

# **25 years before Marco Polo; Benedict the Pole and Giovanni da Pian del Carpine on the court of the Khan of Mongols, 1245-1247**

BENEDETUS  
POLONUS

**ISTITUTO POLACCO DI ROMA**  
Via Vittoria Colonna 1  
00193 Roma

Screenplay:

Mariusz Ziolkowski

Poster texts:

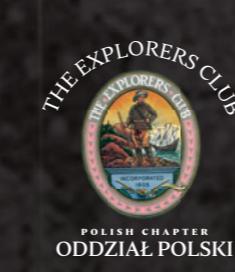
Róża Paszkowska, Michał Adamiak, Ryszard Grygiel, Robert Szyjanowski

Scientific consultation:

prof. dr hab. Jerzy Strzelczyk, dr Jerzy Kaliszuk

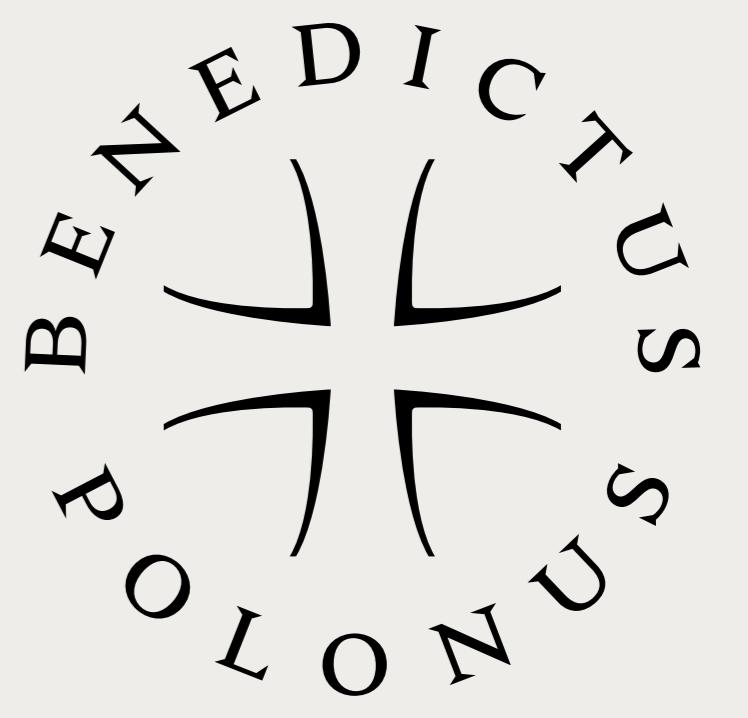
Exhibition sponsored with a grant of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Poland): nr 948/P-DUN/2017

Exhibition design:



education  
through  
imagination  
[www.artfm.pl](http://www.artfm.pl)

# Mongol conquests before 1241



The Mongols entered the theatre of history in 12th century thanks to their outstanding leader, Temüjin. He stemmed from a small tribe called the Mongols who had their encampments in the basin of the upper Onon river, close to today's borderline between Mongolia and Russia.

As a result of long-lasting and poorly documented wars Temüjin gained control over a number of nomadic tribes in the steppe, and extended the name Mongol over these tribes. After adopting the title of Genghis-Khan, he continued his conquests. In the years 1202–1205 he included the tribes of the Keraites, the Naimans and the Tartars in his union. The latter tribe name soon became synonymous with the Mongols for many Europeans: both terms (the Mongols and the Tatars) were used interchangeably by medieval chronicle writers in Europe.

In 1206, a *kurultai* (a great gathering of tribe leaders) took place, with the aim of recognising Genghis-Khan's authority over all Mongols. The oaths of allegiance sworn by the subjects and the contracts he entered into with tribal leaders became the foundation of *lasa*, the undocumented law of the Mongol empire. Among other sources, the "Secret history of the Mongols" (the oldest known chronicle of the Mongols) and accounts from Muslim authors as well as diplomatic letters with the noble people from the West reveal what Genghis Khan's subjects were obliged to do under these contracts and patents. One of the obligations and goals was to conquer the world, all countries "from sunrise to sunset" (as stated in the letter from Genghis Khan's grandson, Great Khan Gayuk to Pope Innocent IV).

After uniting the Mongol tribes, Genghis Khan began to expand his state to include the neighbouring countries. In 1209, he was joined by the Turkish Uigurs, and by 1211 Genghis Khan conquered the Tibetan Tanguts and Xia, thus securing the border before the planned attack on the Jurchens – which was successfully completed after a few years. After conquering northern China

he moved west to take over the land of the Quara Kitay in eastern Turkestan. In the years 1219–1223 Genghis Khan successfully led a conquest of the land ruled by the Shah of Khwarezm, Mohammad II, which enabled the Mongols to establish their rule over western Turkestan and the area of today's Iran, as well as parts of today's Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was during that conquest that the Mongols entered the territory of Europe for the first time: two of their generals, Jebe and Sübedei, detached from the main Mongol army and traversed the Caucasus mountains. They invaded Georgia twice and clashed with the coalition of nomadic tribes in Eastern Europe, the Cumans (also known as the Kipchaks or the Polovcs), the Alans and the Cherkyes. The Cumans, who occupied the northern shores of the Black Sea, faced with the overwhelming Mongol force, asked the Rus' dukes for military support. However, their combined armies suffered a defeat in 1223 at the battle of the Kalka River in the lower Dnieper region. Although the first contact of the Europeans with the Mongols ended in a bitter defeat of the European tribes, it did not result in establishing Mongol rule at the time. After completing the conquest of Khwarezm, Genghis Khan returned to northern China where he solidified his authority by definitely destroying the country of the Tanguts. In 1227, the emperor died and left his sons to govern the vast Mongol empire stretching from the Pacific to the Black Sea. Before his death, Genghis Khan divided the empire into four realms called the *Ulus*. Jochi (and later his son Batu), received the western territory, i.e. the future Golden Horde. Chagatai, in turn, inherited the lands of the Qara Kitay. Tolui became the ruler of the indigenous nomadic lands where Genghis Khan first came to power, and the supreme ruler, Ögedei, extended his authority over the territory of Western Mongolia.

Genghis Khan's death did not put an end to the Mongol expansion. In 1229, during Ögedei's reign, the nomads returned to the Khwarezm to conquer Persia, which had been recaptured by sultan Jalal ad-Din. It was also during that conquest that the Mongols reached Europe: in 1232 they invaded and, after seven years, successfully conquered Georgia. Further military campaigns in the years 1237–1242 were directed against the Cumans, the Volga-Kama Bulgars, the Greater Hungarians and the Rus', all of whom soon became dependent on the Mongol conquerors. The campaign enabled the Mongols to reach as far as Poland and Hungary. A relatively small division led by Orda, Batu Khan's brother, burned and looted Poland after inflicting considerable losses on the Polish army at the Battle of Legnica, on April 9, 1241. Subsequently, the Mongols went through Moravia to Hungary in order to re-unite with the main army. At the same time, the Mongols were active in the east too, in northern China and Korea. They also conquered the Sultanate of Ikonium and soon became direct neighbours of the Byzantine Empire.

Europe was saved by the news of the death of Great Khan Ögedei. When the information reached Batu Khan in the spring of 1242, he was in the middle of a war campaign in Hungary and decided to withdraw his forces. The unexpected move of the Mongols enabled the Hungarians to re-group and gather more intelligence on the new enemy that the West was about to face.

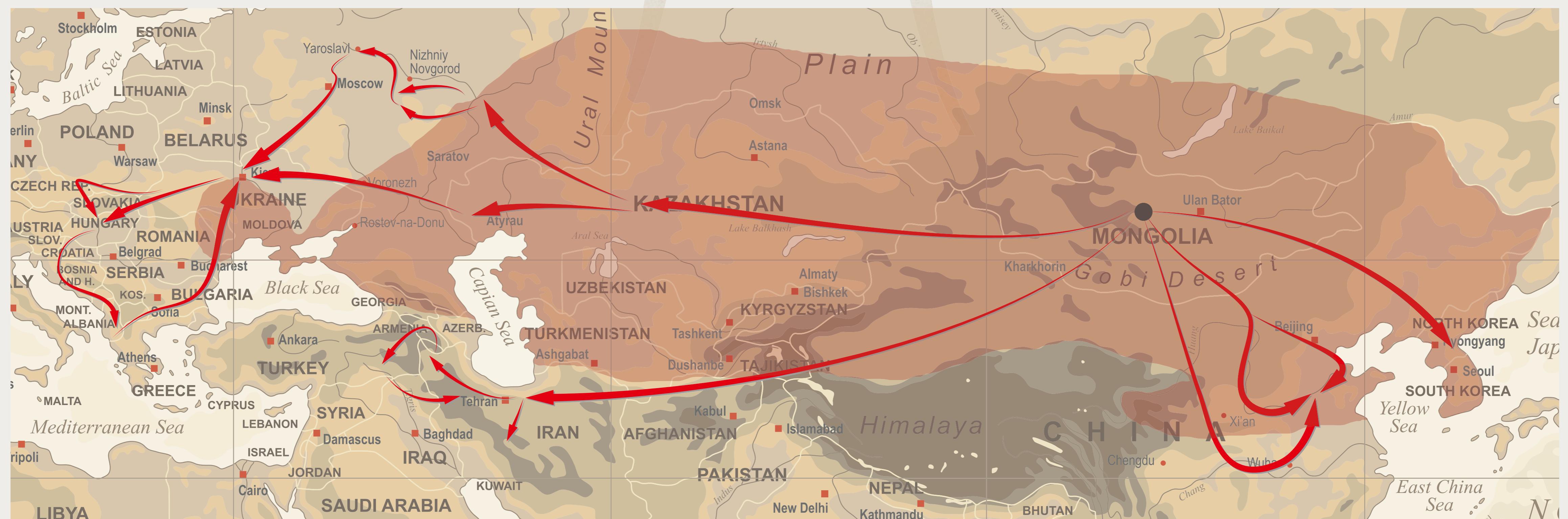


The Tale of the Destruction of Ryazan by Batu Khan, Russian painted manuscript, 16 c., author unknown, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com



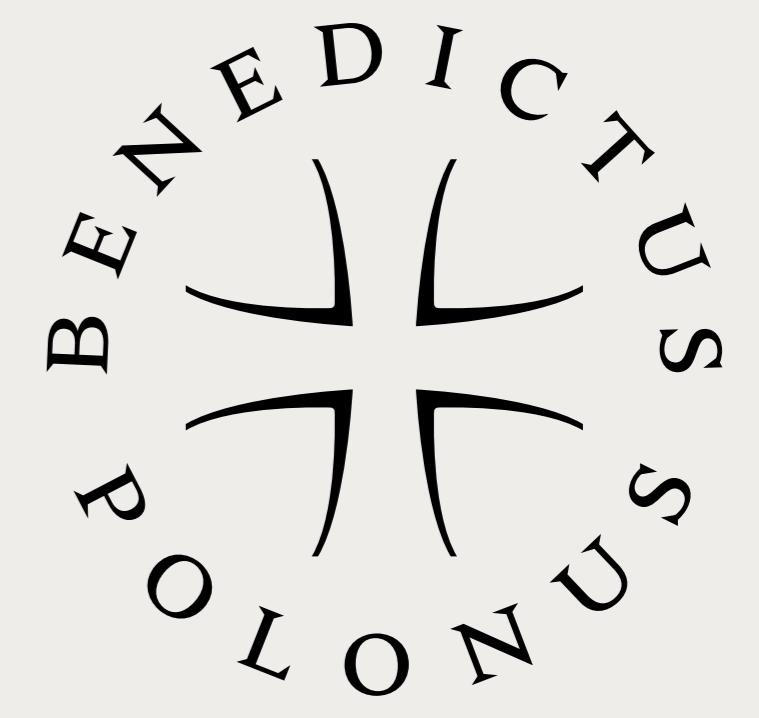
Portrait of Genghis Khan, appointed after his death about 1278. National Museum of Taipei (Taiwan), public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

“  
after uniting the Mongol tribes, Genghis Khan began to expand his state to include the neighbouring countries  
”



Territorial limits of the Mongol empire before 1241 AD.

# The Mongols – their clothing, homes and weapons



The Mongols stemmed from the Great Steppe of Eurasia. The region of their origin has specific natural and environmental characteristics: it is partially mountainous, partially plain, mostly free of any forests and not very fertile. The environment in which the Mongols dwelled determined their nomadic way of living.

The reports from medieval travellers contain particularly interesting descriptions of the appearance of the Mongols. Their distinct facial features must have been a novelty for the European travellers, as underlined by John of Pian di Carpine in his "History of the Mongols": "The appearance of the Mongols is different than that of all other people". The nomads described by John of Pian di Carpine were of medium height and, typically, of thin build. Their faces were broad, with prominent cheekbones and flat noses. Their eyes were small and wide-set, and men had weak facial hair. The chronicle writers also offered a detailed description of the characteristic male hairstyle: clean-shaven top of the head, much like a monk's tonsure, a clean-shaven stripe above the forehead, and braided hair.

