

The *Itinerarium* of Friar William of Rubruck

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Rubruck's mission

The Franciscan Friar William of Rubruck, who traversed virtually the whole breadth of Mongol Asia during the years 1253-55, was not the first Western European to do so. He had been preceded by his fellow-Franciscan, John of Plano Carpini (Pian di Carpine), who headed one of three embassies from Pope Innocent IV to the Mongol world in 1245-7, designed to protest at the Mongol devastation of Poland, Moravia and Hungary in 1241-2 and to urge the Great Khan (Kaghan) to become a Christian. On his outward journey to the court of the Great Khan (Kaghan) Güyüg, Carpini had followed a broadly similar route to that which Rubruck would take – through the Pontic and Caspian steppes and Turkestan and crossing the Altai and Tarbaghatai ranges. Like the other papal embassies, Carpini's journey had borne no fruit, since the Mongols were engaged in a programme of world-conquest, in the belief that the entire world had been granted by Heaven to the empire's founder, Chinggis (Genghis) Khan (d. 1227),¹⁾ and Carpini was simply sent back with an ultimatum demanding the submission of the Pope and the Western kings.²⁾

Rubruck, however, was the earliest Catholic Christian to make the journey across Mongol Asia in a private capacity and of his own volition. Apart from a brief anecdote recounted by the late thirteenth-century author Giacomo d'Isco and a few details provided by the English Franciscan Roger Bacon (d. c.1292), everything we know of him is derived from the report that he composed for King Louis IX of France (d. 1270; later St. Louis) after his return. The only personal detail he vouchsafes is that he was a man of considerable bulk (xxi, 6). Despite the estimates often found in the secondary literature, we have no idea whatever of his age. Although he originated from

Cassel in French Flanders (and not, as once thought, from Ruysbroeck in Brabant),³⁾ allusions to the width of the Seine in Paris and to the distance between that city and Orléans (xiii, 10, xviii, 4, and xxi, 6) indicate that he had spent some time in the Paris region. His report, which bears no sure title and hence is usually termed simply the *Itinerarium*, takes the form of a long letter to King Louis. From the fact that he appears to number Louis among his 'spiritual comrades' (Epilogue, 1), we might assume that the contacts between the two men were of long standing and that Rubruck was one of the friars with whom the king was closely associated.⁴⁾ An incidental reference he makes to the Damietta branch of the River Nile (xxxvii, 8) indicates that he had accompanied Louis's expedition against Egypt (1249-50) in the course of the Seventh Crusade;⁵⁾ and since d'Isèo describes him as a lector,⁶⁾ it has been proposed that he may have held this rank in the Franciscan Order's convent at Nicosia on Cyprus, where the crusading army had wintered (1248-9).⁷⁾

Following the disastrous outcome of the Egyptian campaign, Rubruck evidently accompanied the king and the remnants of the crusading army to Palestine, where he must have witnessed the return of an embassy that Louis had sent to the Mongols during his halt on Cyprus. In December 1248 the King had been visited by David (Dā'ūd) and Markūs, eastern Christian envoys from the Mongol general Eljigidei, then operating in Iran. The general's letter wished Louis well in his campaign against the Muslims and asked the king to secure equitable treatment for Christians of other churches living under Latin rule; his envoys went further, informing Louis that both Eljigidei and the Great Khan (Kaghan) Güyüg were themselves Christians. These amicable assurances contrasted so markedly with the ultimatums sent by the Mongols hitherto that Louis was encouraged to respond with an embassy of his own in the following month, headed by the Dominican Andrew of Longjumeau.

When he rejoined King Louis in Palestine in 1251, Friar Andrew brought news of a community of German silver miners who had been enslaved during the devastation of Hungary in 1241-2 by Mongol forces under

Chinggis Khan's grandson Batu Khan; they had passed into the possession of another of Chinggis Khan's descendants, Būri, and had been transported to the neighbourhood of the Central Asian town of Talas (xxiii, 2). Rubruck was clearly moved by their plight, since he describes them at one point as the principal reason for his journey (xxxiii, 1). But he also tells us that he had conceived a desire to spread the Christian gospel to the pagan Mongols at large (xxxiii, 8) and that rumours had reached the crusaders of the conversion to Christianity of the Mongol prince Sartaq (i, 7), Batu's son, whose headquarters lay in the Pontic steppe. These considerations likewise played a part in his decision to make the hazardous journey to the Mongol world. Rubruck was accompanied, at least from Constantinople, by a fellow-Franciscan, Bartholomew of Cremona (since the friars always travelled in pairs), who had experience of dealings with the Greeks of Nicaea (xxviii, 10), by an interpreter and by a slave-boy whom he had purchased (i, 10).

