriates within the Mongol Empire were still endowed with many of the same Western ideologies and cultural tropes. Therefore, an analysis of their work necessitates a very limited consideration of Eastern societies beyond the depth and scope of these foreign perspectives.

Overall, travel to the Far East during the late medieval period constitutes important cultural interactions for Western Europeans. Processes of othering, alienation, observation, and confrontation that characterize the following periods of European imperialism have distinct roots in these interactions. The documentation of such systems is evident and discernable amongst the cultural products of and by Europeans Christians during this period.

Methodology

Material that provides historians with a firsthand account of European travel to the Far East in the Middle Ages is a fairly small canon. There are many overlaps between these texts, and historians have drawn upon a range of interdisciplinary approaches with which to analyze and interpret them. Scholars have engaged with themes including, but not limited to: sociopolitical dynamics, economic concerns, art history, geopolitics, discourses of othering, religious histories, identity, and nationalism. A review of this multifaceted literature prefaces my own focus across and within the historiographical repertoire.

The Age of Self-Discovery

One of the most important concerns of the aforementioned scholarship addresses a critical factor in the worldview of Western Europeans: Christianity. In many instances, an inescapable awareness of the faith and of the Church was what dictated policy and action toward the Mongol Empire and its leaders.⁴ As Gregory Guzman notes, King Louis IX of France and Pope Innocent IV were central actors in thirteenth-century diplomacy in and out of Latin Christendom. At any time, attitudes pivoted between religious-diplomatic policy and the political-military arena.⁵ This binary of rhetoric proved to be more of a spectrum, however, as is reflected by the languages of envoys, missionaries, and merchants of this time. This is a consequence of Christianity's saturation within the lives of medieval Europeans – and was compounded by centuries of tension between the papacy and European monarchies. Therefore, many historians have articulated the dynamic between conversion, crusade, and Christian eschatology.⁶ At any given point, European travelers were engrossed in whatever relevant religious diplomacy was in fashion. Even their perceptions of the East were formed largely on Christian myths, biblical texts, and the various clerical attachés that wrote of their experiences.⁷ Consequently, primary sources are virtually inextricable from religious contextualization. Any scholarly inquiry into this era is complicated by the frequent intersections of applicable works with refrains of Christian apprehension to Muslim civilizations, ambitious to convert and crusade, and incorporations of the expanding world into existing theology.

While the writings of friars and missionaries are widely cited in the body of existing research, they constitute a limited purview of their respective context. The rise of the Mongol Empire began a whole series of cultural and political exchanges that

⁴ Knobler, "The Power of Distance," *Medieval Encounters* 19, no. 4 (2013): 434-480.

⁵ Gregory Guzman, "Christian Europe and Mongol Asia: First Medieval Intercultural Contact between East and West," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2, (1985): 227-244.

⁶ Felicitas Schmieder, "Christians, Jews, Muslims – and Mongols: Fitting a Foreign People into the Western Christian Apocalyptic Scenario," *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 2 (2006): 274-295. Schmieder discusses the eschatology of Mongol encounters at length, including the immediacy of biblical explanations for their initial invasions of Eastern Europe.

⁷ Adnan Husain, "Mission to Crusade: Friar William of Rubruck's Journey to the Mongols." In *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture*. Ed. Glenn Jason, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 245-258.

created unprecedented communities, cultural objects, and identities. Commercially-inclined voyagers were exposed to manuals that specifically warned against practical, albeit subtle, changes in the way business was conducted across expanding Eurasian trade networks.⁸ Similarly, communities of expatriate Christians produced art that was often infused with local traditions, materials, and sociocultural iconography.⁹ Fundamentally, this period is characterized by consistent occurrences of theological, sociological, and economic reconceptualization amid an expanding physical and ideological worldview. With respect to these challenges, Christians were confronted with an important, and somewhat forced, reconciliation between well-established conventions of self and other. Not only were entirely new religions, languages, customs, and peoples being discovered; European thought was severely destabilized as a result.¹⁰ As many historians have commented on more obscure macro-level points of inquiry, opportunities exist to scrutinize the more practical, mundane experiences of the writers and their audiences.

Substantial work has been done to better understand the significance attached to what is arguably an overlooked piece of Western and world history. At this time, we are able to observe the transition from centuries of crusade to centuries of colonialism and imperialism. What falls in between is a trial run of sorts, a scaled-down European expansion with entirely different mechanics and outcomes. Beyond this, several features of the period have characteristics that stretch across the actual sequence of events. On a political level, contact with Asia was as much about diplomacy, conquest, and strategy as the Age of Exploration. Furthermore, on a

⁸ John Dotson, "Commercial Law in Fourteenth-Century Merchant Manuals." *Medieval Encounters* 9, no. 2-3 (2003): 204-213.

⁹ Jennifer Purtle, "The Far Side: Expatriate Medieval Art and its Languages in Sino-Mongol China." *Medieval Encounters* 17, no. 1-2 (2011): 167-197.

