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Christian Europe and Mongol Asia:
First Medieval Intercultural Contact Between East and West

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Between approximately 400 and 1000 A.D., Christian Europe was an isolated and inward looking civilization due to an almost continuing series of invasions by Germans, Huns, Muslims, Avars, Vikings, and Magyars. Western Europe represented a civilization on the defensive a civilization fighting for her life. But after a century or two of peace and prosperity, Christian Europe's population and self-confidence grew; Europe was soon on the offensive in Spain, the Western Mediterranean, and the Crusades in the Middle East. Western Europe thus began to enter into the large Asian world of which she knew little or nothing at all.

Medieval Europe was especially ignorant of the Far East of Asia beyond the Muslim Middle East. The Christian West still accepted many old classical myths and legends about far off places and peoples and still tried to find a Biblical explanation and/or niche for everything and everyone. Muslim defeats in the East at the hands of the Kara-Khitans and later the Mongols were attributed to the legendary Christian priest-king, Prester John, and later to his son, King David. Thus Christian Europe was slowly becoming aware, in a vague and hazy way, of the peoples and activities of Central and East Asia. But in this early stage, the West was not receiving an entirely accurate view. At first Western Europe viewed the Mongols as enemies of

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Islam, and thus as friends of all Christians. However, this early Western hope and expected friendship soon changed to fear and terror, as the Mongols conquered all of Christian Russia by 1240. The Mongols were too cruel and too vicious to the Russian Christians to be either Prester John or his son, King David.

In 1241, the Mongols entered Poland and Hungary in full force about 150,000 strong. Most Western Christians were stunned and shocked as this highly mobile and well-organized Mongol army quickly and decisively defeated the Poles and Germans at Leignitz and the Hungarians and Cumans at Mohi. All of Western Europe was open to the Mongols as no united Christian military force existed to oppose them on the battlefield. Western Christians were awe-struck by the Mongols' great numbers, their speed, and their cruelty; the Western Europeans were literally in a state of shock and disbelief, as they awaited the Mongols' next move.

The Mongols' sudden withdrawal from Europe was as unexpected as their dramatic attack. Their return to the East was considered a miracle by many Western Christians. The Mongol pullback was traditionally attributed to the death of Ogodei Khan in 1241 and the resulting need for the Mongol princes, especially Batu (the leader of this western invasion and Khan of the Golden Horde), to return to Mongolia for the election of a new Great Khan. This view has been rejected by historians as Batu never went back to Karakorum, the Mongol capital. Batu took his military forces to Eastern Russia in order to influence the upcoming election of his hated

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enemy and cousin, Guyuk. Batu failed as Guyuk was elected Great Khan. Modern scholars now believe that the Mongols left Christian Europe because there was not enough grass for the numerous horses and herds of these steppe nomads and because they had decided that wooded and mountainous Europe was not worth conquering.

While the West did not know why the Mongols left in 1242, most Europeans believed that they would return. Many Christians viewed the Mongol invasion as punishment for sin and possibly the beginning of the End of the World. The latter belief carried additional weight when the devastating Mongol invasion was added to the Fall of Jerusalem in 1244 and the ongoing life and death struggle between the papacy and Emperor Frederick II.

The first phase of East-West relations between Mongol Asia and Christian Europe revolves around Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254). As the nominal leader of Western Civilization, Pope Innocent IV was the first to take action. The Mongol threat was one of the three major items (along with the deposition of Emperor Frederick II and the call for a new Crusade) on the agenda of the 1245 Council of Lyons.

Innocent IV was a far-sighted leader who realized the danger of a renewed Mongol attack on divided and unprepared Europe. Lacking military power, Innocent IV could only employ diplomacy. Thus he decided to send papal envoys to the Mongols to find out *who* they were and *what* their intentions were, and to hopefully convert them to Western Christianity in the process. As his envoys, he selected

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mendicant friars as they were active and dynamic preachers, teachers, and missionaries. Pope Innocent IV sent four separate embassies to preach and gather information in 1245. The two Franciscan and two Dominican missions all carried religious and diplomatic letters addressed to various Mongol leaders and military commanders. The papal letters asked Mongol intentions, told them to stop killing and slaughtering people (especially Christians), and urged them to accept baptism. The papacy thus favored peace and harmony with the Mongols via diplomacy and conversion.

