

John of Plano Carpini, Papal Diplomat and Spy along the Silk Road

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In March 1245, Pope Innocent IV authorized three missions to the Mongols, seeking information about this menace from the East and summoning Eastern Christian support against an anticipated Mongol onslaught. Only one of the missions, led by John of Plano Carpini, reached Mongolia—the first-known Western European party to reach East Asia by a land route. Traveling along the Silk Road’s new “Grasslands Route,” John and his companion Benedict reached the camp of Güyüg Khan, where they witnessed his installation as the Great Khan. Upon their return to the papal court in 1247, they delivered Güyüg’s letter demanding the submission of the pope and all the West’s princes. John also presented a detailed report on what he and Benedict had learned. A close reading of it reveals a master intelligence operative at work. In addition to presenting an overview of Mongol history and culture, Friar John’s report provides detailed information on the Mongols’ grand strategy, their military organization and armaments, and their battle tactics. Turning from intelligence gathering to military operations, he offered practical advice on how to meet and defeat the coming Mongol onslaught, an attack that, providentially for the West, never came. What did occur was a modest but significant migration of Western missionaries and merchants to East Asia in the century following this pioneering journey.

Keywords: John of Plano Carpini, Mongol Empire, missions to the Mongols, Silk Road’s Grasslands Route

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* In memory of Gregory G. Guzman (1939-2022), whose research raised our understanding of the 1245 papal missions to the Mongols to new heights.

An Eyewitness to Thirteenth-Century Silk Road Realities

Thanks to the research of a handful of scholars over the past century, the story of the medieval travels of Roman Catholic clerics to the Mongols of Central and East Asia has become an integral part of the fabric of world history studies.¹ One such traveler was the Franciscan friar (brother) John of Plano Carpini (Giovanni da Pian di Carpini). Dispatched by Pope Innocent IV in 1245, Friar John had a double mission: to serve as a diplomat to various Eastern Christian states and churches, rallying them to unite with the Church of Rome in resisting further Mongol aggression; and to spy out Mongol intentions with an eye to enabling the West to counter the Mongol threat. Despite the claims of some historians, Friar John was not a missionary with the mandate of spreading the Gospel among the Mongols.²

John and his companion, Friar Benedict the Pole, rode to the encampment of the Great Khan in Mongolia by way of the Silk Road's newly opened Grasslands Route, making John the first-known Western European to reach East Asia by a land route.³ The friars returned home in 1247, where they recounted their adventures. Included among their reports was John's *Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* (*History of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars*).⁴ When studied in conjunction with records of the friars' oral reports, John's *Historia* provides a privileged view into the manner in which Western Europeans, despite the precarious nature of overland travel along the Mongol-created Grasslands Route, were becoming active participants along the Silk Road. Close analysis of it also reveals Friar John's mastery of the craft of intelligence-gathering and the art of diplomacy. Although one historian has already analyzed the *Historia* as an exemplar of medieval military intelligence,⁵ much more remains to

¹ Most notably: Paul Pelliot, *Les Mongols et la papauté* (Paris: Librairie Auguste Picard, 1923); Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971); Jean Richard, *La papauté et les missions d'Orient au moyen âge (XIII^e-XV^e siècles)* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1977); Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221-1410*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018); Herbert Franke, "Sino-Western Contact under the Mongol Empire," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6 (1966): 49-72; and seminal articles by Gregory G. Guzman, including, "Simon of Saint-Quentin and the Dominican Mission to the Mongol Baiju: A Reappraisal," *Speculum* 46, no. 2 (1970): 232-49.

² This misperception can be found here and there on the internet, especially in curricular materials for students in the United States. For example, <https://www.teachingcalifornia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/7.8-Mongol-Empire-Student-Handout.pdf> (a project of the California Historical Society in partnership with the California History-Social Science Project, accessed 19 April 2023).