Rubruck's task was therefore essentially a spiritual one, borne of the Franciscans' duty to spread the Gospel throughout the world (xxviii, 8, xxxiii, 8, and xxxiv, 6).⁸⁾ Yet from the outset a certain ambiguity surrounded the mission. Louis had asked him to put in writing everything he saw and heard during his sojourn with the Mongols (Preface, 2) – in other words, to spy. The party included one of the king's clerks, Gosset, whose task was to carry the alms Louis had provided for the friars' expenses (xix, 10). More importantly, Rubruck carried a letter from Louis to Sartaq, which has not survived but the contents of which can be reconstructed from the several references to it in the *Itinerarium*. It was partly a letter of introduction, since Louis asked for safe-conduct for the friars and for permission for them to stay in Mongol territory (xvi, 1, xix, 9, xxviii, 16, and xxxiii, 8); he further felicitated Sartaq on having embraced Christianity (xix, 5). All these circumstances combined to give the mission the semblance of an official diplomatic overture. Rubruck was keen from the outset, however, to dispel any notion that he was an envoy of the French King (ix, 1). The reason, apparently, was that Louis had been greatly discouraged by the reception accorded to Friar Andrew. Eljigidei had forwarded the king's envoy to the

Mongol regent, Oghul Qaimish, who had treated Louis's gifts as tribute and the embassy as a gesture of submission.⁹) This was standard Mongol practice. The Mongols regarded the despatch of an embassy by a foreign prince as expressing a desire for 'peace'. The same Turkish-Mongol term denoted both peace and submission, and it was impossible to have peace with them without acknowledging their sovereignty.¹⁰) 'Why have you come, if not to make peace?' would be the question repeatedly put to Rubruck and his colleague by the bemused Mongols on their arrival at the headquarters of the Kaghan Möngke (xxviii, 2). One further hazard was that the Mongols were on the lookout for bogus envoys and that any who were caught were put to death (viii, 2, and xxix, 13).

It was in order to dispel the impression of being an accredited envoy that on reaching Constantinople in the early spring of 1253 Rubruck had publicly preached in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia that he was travelling among the unbelievers in accordance with the Franciscan Rule (i, 6), a fact he would stress at the first Mongol encampment he visited (ix, 1). But at the Crimean port of Soldaia merchants warned him that if he were not an envoy he would be denied safe passage; and so he gave prominence to the fact that he carried a letter in which Louis informed Sartaq of 'what was in the interests of the whole of Christendom' (i, 7). Although at one point he was accused of being an impostor (ix, 2), Rubruck was otherwise generally taken to be an accredited envoy. This ensured an escort for the journey through Mongol territory and conveyance by means of the postal relay system (Mong. *dzam*; Turkish *yam*) that had been established to expedite official business.

The understanding that Rubruck was an ambassador would have the effect of compromising the course of his mission. Louis's letter urged Sartaq to be 'a friend to all Christians and an enemy of all enemies of the Cross'; Rubruck later suspected that Armenian translators at Sartaq's encampment had given a more forceful rendering in order, perhaps, to engineer collaboration against their Muslim enemies. Whatever the case, the Mongol prince interpreted these phrases as a request for Mongol military aid against the Muslims (xxvii, 11); and this impression had surely been reinforced by

Rubruck's description of Louis's letter to Sartaq as 'a message of peace' (xxviii, 16), a term of whose significance he seems to have been unaware. Feeling that the matter exceeded his competence, Sartaq forwarded the friars to the headquarters of his father Batu on the Volga (xvi, 1). Batu in turn despatched them to the Kaghan Möngke in Mongolia, sending the clerk Gosset back to Sartaq (xix, 9), evidently as a hostage. He also sent a messenger of his own to the Kaghan with a covering letter explaining the problem (xxiii, 7, and xxvii, 11); though the whole affair subsequently degenerated into farce when Rubruck was told that this letter had been mislaid and that Möngke had forgotten its contents (xxxiii, 8).¹¹⁾

The Mongols' changing perceptions of Rubruck's status were reflected in the etiquette to which the friars were subjected. At Sartaq's encampment they were initially treated as holy men and hence exempted from the requirement to make the triple genuflection to the prince (xv, 6), whereas on their appearance before Batu and the Kaghan they were expected, as ambassadors, to do so when first addressed (xix, 7, and xxviii, 16). Only at Möngke's court, where they were initially quartered with other foreign envoys (xxix, 5; cf. xxxii, 11), was it finally realised that they were travelling as simple 'priests' (xxxiii, 9, and xxxvi, 13). But when they had been there for five months, the Kaghan decided to send Rubruck back to Louis with an ultimatum denouncing David, Eljigidei's envoy of 1248-9, as an impostor and demanding the French King's submission (xxxiv, 3, and xxxvi, 5-12).