¹⁰ Azizeh Khanmohamadi, "Worldly Unease in Late Medieval European Travel Reports." In *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages*, ed. John M. Ganim and Shayne Aaron Legassie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 105-120.. Khanmohamadi elaborates on the idea of Christians as a "global other" which was influenced by the interactions between themselves and Mongols, remote Christian groups, Muslims, and other populations beyond the highly familiar Mediterranean world. See Knobler for extended discussions on pre-contact tropes of distant power and perceptions of the Far East.

The Age of Self-Discovery

social register, Western Europe was incorporating these new lands and peoples into the Muslim-Christian power struggles defining this period.¹¹ The Mongol Empire was filled with challenges to deep-rooted Christian beliefs and worldviews; a fact that made encounters with the other “profoundly disorienting and disquieting.”¹² It was as much an exploration of Western European identity and power as it was a physical spread across the continent.

It is curious how historians have identified such a complex array of topics with which to approach this period, and yet the field remains fairly limited. What is clear, however, are a set of highly relevant and compelling narratives that give a window into the important discourses that framed this period of world history.¹³ A study of these matters must be cognizant of the immense political, social, economic, and religious intersections exposed by contemporary historians, which are briefly outlined below.

Looking Eastward: Early Missionary Travel & Correspondence

Perhaps the most important event in the creation of a consistent East-West agenda was the First Council of Lyon (also known as the Thirteenth Ecumenical Council) organized and assembled in 1245 by Pope Innocent IV. This meeting came at a time during which the Church was faced with both internal and external crises including the Mongol threat, rivalries with Emperor Frederick II, and the declining influence of Christianity in the Holy Land. In response, Pope Innocent dispatched three missionary groups led by the following men: John of Plano Carpini, Simon of

¹¹ Knobler, “The Power of Distance,” 445-447. The Mongol rulers of the Middle East are cited as being particularly attractive to various periods of aggression between Christians and Muslims in the region given their obvious geopolitical advantages.

¹² Khanmohamadi, “Worldly Unease,” 105.

¹³ Any and all discussions of the primary sources presented in this essay are shadowed by an ongoing and extensive set of complex questions related to legitimacy, authenticity, and accuracy. These topics are largely overlooked for the sake of brevity and an attention towards the more explicit, thematic ideas expressed by the texts. For a more in-depth insight into the controversies most prevalent in this essay see Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Frances Wood, “Did Marco Polo Go to China?” *Asian Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1996): 296-304.

Saint-Quentin, and Andrew of Longjumeau.¹⁴ The first became most engaged with the Mongol empire and its leaders and his work is best preserved in medieval histories. The other two individuals traveled mainly through the lands of the Near East including Armenia and Tabríz, although records of their travels are much scarcer. Each of the envoys was entrusted with two letters written by Pope Innocent and addressed to the leader of the Mongols, which were delivered by Plano Carpini upon his arrival at Guyuk Khan's court in the fall of 1246.¹⁵ The goal of these envoys, according to their correspondences and personal narratives, was the articulation of papal political agendas and the attempted integration of the Mongol peoples into the overarching Christian worldview. With an increasingly fragile presence in the Middle East, combined with tensions in Central Europe, the Pope would have been eager to assess the political, theological, and economic opportunities presented by this seemingly new civilization at the eastern periphery of the Christian world. Of course, the Mongol people were most legitimized by their conquests of both Christian and Muslim groups. These largely successful campaigns formed the basis of a transformation in Western attitudes. It was at this time that the mythical people and geography of the Far East became a very real part of the struggle for Christian dominance in an ever-widening series of geopolitical negotiations.

As a result, the earliest contact between West and East was made on the basis of both diplomacy and conversion. John of Plano Carpini and his companion, Benedict the Pole, carried the papal bulls addressed to Guyuk Khan. The language of both texts is reflective of a point of conflict for these two leaders. Pope Innocent sought, in a rather malicious way, to end the violent and swift spread of the Mongol Empire across the largely Christian lands of Eastern Europe. Of course, this is also a convenient way to insert blatant Christian propaganda into diplomacy. Mongol invasion in Eastern Europe also compounded the instability of the fractured Christian unity seen in the late Middle Ages. While the inhabitants

¹⁴ Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West: 1221-1410* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 87-88.

¹⁵ Plano Carpini, John. "History of the Mongols" in *Mission to Asia*, edited by Christopher Dawson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 67.

The Age of Self-Discovery

of Easter European nations were unlikely to align with papal authority and the larger Western European agenda, they nevertheless constituted an important symbolic frontier for the faith. Despite the Pope's maneuvering, Guyuk Khan's reply offers an aggressive rebuke of the Pope's suggestions. The attitudes of both men are revealing in the exposé of the inextricability between Western European diplomacy and faith.