³ Earlier, unknown numbers of Europeans had been enslaved during the Mongols' advance into Central Hungary and shipped east. Additionally, some anonymous merchants had crossed Inner Eurasia to Mongolia: Gregory G. Guzman, "European Captives and Craftsmen among the Mongols, 1231-1255," *The Historian* 72, no. 1 (2010): 122-50. It is likely some of the captives and maybe even some merchants were Western Europeans.

⁴ *Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus*, edited in Giovanni di Pian di Carpini, *Storia dei Mongoli*, Enrico Menestò, et al., eds. (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull' Alto Medioevo, 1989), 227-333, is the best available edition of the second, more complete version of the report (cited hereafter as *HM2*). An earlier, still reliable edition of the same text is in *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol. I, *Itinera et relations Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV*, ed. Anastasius van den Wyngaert (Florence, Italy: Quaracchi, 1929), 27-130 (cited hereafter as *HM1*). Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 3-72, provides an English translation

⁵ Stephen Bennett, "The Report of Friar John of Plano Carpini: Analysis of an Intelligence Gathering Mission Conducted on Behalf of the Papacy in the Mid Thirteenth Century," *University of Limerick History Society Journal*

be considered in that regard. Likewise, although several historians have sketched Friar John's journey to and from Mongolia, this study shall go further by examining that trek in detail, with an eye toward exploring the rigors of travel along the Grasslands Route.

The Mongol Menace

In 1241, Mongol horsemen, led by Batu, grandson of Chinggis Khan, drove deeply into Eastern and Central Europe. In response, on 16 June, Pope Gregory IX authorized a crusade against the Mongols, but deep divisions within Europe prevented its getting underway. It seemed nothing could stop this storm from the East. The campaign of 1241-42 was actually the high-water mark of the Mongols' westward advance. After devastating Hungary, the Mongols retreated to the Lower Volga, where Batu established the khanate of the Golden Horde. Western Europeans, however, had no way of knowing the Mongols would never return.

Pope Innocent IV, the "Tartars," and the First Council of Lyons (1245)

Pope Gregory IX died on 22 August 1241 and, after a bitter interregnum, the Church's cardinals elected Innocent IV on 25 June 1243. Twenty-six days later, the pope wrote the patriarch of Aquileia in northern Italy, instructing him to call the "Christian faithful of Germany" to take up the crusader's cross in defense of an already-devastated Hungary.⁶ It was too little, too late. Emperor Frederick II, who was also king of Germany, would not support such a crusade and soon had a major falling out with the pope. Although Innocent's Mongol crusade came to naught, the new pope was determined to meet the Tartar⁷ threat head-on.

In November 1244, Pope Innocent, fleeing the machinations of Frederick II, found refuge in Lyons, France, and within a month began planning to hold there a general council of the Church to address multiple issues facing Western Christendom, including the Mongols. The First Council of Lyons (26 June-17 July 1245) included among its decrees the pronouncement "Regarding the Tartars." In it, the council declared that inasmuch as the "impious race of Tartars seeks to subject or rather annihilate the Christian people," it commanded all Christians to carefully watch the routes by which the Tartars could enter

12 (2011): 1-16.

⁶ *Epistolae saeculi XIII e regestis Pontificum Romanorum Selectae*, vol. 2, ed. Karl Rodenberg (Munich: Monumenta Germania Historica, 2000), 3-4, no. 2.

⁷ Tartarus was the classical Latin term for the House of Hades and, later, Christian Hell. Due to the power and prestige of the Tatars, a Mongolic people, "Tatar" had become a generic term for Inner Asian nomads. By changing Tatars to "Tartars," Western Europeans identified the Mongols as devils or the Devil's horsemen.

the West and then to keep them at bay from fortified positions.⁸ The strategy was totally impractical, but several months earlier, the pope had set in motion a more practical means of discerning and, thereby, possibly blunting future Mongol threats.