Since his colleague Bartholomew, unable to contemplate the hardships of the return journey, secured permission to remain at Möngke's headquarters (xxxvi, 14 and 17), Rubruck travelled back with only his interpreter and a Mongol guide by way of the encampments of Batu and Sartaq, where he retrieved the clerk Gosset, who had narrowly escaped being enslaved (xxxvii, 5), and thence through the Caucasus range. When the small party reached Anatolia, Rubruck crossed the Christian kingdom of Lesser (Cilician) Armenia and sailed to Tripoli in July 1255. Here he learned that Louis had embarked for France in April 1254, and the Franciscan Provincial Minister of the Holy Land appointed him as lector in the Order's convent in Acre and made him

send his report to the king by the hand of Gosset (i, 10, and Epilogue, 1). At the end of the *Itinerarium* Rubruck asks Louis to intercede and secure authorisation for him to travel to France (Epilogue, 1). That this appeal was successful is evident from the fact that his fellow-Franciscan Roger Bacon met him in Paris at some point between 1257 and 1267, when he finished his own *Opus maius*.

In several respects, Rubruck's mission fell short of its objectives. He proved unable to make contact with the German slaves, whose master Būri had been executed on Batu's orders in 1251/2 in view of his opposition to the new Kaghan Möngke. The Germans had then been moved from the Talas region to the district of Bolad (now Po-lo in Xinjiang), some hundreds of miles further east; as it happened, he passed not far from here on his outward journey to the Kaghan, but was unaware of the fact, and his return journey took him by a different route (xxiii, 2-3). Regarding Sartaq's alleged Christian sympathies, he is highly sceptical (xvii, 2), suspecting, rather, that the prince merely held Christians in derision and displayed greater favour towards Muslims if they brought more impressive gifts (xviii, 1). One difficulty here was that Sartaq was a Nestorian Christian and thus belonged to a church which, in the eyes of Catholic Christians, was heretical; but Rubruck's doubts may have arisen from the traditionally evenhanded approach of Mongol princes towards the representatives of all faiths and sects.¹² Certainly Sartaq's Christian faith is attested not only by Armenian Christian sources but also by Muslim authors, who can have had less interest in distorting it.¹³

Nor, lastly, was Rubruck able to spread the Gospel to the Mongols at large. He notes that after the public religious debate that took place in the town of Kharakhorum in Möngke's presence (see below) not a single person present expressed the desire to become a Christian (xxxiii, 22). There is a certain pathos in his statement 'We baptised there a total of six souls' (xxxvi, 20). In some measure this meagre harvest was due to the shortcomings of his interpreter 'Homo Dei', a man whom he describes as 'neither intelligent nor articulate' (x, 5), who tended to be inebriated at

critical moments (xxviii, 9, 15-16 and 18) and who in any case lacked adequate knowledge of the language (xiii, 6, xxii, 2, xxv, 8, and xxvii, 4). Allegedly, even the Mongols at the Kaghan Möngke's headquarters regarded the interpreter as unfit for purpose (xxix, 3). It was only during his stay there that Rubruck benefited from the services of a good interpreter in the adopted son of the Parisian goldsmith Guillaume Buchier, who translated for him during the religious debate. But the friar's handicap also arose from his perceived status as an ambassador, which meant that he was transported under escort, and at some speed, along the postal relay network and was unable to deviate from the route by which he was taken. Ironically, when describing his final interview with Möngke he notes that he would have had the opportunity to expound the Gospel to the Mongol sovereign had he still been deemed an ambassador, since only official envoys were permitted to speak at length and invited to say more (xxxiv, 4, and Epilogue, 5; cf. also xix, 5). It was at this juncture that he asked Möngke's leave to return at a later date to spread the Gospel; but the Kaghan's response was noncommittal (xxxiv, 6-7). We have no way of knowing whether Rubruck subsequently attempted to visit the empire a second time.

The question also arises, however, whether Rubruck's own tactics, and those employed elsewhere by the thirteenth-century Mendicant Orders, were of a kind to win converts in the steppe. In the first place, the Franciscan Rule imposed certain restrictions on the friars. As Rubruck repeatedly admitted to his hosts (x, 4, xv, 2, and xxviii, 16), they brought no precious gifts of the kind that Mongol rulers prized, such as valuable cloth; virtually all that they carried was for their own use (x, 2). This provoked the indignation of their interpreter and the contempt of their guide on the outward journey, until he recognised the value of the friars' prayers (xv, 2, and xxii, 2). In accordance with the Rule – and in contrast with Carpini's embassy some years earlier – Rubruck and his colleague also travelled barefoot for as long as the climate permitted (xix, 5, and xxviii, 4 and 11). He appears to have realised that future visitors would need to be more impressively equipped, since he warned a party of Dominicans he encountered on his way back through Armenia that

if their sole purpose was to preach little heed would be paid to them (xxxviii, 10), and ended his report with the advice that the Pope send a bishop to the Mongols, in some style and accompanied by several good interpreters (Epilogue, 5).