The first of Pope Innocent's bulls, written in Lyon on March 5, 1245, speaks to the goal of conversion and the justification of sending Christian missionaries (Order of Friars Minor) to the Mongol ruler in an attempt to convert him and by extension his people. His letter reads:

Following their salutary instructions you may acknowledge Jesus Christ the very son of God and worship His glorious name by practicing the Christian Religion. We therefore admonish you all, beg and earnestly entreat you to receive these Friars kindly and to treat them in considerate fashion out of reverence for God and for us, indeed as if receiving us in their persons, and to employ unfeigned honesty towards them in respect of those matters of which they will speak to you on our behalf... matters to your profit.¹⁶

Within this level of discourse, conversion is emphasized as the primary topic and motivation for the correspondence. Importantly, Pope Innocent's words are in many ways highly formal yet inherently condescending. On the most fundamental level, the letter ignores any notion of the Mongols' own religious views or beliefs. The document does not even address or name any competing ideology which Christianity is poised to replace. This is likely both a result of ignorance and intentional omission with regards to the letter's intent. Furthermore, the wording suggests the dispatching of the missionaries as well as the simple act of communication is somehow a large gesture of kindness on behalf of

¹⁶ Pope Innocent IV, "Two Bulls of Pope Innocent IV Addressed to the Emperor of the Tartars" in *Mission to Asia*, edited by Christopher Dawson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) 73-78.

the Pope and the friars. They see themselves as truly righteous servants of God, who by reaching out to the Mongol people are not only fulfilling their own religious doctrine but are engaged in an activity worthy of heightened hospitality and respect on behalf of the Mongol people. The “apostolic mission” of the Pope and his missionaries is considered to be validated, justified, and sponsored by God.¹⁷ Understandably, any relevant action was conducted under the auspices of salvation and bestowing mercy upon the populations of non-believers, thus an observably patronizing pattern of formalities is identifiable. As a result, these men demand not only the theological submission of the Mongols, but also a conscious diplomatic submission. While not explicitly stated, conversion to Christianity implies a subservience to the Pope and Western Europe. The Pope goes to great lengths establishing the hierarchies relevant to his own efforts and those of the friars. As argued, the “virtue of [the Pope’s] office, [is] to your salvation and that of other men... to lead those in error into the way of truth and gain all men for Him.”¹⁸ As a result, there is a direct line drawn between the authority of God, the power of the Pope, and the goal of his messengers. If the Khan and his people acquiesced to these demands, it would in turn validate and encourage such demonstrations of power.

The change in tone observable in Pope Innocent’s second bull, written just one week later, is remarkably divergent in its approach and argumentation. While the letter is rich with the same consistent utilization of Christian ideas, it approaches the idea of conversion in a disciplinary and forceful manner. As scholar Peter Jackson asserts, this letter was more concerned with “an exposition of the Christian faith and [urging] the Mongols to accept baptism.”¹⁹ The fact that both letters were intentionally delivered together may be reflective of a level of confidence on behalf of the Pope, who was no doubt biased in favor of notions of Christian supremacy despite any recent Mongol military success.²⁰ Pope Innocent’s second communiqué reads:

¹⁷ Ibid., 74

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jackson, *The Mongols and The West*, 88.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

The Age of Self-Discovery

Desiring that all men should live in concord in the fear of God do admonish beg and earnestly beseech all off you that for the future you desist entirely from the assaults of this kind and especially from the persecution of Christians, and that after so many and such grievous offences you conciliate by a fitting penance the wrath of Divine Majesty... Sometimes he refrains from chastising the proud in this world for the moment, for this reason, that if they neglect to humble themselves of their own accord He may not only no longer put off the punishment of their wickedness.²¹

While this is certainly a more direct way of condemning Mongol behavior, it omits several important ideas. In his condemnation of their actions, the Pope does not suggest a military response, or even a personal reaction on behalf of his office or any other European ruler. Instead, he diverts all figures of punishment and consequence to the Divine. Predictably, the violence against Christians is identified as being especially grievous. In response to this extremely threatening warfare waged against Christian communities, the Pope argues that God has simply withheld punishment in order to provide an opportunity for the humbling, meaning conversion, of the Mongols. What all of this posturing reveals, however, is the fear and limitations of the Pope and monarchs of Western Europe. As he later states, the second set of friars dispatched, including John of Plano Carpini, intend to host “profitable discussions... especially those pertaining to peace.”²² Again suggesting that missionaries provide opportunities that are exceptionally valuable to the Khan, the Pope alludes to peace as being an especially important part of these discussions. This is likely a recognition of both the immense power of the Mongol armies as well as the inadequacies of European military organization and mobility.²³ Although most poignantly presented here, this duality is expressed in both papal messages. Veiled as a

²¹ Pope Innocent IV, “Two Bulls of Pope Innocent IV,” 75.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Knobler, “The Power of Distance,” 444.

formal and then bold attempt at coercion and conversion, Pope Innocent is ultimately unable to diverge from the theological framework in his political maneuvering. This paradigm represents the crux of Western Europe's misguided yet stubborn worldview, anchored by the emphasis of Christianity-Islam theo-political binaries. Overall, the West was composed of ideologies and cultures that asserted a Christian dominance supported by principles and authorities against which foreign powers such as Mongols or Muslims problematized the extension of Christian dominance beyond Latin Christendom.