The clothes that the Mongols wore were, according to the chronicles, the same for men and women – which is why "it was hard to tell unmarried ladies and young women apart from men" (John of Pian di Carpine). They usually wore a del with a long vertical slit, wrapped twice at chest height and fastened with buckles, one on the left-hand side and three on the right-hand side. Del's were made from bukanar (thinly woven cotton or linen canvas), velvet or baldakin (brocade, a silk fabric with threads of gold). Winter clothes followed the same cut but were lined with fur, or fur was the outside layer. Clothes were complemented by fur hats. Married women wore a different set of

clothes: a broad ankle-length kaftan and a high hat, the boktak, with a rigid frame covered with a fabric, decorated with a feather or a decorative stamen made of gold, silver or wood.

The dwellings of the Mongols were round tents, yurts, constructed of wooden latticework covered with felt. In the middle of a yurt there was always a fire, over which there was a crown, an opening in the roof to extract smoke and let in light. Due to scarce supplies of firewood, the fuel used most often was argal, animal dung from horses and cattle. Tents varied in size, depending on the wealth of the owner. After disassembling, elements of yurts were loaded on transport animals or carriages and taken with the tribe, also to war. When entering a yurt it was important to take care not to step on the threshold, the home of protective deities according to the Mongols. If someone broke that custom on entering the home of the Great Khan, he could even be punished with death. The possessions of the Mongols included mostly animals typical for nomadic tribes: horses, cattle, sheep, goats and camels. Tribe leaders and Mongol aristocracy also possessed gold, silver, precious stones and fabrics.

The barren land in the regions occupied by the Mongols did not let them grow vegetables, fruit and grains, with animal keeping as the only source of livelihood. Consequently, the Mongol diet was based on animal products such as

milk and meat – predominantly horse meat, beef and mutton. However, the Mongols did not shy away from other types of meat when available, including the types regarded as dirty by Europeans i.e. the meat of dogs, mice, lice and other animal. Following one of Genghis Khan's orders, the Mongols were also supposed to eat animal carcasses including offal. Moreover, literary sources confirm that they ate human meat during war campaigns in northern China.

As nomads, the Mongols were excellent horseback riders. Starting from a very early age, children (both boys and girls) practised horse riding and bow shooting. According to the accounts from medieval chronicle writers, every Mongolian warrior owned two or three bows which are now referred to as composite bows. The bows were accompanied by three quivers with arrows for different distances. Allegedly, the whistling arrows were much feared by the enemies of the Mongols. In direct short-distance combat the Mongols used axes, bludgeons and halberds to drag their enemies off their horses. The wealthy also sported single-edged curved sabres. The Mongols protected themselves in battle with large shields. The armour of the nomads was typically made of hardened leather or metal sheets – hauberks were rarely used. Additionally, armour was also used to protect horses.



Mounted Mongolian warriors pursue enemies. Illustration of Rashid-ad-Din's Gami' at-tawarih (?), 1st quarter of 14th century, public domain, source: [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)



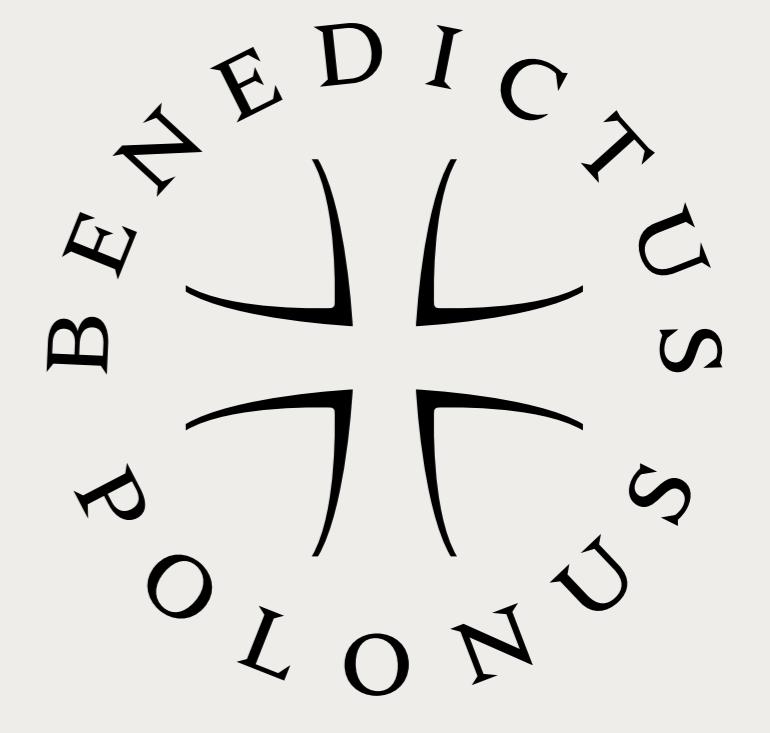
Preparing a ceremony at the Khan's court. Medieval Persian miniature, public domain, source: [www.amgalant.com](http://www.amgalant.com)



A Mongolian lady walking with two pages, Diez Albums Iran, possibly Tabriz, early 14th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – PK, Diez A fol. 72, S. 11, material used under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0, author: Datenbank der orientalischen Handschriften, der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

“  
when entering a yurt it was important to take care not to step on the threshold, the home of protective deities according to the Mongols. If someone broke that custom on entering the home of the Great Khan, he could even be punished with death  
”

# The Nestorians in Asia and the legend of Prester (Priest) John



In the Middle Ages, the reports coming to Europe about the developments in distant Asia often evolved into fantastic stories, merged with other tales and, consequently, took on a new, totally unexpected meaning. This was the case with the legend of a Christian state on the territory of the present-day India which was said to be ruled by King John, also known as Prester John or Presbyter John. He was sometimes identified (for instance, by Bishop Jacques de Vitry) with legendary King David, who was imagined to be the youngest son of the king of Israel. Thus, Prester John personified the dream of the Crusaders waiting for help from the East to fight the Muslim enemy in the Holy Land.

At the root of the stories about Prester John were real-life historic events. The background to the legend was the development of Nestorianism, and the reason for the fact that the support was expected from the Christian ruler from the East was that he was believed to have conquered the Qara-Khitai and Mongols.

Nestorianism dates back to the 5th century and was advanced by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. He stressed the duality of Christ's nature and was therefore declared a heretic by the Council of Ephesus. His supporters

were relocated from the Eastern Roman Empire, as a result of which they spread their faith in Asia – in Sassanid Persia. Nestorianism reached not only Mesopotamia, Anatolia and eastern Syria, but also India, Arabia and Central Asia. As early as in the 11th century, Nestorian missions could be encountered among numerous Mongol tribes.

Prester John was believed to be one of the Nestorians – and, thus, a heretic in the eyes of the Church. The first written record of him was made by the French chronicler Alberic of Trois Fontaines, who reported his visits to Constantinople in 1122 and to Rome to receive the metropolitan pallium. The next mentions in 1141 and 1145 specify that John was not only a Church dignitary but also a secular ruler – the king of India and Armenia. He was believed to have defeated the Muslim ruler of Khwarezm, who in fact had been beaten by the Qara-Khitai in 1141. In the face of a significant loss of the Crusaders, i.e. the loss of Edessa in 1144, the presence of a successful Christian ruler in the East allowed hope for being relieved. Approximately twenty years later, an alleged letter from Prester John to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III spread throughout Europe.

At the beginning of the 13th century the legends about Christian rulers in Asia were spreading among the Crusaders. King David was believed to have conquered Persia, which in fact was an echo of the victories of Genghis Khan. Other traces of Mongol raids include the letters of the queen of Georgia – Rasisudan – to Rome. According to the queen of the country raided by the Tatars, the aggressors were Christian. An Italian chronicler, Richard of San Germano, attributed the Mongol invasion of Rus' and Cumania, during which the Battle of the Kalka River took place in 1223, to a ruler called Prester John.

In the face of the difficulties that the Crusader army encountered in the Holy Land, the stories about Prester John and King David, the presence of Nestorians in Asia as well as the war operations of Genghis Khan who was unknown in Europe at that time, merged into a legend about a Christian ruler who came to support the crusade against Muslims.



Palm Sunday (probably), Khochu (Xinjiang, China), Nestorian Temple, 683-770 AD, wall painting, Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication, source: www.wikipedia.com



A fragment of the Nestorian stele from Xian (China) from 781 AD. Currently in the Beilin Museum, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

“  
nestorianism dates back to the 5th century and was advanced by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. He stressed the duality of Christ's nature and was therefore declared a heretic by the Council of Ephesus



# Battle of the Legnica

B E N E D I C T U S  
P O L O N U S

The first incursion of the Mongols into the territory of Europe took place during the campaign to conquer Khwarezm, in the years 1219–1223. Despite a bitter defeat suffered by the Rus' army which supported the invaded Cumans, the conquest did not materialize and the land did not become part of the Mongol empire. However, that campaign blazed the trail and served as a reconnaissance before the next offensives which were no longer spontaneous but carefully planned and prepared.

The war campaign in the years 1237–1242 was conducted on a much larger scale than the first Mongol invasion of Europe. The campaign was led by Batu Khan and his right hand man, Sübedei, who knew the territory from the previous incursion. The first region to suffer was the Volga-Kama Bulghar. Its capital city, Bulgar, fell in the autumn of the first year of the Tartar invasion. At the same time, other divisions of the army were ravaging the lands of the eastern Hungarians, the Mordvins and the Burtas. After the Mongol forces were re-united, they struck Rus' with its cities of Ryazan, Kolomna, Moscow, Vladimir Suzdalski, Rostov, Yaroslavl on the Volga, Pereyaslav, and Tver. The victorious march of the Tartars was halted by the spring thaw and a two-week-long resistance of the castle city of Torzhok. These circumstances may have then saved the city of Novgorod Veliky from the Mongol attack. In 1238, the Mongols completed their conquest of Cumania, and overpowered the Alans, the Circassians, the Mordvins and – most probably – the Bashkirs. At the end of the same year they once again invaded Rus', and sacked Pereyaslav, Chernihiv and Sudak in the Crimea. Faced with the advances of the Mongols, the Grand Prince of Kiev Mikhail decided to flee to Hungary, and Kiev fell into the hands of the invaders on December 6, 1240. Soon afterwards, other cities were conquered including Kamyanets-Podolski, Volodymyr-Volynskyi and Halych. Thus, the borders of the Mongol Empire reached the territory of Poland and Hungary, i.e. the area under the influence of the Western Christianity. A further step of the Mongol invasion of Europe was to attack Hungary, the main target of the campaign, and Poland. The latter seems to have been a secondary target, or simply a route to the country of king Bela IV. A pretext

to attack the Hungary was the fact that king Bela had accepted the nomadic tribes fleeing from the previously invaded lands of the Rus' and the Cumans. The Mongol army split into a few divisions, with the largest advancing from Halych to Buda, and others going towards Hungary through Wallachia, through the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvania. The northern wing, led by Batu Khan's brother Orda, went through the territory of Poland to cross Moravia and later hit Hungary from the north.

Orda's division was relatively small: it consisted of one turnen, i.e. 10,000 men. However, despite its size it was able to render a severe blow to Poland which was then divided by conflicts between regional duchies. The first reconnaissance activities ended with the Mongols sacking Sandomir on February 13, 1241. The actual invasion began in March when the army's major forces struck Kraków after winning the battles of Chmielnik and Tarczek along the way, while a smaller sub-division ravaged the cities of Łęczyca and Sieradz. After taking Kraków on March 28, 1241, the Mongols proceeded to Silesia through Racibórz and Opole, where Polish troops attempted to resist the invaders. Wrocław surrendered without putting up a fight – only the city's fortified castle resisted successfully.

The subsequent battles of Chmielnik, Racibórz and Opole were impossible to win for the Poles but their objective was to win some time that prince Henry II the Pious needed to amass a sizeable army at Legnica: four detachments of knights from Silesia and Greater Poland led by the prince himself, knights

from Upper Silesia and Lower Silesia headed by Duke of Opole Meshko II the Fat, knights from Lesser Poland and Greater Poland led by comes palatinus Sulislav, and knights of religious orders headed by margrave Boleslav Dipoldovits. However, the army of Henry the Pious was unable to join forces with the relief forces led by Venceslaus I.

The battle took place on April 9, 1241 at Legnica – a few kilometres south-east of the city, in a location called Dobre Pole. Franciscan Monk C. de Bridia wrote in his "History of the Tartars" that the defeat of the Polish forces was caused by a sudden retreat of a division led, as researchers claim, by Duke Meshko of Opole. As a result of the battle, Sulislav and Boleslav Dipoldovits were killed, and Duke Henry the Pious was taken hostage and forced to kneel before the body of a Mongol general killed in the Battle of Sandomir. Subsequently, the duke was executed and his head was, "chopped off and, much like a sheep's head, carried through Moravia to Hungary to present to Batu; soon afterwards it was thrown on the pile of other heads chopped off the bodies of killed knights" (C. de Bridia).