Secondly, the Mongols had a very different perspective on matters of religion. Not for them the disjunction between divine favour in this world and the next, as posited by Christianity. Rather, they saw a continuity between success and prosperity in this life and in the afterlife, so that earthly poverty was viewed quite simply as a sign of punishment from Heaven; and the idea of redemption through poverty was accordingly alien to them. Whereas the Western missionary distinguished between the 'true' faith and the false, the Mongols contrasted right conduct on the part of adherents of any religion, for which the reward was material success, with evildoing, of which the consequence was failure.¹⁴⁾

Mongol rulers, moreover, valued a religion for what has been termed 'inclusivism'. This stance was in some measure reflected in their attitude towards relations between members of the various faiths at their courts. An anecdote retailed by Giacomo d'Iseo has a Mongol khan objecting to the tactics of a Flemish lector who had threatened him with eternal damnation. The story can seemingly be linked with Rubruck's first visit to Batu's court, when he assured the khan that he would not possess the things of Heaven without having become a Christian, for 'He that believeth and is baptised, shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned'.¹⁵⁾ Batu responded with a slight smile, Rubruck tells us, and the Mongols present began to clap the friar in derision (xix, 7). Similarly Möngke forbade provocative or insulting remarks during the religious debate (xxxiii, 12) and on other occasions, too, expressed disapproval of contentious behaviour on the part of the 'religious' (xxxii, 8 and 11, and xxxiv, 2). But more than this, Mongol rulers were attracted by those religions that were compatible with their ancestral shamanistic beliefs and that could claim in some sense to subsume other faiths. Buddhism had a track record of asserting itself as the source of other religious systems, and Islam, while by no means an

'inclusive' faith in that context, nevertheless claimed to be the final revelation and to complete, and thereby to have subsumed, the other monotheisms – Christianity and Judaism. The Christianity purveyed by Rubruck, by contrast, set its face against such compromises; it stood over against other faiths rather than accommodating them.¹⁶⁾

Rubruck's sources of information

As we might expect of one who had probably attained the rank of lector, Rubruck appears to have been fairly well trained in the theological sphere. He cites Scripture thirty-one times in the course of his work.¹⁷⁾ He carried with him a copy of the *Sententiae* of the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard (xvi, 3), and had also evidently read St. Augustine (below). The image of Asia that he had formed before setting out on his mission would doubtless have been common among educated Western Europeans. Several references demonstrate his familiarity with geographical information from the encyclopaedic *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (d. 636) (xii, 6, xviii, 4-5, xix, 1, xxi, 2, xxix, 46; and cf. xxvi, 8, on the Seres, where Isidore is his unnamed source), and he also mentions the third-century writer Solinus (xxix, 46).

We cannot be sure, however, that Rubruck had access to the written reports of previous visitors to the Mongol world prior to embarking on his journey. The fact that he mentions Plano Carpini only once, and garbles the name as 'Polycarpo' (xix, 5), suggests that he was not directly conversant with the text of Carpini's *Ystoria Mongalorum*, though at a few points, when describing the Mongols' manner of life and customs, his language seemingly echoes that of Carpini.¹⁸⁾ He betrays greater familiarity with Andrew of Longjumeau's experiences (xviii, 5, xxiii, 2, xxvii, 5-6, xxxiii, 9, and xxxv, 3), for which, indeed, the *Itinerarium* is our principal source; though again this does not necessarily mean that he had read Andrew's report. His

phrasing further indicates that while at Constantinople in 1253 he had gleaned oral information from the knight Baldwin of Hainault (xxix, 44), who had recently returned from an embassy to the Mongols on behalf of the Latin Emperor of Constantinople ('Romania').