Sending Out Missions to the Mongols

Early in the thirteenth century, several orders of mendicant friars (begging brothers) emerged within the Roman Church. The most important were the Order of Friars Minor, better known as the Franciscans, so named after their founder, Francis of Assisi, and the Order of Preachers, better known as the Dominicans after their founder Dominic de Guzmán. Each was zealously devoted to serving Christendom and were, in the pope's eyes, the perfect persons to meet and spy out the Tartars.

In March 1245, Pope Innocent commissioned four diplomatic missions to the “king and Tartar people who are ignorant of the Way of Truth,”⁹ two comprised of Franciscans and two of Dominicans. One Franciscan delegation went elsewhere, probably to the Holy Land, leaving three missions to the Mongols. Each set of envoys carried two identical letters for Mongol eyes. The first, composed on 5 March, was a standard letter of introduction, typical of papal inaugural letters. It set forth the basic doctrines of Christianity, proclaimed the pope's unique position as the “keeper of the keys of Heaven,” expressed the hope that the Tartar king would embrace Christianity, and commended the pope's emissaries to his safekeeping.¹⁰ The second, dated 13 March, was the key document and, therefore, carefully drafted. Excoriating the Mongols for the desolation they created, it counseled them to cease their assaults before the wrath of God fell upon them and noted that the legates were charged with discussing peace and learning why they engaged in campaigns of destruction and what their future plans were.¹¹

The hope articulated in the first letter that the Mongol khan would convert was sincere enough, but these were not evangelical missions. There is absolutely no evidence in the reports of the three sets of envoys that they had expended any effort to bring the Mongols to the waters of baptism. In the same month, March 1245, Innocent IV reissued Pope Gregory IX's bull¹² *Cum hora undecima* (Since the eleventh hour [has arrived]) of 1235, a manifesto granting special privileges to friar-missionaries working among Muslims and pagans. In reissuing it, Innocent identified eighteen peoples to whom the friars would be sent, including Armenians, Bulgarians, Cumans (the Qipchaqs of western Central Asia), Ethiopians, Greeks,

⁸ Innocent IV, *Acta Innocentii PP. IV (1243-1254)*, ed. Theodosius T. Haluščynskyj and Meltius M. Wojnar (Vatican City: Pontificia Commissio ad redigendum Codicem Iuris Canonici Orientalis, 1962), 55-56, no. 23.

⁹ *Acta Innocentii PP. IV*, 31-32, no. 17.

¹⁰ Karl-Ernst Lupprian, ed., *Die Beziehungen der Päpste zu islamischen und mongolischen Herrschern im 13. Jahrhundert anhand ihres Briefwechsels* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1981), 141-45, no. 20.

¹¹ *Acta Innocentii PP. IV*, 31-32, no. 17.

¹² A papal bull is an official papal letter or decree to which a lead seal (*bullā*) is attached. A bull receives its title from its opening words.

Indians, Khazars, Nubians, and Ruthenians (the Rus'),¹³ most of whom the pope perceived to be deviant Christians. Although he included the Cumans, a shamanistic steppe people, conspicuously absent were the Mongols. And in 1245, Nubia (present-day Sudan and South Sudan) and Ethiopia were lands beyond the West's immediate reach, whereas Mongol-held lands were not. It was not until 1253 that the Mongols began to be included in reissues of *Cum bora*; when finally it appeared they were potential allies against a common enemy—Islam. The argument from silence is the weakest of arguments, but the silence is deafening in 1245.

The friars' purpose, obliquely and ambiguously admitted by the pope within the context of mentioning peace discussions, was reconnaissance and intelligence. They were to spy out the Mongols, and Innocent articulated a seemingly valid and innocuous reason for their curiosity.