The Franciscan mission of John of Plano Carpini is probably the most interesting and best known of these four early embassies. John was a portly sixty-year-old friar who traveled to Karakorum via Poland and Russia. He covered over 3000 miles in approximately three months and was present at Guyuk's enthronement in 1246. Guyuk sent a written reply to the papal letter carried by Friar John. The Great Khan's return letter was basically a threat that ordered the Pope and the Christian West to submit to Mongol supremacy or else. Guyuk's letter, like all subsequent Mongol letters to Western Christians, was an ultimatum; it stated that it was the will of heaven that the Mongols dominate and rule the earth. The fact that the Mongol

armies were always victorious was cited as proof of this claim. Thus the Mongols believed that they had a divine right and mandate to rule the entire world.

Friar John's report to the Pope in 1247 represented the first Western eye-witness account of Mongol Asia. It was a widely read

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account as it was incorporated into Vincent of Beauvais' popular *Speculum Historiale*. Friar John's history contained an accurate description of Mongol life and customs, and was especially revealing in Mongol military organization and tactics and how best to oppose them. He was as much a military spy for the Christian West as a religious envoy for Pope Innocent IV.

Thus this first state of East-West relations between Mongol Asia and Christian Europe was not too successful as it became apparent that a deep political-religious gap existed between Mongol Asia and Christian Europe. Since both the Mongol Khan and the Christian Pope regarded himself as God's divinely appointed representative on earth, meaningful dialogue and communication between these two East-West leaders came to a temporary standstill.

After the reign of Pope Innocent IV, the initiative in Europe's relations with the Mongols shifted away from the religious-diplomatic papal policy with its stress on baptism and conversion to the political-military arena once the Western kings and rulers became directly involved in East-West relations. This second phase of intercultural contact between Mongol Asia and Christian Europe centers largely on attempts to establish political-military alliances between the Western Christians and Eastern Mongols against their common Muslim enemies in the Middle East.

King Louis IX of France was the focal point of this first political-military alliance attempt. A Mongol general in the Middle East

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sent two envoys to the crusading Louis IX on the island of Cyprus in 1248. King Louis sent envoys in return. Louis IX was sick, defeated, and a prisoner (after his defeat by the Egyptian Mamluks in the Sixth Crusade, 1248-1250) when a nebulous Mongol response was received. Despite the lack of any concrete alliance, this was an important mission, as it represented a positive Western response to the first suggestion of a Mongol-Christian alliance. Thus it was the opening of a new era in East-West relations. The initiative came from the Mongols the invincible Mongols were approaching the Western Christians for a possible alliance against their common Muslim enemies.

The second stage of the political-military alliance phase of Christian-Mongol relations centers on the activities of the Mongol Khans of Persia. The middle of the thirteenth century saw a major redistribution of power in both Europe and Asia. In Europe the papacy destroyed the Hohenstaufen family and its imperial plans. In the Middle East and Mongol Asia, the power situation was also readjusted significantly. Several major Mongol leaders died Batu in 1256 and Mongke, the fourth Great Khan, in 1259. The Mongols under Hulegu conquered the Baghdad Caliphate in 1258. The Mongols thus became a major factor in Middle Eastern affairs along with the Muslims, Christian Crusaders, Persians, and Khwarizmians. The Mamluk Turks emerged in Egypt as heretical rebels against the orthodox Caliph at Baghdad. The Mamluks were the only major military obstacle in the way of a complete Mongol takeover of the Muslim Middle East. They are credited with the first defeat

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of the Mongols on the battlefield (at Goliath's Spring in 1260) even if Hulegu's main Mongol army had gone East for the election of a new Great Khan and even if there were only a handful of Mongols at the battle.

While all this was taking place, Hulegu established the Mongol Khanate in Persia; this is usually referred to by the term Il-Khanate which means subject Khanate. Hulegu was opposed by the hostile Mamluk Muslims of Egypt in the West and by the hostile Russian Mongols of the Golden Horde in the North. The Mongols of the Golden Horde had accepted Islam, and thus they opposed Hulegu's attack on the Baghdad Caliphate. This is the major reason Hulegu took his main army north and east in 1260, as the Russian Mongols represented a much more serious threat than Mamluk Egypt.

Caught between his enemies, Hulegu began to view the European Christians as potential allies against his hostile neighbors. At first the Western Christians were not too receptive to the Persian Khan's friendly overtures. They were confused by the hostility of the Golden Horde in Russia and the friendliness of the Il-Khans in Persia, as the Western Christians still viewed all the Mongols as part of one empire. But the rise of the Mamluks in Egypt posed a serious threat to the last few crusader states in the Levant, so the Christians began to see the Mongols of Persia as potential allies against Mamluk Egypt.