In direct defiance to the aspirations conceived in the Thirteenth Ecumenical Council, Guyuk's response to the aforementioned missionaries is a bleak rebuke of the West's notions of grandeur and superiority that are so rooted in Christian mandates. Shorter in length than the Pope's communications, the Khan takes issue with Pope Innocent's most fundamental premises. Mainly, the general idea of God being on the side of the Western Christians is problematized by the Khan's extolling of Mongol military success. Furthermore, the most basic attempt at submission is explicitly reversed onto the Westerners. Dated November 1246, the letter reads:

How could anybody seize or kill by his own power contrary to the command of God? How knowest thou whom God absolves, in truth to whom He shows mercy? How dost thou know that such words as thou speakest are with God's sanction? From the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject to me. Who could do this contrary to the command of God?²⁴

This passage is reflective of the letter as a whole in the sense that it is filled with very direct and destabilizing questions. Guyuk Khan questions not only the Pope's authority, but also the ideas of divine preference that are so key to Christian entitlement and confidence on the world stage. It is also interesting that Guyuk Khan uses the

²⁴ Guyuk Khan, "Guyuk Khan's Letter to Pope Innocent IV (1246)," in *Mission to Asia*, edited by Christopher Dawson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 85.

The Age of Self-Discovery

word “command” in his allusions to God’s will. This connects with a previous statement: “God has slain and annihilated these lands and peoples, because they have neither adhered to Chingis Khan, nor to the Khagan, both of whom have been sent to make known God’s command.”²⁵ Combined, these two statements completely overturn the otherwise unquestionable belief held by Christians regarding their status as God’s chosen people. Not only this, but the Khan reconciles what is seemingly the greatest weakness of Pope Innocent’s argumentation: the rapid expansion and terrifying reputation of the Mongol peoples. It only makes sense that the ruler of such a militarily successful civilization would refute the threatening language of a civilization whose people were so frequently vulnerable to both Mongol and Muslim aggression, especially along Europe’s eastern periphery. The Khan’s language is therefore deliberate in the destabilization of the Pope’s most assured moral and political assumptions. This dynamic is representative of astute diplomatic consciousness on behalf of the former, as Christian threats are made empty in the face of continued Mongol expansion. Guyuk Khan ends his text by asserting, “You should say with a sincere heart: ‘I will submit and serve you.’”²⁶ Obviously this is not the response that any Christian would appreciate or find comforting. Although the language of the Khan does not anticipate a large-scale clash between Christian and Mongol forces, it does allude to the extreme tension that manifested itself in the desires of both rulers to assert themselves among the increasingly crowded group of continental powers.

Armed with the knowledge of the earlier missions and with a strong mandate from St. Louis, one Franciscan missionary was able to produce the most detailed account of the Mongol Empire that has survived to this day.²⁷ *The Journey of William of Rubruck* was originally a report given to the French monarch Louis IX upon the former’s return from the Mongol Empire in 1255. Traveling on a much-professed religious quest to Christianize the Tartar peoples, William left Europe in 1253 and wrote about his experience

²⁵ Ibid., 85

²⁶ Ibid., 86

²⁷ Christopher Dawson, Introduction to *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), xxi.

extensively. Within the relatively narrow canon of relevant texts produced during this period, William's account is on par with those of Marco Polo and exceeds that of John of Plano Carpini. The language used in his work is particularly important in any consideration of audience, purpose, and genre. Such considerations abound in research of similar texts due to their deep connections with political, social, and religious histories.

While these texts each host their own intersectionality, William of Rubruck's work is distinguishable in several ways. Firstly, its conception is seated in the earlier collection of narratives available to modern readers. Contact with Mongols along the periphery of Europe began in the early 1220s but did not gain notable significance until late 1237 with the Mongol conquest of Russia and Eastern Europe. John of Plano Carpini had signaled the beginning of papal inquiries into these Eastern peoples with his travel from 1245-1247. Consequently, William of Rubruck's insights are part of the earliest perceptions of Mongol lands and are characterized by an attention to religious and geographical matters. The explicit sponsorship of William by the French crown is a valuable detail when studying how exploration of Eastern lands became both highly politicized and equally ecclesiastical. The former was predominantly interested in a strategic military alliance with the Mongols against the Muslim rulers of the Middle East. Centuries of crusade, both successful and unsuccessful, made such an opportunity highly attractive.²⁸ Prior to the Mongol invasions in the early 1240s, the Islamic enemy had been the central actor in the formulation and execution of Latin Christendom's complex foreign policy. The twelfth and early thirteenth century was a confused mess of constant instability and unpredictability of crusader warfare and political negotiations. The efforts of Popes Innocent III, Gregory IX, and Frederick II proved largely ineffective in maintaining a Christian power base in important cities such as Antioch, Tripoli, and Jerusalem as well as settlements along the Syrian-Palestinian coast²⁹. As a loyal subject, William was clearly conscious of such political matters as well as his own deeply religious motivations. His narrative reveals a clear tendency to

²⁸ Guzman "Christian Europe and Mongol Asia," 227.