Both Dominican parties traveled no farther than Southwest Asia and the Caucasus. One embassy, headed by Andrew of Longjumeau, made brief contact with a Mongol military detachment in Iran and submitted a now-lost report, a brief précis of which the English monk Matthew Paris inserted into his *Greater Chronicle*.¹⁴ Despite the friars' failure to reach any high-ranking Mongol, they managed to learn that the Mongol khan planned to conquer the world, which they duly reported.¹⁵ The second Dominican delegation, led by Ascelin of Cremona, reached the Mongol *noyan* (general) Baiju in Armenia in May 1247 and proceeded to alienate their host by refusing to prostrate themselves before him. Consequently, as the delegation's chronicler, Simon of Saint-Quentin, reported, they were thrice condemned to summary execution. Several Mongols suggested flaying Ascelin, stuffing his skin with straw, and sending his corpse to the pope.¹⁶ Finally, all were reprieved and allowed to depart for home. Inasmuch as Mongol culture held envoys in high regard and considered their ill-treatment or murder a high crime warranting all-out war, Baiju's cohort surely considered the Dominicans' behavior to be beyond all acceptable norms.

Failures as diplomats, Ascelin and Simon were equally inept as spies, allowing Baiju to send back with them two envoys. Carrying a letter for the pope, a letter quite similar to that of Güyüg Khan, which Innocent had earlier received from the hands of Friar John of Plano Carpini,¹⁷ the two emissaries were probably also charged with investigating the state of Europe's defenses. The Dominicans and their tag-along guests arrived in Lyons in the summer of 1248. Upon receiving Baiju and Güyüg Khan's letters, but only after deliberating for four or more months, the pope contented himself with urging Baiju, and through him

¹³ Most histories in English refer to them as Russians, but because of the ethnic and political complexities surrounding the term, I prefer the Latin-derived "Ruthenians," a generic exonym used in the medieval West for all inhabitants of the land of the Rus'.

¹⁴ Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. H. R. Luard, *Rolls Series*, 7 vols. (London: Longman & Co. et al., 1872-83), 6:113-16, doc. 61 of *Additamenta*.

¹⁵ Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, 114.

¹⁶ Simon de Saint-Quentin, *Histoire des Tartares*, ed. Jean Richard (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1965), 101-02.

¹⁷ Baiju's letter demanding Western Christian submission is included in Simon of Saint-Quentin's *Histoire des Tartares*, 113-15. For Güyüg Khan's letter, see note 54.

all Mongols, to cease persevering in error and slaughtering people, especially Christians.¹⁸ He realized further diplomatic overtures would be fruitless, but his effort to gain intelligence had succeeded, thanks to the efforts of Friars John and Benedict the Pole.

Friars John of Plano Carpini and Benedict the Pole

John of Plano Carpini was born in the Umbrian town of Pian di Carpini (today Piano della Magione) sometime between 1180 and 1190 and probably closer to the earlier date. John was one of Francis of Assisi's early disciples and thereafter rose within the administrative ranks of the Franciscan Order. After years in the field, Friar John was brought to the papal court. In 1145, Carpini was at least in his mid-fifties, and more likely sixties, and so corpulent that, when traveling around Europe, he rode a donkey rather than a horse. Yet, when Pope Innocent needed someone to carry out a sensitive mission of diplomacy and espionage to a far-away and unknown place, he turned to Friar John. Despite his age and weight, Friar John undertook a horse-riding journey across Eurasia's northern lands that would have wearied a much younger and fitter man. When Carpini reached Breslau, Silesia (today Wrocław, Poland), another Franciscan, Benedict the Pole, joined his company. We know nothing about Benedict's life before and after this mission, and the mission's extant records say very little about him directly. Notwithstanding, the few clues we have point to his becoming a co-equal colleague.

Records of a Mission Completed

Over the course of two years and seven months, 16 April 1245 to early November 1247, Friar John traveled from Lyons to Mongolia and back to Lyons, a round trip of at least 18,000 kilometers, and for most of that time and distance, he was accompanied by Brother Benedict. Given the importance and novelty of their mission, John and Benedict wrote and spoke extensively about their experiences and the knowledge they had gained, and we are fortunate that a significant amount of their reportage has survived.