After the successful battle, the victorious army of Orda pillaged Moravia and re-joined Batu Khan's army in Hungary.

“  
the subsequent battles of Chmielnik, Racibórz and Opole were impossible to win for the Poles but their objective was to win some time  
“



The Battle of Legnitz; The Beheading of Heinrich and His Soul Carried by Angels to Heaven, author: Nicolaus of Prussia, Lubin Codex „Vita beatae Hedwigis,” 1353 AD. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.



The Tartars Carrying the Head of Heinrich before Castle Legnitz; Saint Hedwig Seeing in a Dream Her Son's Soul Carried to Heaven, author: Nicolaus of Prussia, Lubin Codex „Vita beatae Hedwigis,” 1353 AD. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.

# Life in the Empire of the Genghisides – Pax Mongolica

BENE DIC  
POLO NUS

At the beginning of his pontificate (1243–1254), Pope Innocent IV faced a new threat to the Christian world. When he decided to send a diplomatic mission to the ruler of the contemporary “evil empire”, the Great Khan of the Mongols, the head of the Universal Church took an enormous risk – as the experience of the recent invasion of Eastern Europe indicated rather clearly that the focus should be on building up military efforts to repel the aggressors. The positive outcomes of the legate expedition, and even the mere fact that the legates returned alive from Karakorum after travelling several thousand miles, lead to certain conclusions concerning the organisation of the Mongol state. It was, on the one hand, a deadly war machine, but on the other hand also a state which allowed envoys and merchants, including those from enemy countries, to move across its vast territory more freely than in any other country.

The achievements of the armies of Genghis Khan and his successors were impressive. For the first time in history the entire Silk Road was controlled by a single state. However, the Mongol Empire astonished the world not only with the pace of its conquests and the sheer surface of the conquered land. The Mongol administrative system did not adopt the regulations previously applied in the conquered countries: instead, the invaders’ administrative machinery was implemented in all the conquered lands, which facilitated an almost immediate unification of all the new subordinate territories. The conquest and pacification stage was followed by the implementation of the rule of extremely repressive laws which were ruthlessly enforced. In modernity, the state of peace achieved in the realm of the Great Khan was named Pax Mongolica, from the ancient term Pax Romana. The apparent similarity between the terms, however, should not lead to simplifications because the term does not reveal the extremely high price which the conquered and subjugated nations had to pay for peace.

Already at the beginning of his reign, Genghis Khan began to establish a system of rules and regulations applicable in the Mongol state, known as jasa. It had never been codified, and individual regulations set a precedent for subsequent legal cases. Jasa stipulated only three kinds of punishments: death (most frequent), exile, and asset forfeiture. Mongols’ subjects feared not so much the laws themselves, but rather the unavoidability of their enforcement. Jasa was, above all, a tool for the implementation of cruel terror which paralysed any attempts to shake off the yoke, as well as deterring subjects from committing any crimes, in particular offences against the Mongols and their instructions. It is also interesting to note that, despite the strict laws, bribery was widespread among the empire’s elites, as reported by envoys from Europe who crossed the empire.

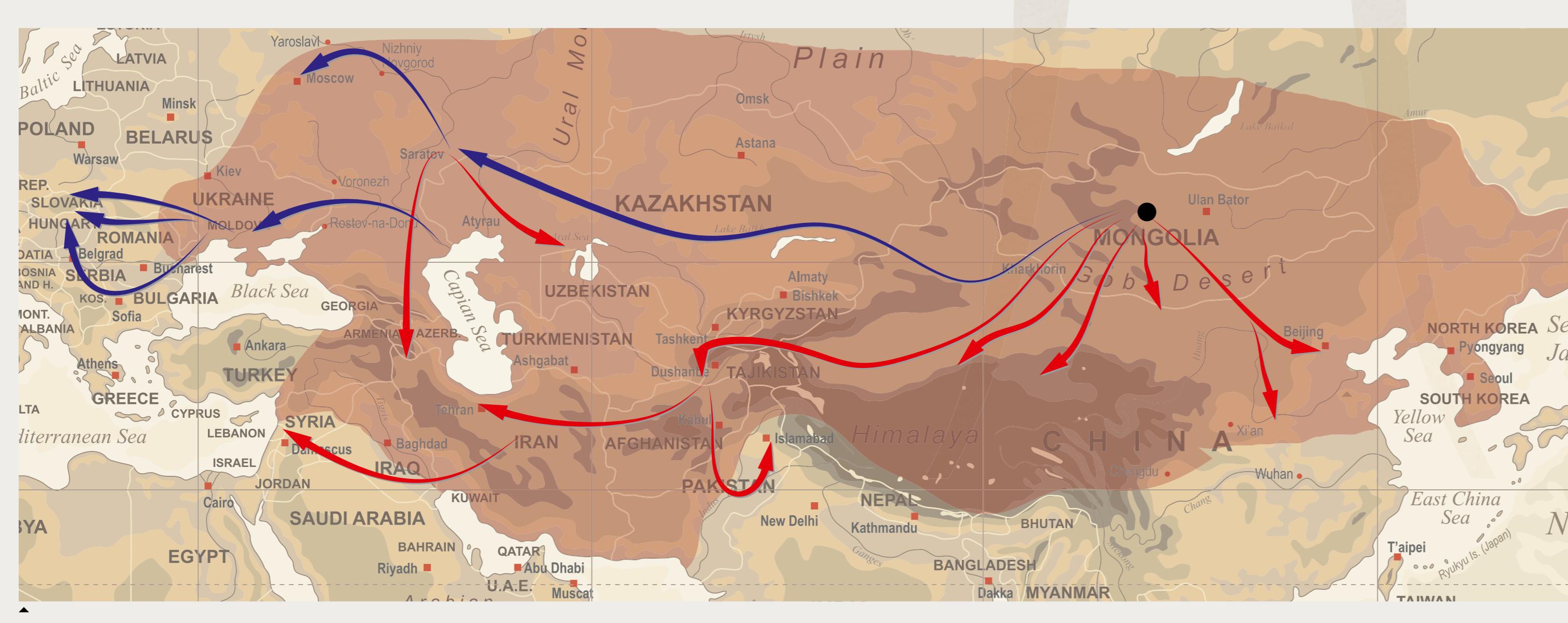
Reigning over the vast empire, which at the time of its greatest territorial reach extended between three oceans, also required a rapid exchange of information between the provinces and the capital city of the Great Khan. The Mongols, drawing on the experience of the conquered countries, created a messenger post system, called Örtöö, after a single relay station. The system is also known under its Turkic name, yam. In the initial period of its existence, it was used by messengers, foreign envoys and legates, and, until mid-18th century, also by merchants. The legates from Europe wrote chronicles with excellent descriptions of the routes and stations along the way to the seat of the Khan of the Mongols. Thanks to the presence of relay horses at every supply point, the travellers were able to advance incredibly fast. This explains why the envoys sent by Pope Innocent IV covered the distance of 5,000 kilometres within just 106 days.

The possibility to enjoy envoy’s privileges, including the protection provided by the Mongol state, complimentary (and obligatory) assistance from its people, and the possibility to travel along the Mongol postal routes, was confirmed by a special permission, paiza. It was a metal tablet with a multilingual inscription warning against showing any signs of disrespect or refusing assistance to paiza’s bearer. This meant that the bearers of the document could enjoy numerous privileges in the Mongol Empire. The papal legates were also given paizas and, consequently, they could complete their missions without interruptions. These special entitlements were therefore the reason behind the successful and safe return of the legates to Europe. It should be noted, however, that over time this support and protection system became a source of corruption and exploitation of Mongolian subjects. Therefore, the subsequent Mongol rulers began to restrict it.

In summary, all the factors mentioned above contributed to the success of the missions of papal legates. The most important factor was the ruthless law enforcement ensured by the Mongol state which effectively protected its official guests. For one hundred years, Pax Mongolica ensured easy circulation of goods and ideas in Eurasia. However, this came at a terribly high price paid by the conquered people, and Central Asia never recovered from the damage done by the subsequent waves of the Mongol invasions. For more than half a century following Genghis Khan’s death, his empire was still expanding in Europe and Asia, but animosities among his successors first led to conflicts over succession, and then to the breakup of the vast empire. A definite end to Pax Mongolica was put in the middle of 14th century by the pandemic of plague, known in Europe as the Black Death. The disease spread at an unprecedented speed also along the Silk Road.



Mongolian Safe Conduct Pass (Paiza) with Inscription in Phakpa Script, Yuan dynasty (China), end the 13th century AD, public domain, source: www.metmuseum.org



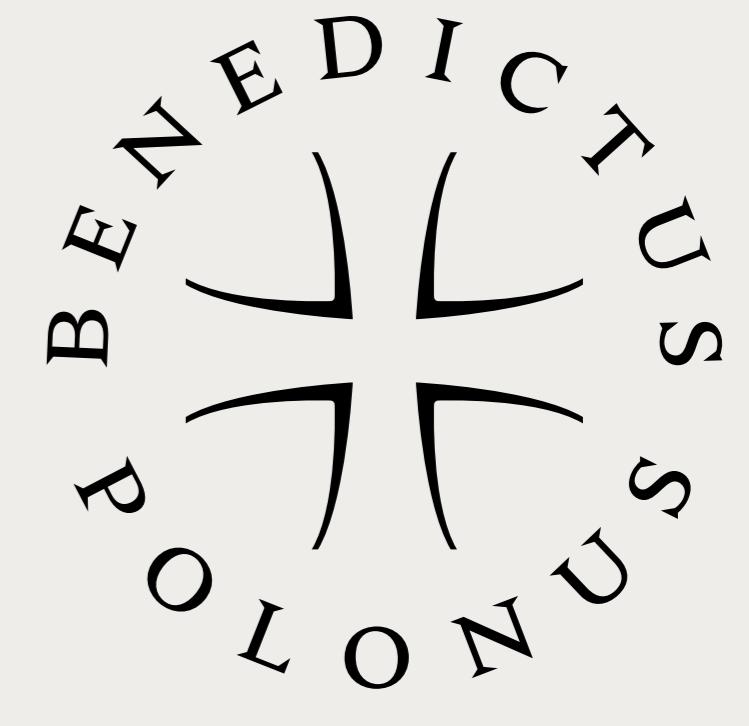
Mongol empire before 1259 AD.



◀ Pax Mongolica facilitated trade contacts: Marco Polo on the caravan route, author: Abraham Cresques, Atlas catalan, ca. 1375 AD, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

“instead, the invaders’ administrative machinery was implemented in all the conquered lands, which facilitated an almost immediate unification of all the new subordinate territories. The conquest and pacification stage was followed by the implementation of the rule of extremely repressive laws which were ruthlessly enforced”

# Pope Innocent IV's four embassies to the Mongol Khan in 1245



The retreat of Mongol armies after their victories over Poland and Hungary was most likely caused by the news of the death of Great Khan Ugedei (December 11, 1241), which reached Batu Khan, the leader of the war campaign, in the spring of 1242. Europe was thus granted the time to gather its forces and learn about the new enemy, who up until then had been known rather through mythical than true accounts. The Europeans could not have known the reason for the sudden and surprising retreat of the Mongols, just as they could not have foreseen how soon they would have to face the warlike nomads again.

Pope Innocent IV, who began his pontificate in 1243, decided to make use of the opportunity to solve the Mongol problem. He raised the Tatar question at the ecumenical council in Lyon, summoned in 1245. The council's official statement was, however, rather theoretical in character: it called upon Christians to strengthen their defences against the next attack. Of greater importance were other actions undertaken by the pope, mainly the embassies, which he decided to send to the Mongols even before the council – in the spring of 1245. The aim was primarily to gather intelligence on the enemy. On the other hand, a rather distant objective was to gauge the likelihood of converting the Mongols to Christianity, and so to possibly enlist their aid against the Muslims in the Holy Land.

**“the aim was primarily to gather intelligence on the enemy. On the other hand, a rather distant objective was to gauge the likelihood of converting the Mongols to Christianity, and so to possibly enlist their aid against the Muslims in the Holy land”**

It may have been Archbishop Peter who strengthened Innocent IV's resolve to send envoys to the Great Khan of the Mongol empire. Exiled from Rus by the Tatars, the archbishop delivered a report on the invaders upon his arrival in Lyon. Among other matters, he assured the pope of their respect for envoys. As a result, most likely four embassies were sent, although the number is not certain, and in the case of some of them the personnel sent, the route and the final destination remain unknown.

The first to depart was allegedly Lourenço of Portugal, a Franciscan monk. He received a papal letter to the Tatars dated to March 5, 1245. He was to deliver a second letter to Koloman, the ruler of the Bulgars, whom Innocent IV wanted to return to the Catholic Church. The fate of Lourenço of Portugal's embassy is unknown – there is even no certainty as to whether it actually took place, or whether it remained merely a plan.