Hulegu and his successor khans in Persia again took the initiative and sent a series of envoys and embassies to the popes and

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Western kings; they asked for a political-military alliance against the Mamluks. Many of the Persian Khans had Nestorian Christian wives; the khans were thus assumed to be favorably disposed to Christianity. Since most popes continued to see baptism as a prerequisite for a political-military alliance, the Mongol envoys spread rumors of the various khan's imminent conversions with almost all of their embassies. The three Mongol envoys who appeared before the 1274 Second Council of Lyons dramatically asked to be baptised before that assemblage to create an even more favorable climate for their mission. The Latin sources report that the Western Churchmen recognized this obvious ploy.

As a result of these Mongol embassies, the English King Henry III and his son Edward I planned a joint military attack with the Mongols against the Muslims of Egypt, but the Mamluks seized the military initiative in 1271 and prevented any significant joint activity by these Christian Crusaders and Persian Mongols. From this point onward, the Western kings were no longer eager for a new Crusade, but dialogue and embassies between Western Christians and Persian Mongols continued for the next fifty years due to the Il-Khan initiative.

Actually, the Persian Khan's diplomatic activity peaked under Arghun Khan (1284-1291). He sent four embassies to Christian Europe in less than

eight years. His most serious and interesting mission was led by a Christian monk named Rabban Sauma. He was a reverse Marco Polo in the sense that he was a Chinese Uighur who traveled to the

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Middle East and then on to Western Europe as Arghun's ambassador to the popes and kings of England and France in the late 1280's. Rabban Sauma was a Nestorian Christian and was thus an ideal envoy to the Christian West. He wrote an account of his trip to the West and thus provided posterity with a counterpart to the Polo description of China.

At this point, the Christian West was no longer interested in military action to liberate the Holy Land, especially after the Fall of Acre in 1291 the last Crusader State in the Levant. For all practical purposes, the Western crusading spirit died with King Louis IX of France in 1270. The popes and Church, like the Western kings, were unable and unwilling to support military action in the Middle East.

With this shift in Western sentiment, the popes and Western Christians returned to their earlier policy of diplomatic-religious propaganda and missions over the political-military alliance policy of the Western kings and crusaders. The conversion of the Mongols to Christianity had always been the chief aim of the Church since 1245, even though this goal was temporarily overshadowed by the political-military phase of the Western kings. This primacy of conversion and evangelization was evident in all papal letters and bulls. This Western preference for conversion continued to be the dominant theme of East-West relations after 1300, but now the popes and friars looked beyond the Middle Eastern Persian Khanate. They looked to the Far Eastern home of the Mongols; they looked especially to China as it was the largest and

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most powerful khanate of the four parts into which the earlier united Mongol Empire had split.

Papal interest in a Christian mission to the Far East was intensified by the trips of the Polos to China in the late thirteenth century. Through the Polos, Kublai Khan (the last of the five Great Khans) asked for one hundred Christian teachers. Pope Gregory X sent only two Dominican Friars, but both turned back in the Middle East.

The early papal mission to Mongols of China revolves around the activities of John of Monte Corvino. He was eventually appointed the first Christian Archbishop of Peking. John was a Franciscan missionary in Armenia and Persia for years before he returned to Italy in 1289. He confirmed for the papacy the many well-known reports and rumors of Kublai's being friendly to Christians. Pope Nicholas IV decided to send a Franciscan mission to Kublai in China a mission led by friar John of Monte Corvino. He carried the usual religious letters of good will to Eastern political rulers and religious leaders. Friar John took the dangerous two year sea trip from Persia to South China. He arrived in Peking in 1294 one year after Kublai died.

Friar John presented the papal letters to the new Khan. He was granted permission to settle and preach in the capital city as he had status as both a clergyman and a Western ambassador. The Khan's court was primarily Buddhist, but it was tolerant of all other religions. John was given up for dead in the West until the Pope received two letters from

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him in 1306-1307. It was at this time that the pope appointed him Archbishop of Peking and Patriarch of the Orient. These letters were the last friar John wrote to the pope. It was first in 1333 that the pope was informed of John's death five years after it occurred in 1328. The pope responded by sending a friar Nicholas to be the new Archbishop of Peking. His exact fate is unknown, but he never made it to Peking.

The Franciscan John of Marignolli led the last documented Christian mission to the Mongol Court in China; his trip was the end of early East-West contact and the end of the medieval Christian mission in China. In 1336 Christian Alan mercenaries serving the Mongol Khan in China wrote and asked the Pope for clergymen to serve their spiritual needs. John of Marignolli was appointed to lead the largest papal embassy sent to Peking. His trip and experiences are known only through his own account. Friar John carried the usual papal religious letters; he had several audiences with the Mongol Khan in Peking in 1342. His large thirty-two man mission spent three years in Peking. He left in 1345 as he sensed the coming unrest that resulted in anti-Mongol violence in 1348 and the eventual overthrow of the Mongol dynasty in China in 1368.