²⁹ Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, 11-12.

The Age of Self-Discovery

support and advertise the conversion of any non-Christian population.

Observations by William of Rubruck are telling of how assertions of superiority were configured in the day-to-day experiences of missionaries to the East. Chapter twenty-seven of his travels is entitled "Of Various Tribes and of Men that Used to Eat Their Parents" and is a generally demeaning commentary on the people that inhabit various regions of Cathay including Nestorian Christians, against whom William of Rubruck displays a fairly consistent suspicion.³⁰ He remarks:

They are all subject to the Tartars and given to idolatry; they invent numbers of gods, men who have turned into gods, and the genealogy of gods... There are Nestorians and Saracens living among them as far as Cathay... The Nestorians there know nothing... They are usurers and drunkards... The lives of the Mongols themselves and even of the *tuins*, that is the pagans, are more innocent than theirs."³¹

These small communities of Christian sects did exist in small pockets across Asia at the time, although their significance is obviously greatly discounted by this specific account. This passage is revealing of the way that William evaluates the morality and essentially the value of life attached to the inhabitants of this region. Condemning the practices of Nestorian Christians, he sharply states that the lives of pagan Mongols are more innocent. This reinforces the immense esteem placed upon an adherence to faith by not only William and his companions, but by the majority of Western travelers. To them, it was not simply enough to be labeled a Christian or to associate with Christian iconography such as the crucifix.³² Such categorization had to be paired with a very visible and active participation in the strict disciplines of orthodox Christian life as well as the effective conversion of the regions'

³⁰William Rubruck, "The Journey of William of Rubruck," in *Mission to Asia*, edited by Christopher Dawson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 140.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

pagans. William notes that “they pay more attention to gaining money than spreading the faith” in a reference to both the famed wealth of the Far East as well as the conduct of the pseudo-Christians.³³ Ultimately his broader commentary is reflective of the widespread practice of othering between Christians and the East, or at the very least a tendency to absorb foreign cultures and behaviors undesirably in the eyes of William and his contemporaries.

William’s chapters provide us with manifestations of these two critical forces that shaped the who, when, and why of medieval travel to the Far East. As with other sources, the excerpts subsequently cited may reflect a reasonable level of narrative embellishment. However, the relevant analysis rests on attention to the author’s attitudes and language rather than an intent to scrutinize authenticity. Chapter twenty-eight contains a conversation with an Armenian monk, who upon meeting William exposes an interesting point of conflict between the two missionaries:

We told him the reason of our coming and he began to encourage us greatly, saying that we were to speak out boldly for we were the ambassadors of God, Who is greater than any man. After that he related to us how he had come there, saying that he had preceded us by a month. He told us that he had been a hermit in the territory of Jerusalem, and that God had appeared to him three times bidding him to go to the chief of the Tartars; and when he neglected to go the third time God threatened him, casting him down on the ground and saying that if he did not go he would die; and he had told Mangu Chan that if he would become a Christian the whole world would come under his sway and the French and the mighty Pope would be subject to him; and he advised me to say the same to him. Whereupon I replied: ‘Brother, gladly will I urge him to become a Christian, for the reason of my coming is

³³ Ibid., 145.

The Age of Self-Discovery

to preach this to all men; I will also promise him that the French and the Pope will rejoice exceedingly and will consider him as a brother and a friend, but that they should become his vassals and pay him tribute like the other nations, never will I promise, for I should be speaking against my conscience.' At that he remained silent.³⁴

According to the Armenian, God specifically called upon him to travel on a mission to the East, to the chief on the Mongols. This is of course a convenient justification to travel but also an important element in who sanctioned such activity. In this case, the mandate was received from a completely indisputable source of power, above both the Pope and the various European monarchs, a situation reminiscent of scores of biblical images. It is thus the merging of religious precedent with the political context of the era. The monk suggests to Mangu Chan that complete domination of the known world is attainable only if he converts to Christianity. Most likely in response to the aforementioned Mongol invasions, this monk recognizes the warlike culture and the great power exerted by the Mongols over Eurasia during this time. Their military was not the only reason the Mongols were feared, as they also possessed an immense capacity to terrorize their victims and spread sentiments of fear to neighboring territories.³⁵ With that in mind, this conversation is conscious of the significant symbolic power of the Mongol threat as understood by not only Christians, but also by other Central Asian communities. Ultimately, in the motives of his travel and the message he brings, the monk represents the convergence of divine mission with political negotiation that is expressed within all forms of primary material during this time. Biblical themes of men on divine missions overlap with the discussions of geopolitics, war, and dominant power structures. Whether it was the official missionaries sent by Popes or religious migrant communities, each group negotiated the complex

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ Phillips, J. R. S. *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 67.

dynamics of Christian incorporation into the growing global societies.