Much more is known about the second embassy, led by the Franciscan Giovanni di Piano Carpini, which also included Benedict the Pole and Czeslaw of Bohemia, about whom little is known. The mission received a papal letter dated to March 13, 1245, and departed from Lyon on April 16 of that year. The legates headed to Prague first, and then, on the advice of King Wenceslaus, chose to

go through Poland, visiting Wrocław (where they were joined by Benedict the Pole), and Lęczyca. Then they headed to Kiev, from where the Tatars escorted them to Batu Khan's camp at the Lower Volga, and then as far as the Great Khan's camp in the vicinity of Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol Empire.

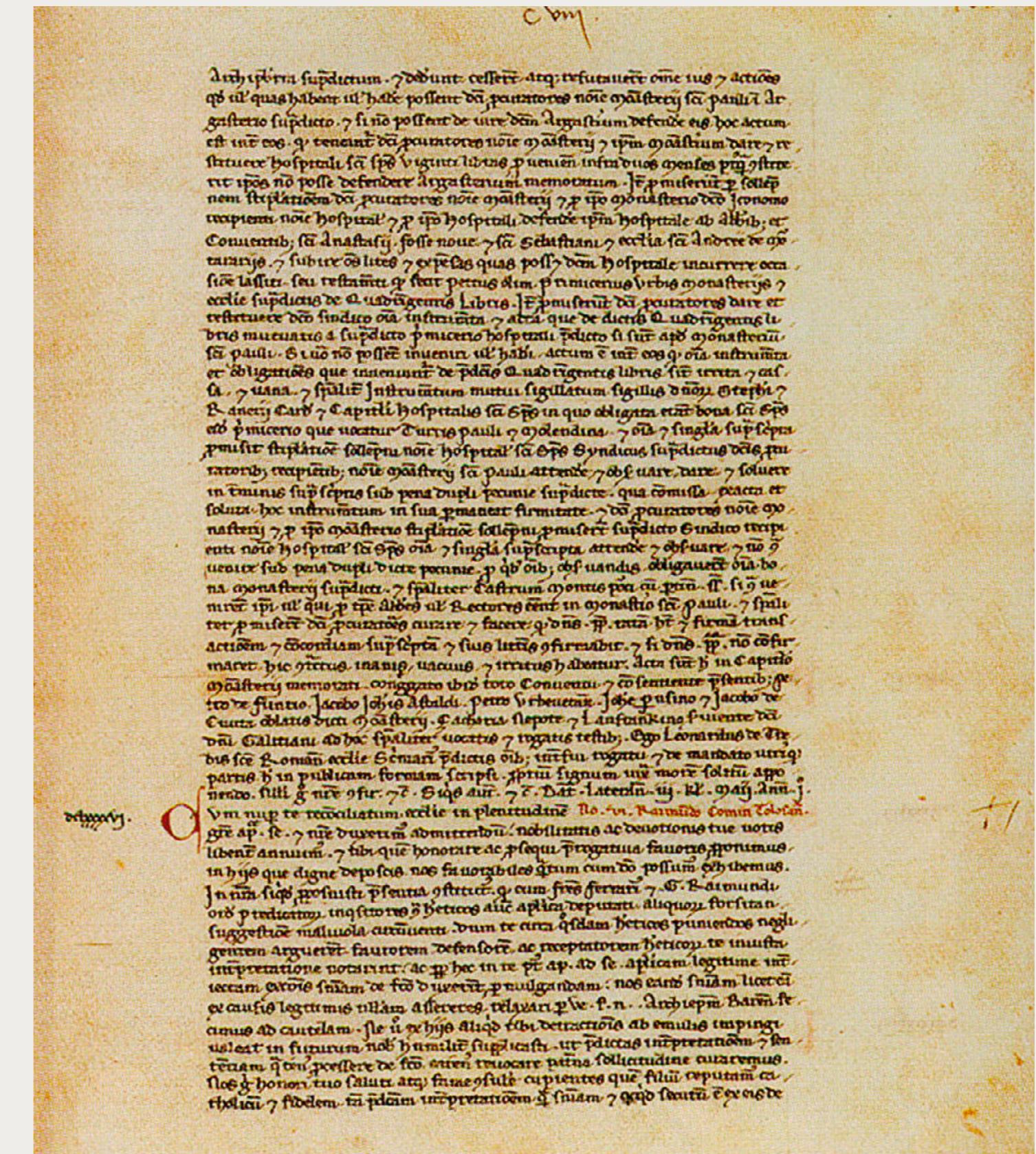
The papal letters carried by the third embassy, led by the Dominican Andre of Longjumeau, have not survived. However, the replies, which the monk delivered to Innocent IV, are known. Andre of Longjumeau departed from Lyon in March or April of 1245. He travelled through Muslim lands, delivering letters to the Sultans Ismail in Baalbek, al-Manosur in Horns and Daud in Karnak, respectively. He also reached the leaders of Jacobites and Nestorians. We do not know for certain if he managed to contact the Mongols, although it is likely.

It is, however, entirely certain that the Mongols were visited by Ascelin of Cremona and his companions, among others Simon of Saint-Quentin, whose account was immortalised by Vincent of Beauvais in his chronicle. The Dominican embassy departed in March or April of 1245. The route it took on its way to the Mongols is not known, but it is important to note that it took the embassy

more than two years. The alleged reason for the delays was the hindrances caused by Muslim rulers, which affected also the abovementioned Andre of Longjumeau. Ascelin's embassy reached Baiju's camp near the city of Sisian on May 23, 1247, and left after nine weeks, on July 25. They were accompanied on their way to the pope by two Mongol envoys, who carried a letter from Baiju to Innocent IV, and a copy of a letter from the Great Khan Guguk to Baiju. An additional task carried out by the embassy was to establish contact with the Nestorians. Ascelin of Cremona's hostile attitude towards the Mongols, clear from Simon of Saint-Quentin's account, as well as his refusal to go to the empire's capital result in the fact that this embassy – although it reached the Tatars – was far less successful than Giovanni di Piano Carpini's and Benedict the Pole's.



▲ Pope Innocent IV sends Dominicans and Franciscans out to the Tartars. Chronicle of Vincent de Beauvais, Le Miroir Historial (Vol. IV), 1400-1410. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fr. 308-311, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

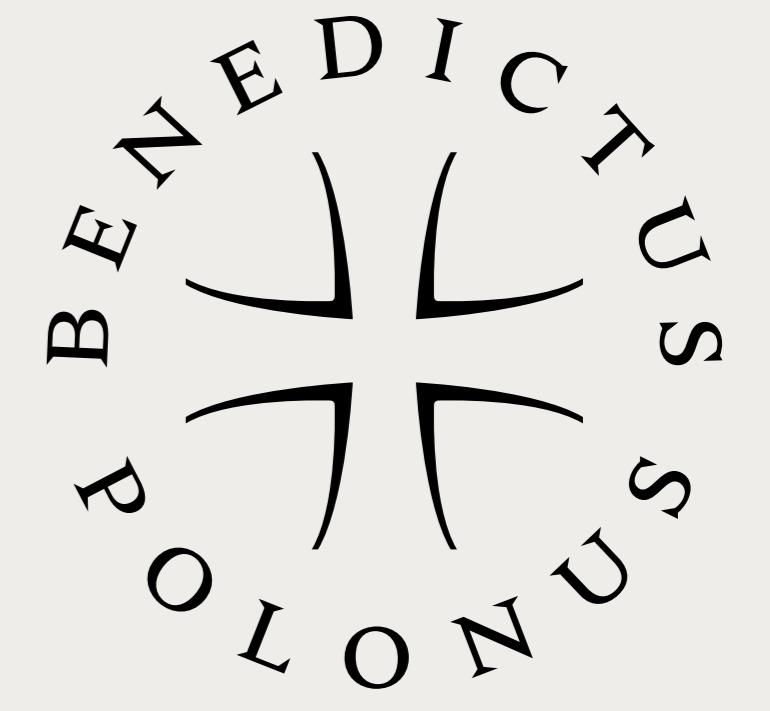


▲ Letter of Pope Innocent IV to Güyük Khan, public domain, source: Vatican Secret Archives, Vatican City, Inv. no. Reg. Vat. 21, ff. 107 v - 108 r.



▲ Ascelin of Lombardy receiving a letter from Innocent IV, and remitting it to the Mongol general Baiju, author: David Aubert Chronique des Empereurs, 1462 AD, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

# The Expedition and the Delegates



The composition of the group of delegates headed by John (Giovanni) di Piano Carpini is not entirely clear. There is also little we know about the friar himself. He was born towards the end of 12th century in Piano Carpini near Perugia. There is no information about his childhood and youth. Some researchers suggest that prior to joining the community of Saint Francis of Assisi, Giovanni may have been a knight. However, that is not confirmed by any sources and only suggested by Giovanni's thorough knowledge of military tactics and weaponry as reported during the expedition to the Mongols. Documented information about Giovanni's life concerns his later life, when he joined the Franciscan Order and is provided by the chronicle of friar Jordan of Giano who wrote about the early years of the order. Giovanni was one of the oldest companions of Saint Francis, and his name first appears in the chronicle in the entries devoted to the Franciscan general chapter in 1221. We also know that Giovanni travelled across the Alps to Germany with a group of monks where he was elected as custodian of the Saxon province of the order on 8 September 1222. He was released from his duties two years later and moved to Cologne where in 1228 he was designated as the minister of the order's German province, a position he held until 1230 when he was sent to Spain on a mission to manage Spain's Franciscan monasteries. We have no information on the Spanish period of Giovanni's life. His name appears again in written sources for the period between 1232 (or 1233) and 1239 when he was the order's Saxon minister. The chronicles contain no information about what John did until 1245, but one thing is certain: in the spring of that year he set out on a mission of papal legates sent by Pope Innocent IV to the Mongols, and he returned from the mission in the autumn of 1247. It is important to note that when he was starting the journey, he was probably 60–65. After returning to Lyon, Giovanni remained at Pope's side and that is most probably when he wrote his "History of the Mongols". Later he was sent to the court of Louis IX on a mission to convince the king to delay his war expedition to the Holy Land. In 1248, Giovanni di Piano Carpini was nominated Archbishop of Bar (Antivari) in Dalmatia. He died on 1 August 1252.

There is even less we know about Giovanni di Piano Carpini's journey companion who travelled with the Italian all the way to the court of the Great Khan of the Mongols. The companion was called Benedykt Polak (or Benedict of Poland). He joined the papal delegation in Wrocław, in the spring of 1245. Benedict may have been a friar at Wrocław's Franciscan convent. Thanks to

his knowledge of the Old East Slavic language, he most probably assisted as an interpreter during the journey. There are also reasons to believe that he was able to communicate directly with the Tatars (as reported by C. de Bridia), either in Old East Slavic language or in basic Mongolian, which Benedict may have learned to speak. Benedict accompanied Giovanni all the way to Guyuk's court, and on the return journey to Europe – possibly as far as Lyon or at least as far as Cologne, where he dictated his account of the journey to a clergyman whose name we do not know. Later mentions of Benedykt Polak can be found in the certificate of miracles performed by Saint Stanislaus, the bishop of Kraków. Benedict was also the guardian of the Franciscans in Kraków. We do not know any confirmed facts from his later life.

There is unclear information about a possible further member of the delegation, Venceslas of Bohemia, mentioned by C. de Bridia in his "Historia Tartarorum" as a travel companion of Giovanni di Piano Carpini alongside Benedykt Polak. In his chronicle, Benedict does not provide the name of Venceslas but he clearly states that he was a Franciscan friar who departed from Lyon. In Giovanni's account, only Benedict's name is mentioned but no details are provided of the remaining travel companions. In later Franciscan historiography the third traveller is also referred to as Stephen of Bohemia. Moreover, we know that a part of the delegation, most probably including Venceslas of Bohemia, was stopped by Batu Khan at the Volga river.

In 1965, a third report from the journey was revealed, authored by the mysterious C. de Bridia. We do not know if the author actually took part in the delegation or simply wrote down the stories of the travellers. It may have been that he too was stopped by the Mongols when they reached the Volga, along with Venceslas of Bohemia, and waited there to re-unite with the delegates on their return journey. This could explain why C. de Bridia referred to and quoted the reports from Giovanni and Benedict concerning their stay at the Great Khan's court. There are some premises to facilitate the identification of C. de Bridia in the foreword to his "Historia Tartarorum": the book was commissioned by Boguslav, minister provincial of the Franciscans in Bohemia and Poland. The author was most probably a Franciscan monk himself and stemmed from Poland: "Bridia" is most often interpreted as the city of Brzeg in Silesia.



Innocent IV, Page from a manuscript, XIII c, public domain.