The value of the *Itinerarium* resides more in the quality of the friar's oral sources during his sojourn within the Mongol empire. These included not merely Mongol informants at the numerous camps through which his party passed, but also non-nomads visiting the Mongol world: an Armenian monk, who had previously been a hermit in the Jerusalem region and with whom the friars stayed for some time while in Möngke's encampment (xxviii, 8, and *passim*); envoys from Muslim princes, including the Sultans of Transjordan and Delhi (xxix, 6 and 9, and xxxvi, 3); priests from northern China (xxiv, 5, and xxix, 44-5, 47); and 'a great crowd of Christians... – Hungarians, Russians, Alans, Georgians and Armenians' (xxx, 10). The bulk of Rubruck's information, in fact, may well have been derived from expatriate Catholic Europeans who had been carried off from Hungary as slaves in 1241-2, like the Hungarian clerics whom the friars met in Batu's encampment (xx, 3) and from whom they doubtless acquired information transmitted at an earlier date by Hungarian Dominicans concerning the Bashkir people (xxi, 5);¹⁹ the Parisian goldsmith Guillaume Buchier (xxix, 9 and 49, xxxii, 4-5, xxxiii, 15), who was notably one of Rubruck's sources regarding the shamans' activities (xxxv, 1), and his adopted son (xxix, 11); the woman Paquette from Metz, who cooked a meal for the famished friars on their arrival at Möngke's headquarters (xxix, 2-3, and xxxv, 5). Conceivably these informants account in part for the tendency to minimise Mongol strength (see below) and to play up the opportunities for crusade against them and their satellites, since such *déracinés* would have longed for deliverance at the hands of their coreligionists.²⁰

The Itinerarium and its importance

Whatever obstacles prevented Rubruck from achieving his goals, on one count – that of fully transmitting intelligence on the Mongols to King Louis – he fulfilled his commission to the letter. His report is not written in a particularly elegant Latin, but the style is undeniably lucid and vivid. At an early juncture, he assures King Louis that he would have drawn everything for him had he only known how to draw (ii, 4). His concern was superfluous. Much of the *Itinerarium*, as we might anticipate, partakes of the character of personal memoirs and follows the order of the itinerary itself (though it is noteworthy that the space allotted to his return is little more than a fifth of that taken up by the outward journey).²¹⁾ The narrative is charged through with personal reactions to the joys and trials that the friars met with from the moment when they moved from the settlements of the Crimean seaboard into the vast Eurasian steppe, entering, as Rubruck puts it, 'another world' (i, 14, and ix, 1). The tribulations perhaps loom larger – whether the harshness of the climate, poor living-quarters, the dearth of rations, being pestered for gifts by the Mongols at every nomad encampment they visited, or the nomads' offensive personal habits. At times he found their assumption that everyone should make 'peace' with them intolerable; 'I would, if permitted', he says, 'preach war against them....throughout the world' (xxviii, 3). In this respect Rubruck's report contrasts sharply with Plano Carpini's *Ystoria Mongalorum*, the more sober, measured and systematic work of an experienced diplomat and administrator, who has accordingly been judged a superior ethnographer;²²⁾ but for all that, it is no less valuable or impressive.

Yet while the greater part of the *Itinerarium* comprises a narrative of the friars' experiences, significant sections are organised thematically, with early chapters (ii-viii) that detail the Mongols' tents, diet, dress and appearance, their methods of hunting, the division of labour between the sexes, their laws and funerary practices, and the manufacture of their favourite beverage,

fermented mare's milk (*khumis*). These chapters bear frequent witness to Rubruck's near-boundless curiosity: at one point he tells us that he measured the distance between the wheeltracks of a Mongol wagon (ii, 2). In addition, thematic passages sometimes interrupt the narrative itself, as do the sections (xxv, 9-10, and xxxv) surveying the activities of the shamans, or 'soothsayers' as Rubruck terms them.

Rubruck, moreover, is the first Western traveller in the Mongol empire to have visited Kharakhorum, the administrative centre of the empire (to which Carpini had not penetrated), and to have furnished a description of the town; it contained twelve Buddhist temples, two mosques and a single Christian church. He is somewhat scathing regarding both the size of the town and the dimensions of the Kaghan's palace (xxxii, 1). Such an attitude is symptomatic of a more widespread tendency within the work to play down the Mongols' power, an accent likewise audible in Plano Carpini's *Ystoria Mongalorum*.²³ It is noteworthy in this context that Rubruck displays little interest in military matters; there is no section specifically devoted to the topic, merely some slightly dismissive remarks about the Mongols' weaponry and armour (xxxvii, 17). On the other hand, Louis would have been extremely interested by Rubruck's claim that the Mongols would long since have reappeared in Hungary had the shamans permitted it (xxxv, 2). Given the character of the mission, the king may have anticipated that Rubruck would confine his observations largely to religious and cultural matters.