William of Rubruck refutes the monk's advice to echo this same message to the Khan. He too recognizes the great power of the Mongol Empire as he remarks "pay him tribute like the other nations" in reference to the many other populations overrun by Mongol conquest.³⁶ However, he contends that European powers, principally in the form of the Pope and the French people, are in a position of indefinite superiority. This superiority is rooted, if anything, on spiritual grounds. As William states, to promise the submission of Europe to the Khan would be "against [his] conscience."³⁷ European primacy is phrased not in terms of military or economic power, but in the context of William's conscience as a Christian man. It is this line of thinking that forms an acute perception of religion-based political power and moral superiority. Although missionaries like William and the Armenian monk are more than happy to incorporate the strange Mongol peoples into their religion, William's attitude shows that Christians are much less willing to upset the deep sense of entitlement afforded to Christian Europeans. To William and most other Europeans, their worldview rested on the perceived inferiority and othering of non-Christian civilizations such as the Mongols.

Secular Works: Marco Polo & Muhammad Ibn Battuta

Although much of the religious discourses that have been discussed so far represent the bulk of our modern insight into the period, it should not discount contributions of men not so intimately linked to religious institutions.³⁸ The Mongol Empire established control over much of Eurasia in the middle of the fourteenth century, which gave Westerners an unprecedented opportunity to travel as far as modern-day Beijing. Scholars have

³⁶ Rubruck, "The Journey of William of Rubruck," 151.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Such a categorization is, however, inherently difficult given the obvious cultural dominance of both Christian and Islam during this time. Nevertheless, there were men most commonly labeled envoys, merchants, or explorers whom in one way or another contributed to the relevant knowledgebase of Asia for both their contemporaries and modern observers.

The Age of Self-Discovery

also noted that this period of relative peace in central Asia (*Pax Mongolica*) coincided with equally important European developments, including the establishment of Florentine and Venetian coinage and an increased demand for raw materials including silk.³⁹ Today several texts have survived that were produced by the more diverse pool of travelers who emerged in this era. One Venetian merchant in particular, Marco Polo, remains famous for the tales of the Far East attributed to him and preserved in dozens of manuscripts of varying lengths. His work is arguably the most frequently cited and prevalent in the popular imagination, despite challenges to its authenticity.⁴⁰ Several decades after Polo's return to Italy, Muhammad Ibn Battuta, also known as Abu-Abdullah Mahomed, set out on an equally ambitious journey across the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. His work is also burdened by academic suspicion however it plays an important role in the literature of the period, especially towards the end of the *Pax Mongolica*.⁴¹ These two narratives demand consideration in this essay by virtue of both their content and authorship. In addition to being rich in observational material, the narrators occupy the roles of merchant, explorer, and storyteller simultaneously. Most importantly, readers can draw upon the Christian and Muslim perspectives of the two men respectively.

Born in 1254, Marco Polo was the son of a merchant who was exposed to trans-continental travel early in his life by virtue of his father Niccolò and uncle Maffeo. He began his journey in 1272 and spent several decades traveling throughout Asia and claimed to have held offices within the government of Kublai Khan. He returned in 1292 but did not disseminate his travels until his imprisonment in Genoa around the year 1298. It is during his incarceration here that his stories were dictated to a fellow inmate, Italian author Rustichello da Pisa. Since then, his work has retained a consistent readership and established itself as a

³⁹ Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, 295.

⁴⁰ Frances Wood, "Did Marco Polo Go to China?" *Asian Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1996): 297.

⁴¹ Henry Yule, Introduction to *Ibn Battuta's Travels in Bengal and China* by Muhammad Ibn Battuta, 1-79. *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, vol. IV trans. by Sir Henry Yule. Rev ed. Edited by Henri Cordier, (Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited: 1967), 41.

source of speculation and inspiration.⁴² We are told in the text prologue of Polo's very warm reception in the court of Kublai Khan and his alleged status as a personal envoy to the Khan. This bears a fairly striking shift in comparison to earlier missionary narratives that maintain a much more distant approach to the people and rulers of Mongol lands and depict a similarly reciprocated relationship:⁴³

The Great Khan was very well-disposed toward him for the goodness and great valor he saw in him. When the Great Khan saw how wise Marco was, he sent him as an envoy to a land it took a good six months to get to. The young man fulfilled the embassy wisely and well... When he went on his missions, [Marco] put a good deal of effort into being able to tell the Great Khan about all the novelties and strange things he had seen.⁴⁴

This passage, similar in style to the rest of the work, is indicative of the unusual tone of the narrative's delivery. The reader is confronted with a middle-man; an extra voice of sorts that distances them from the events and makes the text read more like a work of fiction than a firsthand account. Considering the form and conveyance of William of Rubruck's text, this style represents the very different circumstances under which Polo's work was produced. Lacking in the sort of authoritative mandate tied to papal or imperial missionaries, Polo was not as compelled to make judgments and observations for the purposes of gathering knowledge. Despite this, there are plenty of references to the

⁴² Simon Gaunt, *Marco Polo's Le Devisement Du Monde: Narrative Voice, Language and Diversity*, (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 1-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126-131. Gaunt elaborates extensively on the ways in which Kublai Khan is presented by Polo in manners of hyperbole, exaggeration, admiration, and contradiction; arguing that the Khan was often conveyed as knowledgeable of the Christian faith and even in alignment with many of its values despite his persecution of Christians and well-documented heretical opinions.