**“**  
there is even less we know about Giovanni di Piano Carpini's journey companion who travelled with the Italian all the way to the court of the Great Khan of the Mongols. The companion was called Benedykt Polak (or Benedict of Poland). He joined the papal delegation in Wrocław, in the spring of 1245  
**“**



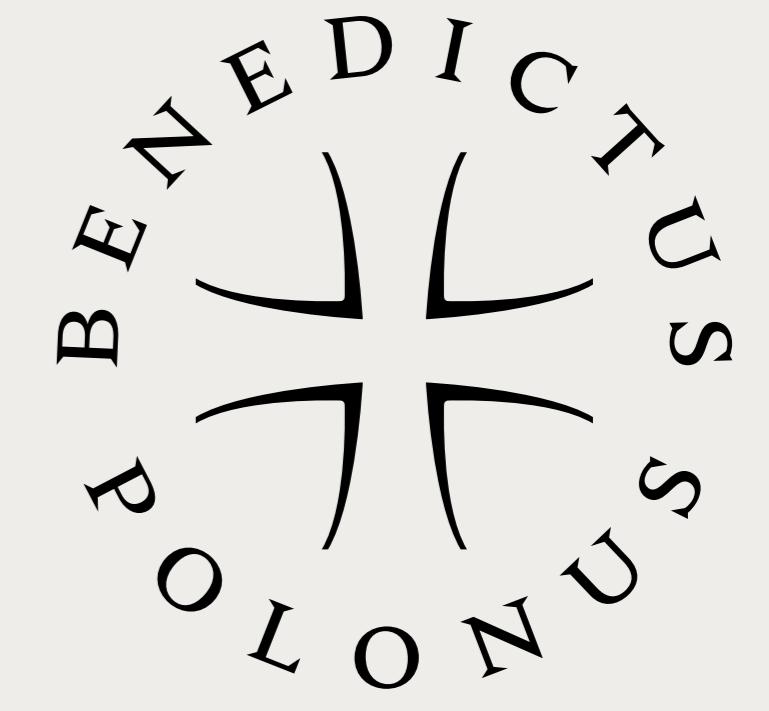
One of the pages of the manuscript of the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi. The work also contains elements of the legend of Saint Stanislaus, probably drawn up at the request of the Hungarian King Charles I Robert and his wife Elżbieta, daughter of Władysław Łokietek, around 1320-1342 AD, author: anonymous, Bolonia, public domain, source: www.metmuseum.org



The Great Khan giving the Polo brothers a golden table. However, dark habits and tonsures indicate that it is rather about monks (Franciscans?), Painted medieval manuscript, British Library, London, public domain, source: www.bl.uk

# Łęczyca

## 1245



On their way to the Great Khan of the Mongols, the legates of Pope Innocent IV were hosted at lords' manors. Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, together with his companion Stephen of Bohemia, first headed to the kingdom of Bohemia. Next, following the advice of King Wenceslaus I, they chose the route leading through Poland and Rus. They travelled from Prague to Wrocław, where they were received by Bolesław II the Horned. At this point of their journey, the legates were joined by Benedykt Polak (Benedict the Pole). Possibly, yet another member – C. de Bridia – joined the expedition in Silesia, but there are some doubts as to his participation.

From Wrocław the papal legates went to Łęczyca, which at the time was the main political centre of the Duchy of Masovia. At the time of their stay, the manor of Konrad I of Masovia hosted the convention of Polish princes and dignitaries. Among those present at the convention were Jan Prandota, the bishop of Kraków, and Duchess Grzymisława, widow of Leszek

White and mother of Bolesław V the Chaste. Undoubtedly, the Polish lords were able to provide the papal legates with important information about their further route and the Mongols, since just a few years earlier the Mongol invasion had wreaked havoc on Polish territories. Four years earlier, in the spring of 1241, the Tatars invaded Łęczyca, and soon afterwards they conquered Kraków. Subsequently, the invaders headed to Silesia, where the famous Battle of Legnica was fought. The convention, apart from Polish lords, was also attended by Russian prince Vasylko Romanovich. As the ruler of the territories subdued by the Mongol Empire, Vasylko, the prince of Volodymyr and Volhynia, was also able to provide valuable information to the papal legates. In 1245, Vasylko's elder brother, prince Daniel of Galicia, was summoned to the camp of Batu Khan to recognise Mongol overlordship. In a precautionary move, he first sent envoys so that they could obtain the guarantee of safety for their ruler. The information they provided assured Daniel that the way to the Tatar general was safe. He also

learned that it was necessary to provide gifts for every Tatar chieftain he would meet on the way.

In order to ensure a warm reception by the Mongols, the Franciscans purchased a certain amount of furs and received some as gifts from Konrad of Masovia, Duchess Grzymisława of Kraków, (who was at the time a guest in Łęczyca), bishop Prandota, and from a number of Polish knights unknown by name. The Prince of Masovia and his son, most probably Casimir, as well as the bishop insisted that the legates continue the journey under Vasylko's protection. The advice was followed: Giovanni da Plan del Carpine, Benedict the Pole and their companions travelled the first leg of the journey with the prince and then were escorted by one of Vasylko's servants to finally reach Kiev "a Rus city which is currently under the yoke of the Tatars", as Benedict put it in his report.



Church in Tum of Łęczyca, XII c. Photo: J. Jankowski.



Visualizations of the stronghold (grodzisko) in Łęczyca, state in the 13th century, author: Wojciech Przybyłowski. Courtesy of Museum the Castle of Łęczyca.

“  
from Wrocław the papal legates went to Łęczyca, which at the time was the main political centre of the Duchy of Masovia. At the time of their stay, the manor of Konrad I of Masovia hosted the convention of Polish princes and dignitaries  
“

# The route of the expedition of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and Benedict the Pole to Karakorum

BENE DIC  
TUS  
POLONIUS

The envoys Pope Innocent IV sent to the Mongols, led by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, set out from Lyon on April 16, 1245. The Franciscans went first to the court of Wenceslaus I, the Czech ruler whom they had known and who was a friend of Giovanni. On his advice, they continued their journey across Polish and Rus lands. In Wrocław, they were joined by a Polish Franciscan, Benedict. In Silesia they may have also been joined by another envoy, C. de Bridia. However, there is some uncertainty both about his participation in the expedition and his identity.

After leaving the court of prince Bolesław II the Bald in Wrocław, they headed to Łęczyca, where a convention of Polish dukes and dignitaries was taking place at that time. In Łęczyca, the papal legates were given a friendly welcome by Konrad I of Masovia. The material support they received from him and other noblemen later turned out to be priceless – after reaching the Mongols the legates wouldn't have gone much further without the gifts of furs.

They set out from Łęczyca to Rus', accompanied by prince Vasilko Romanovich, the brother of Daniel of Galicia. At the beginning of their stay at the court of the two princes, they delivered a letter from Innocent IV, in which the pope urged the brothers to return to the Roman Catholic Church. It was a secondary mission of the papal envoys, whose main task was reaching the Tatars. Giovanni and his companions later went to Kiev, accompanied by a servant of the prince of Galicia-Volynia, after a hard stopover in Danilov, where they fell seriously ill. Their route from Łęczyca to Kiev, later reconstructed, ran through the towns of Zawichost, Horodło, Volodymyr, Lutsk, Peresopnytsia, Zvyahel and Belgorod.

In Kiev, the minorites had to exchange their horses for some more resilient ones, adapted to the harsh conditions of the East. It was also in Kiev that they had to hand in some of their gifts, in order to persuade the local commander to provide them with horses and entourage. They set out from Kiev on 3 February 1246, and continued their journey through Kaniv on the Dnieper River. In the neighbouring village, governed by an Alan called Micheas, they again had to give some gifts in order to be conducted to the first Tatar watchtower, where gifts were also necessary, just as in the camp of Corenza, Batu Khan's nephew, the first Mongolian chieftain they met. As it was impossible to have the letter from the Pope translated, the legates were sent directly to the camp of Batu Khan, where they arrived on 4 April 1246. Batu Khan held his camp on the lower Volga. To get there, the Franciscans had to travel across the entire land of the Cumans, crossing the Dnieper, the Don and the Volga. The travellers thought that all the rivers flowed into the Greek Sea, also called the Great Sea – they mistakenly merged the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea into one in their reports.

Four days later, on 8 April 1246, Batu Khan sent the envoys on their way to the heart of the empire. However, he decided to keep some of them ([Česlav of Bohemia may have been among them, as well as the mysterious C. de Bridia]), under the pretext of planning to send them back to the Pope. However, they only managed to reach the land of chieftain Mauci, who was camping on the steppes east of the Dnieper. They were detained there until the return of Giovanni and Benedict. Having left Batu Khan's camp, the friars, Giovanni and Benedict, were riding strenuously, changing their horses five to seven times a day. They crossed Cumania, the desert country of the Kangites, the Muslim Khwarezm, and the lands of the Black Khitans. In his later report, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine mentioned passing a small

sea, which may have been Lake Alakol, the Aral Sea or Lake Balkhash. Along the way, they were hosted by one of the emperor's wives, before finally reaching the mountainous land of the Naimans. They arrived at the camp of Guyuk Khan on 22 July 1246, after a three-week ride across the land of the Mongols. At the time, a congress of Tatar chiefs was being held at Syra-Orda, with the purpose of electing the Great Khan. Therefore, the envoys had to wait for an audience until the grandson of Genghis Khan, Guyuk, was enthroned on 21 August 1246, and received the two papal legates officially as the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire.

The envoys of the Pope stayed with the Mongols until 13 September 1246, when they headed homewards, carrying a letter from the Great Khan Guyuk to Innocent IV. On their way back to Europe, they chose a similar route, paying another visit to Batu Khan and to chieftain Mauci, where their detained companions had been waiting for them. They arrived in Kiev on June 9, 1247, under Cumanian escort. They also received the answer from Daniel of Galicia and Vasilko Romanovich, who declared their willingness to return to the Roman Catholic Church. On their way to Lyon, the legates crossed the Polish, Czech and German lands, sharing their adventures and observations (which their listeners wrote down) on multiple occasions. The envoys finally reached Pope Innocent IV on 13 November 1247, having endured an exhausting journey of two and a half years.



The route of the expedition of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and Benedict the Pole to Karakorum



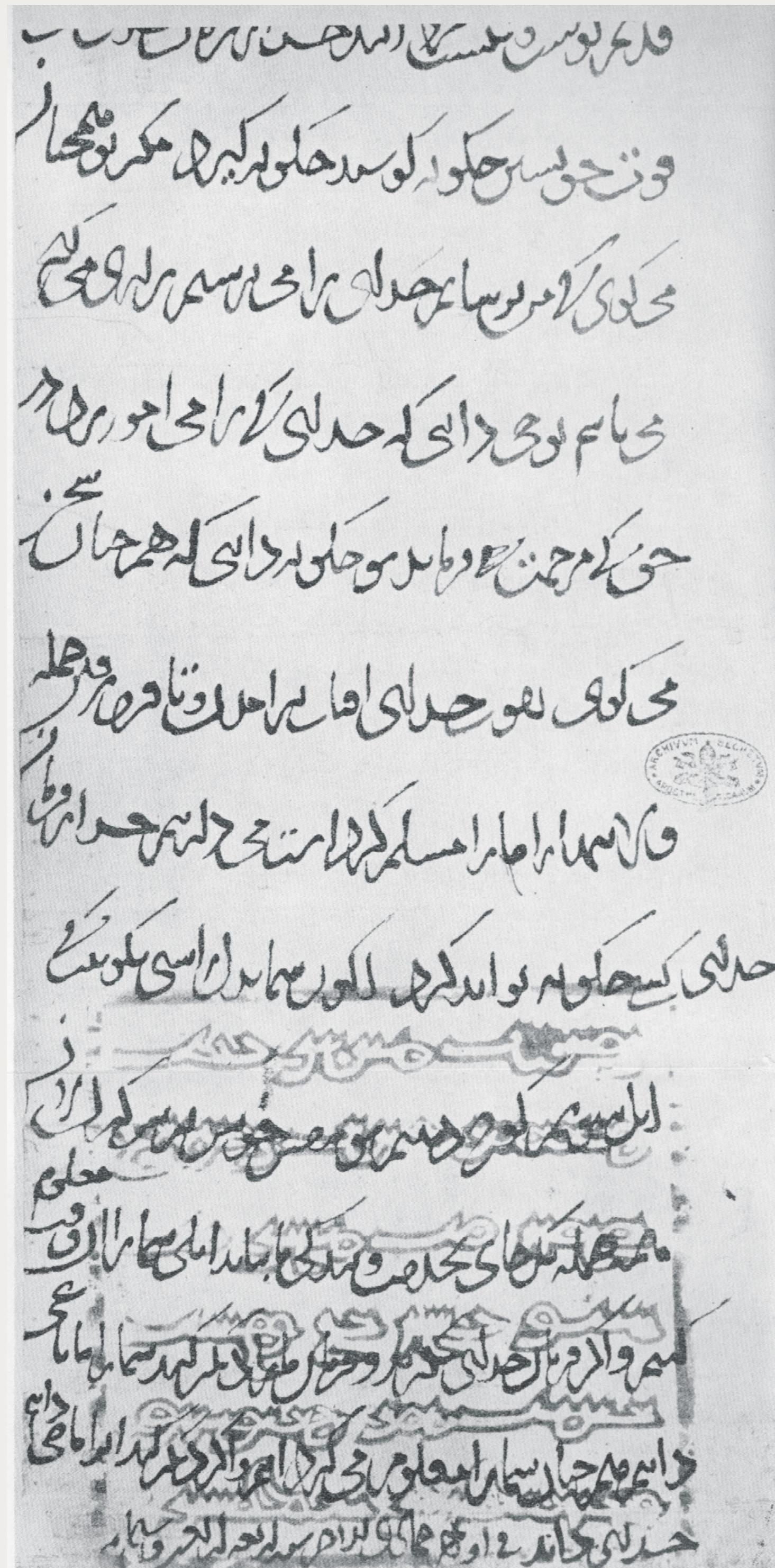
The Map of the World, the so-called Tabula Rogeriana, painted by Muhammad al-Idrisi for Roger II in 1154. The original is reversed by 180 degrees (South at the top), public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