Certainly, as we should expect, Rubruck displays great interest in other religious confessions. At the Kaghan's headquarters, he was thrown together with Christians belonging to non-Catholic traditions, namely an Armenian monk, Sergius (Sargis), whose domicile the friars shared and Nestorian priests; and considerable attention is given to the Nestorian community in particular, to whom Carpini had barely referred. The *Itinerarium* furnishes us with an unparalleled insight into the manner in which the various confessional groups – Nestorians, Muslims and Buddhists – jostled for influence at Möngke's court. Nothing throws into sharper relief the gulf that separated the Latin Mendicant from his eastern brethren. The Armenian monk

advised Rubruck to tell the Kaghan that if he were prepared to become a Christian the whole world would enter into subjection to him and the Catholics and their Pope would do his bidding; Rubruck was scandalised and replied that such a step would gainsay his own conscience (xxviii, 8). The monk further assured Rubruck that although the Kaghan wanted all of them to pray on his behalf he put his faith solely in the Christians. The friar dismisses this out of hand: 'He believes in none of them.... And yet they all follow his court as flies do honey, and he makes them all gifts and all of them believe that they are on intimate terms with him and forecast his good fortune' (xxix, 15).

Rubruck notes how the Nestorians were to be found in fifteen cities in China (xxvi, 15). His relations with at least one of the priests, described as a well-read man (xxix, 56), were cordial and characterised by mutual respect; but in general he exhibits a wariness and hostility towards them. Although he notes the assurance they gave him that they would accept a patriarch from the Pope if the route lay open, he also mentions their exclusion of Christians of other churches from their rites (xxx, 10). He ascribes the over-blown legend of Prester John to the Nestorian tendency to exaggerate (xvii, 2). Their failure to employ the crucifix, omitting the figure of Christ from their crosses, leads him to suspect that they are in some way embarrassed by the Passion (xv, 7, and xxix, 34). At one juncture he gives vent to a harsh critique of the Nestorian priesthood (xxvi, 12-14): they are ignorant; their ablutions betray Muslim influences; all the males (even infants in the cradle) are ordained as priests in the course of episcopal visitations that occur as infrequently as every fifty years; the priests marry and are simoniacs, since they perform no sacrament without levying a fee. Some of these charges are ill-grounded: the cross that the Nestorians employed, for instance, was that of the *Parousia* (the Second Coming) rather than of the Passion;²⁴ the Nestorian ablutions predated the rise of Islam.²⁵ Other accusations fail to do justice to the predicament of communities which were cut off by vast distances from their metropolitan authority in Baghdad and which lacked the tithes and extensive landed endowments at the disposal of the Roman Church.²⁶ It

might further be added that the Nestorians had not experienced the crucible of the Gregorian Reform through which the Roman Church had passed in the eleventh-early twelfth centuries.

The particular importance of the material on the shamans is that it constitutes the only account we possess of Mongol shamanism and folk beliefs prior to the adoption of Buddhism in the sixteenth century and the consequential contamination of shamanism by the new faith. Virtually two whole chapters (xxiv and xxv, 1-8) are dedicated to the Buddhists themselves (whom Rubruck terms simply 'idolators'), and their beliefs and practices. The friar is a trifle confused, since he ascribes the Mongols themselves to a specifically monotheistic Buddhist sect (xxv, 9). But the *Itinerarium* is thus the earliest Western account of Buddhism, a faith of which Catholic Europeans were previously unaware; it is not even mentioned in the reports of the papal envoys of 1245-7. Rubruck is also conscious of the presence in Central Asia of what he terms Manichaeism, i.e. dualist beliefs regarding the material and spiritual worlds (xxix, 56) and the doctrine of reincarnation (xxxiii, 14-15). Ecclesiastics in Western Europe were prone to label any dualist sentiment as Manichaean, and in each of the cases identified by Rubruck these views were expressed by non-Manichaeans, whether Buddhists or Christians of other churches; though it has been suggested that the friar may also have encountered genuine Manichaeans and confused them with the 'idolators'.²⁷⁾

Accommodated within Möngke's encampment alongside envoys from a great many powers, Rubruck was naturally brought into contact with representatives of races whose names were completely unfamiliar in Western Europe: the Uighurs (xxiv, 1), accurately described as the first city-dwellers to submit to Chinggis Khan (xxvi, 1); the Tibetans (xxvi, 3); the Koreans, alluded to under more than one name (xxvi, 5, and xxix, 49); the Tangut (xxvi, 2 and 4); and several forest tribes dwelling to the north, like the Kirghiz and the Uriangkhai (xxix, 45). Chief among these unfamiliar peoples, however, we must rank the Chinese. Although Rubruck never travelled as far as China, he encountered Chinese and obtained information on the technical

skills of its inhabitants, not least in medicine (xxvi, 9), their paper currency and the characteristics of the Chinese script (xxix, 50). He was the first medieval writer to identify them, correctly, with the silk-producing Seres of Antiquity (xxvi, 8).