⁴⁴ Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, Translated by Sharon Kinoshita (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016), 10.

The Age of Self-Discovery

aforementioned religious imagery and politics explicitly present in Rubruck's manuscript.

A Christian such as Marco Polo would be especially critical of the Islamic faith, and many times his narrative extolls sharp judgments upon practitioners of the faith, such as Saracens in the city of Tabriz: "[They are] very bad and disloyal, for their faith, given to them by their prophet Muhammad, commands them to do all the ill they can to all people who are not of their faith."⁴⁵ For an observer who shows the capacity to bestow great respect upon non-Christian foreigners, for example the Great Khan, it is revealing of Polo to treat the Islamic people he encounters with such indignation. Often, he lumps Muslims together with idolaters and Nestorian Christians, with each of these groups representing a discernable *other* to the Latin, western European consciousness. What is revealed by this series of observations is Polo's adherence, whether conscious or unconscious, to the dominant Christian attitudes that defined generations of travelers before him. His venture deep into the heart of the Mongol Empire did not necessarily represent any heightened level of cultural or religious tolerance, or any significant attempt to correct accepted Christian knowledge beyond a limited series of plaintive geographical and cultural perceptions.

What can be acutely identified in several excerpts is a stylization of other religious practices in arguably Christian terms. This element of narrative agency is absolutely critical in how we can analyze Polo's interpretation of heretical peoples, especially idolaters. His descriptions of the cities of modern-day Dunhuang and Ganzhou are compelling examples of such an agenda:

[The idolaters] have many abbeys and many churches, which are all full of many sorts of idols, to which they make sacrifices and show great honor and reverence. Know that all of the men who have children raise a sheep in honor of the idols; after a year, or on the feast of the idol, the one who has raised the sheep takes it, along with his children, before the idol – both he and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

his children showing great reverence... [they say] their office and prayer that the idol safeguard their children.⁴⁶

Clearly, the practice of animal sacrifice before the presence of an idol is not something that could be characterized as normative Christian behavior. However, Polo describes this scene with a respectful admiration and phrases it in a way that makes it much more familiar and therefore less threatening. Images of churches, abbeys, ritualistic reverence, prayer, and feast days are concepts that are quite reminiscent of similar Christian practices. Not only are these specific actions conveyed in this manner, Polo goes on to narrate the idolaters' other customs in a tone that is much more objective than it is hostile or condemnatory. It is safe to assume that the same situation would have been described much differently by devout friar missionaries sent several decades prior. The effect of Polo's tactful commentary is twofold. First, he projects familiar terms and concepts onto what is ostensibly a very unfamiliar and distinct religious culture of an equally alien society. By doing so, Polo retains enough exoticism to engage the reader yet confines the threatening heretical practices to Christian metalanguage. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Polo essentially Christianizes the entire ritual in a way that renders the underlying foreign culture inscrutable. The reader is disarmed in any attempt to pursue an interest in deeper understanding or elaboration. This initiative would be made dead upon arrival, as Polo integrates the familiar Christian features and belittles the actual premises that define the idolaters' values, beliefs, and practices.

At many points during the retelling of his journeys, Marco Polo was inevitably forced to characterize the peoples he encountered and, by extension, their religions. What these and other passages expose are key conceptual frameworks used by Polo to interpret the marvels he encountered in the Near and Far East. By holding onto longstanding suspicions of Christianity's most important enemy, the Muslims, and using the former's imagery, language, and practices to explain those of the idolaters, Polo is just

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

The Age of Self-Discovery

as engaged in a political and religious agenda as his missionary predecessors were. This sometimes subtle yet important narrative component is one echoed by Polo's Muslim equivalent, Muhammad Ibn Battuta.

Ibn Battuta was born in Tangier in February of 1304, several years after the first publication of Polo's *Description of The World*. Although not as extensively studied as Polo in English-language scholarship, Battuta's work was similar in that it was dictated to a third party, in this case Mahomed Ibn Juzai, upon the former's return to Morocco in 1355; and that it covered a long period of travel over an immense portion of the known world.⁴⁷ Portions of the text that exist today can be ascribed with many of the same analytical observations that apply to Polo's texts. Of course, Battuta's words reflect Muslim conceptualizations and understandings, but at times this view only reinforces some of the similarities than can be drawn between the two religions, which may reflect an overlooked continuity.