“  
they arrived at the camp of Guyuk Khan on 22 July 1246, after a three-week ride across the land of the Mongols. At the time, a congress of Tatar chiefs was being held at Syra-Orda, with the purpose of electing the Great Khan

# Karakorum

## – the reception of the legates by Guyük Khan

B E N E D I C T U S  
P O L O N U S



Letter from Guyük Khan to Innocent IV, domena publiczna, source: [www.asnad.org](http://www.asnad.org)

The envoys of Pope Innocent IV: John de Piano Carpini and Benedict of Poland reached the vicinity of Karakorum, but they didn't enter the city itself. The Mongolian capital had to wait another 8 years for a European traveller, William of Rubruck, to pass through its gates. The envoys were received by Guyuk Khan in his summer residence Sira-Orda, located half a day's journey south of Karakorum. The papal legates arrived at the camp on 22 July 1246. At that time Guyuk wasn't a Great Khan yet – he was elected approximately one month later. Although the content of the Pope's letters was passed on to Guyuk promptly after the envoys came to the camp, he didn't officially receive the Franciscan envoys until he formally became a khan. After coming to Sira-Orda, Giovanni da Piano Carpini and Benedict the Pole were accommodated in one of the camp's numerous yurts, like many other envoys present in the camp (in his chronicle, Giovanni mentioned over four thousand envoys). A few days after the arrival, the Franciscans witnessed a great Mongolian festivity which lasted 4 days. They wrongly believed it to be the kurultai – a formal election of a new khan. As a matter of fact, Guyuk's enthronement took place later, on 21 August 1246. Before that ceremony, the Franciscans were received by Guyuk's mother, Töregene-Katun, who was a regent after the Great Khan Ögedei had died. The papal envoys were present at the ceremony of Guyuk's enthronement which was delayed from 15 to 21 August 1246 due to a severe hailstorm. During the feast, the Franciscans were asked, for the first time, to see the newly-appointed great Khan of the Mongol Empire. They were requested to write down their message. A few days later, with the help of an interpreter, they passed the Pope's message to Guyuk and his chancellors present in the yurt. They waited until 11 November for the reply. After translating the letter and preparing two copies – one in Latin and one in Saracenic – they started their journey back to Europe. They left Sira-Orda on 13 December 1246.

Guyuk intended to send two envoys to the Pope. As noted by Giovanni da Piano Carpini, he received a suggestion to request the Great Khan that these two envoys accompany Giovanni on his return journey to Europe. However, the Franciscan refused to accept the company of the Tatar envoys, thus demonstrating a great insight and a sense of diplomacy. Most of all, he feared that the Khan's delegates would use the journey to spy and gather intelligence vital for another invasion. He also believed that if Mongols saw the prevailing discord and internal conflicts in the West, they would become more willing to embark on new war campaigns. Moreover, Giovanni knew that there was a risk of Europeans not respecting the envoys' immunity and killing them, which could trigger a vicious revenge of the Mongols – as it had happened in the past.

Interestingly, as proven by his notes, Giovanni da Piano Carpini believed there was a chance of converting Guyuk Khan to Christianity. He claimed that the Khan was "discerning, shrewd, very earnest and dignified in his behaviour. No one has ever seen him laughing at a trivial cause or acting carelessly. [ ] We have also been told by his Christian servants that they genuinely believed he could become a Christian." What may have supported that belief was the fact that Christians (the Nestorians to be precise) were allowed to enjoy the liberty of prayer and missionary activity in the empire. However, the opposite message was contained in the letter from the Great Khan to the Pope: not only did Guyuk refuse to convert to Christianity, but he even demanded that European rulers and the Pope accept the authority of the Mongols. As Guyuk wrote in his letter to Innocent IV: "From sunrise to sunset,, all the lands have been made subject to the Great Khan. How could anyone act against the will of God?".

“  
a few days later, with the  
help of an interpreter,  
they passed the Pope's  
message to Guyuk and his  
chancellors present  
in the yurt  
“

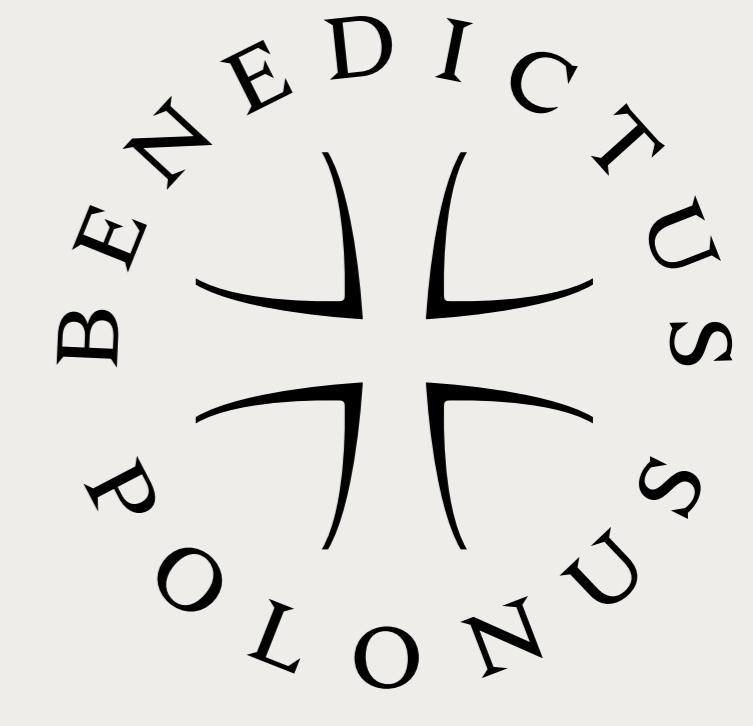


Model of the Khan Palace in Karakorum in the National Museum of Mongolian History in Ulan Bator, public domain, source: [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)



Reception at the court of Guyük Khan, author: 'Alā al-Dīn 'Atā Malik b. Bahā al-Dīn Muhammed Al-Guvayni. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Supplément Persan 206, public domain, source: [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

# Three accounts of expedition: Giovanni da Pian Del Carpine, Benedict the Pole, C. de Bridia



The expedition headed by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine is undoubtedly the best documented mission of the four delegations sent by Pope Innocent IV to the Mongols. As many as three accounts of the mission are known. The first was drafted by Giovanni himself, the second dictated by his companion Benedict the Pole, and the third was written down by C. de Bridia.

*Ystoria Mongolorum* by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine is known to have been preserved in two versions – the shorter one, composed of eight chapters and the longer one, with an additional ninth chapter, a narrative of the journey itself. The abridged version was already in the making during the return journey of the delegates. The narrative includes the friars' recent memories and notes taken down during their stay at the court of the Great Khan in Mongolia. As mentioned by the author, on their return trip to Lyon, the friars would regularly make accounts of their journey in "Poland, Bohemia, Germany, Leodium and Champagne", among other places. They are also thought to have passed through the court of Bela IV of Hungary. The testimony of the encounter between the papal legates and the Hungarian king's envoys to Tatars is included in Carpini's manuscript, currently kept at the National Library of Luxembourg. The full expedition report was not completed by Carpini until his return to Lyon, where he stayed for three months at the Pope's residence. The additional ninth

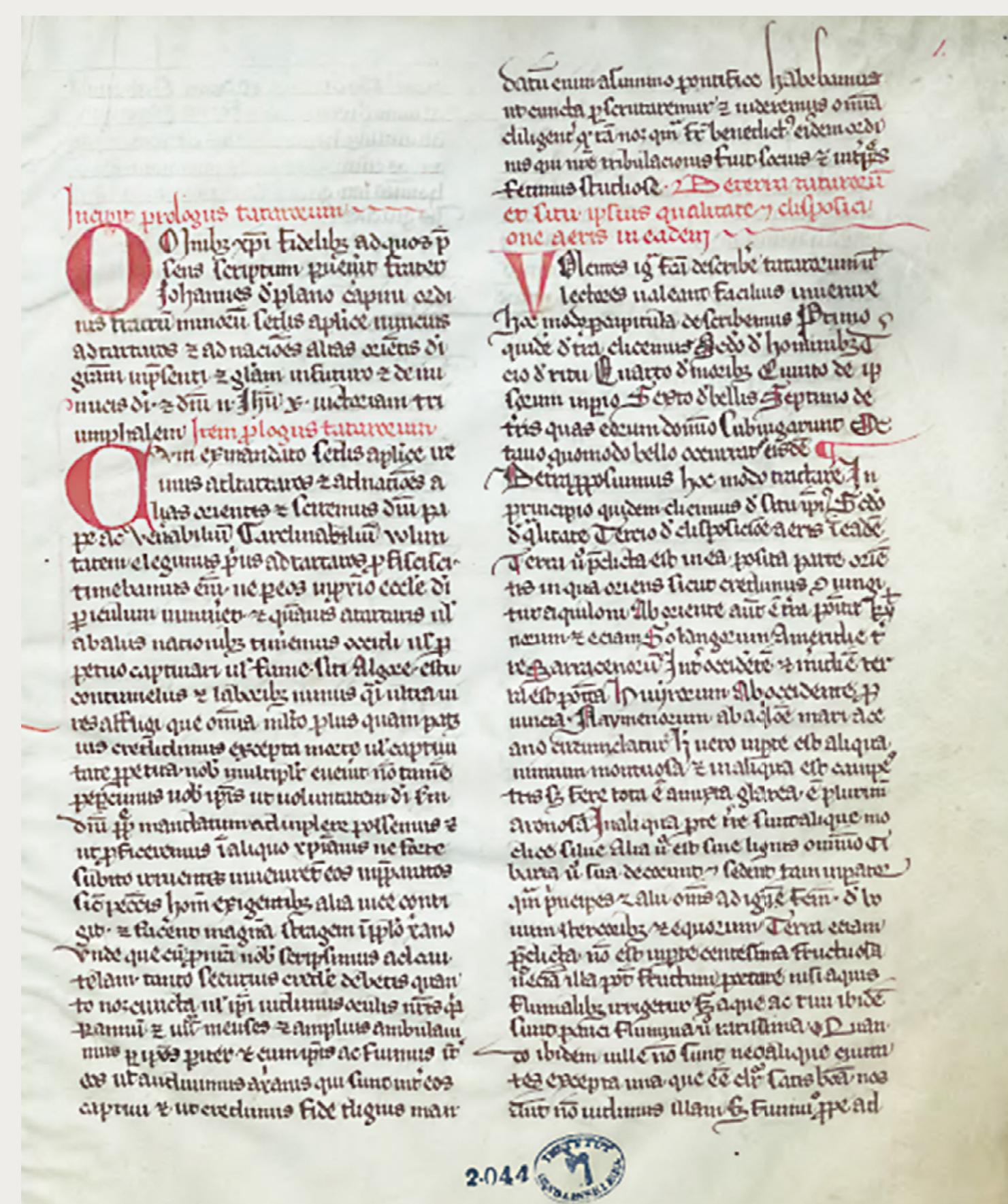
chapter, an account of the journey, was appended to the already existing eight-chapter version describing the country (Chapter 1), its inhabitants (Chapter 2), religion (Chapter 3), customs (Chapter 4), history (Chapter 5), army and war strategies (Chapter 6), their conduct with respect to the conquered nations (Chapter 7) and military strategies used in combat (Chapter 8). The itinerary, drafted at the request of Pope Innocent IV, is reminiscent of a diplomatic report thanks to the friar's spot-on, clearly depicted and neatly arranged observations.