A few words on the impact and consequences of this early Christian Europe-Mongol Asia intercultural contact are in order here. In the first place, it should be noted that there was little lasting European impact on the Mongols and Asians. Hardly any evidence of Western Christian influence and activity exists in Mongol and Chinese sources.

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Most of the information in this study comes from the Latin sources of the West. Furthermore, the united Mongol Empire split into four separate Khanates at first and into more regional units later. The Mongol rulers were soon assimilated into the respective cultures, religions, and civilizations, especially in China and the Middle East. Thus these Mongol rulers were no longer ripe for conversion to Christianity. China in particular returned to her traditional isolation after a century in the larger Mongol World Empire. There was no real Western European impact on China, as Western Christian embassies never went beyond the Mongol ruling elite and their foreign officials they never really entered into contact with the Chinese masses.

In the second place, it can be concluded that Western Europe basically responded to outside Mongol and Asian requests for missionaries, ambassadors and alliances. The European popes and kings seldom took the initial step in dealings and relations with the Mongols and Asians. The Western popes and kings were suspicious of any type of Christian-Mongol relationship or alliance. They felt Mongol unbelievers could not be trusted until after they accepted Christianity. This is the reason most papal letters and bulls were purely religious and spiritual in character and content. Europe was after conversion before alliance, as conversion meant the acceptance of papal leadership as well as Christianity. This early Christian-Mongol contact (both religious-diplomatic and political-military endeavors) ended in the mid-fourteenth century as that is when the Mongols dropped the initiative when the

Mongol Khans in Persia accepted Islam and when the Mongol dynasty was overthrown in China.

The final conclusion to be drawn is that the papacy played the central role in this early contact between Christian Europe and Mongol Asia. As the nominal leaders of Medieval Europe, the popes guided, directed, and orchestrated the work and activities of the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the kings of France, England, and the Crusader States in the Levant. The popes and the Church failed to achieve their primary objective of converting the Mongols, but there were some noteworthy religious-intellectual results to offset the failure to convert the Asians.

The Europeans began to learn Middle Eastern and Asian languages at least Arabic and Persian if not Mongol and Chinese. This significant advance played an important role in trade and commerce as well as in diplomacy and the exchange of intercultural ideas.

The papacy and the Church became less rigid in dealing with Eastern Christians and infidels. Occasionally the Western Christians agreed to overlook their theological differences with Maronite, Jacobite, and Nestorian Christians, and to present somewhat of a united Christian front against Muslim and Buddhist beliefs. Intellectually this can be viewed as the beginning of the spirit of toleration and ecumenism within Christianity.

Diplomatic exchanges between Christian Europe and Mongol Asia led to the emergence of the first Western eye-witness accounts of

far-off East Asia. For the first time, Western Europeans were exposed to the true size and scope of the Eurasian landmass; they were exposed to different cultures, beliefs, values, attitudes, and institutions; the papacy and Europe were thus forced out of their narrow religious-geographic perspective; they began to realize that they had to deal with and relate to the non-Christian world with its many different peoples, religions, and cultures. The Europeans gradually assigned the Mongols and other Asians a permanent place in the natural order of things; they no longer tried to force all peoples into a specific Biblical niche or role as they initially did during Europe's narrow Christian view of the world and all people in it. The Westerners realized that they could not refuse to recognize and deal with the rest of the world simply because it was non-Christian that they could not ignore and pretend that all non-Christian peoples and cultures did not exist. Thus the Mongols and Asians were incorporated into the West's intellectual framework in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

This early Christian-Mongol contact is an interesting and important chapter of Medieval and World History. Unfortunately, it is a chapter frequently overlooked by Western historians because the Latin sources are scattered and poorly organized at present. This early East-West contact represented Europe's first interaction with a totally foreign civilization outside the framework of the traditional Mediterranean cultures which emerged from the break-up of the Roman Empire. This early Christian-Mongol contact in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries

represented Europe's first true intercultural experience and is of critical importance in evaluating and understanding the growth and development of Western intellectual history especially in the emergence of a European world-view of mankind and history. Thus it was not later fifteenth and sixteenth century exposure to foreign cultures and civilizations in the Age of Exploration and Discovery, but this early Mongol contact which ended Europe's geographical isolation, moved Christian Europe toward ecumenism and toleration, and broadened Europe's intellectual horizons.

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