In a style reminiscent of Marco Polo, Battuta's description of China and its peoples alternates from wonderment, exoticism, and admiration to condemnation, alienation, and disapproval. As scholar David Waines suggests, "the travelers' shared ambition was to entertain, inform, and impress those would read [their texts]."⁴⁸ Examples of this are provided in the body of Battuta's experiences in China:

The Chinese are infidels and idolaters, and they burn their dead after the manner of the Hindus...They are generally well-to-do opulent people, but they are not sufficiently particular either in dress or diet. You will see one of their great merchants, the owner of uncountable treasure, going about in a dirty cotton frock. The Chinese taste is entirely for the accumulation of gold and silver plate... China is the safest as well as the pleasantest of all the regions on

⁴⁷ Henry Yule, Introduction to *Ibn Battuta's Travels in Bengal and China*, ed. Henri Cordier (Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited: 1967), 40-41.

⁴⁸ David Waines, *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta: Uncommon Tales of a Medieval Adventurer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.

earth for a traveler... The harbor of Zaitún is one of the greatest in the world, - I am wrong: it is *the* greatest! ... In each of the cities of China you find always a Shaikh of Islam, who decides finally every matter concerning Mahomedans, as well as a Kâzi to administer justice... China is a beautiful country, but it afforded me no pleasure. On the contrary, my spirit was sorely troubled within me whilst I was there, to see how Paganism had the upper hand. I never could leave my quarters without witnessing many things of a sinful kind... And during my whole stay in China I always felt in meeting Muslamans just as if I had fallen in with my own kith and kin.⁴⁹

These examples present a significant degree of imagery, dialogue, observation, interpretation, and social commentary. In many ways Battuta's writing utilizes a language and a tone that is akin to Polo's elucidations. He comments several times on the wealth possessed by many Chinese merchants, which was consistent with the reputation of many cities in the Far East including the port city of Quanzhou (Zaitún). However, Battuta does so in a way that is critical of how this wealth is manifested in the clothing and in the lifestyle of locals. Islamic culture is now and has been dictated by a series of rules governing both public attire and dietary restrictions, which would more than likely be used as an interpretive benchmark for observations of the Chinese.⁵⁰ Furthermore, phrases that link the East to its renowned prosperity and exoticism are juxtaposed with instances of perceived difference and othering by Battuta. This dynamic is expressed most explicitly in his observations of religious tolerance and sentiments of community identity. Battuta's travels are made easier by his receptions into small groups of émigré Islamic groups, and he remarks on the certain amount of autonomy afforded to their local administration. These interactions

⁴⁹ Muhammad Ibn Battuta, "The Travels of Ibn Battuta in China, Preceded by Extracts Relating to Bengal and His Voyage through the Archipelago" in *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, vol. IV, trans. Sir Henry Yule, ed. Henri Cordier (Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited: 1967), 110-129.

⁵⁰ Waines, *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta*, 191-195.

The Age of Self-Discovery

with fellow Muslim men are understandably moments of relief for Battuta, who often remarks on his discomfort in a society of nonbelievers, a quality resonant with Polo's encounters with expatriate Christians.⁵¹ Parallels are even more apparent when considering Battuta's treatment of the more general religious environment, in which he was exposed to various regional faiths that no doubt destabilized the Muslim-Christian binary. While Battuta may not devote attention to the specific practices of the foreigners, his consistent inclusion of contact with familiar peoples falls in line with Polo's utilization of Christian interpretive frameworks. As a result, we can extract two highly analogous narrative attitudes which seek to apply a familiar Western set of thematic interpretations to even the most foreign lands while still maintaining the balance of marvel, exoticism, and difference needed to engage their respective audiences. The result of such a process, despite their differing creeds, is a subtle assertion of both political and religious authority. It would be unsettling for Western audiences, either Christian or Islamic, to read accounts of men who traveled to these lands and were somehow prompted to critique their religion or other major social institutions of their homeland. While interesting tales of unfamiliar lands and peoples were in demand, they were not indicative of an attempt to reflect on fundamental differences. Rather, they presented an opportunity for readers to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, thus comfortably maintaining their distance from civilizations that were inevitably fated to be deemed inferior.

Conclusion

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries produced some of the most remarkable texts from which we can understand the expansion of Europe before the Age of Discovery. As leaders of the western world looked east, the emergence of the Mongol Empire forced a reorientation of their political, religious, military, and social attitudes towards the world beyond the Holy Land. This process was the beginning of a new wave of European approaches to the continent's status in the world, which would play a major

⁵¹ Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Batuta in China*, 119.

role in world history in the following centuries. The narrow sample of firsthand narratives used in this essay demonstrate the techniques used by both missionary and secular travelers to arrange a multifaceted hierarchy within their expanding worldview. This organization positions Western political and religious institutions as the hegemony with which to other and subjugate the people and cultures that are considered deviant by the European observer. Marco Polo, William of Rubruck, Pope Innocent IV, and Muhammad Ibn Battuta were all agents through which this global perspective was reinforced.

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The Age of Self-Discovery

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