The second account of the expedition, entitled Report by Benedict the Pole, is known to exist in two manuscripts: one in Paris, the other in Vienna. Moreover, a letter, attached to the report, from Khaghan Guyuk to Pope Innocent IV, has been preserved independently in the chronicle of Salimbene of Parma. The words of Benedict the Pole were put into writing by an anonymous clergyman in Cologne in the autumn of 1247 during the embassy's return voyage to Lyon. An extract found in the annals at the Benedictine monastery in Cologne bears witness to the fact: "[...] The Minorites sent by the pope to the Tatars came back with a letter addressed to the pope from the Tatar ruler. One of the Minorites, named Benedict, of Polish origin, while passing through Cologne, presented an oral and clear account, as he saw and heard to a prelate, a former schoolman in Cologne and a man of letters, of the content of the letter and the journey, its ar-

duous nature and hardships" ("Annales Sancti Pantaleonis Coloniensis").

*Historia Tartarorum* by C. de Bridia, also known as the Tartar Relation, has survived in a single manuscript only, and wasn't disclosed until 1965. It has since been purchased by Yale University in the United States. The preserved manuscript was drafted around 1440. It remains unclear whether the author of the report took part in the mission or whether the record was made using Giovanni's and Benedict's oral accounts, which the author refers to multiple times. If C. de Bridia indeed participated in the mission, he may have been detained in Batu Khan's encampment on the Volga, and was only a witness to his companions' accounts – those who actually managed to reach the headquarters of the Great Khan in Mongolia. C. de Bridia was ordered to put the journey's account into writing by Boguslaus, a Franciscan minister provincial in Poland and Bohemia. It makes for a comprehensive report, integrating geographical, historical as well as ethnographic observations. The fantastic fables and stories concerning the tribes and peoples little-known to Latin Europeans clearly seem to have captured the imagination of the author. What is equally noteworthy, his account also contains references to the author's military expertise and his spot-on description of the recommended strategy on how to combat the Mongols, are equally noteworthy.

“  
the words of Benedict the Pole were put into writing by an anonymous clergyman in Cologne in the autumn of 1247 during the embassy's return voyage to Lyon  
”



"Historia Mongolorum", by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, a copy from the XV c.  
Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, public domain, source: www.dbc.wroc.pl



omni temporalis vita eternae uite coniugio est prius dicenda quin uita. Si sicut plns tradite ordinatur ad finem sequenti uita. qd sicut practice ab eis tradi

Franciscan monk reading at the royal court Painted manuscript, end of the XII century, public domain, source: British Library Royal Collection, BL Royal 3 D VII, f. 1.

# Later journeys to the Mongols: William of Rubruck, the Polo Brothers and Marco Polo

BENE DICIT  
POLO NUS

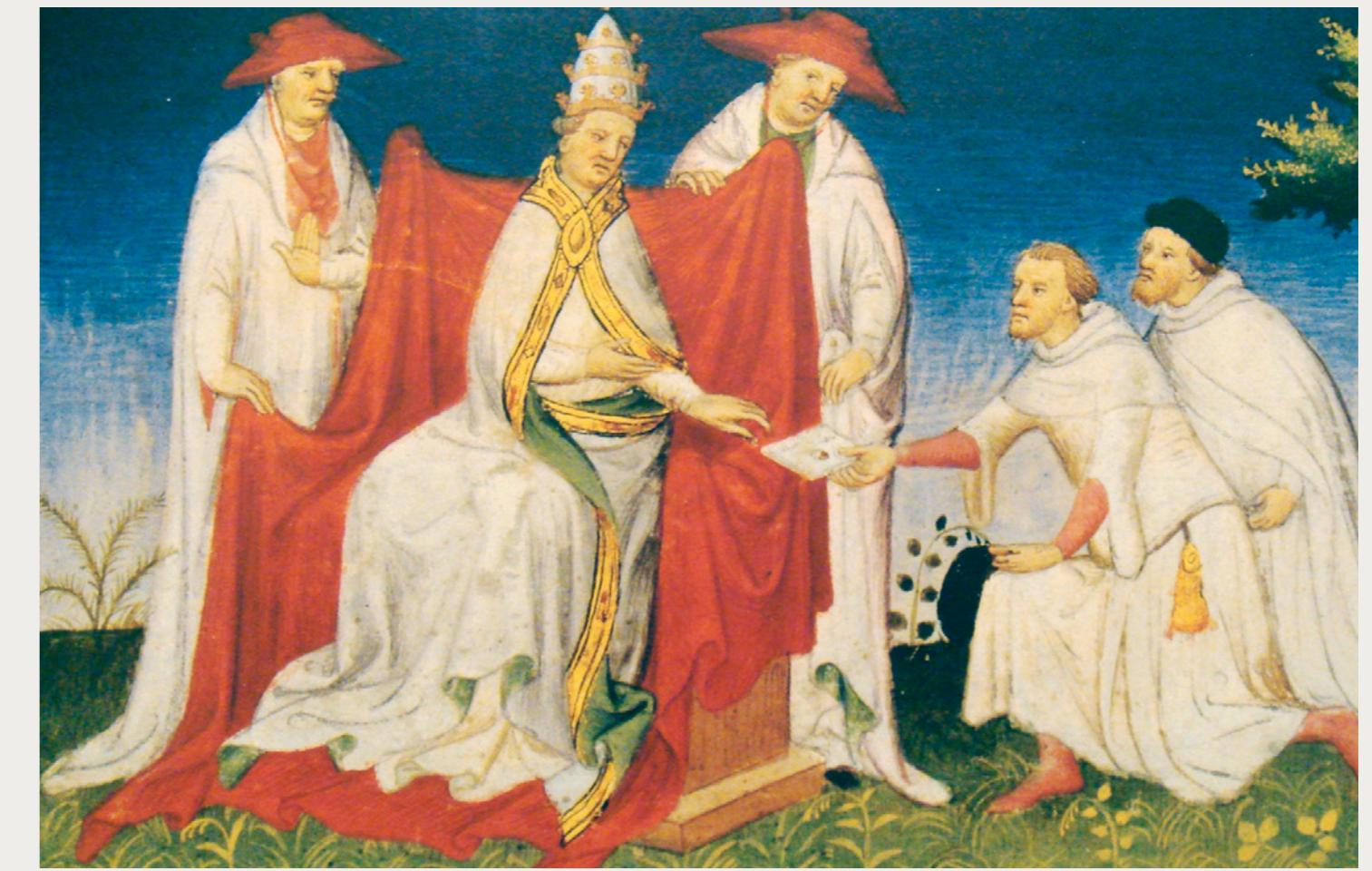
The legates of Pope Innocent IV blazed the trail and opened the European rulers' eyes to the possibility of establishing contacts, or even collaborating with exotic Asian countries. A few years after the extraordinary journey of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and Benedict the Pole, another Franciscan friar, William of Rubruck from Flanders, was sent to the Great Khan of the Mongols, who at the time was Möngke Khan. This journey was an initiative of Louis IX, known as Saint Louis, king of France. The role of Rubruck as an envoy was to examine the possibilities of converting the Mongols and allying with them against the Muslim Turks. The result of the journey of the Flemish monk between 1253 and 1255 was a detailed description of the Mongol Empire, its inhabitants, their customs and religion. Rubruck's geographical observations were also pioneering, particularly the ones concerning the Caspian Sea, which had been considered to be a gulf of the North Ocean since antiquity. On May 7, 1253, William of Rubruck set out from Constantinople. On his way to the Great Khan he was hosted by Sartaq Khan, son of Batu Khan (Batu Khan was the commander-in-chief in the Mongol invasion of Europe in the years 1237-1242). The delegate decided to visit Sartaq's court due to a rumour: Sartaq was allegedly baptised, therefore Rubruck hoped to receive some assistance from the khan. Even though the rumour turned out to be false, Rubruck found out that the ruler was favourable to Christians. After a nearly year-long journey, the Franciscan reached Karakorum. He was the first European to describe the capital city of the Mongol Empire.

Niccolò and Maffeo Polo, Venetian merchants, also reached the heart of the Empire a decade later; a bold act which boosted their business in the East. Initially, they managed a factory in Constantinople and then in the Crimea. From thence they departed to the East, first to Sarai, located on the Volga River, to the court of Berke Khan, ruler of the Golden Horde. A civil war among Tatars prevented them from returning directly to Constantinople – they had to make a detour through the territory of today's Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Political turmoil in Buchara thwarted their plans and forced them to stay in the city for three years. Afterwards, together with an envoy of Hulagu Khan, they went to see Kubilai Khan, the successor of Möngke. They reached their destination in the winter of 1266. Since the Great Khan Kubilai moved his capital to Khanbalic, today's Beijing, it is probably there that the Polo Brothers went. They returned to Europe as envoys of Kubilai Khan, carrying a letter to the Pope. As Clement IV was deceased, the message had to wait until a new head of the Roman Catholic Church was elected, which happened only in 1271. The brothers left for Asia with a letter from the pope, this time taking Niccolò's son, Marco Polo, with them. Their unusual journey lasted several years. They travelled through today's Armenia, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. On their journey they crossed the Pamir Mountains, the Taklamakan Desert and the Great Steppe, to finally reach the court of the Great Khan in 1275 and stay there for seventeen years.

Marco Polo, who accompanied his father and his uncle to the court of the Great Khan, won the ruler's trust and was sent on many missions throughout the empire. Notes from his travels served as a basis for the "Description of the World". The book is a result of a collaboration with an Italian writer, Rustichello of Pisa, and includes descriptions of the areas conquered by the Mongols and their dependent territories. Some of them, like Japan or Java, are mentioned for the first time in a European source. One of his travels brought Marco Polo to India through Ceylon and then to Socotra and Zanzibar. The sailing experience which he gained during this voyage became an asset in his later perilous mission of escorting princess Kōkōchin to Persia. This event is important insofar that it may be an argument for the veracity of Polo's account, as it matches the story in the chronicle of the Yuan dynasty. His father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo then joined Marco, and the three of them set out from China in 1292. After completing the mission, they headed home, to Europe. They travelled through Iran, Turkey and Constantinople and came back to Venice in 1295. The story of the life of Marco Polo abounds in controversies, and the authenticity of his journeys is sometimes questioned. For example, the fact that his name is not to be found in the chronicles of the empire of Kubilai Khan raises a number of doubts. However, researchers have proved that the events described in the relevant Mongolian and Chinese sources correspond to the story in the "Description of the World".



Kublai Khan giving a gold laissez-passer to the Polo brothers. MS fr 2810 f. 3v ok. 1410-1412, Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), public domain.



Niccolò and Maffeo Polo remitting a letter from Kublai Khan to Pope Gregory X in 1271, author unknown, from 'Le livre des Merveilles du Monde', (15th century), material in public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com



An Italian Franciscan of Czech origin, Odoric de Pordenone during his mission in Sumatra (after 1317 AD), Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

**“ Niccolò and Maffeo Polo, Venetian merchants, also reached the heart of the Empire a decade later; a bold act which boosted their business in the East ”**

# Rabban Bar Sawma, the Nestorian – a special emissary of the Ilkhanids to Europe

B E N E D I C T U S  
P O L O N U S

A slow disintegration of the country of the Great Khan and the blocking of the triumphant march of the Mongols in the Middle East by the Mamluks showed that further conquests in the Levantine were only possible in cooperation with European rulers. Strife and quarrel between the descendants of Genghis Khan were becoming more intense. In the second half of 13th century the succession was taken over by the descendants of Tolui, the Great Conqueror's youngest son. The successors were Mongke (1251-1259) and his brother Kubilay (1260-1294), the founder of the Yuan dynasty in China (1279-1368); their brother Hulagu (1253-1265), who was the head of the imperial army in the Middle East and the founder of the Hulagid country, also known as the country of the Ilkhanids (1256-1335). Hulagu always accepted the supremacy of his brothers on the Great Khan's throne and fought alongside them against other descendants of Genghis Khan. Hulagu's branch of the Mongol ruling family had links to Christianity: Sorkaktani-beki (died 1252), Tolui's wife and the mother of the three brothers, and Dokuz-chatun (died 1265), Hulagu's most important wife, both stemmed from the tribe of the Kereits whose faith was Nestorianism. The lands ruled by the descendants of the two women were a stronghold of the Church of the East. Although none of the brothers eventually adopted the faith of their mother, they continued to treat Christians favourably. It was this background that facilitated the journey of an Uighur monk, Rabban Bar Sawma (1245-1317), Kubilay's Christian subject – first as a pilgrim from distant China to the Ilkhanid Iran, and then as an official envoy of the Ilkhanid's Mongol ruler to the kings of Europe.