Yet Rubruck seems to have interpreted Louis's instructions far more broadly than this. With a certain wry humour ('so I was told for a fact'), he transmits eastern folklore, such as stories about a land where all livestock were held in common and merely responded to anybody's call as if they were domesticated (xxvi, 7); or about a city in China with walls of silver and battlements of gold (xxvi, 8); or the tale – which he emphatically did not believe – that beyond China lay a country in which any visitor remained at the age at which he had entered it (xxix, 49). He also shows himself ready to challenge what was received wisdom in the West in the sphere of geography and ethnography. As we have seen, he is dismissive of the renowned power of Prester John (xvii, 2). He distances himself from Classical geographers in distinguishing the courses of the Don and the Volga (xiv, 2), and contradicts no less an authority than the venerable Isidore by stating categorically, on the basis of his own travels and those of Friar Andrew, that the Caspian Sea is landlocked and unconnected with the Ocean (xviii, 5). His tone also betrays a reluctance to trust Isidore's statement that in the northern regions were to be found dogs so large and ferocious that they attacked bulls and killed lions (xix, 1). In Central Asia he made enquiries concerning the monstrous races described by Isidore and by Solinus, but since nobody admitted to having seen them he expressed doubt as to their existence (xxix, 46).

There is also a significant quantity of data relating to trade and trade-routes: the commercial exchanges, for instance, across the Black Sea between the merchants of Anatolia and those of Russia and other northern regions (i, 2); the production of salt along the coasts of the Crimea, which yielded Batu and Sartaq a considerable revenue (i, 13); the rich furs the Mongols obtained from northerly regions (v, 5); and the monopoly of the export of alum that the Sultan of Anatolia had conferred upon two Italian

merchants (xxxviii, 15). The *Itinerarium* makes accurate observations regarding the kinship of different languages, whether those of the Russians, Poles, Bohemians, Slavonians and the Baltic Slavs or Wends (xxi, 3), or the Turkish dialects of the Kipchaks and the Uighurs (xxvi, 4); though in locating the Vlachs (*Illac* ← *Ulac*) alongside the Bashkirs (*Pascatur*), i.e. in some region beyond the Volga (xxi, 3), Rubruck confused the Western European vantage-point with that of the steppe, since for the Turks and Mongols the 'Bashkird' were the Hungarians.²⁸) The report even incorporates details on fauna. One wonders what the French King made of descriptions of animals unknown to Western Europeans: the wild ass or *khulan* (v, 2, and xxii, 3), the yak (xxvi, 2) and the *arghali* – the great horned sheep (*ovis Poli*) – that derives its modern scientific name from the celebrated Venetian adventurer of the next generation rather than from the Franciscan who first noticed it (v, 2).

Rubruck, then, emerges not merely as a talented narrator but as a painstaking and even acute observer with a strong vein of scepticism. But can we necessarily trust him at all points? As already noted, the friar exhibits a marked tendency to understate the Mongols' strength. They had never reduced any country by force, he tells Louis, but only by subterfuge (xxxiii, 3). He is careful to note the various peoples who were still resisting the conquerors (i, 5, xiv, 3, xxvi, 8, and xxxvii, 16) and points to others who are subject to them but who hope for deliverance from the West (xiv, 1, and xxxviii, 3). Clearly Rubruck was of the view that the West could profit from the weakness of the Mongols, and of the Russian and Anatolian rulers who were tributary to them, in order to launch a successful crusade (xiii, 2, and Epilogue, 2). If Western princes, knights and peasants were ready to tolerate the conditions in which the Mongols lived, they would be in a position to conquer the world (Epilogue, 4). He applies to the Mongols the scriptural phrases 'that which is no people' and 'a foolish nation' (xxi, 4).²⁹) He depicts them as less powerful than the fifth-century Huns, whose sway had extended as far as France (xxi, 2) – thereby ignoring the fact that the centre of gravity of the Huns' empire had lain much further west.