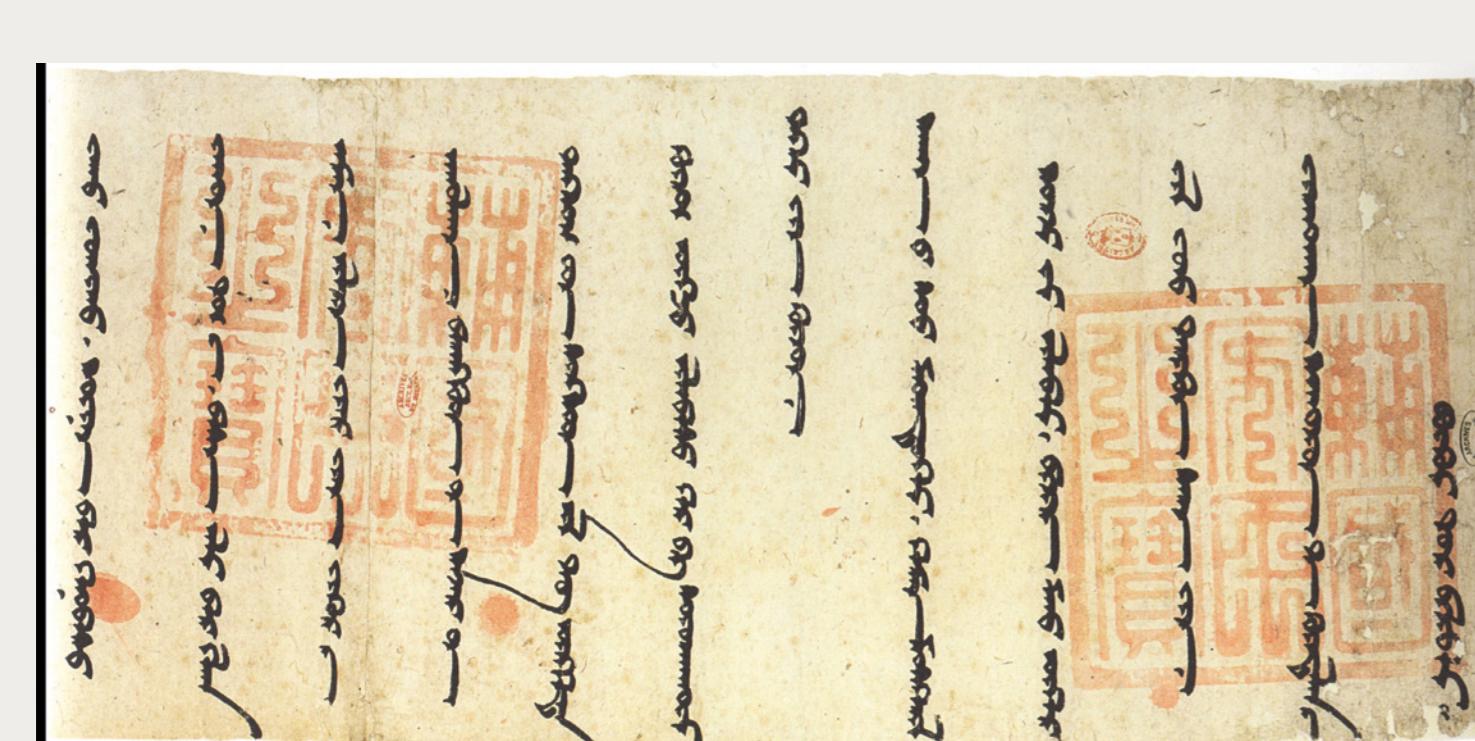
Bar Sawma was the only child of a Nestorian clergyman, Sheban. He was educated to become a cleric in Kubilay's capital city, Khanbaliq (today: Beijing). Later, despite an initial disapproval of his parents, he became a monk and left his family home to live in a hermitage close to the capital. With time, Bar Sawma's fame and piety began to attract disciples. One of them was a young Uighur named Marcos, a son of the archdeacon of Koshang (today: Ordos in Inner Mongolia, China). Approximately in 1278 the two monks made a decision to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After a short stay in Khanbaliq they went to Koshang where they were well equipped by Kubilay's brothers-in-law who ruled the region. Subsequently, the pilgrims travelled via Tangut, Loulan, Kashgar, Talas and the land of the Chagatai Khanate (named after Genghis Khan's third son) to reach Khorasan, which was then ruled by the Hulagids. Later they continued the journey and went to Azerbaijan's Maraga, where in the capital of the Ilkhanids, catholicus Mar Denha I (1265-1281) was the ruler and head of the Nestorian Church of the East. Due to unrest and military campaigns, the monks were unable to reach the final destination of their pilgrimage. That is why they decided to settle down at Arbel (today: Erbil), which led to an unexpected reaction from the catholicus. He saw the presence of the pilgrims as a way to improve the situation of the faithful under the rule of the Hulagids. Therefore, the catholicus asked the pilgrims to go on a mission to Il汗 Abara (1265-1282) in order to officially confirm the legal standing of Mar Denha. As both monks knew the customs and the language of the Mongols, they easily completed the task. Upon their return, Denha I nominated Marcos as the metropolitan of Northern China and gave him his liturgical name of Yahballaha, and

Bar Sawma was nominated Denha's plenipotentiary and presbyter of Eastern Asia. Both monks protested without success, so they began to prepare for their return journey. In the meantime, Mar Denha died in Baghdad, and Yahballaha was indicated as his successor. Yahballaha tried to avoid the nomination using the fact that he did not speak Syriac and did not know the liturgy as an excuse, but the arguments of the Nestorian community prevailed. The Nestorian fathers claimed that the community needed a leader with a thorough understanding of the Mongolian language and the customs of the ruling elites in the Mongol empire. Eventually, the monk agreed to accept the nomination, which was met with a heartfelt welcome across the country's faithful of all social classes. The new catholicus Yahballaha III was officially approved by Abaga Khan. Yahballaha's former teacher and long-time travel companion, Bar Sawma, became his chancellor.

The new Khan of the Ilkhanate, Arghun (1284-1291) was a son of a Christian woman and for that reason treated Christians favourably. However, his positive attitude was motivated mostly politically. As the first diplomatic mission sent by Arghun Khan to European rulers had not produced any outcomes, he took advice with Yahballaha III as to who should embark on a new diplomatic mission. The catholicus suggested Bar Sawma, and the Ilkhan accepted the envoy. Arghun Khan gave Bar Sawma letters to the Byzantine emperor, the kings of France and England, and the Pope. He also equipped the envoy with gold, horses and servants. At the beginning of 1287, the mission left Maraghi and headed to Trebizond (today: Trabzon), where the group boarded a ship to Constantinople. There, the envoys received a warm welcome from emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1272-1328) who gave them precious gifts. Subsequently, Bar Sawma and his companions boarded a ship and sailed to Italy. On the European continent they visited Naples in June and then arrived in Rome. In spring of the same year Pope Honorius IV died and there was no pontiff in the Eternal City at the point of Bar Sawma's arrival. The envoy could not wait for the results of the conclave and set out to continue his journey to the north of the Apennine Peninsula. He travelled through Tuscany, Genoa and Lombardy, and finally reached France where, later in the same year, he was received by King Phillip IV the Fair (1285-1314). The French sovereign promised his help in the fight against the Mamluks to regain control over the Holy Land, and sent his envoy to the Ilkhan. Subsequently, Bar Sawma went to Gascony to see the English king, Edward I (1272-1307). Due to the difficulties Edward I was facing in his own country at that moment, he refused to join the alliance with the Mongols. On his way back, Bar Sawma passed through Rome and met with the newly-elected pope, Nicholas IV (1288-1292). The talks were conducted in a very friendly atmosphere, and the Pope offered the envoy his gifts to Yahballaha III (a tiara and a ring), as well as numerous gifts for Arghun Khan. Bar Sawma returned to Maraghi in 1288 and thus completed his diplomatic mission. Although the mission did not bring any tangible political results, it conveyed a wealth of information about the Church of the East to Europeans. Bar Sawma died in January 1294, and Yahballaha III lived to reach an advanced age, witnessing persecution of his fellow believers – as the country of the Ilkhanids began to disintegrate while becoming increasingly Islamic.



Itinerary of the travel of the Nestorian monk Rabban Bar Sawma from China to Europe 1278 - 1288 AD.



Letter (an extract) in Mongolian of Ilkhan Arghun to Phillip IV Le Bel, King of France from 1289 AD, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

**“**  
It was this background that facilitated the journey of an Uighur monk, Rabban Bar Sawma (1245-1317), Kubilay's Christian subject – first as a pilgrim from distant China to the Ilkhanid Iran, and then as an official envoy of the Ilkhanid's Mongol ruler to the kings of Europe  
**”**



Hulagu and his Nestorian wife Dokuz Kathun, author Rashid Ad-Din, "History of the world", 14th century, public domain, source: www.wikipedia.com

# The First Expedition

## following Benedict The Pole's

### 3.06-2.09.2004



In 2004, an expedition set out from Wrocław with the aim of reconstructing and following the route travelled in the middle of 12th century by the papal legates, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and Benedict the Pole (Benedykt Polak). The spiritus movens of the expedition and its organiser was traveller Robert Szyjanowski. It became his idée fixe to disseminate information about the outstanding feat of the two Franciscan delegates. In particular, Szyjanowski's expedition intended to shed more light on the first Polish traveller, Benedict the Pole, hitherto unknown to the general public.

The information needed to organise the journey was acquired thanks to an in-depth analysis of all existing reports from the expedition, and was based on multiple sources – predominantly the work of such renowned historians as Professor Jerzy Strzelczyk and Reverend Professor Franciszek Rosiński, who kindly offered their support and expertise. After a few years of preparation, in the summer of 2004, a team of five travellers set out on the route plotted roughly 750 years earlier, in specially equipped off-road vehicles – the only means of transport which was able to follow the original course of the former Tatar trails in today's Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

In his report, Robert Szyjanowski found it the most interesting to confront the reports from 12th century with today's reality:

"reading Ystoria Mongolorum by Carpini, Benedict the Pole's report from the journey or Historia Tartarorum by C. de Bridia in the locations actually visited by the legates, where they may even have taken their notes, or inside heritage buildings which have survived, surrounded by the landscapes which have often remained the same, and, most of all, being able to observe the lives of the Mongols so accurately described by the Franciscans – all that gave us an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the perspective of the medieval authors. It also led us to reflect upon the changes which have taken place over time, but also on

so many Mongolian customs, features and artefacts which have remained intact until today, including the design of their everyday equipment. The experience of the journey, the 3 months we spent camping or sleeping in our cars, sometimes in yurts or on bare ground, with all the adventures and problems we had (like the accident in Kalmykia in Russia, or one of our cars drowning in the Yenisei river) let us better understand and relate to the challenges faced by Benedict and Giovanni centuries ago – despite the obvious relative differences between the two expeditions."

The first expedition following Benedict's route and Robert Szyjanowski's research which accompanied the repeat journey have delivered many observations which may serve to clarify the controversies surrounding the estimation of the distance travelled by the papal legates. As a result of the 2004 expedition we have been able to locate a few spots en route which had not been known (such as Danilov or the cities of the Syr-Darya floodplain), and which were described in the reports from 13th century. The effects of Robert Szyjanowski's expedition have been presented at many exhibitions and events across Poland. Although many city authorities have decided to commemorate Benedict's journey with special plaques or even streets named after Benedict the Pole, and although a number of books have appeared on the subject (including a book for children entitled

"Podróż niesłychana Benedykta i Jana" by Łukasz Wierzbicki), the journey of the legates is still widely underappreciated, and its heroes still do not have their well-deserved place in our memories. That is why the story of Giovanni's and Benedict's journey must be told over and over again.

This is a fragment from Robert Szyjanowski's expedition journal:  
"I've been reading and suddenly I can see before me what the travellers described so many years ago.

Is it possible at all that so little has changed, or is it just the circumstances and my imagination? The monk's robe is a highly functional traveller's outfit which serves well in different weather conditions; besides, it sometimes lets me try to pretend I am Benedict, in the scenery described by him or by Giovanni. If only Carpini had had a camera with him..."



Route of the Expedition following the footsteps of Benedict the Pole, June 3rd – Sept 2nd, 2004. Distance covered – approx. 26 thousand km. Giovanni and Benedict took the same route travelling to the Mongol ruler and back to Europe. The participants of the 2004 expedition went back to Europe through Russia.



Mongolian Upland – crossing the stormy valley. Most likely this way, after leaving the valley of the Bulgan River, Benedict and Giovanni entered the country of the Mongols. "Then we entered the country of the Mongols, whom we call the Tatars. Through this country, I think, we rode for three weeks, straining our horses. And on St. Mary Magdalene's Day we came to Giyuk, who is now the emperor." (fragment of the medieval relation). Photo: Robert Szyjanowski.

“  
after a few years of preparation, in the summer of 2004,  
a team of five travellers set out on the route plotted  
roughly 750 years earlier  
”



Mongolia, near Charchorin – former Karakorum – Robert Szyjanowski, as Benedict the Pole in Syr Horde. "We did not see it (the city of Karakorum), but we were there only half a day away from it when we were at Syra-Orda, which is the largest court residence of their emperor." (fragment of the medieval relation). Photo: Robert Szyjanowski.