A second element in the *Itinerarium* that evokes still greater doubt is one of its most celebrated sections: the description of the public debate between the representatives of the Christian, Islamic and Buddhist faiths, convened in Kharakhorum on Möngke's orders in 1254 (xxxiii, 7, 10-23). On the eve of the disputation, Rubruck dissuaded the Nestorian priests from engaging first with the Muslims as they had intended, pointing out that as fellow-monotheists the Muslims were their allies against the 'idolators'; and when the Nestorians proved unable to prove the existence of God but could only quote the Scriptures, he induced them to allow him to open for the Christian cause (xxxiii, 11). In the course of the debate itself, he lured his Buddhist opponent, who wished to begin by discussing either the Creation or the fate of souls after death, onto his own chosen terrain, namely the nature of God, and vanquished him with arguments lifted from St. Augustine (xxxiii, 13-20).³⁰⁾ If we may believe his account, therefore, he proved himself superior in dialectic to both his local coreligionists and to his infidel antagonist. And when Rubruck made way for his Nestorian colleagues to debate with the Muslims, the latter allegedly refused, conceding that Christianity and the entire Gospel were true and claiming that they themselves prayed for a Christian death (xxxiii, 21).

Rubruck's performance, which would clearly make a profound impression on Bacon,³¹⁾ has been hailed as a triumph of Western European scholasticism.³²⁾ More recently, however, scholars have begun to recognise how the friar represents himself in heroic terms during this episode,³³⁾ and to ask whether he does full justice to his antagonist or, rather, inflates his own achievement.³⁴⁾ One wonders, firstly, how satisfactorily such a sophisticated exchange could have been conducted through interpreters³⁵⁾ – even though Buchier's adopted son, who now served as Rubruck's interpreter, was undoubtedly far superior to 'Homo Dei'. In the second place, the views and tactics imputed to the friar's Buddhist opponent are in some respects decidedly foreign to Buddhism and may well indicate that Rubruck transmitted only a fraction of the debate.³⁶⁾

The fate of Rubruck's *Itinerarium*

In view of the high quality of Rubruck's *Itinerarium*, it is all the more regrettable that it barely circulated during the remainder of the Middle Ages. We can no doubt assume that King Louis read it; but any evidence to that effect is lacking. Roger Bacon informs us that he spoke with Rubruck and used their conversation to check the details in a manuscript of the work that he himself saw.³⁷⁾ He incorporated in his own *Opus maius* a good deal of material derived from Rubruck, notably on geographical and scientific matters, in which Bacon was especially interested.³⁸⁾ This material, however, also includes some not found in any copy of the *Itinerarium* that has come down to us. Such interpolations must rest on oral testimony from Rubruck. The statement, for example, that the Mongols would have paid more heed to him had he known something of astronomy³⁹⁾ looks like a gloss on the shamans' expertise in this field (xxxv, 2) and on the verdict expressed in the *Itinerarium* that if Rubruck had possessed the power to work miracles the Kaghan might have humbled himself (xxxiv, 7).

Even Bacon's own work, however, did not enjoy a wide dissemination; and apart from the notices in the *Opus maius*, Rubruck's report appears to have languished in obscurity until the late sixteenth century, when it was rescued and edited by Richard Hakluyt. Since such a high proportion of the principal manuscripts are of English provenance (below), we may well have Bacon to thank that the *Itinerarium* had survived at all.

The manuscripts

The most recent survey of manuscripts of the *Itinerarium*, by Paolo Chies a,⁴⁰⁾ lists a total of nine, which follow in approximate chronological order:-

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 181 (final quarter of the 14th

- century)[C], pp. 321-98
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 66-A (between 1281 and 1287)
[D], foll. 67r-110r
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 407 (between 1331 and 1352)
[S], foll. 37r-66r: incomplete (ending at xxvi, 8)
London, British Library, Royal 14.C.XIII (between 1331 and 1352)
[L], foll. 225r-236r: incomplete (ending at xxvi, 8)
Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. lat. F.77 (13th or 14th
century) [E], foll. 160r-190r
New Haven, Yale University Library, Beinecke 406 (15th century)
[Y], foll. 93r-142v
Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, 623 (16th or 17th
century)[h1]
Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, 624 (16th or 17th
century)[h2]
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Dupuy 686 (1646-7) [p]

Of these, **E** is a copy of **C**, and three other manuscripts, **h1**, **h2** and **p**, which are merely transcriptions of the text printed by Richard Hakluyt in 1598, can accordingly be dismissed as having no independent value. **Y**, however, was unknown to Van den Wyngaert when he produced in 1929 what is still the standard edition, and is therefore of some importance.

C, **E** and **Y** all include, together with various other works, an extract from the 8th-century *Cosmographia* attributed to 'Aethicus Ister', a greatly inferior geographical source on which Bacon relied and which he frequently cited alongside Rubruck's report in the *Opus maius*. It is conceivable, therefore, that **C** is a copy made by Bacon, at some point prior to completing that work in 1267, or at least that it is derived from that copy.⁴¹⁾

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- 39) Bacon, *Opus maius*, I, p. 400.
- 40) Chiesa, 'Testo e tradizione', pp. 134-43.

41) Ibid., pp. 136, 141, 142; also p. 193.