As noted, the most important report is Friar John's *Historia (HM)*, which he began drafting during his homeward journey. However, as he writes at the end of the second version of his account:

People in Poland, Bohemia, and Germany through whose lands we traveled, and in Liège and Champagne, quite boldly took possession of the above-written account and copied it before it was completed and even fully abridged, because at the time we lacked a quiet moment during which we

¹⁸ *Acta Innocentii PP. IV*, 119-20, no. 67.

could completely finish it. Therefore, no one should be surprised that in this account there are more facts and they are more correctly presented than in that other account. After having had some leisure time, we corrected it fully and perfectly, at least more perfectly than the incomplete version.¹⁹

Both editions of the *HM* have survived. The most important addition to the recension is its ninth and final chapter describing the friars' journey and their experiences in Mongolia. The first eight chapters are a detailed intelligence report and operational plan.

Among the eager listeners interrogating the friars as they made their way home through Eastern and Central Europe, and who "boldly took possession" of the unfinished report, was an otherwise unknown Franciscan identifying himself as C. de Bridia. "Bridia" was present-day Brzeg in Silesian Poland, making him a countryman of Friar Benedict. On 30 July 1247, Friar C. completed a report titled *Hystoria Tartarorum* (The Tartar History), which he dispatched to the provincial minister of Bohemia and Poland. Borrowing freely from the first edition of the *HM*, he added information Benedict provided orally. Notwithstanding his debt to the *HM*, taken as a whole, *The Tartar History* is different in tone and focus. Never having seen chapter 9, he writes precious little about the friars' experiences. Regardless, it contains important supplementary information, courtesy of Friar Benedict.

C. de Bridia's text was lost for centuries and only came to the attention of historians in 1965.²⁰ Although the title *Hystoria Tartarorum* clearly appears in the manuscript, Painter named it the *Tartar Relation*. The name has stuck. Because the *Tartar Relation* came to light in a manuscript dated to around 1440, and because the manuscript was bound with the so-called *Vinland Map*, a world map supposedly depicting North American Vinland, which many scholars viewed as a possible hoax, some historians doubted the *Relation's* authenticity. Chemical analysis recently proved the *Vinland Map* to be a twentieth-century forgery.²¹ Yet Gregory Guzman's discovery of a second manuscript copy of the *Tartar Relation* dated to 1339/40 redeemed the text's reputation.²² Today there is no doubt as to its authenticity.

Friar C. de Bridia was not the only author to record what he heard from Benedict's lips. On 3 October 1247, while passing through Cologne, Benedict also told his story to an unnamed churchman,²³ who recorded it as *Relatio Fr. Benedicti Poloni* (The Narrative of Brother

¹⁹ *HMI*, 130; *HM2*, 332-33. John consistently uses the first-person plural (we/us) to refer to himself. This is not evidence that Benedict was a coauthor.

²⁰ George D. Painter published an edition of what was then its sole-known manuscript, along with an English translation, extensive notes, and an introduction in R. A. Skelton, Thomas E. Marston, and George D. Painter eds., *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995, rev. rpt. of 1965 ed.), 54-101 (hereafter cited as *TR1*). Alf Önnersfors published another edition of the text, also based on that single manuscript, as *Hystoria Tartarorum C. de Bridia Monachi* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967), hereafter cited as *TR2*.

²¹ Mike Cummings, "Analysis unlocks secret of the Vinland Map—it's a fake," *Yale News*, September 1, 2001, <https://news.yale.edu/2021/09/01/analysis-unlocks-secret-vinland-map-its-fake>.

²² Gregory G. Guzman, "The *Vinland Map* Controversy and the Discovery of a Second Version of the *Tartar Relation*: the Authenticity of the 1339 Text," *Terrae Incognitae* 38, no. 1 (2006): 19-25.

²³ *Annales Maximi Coloniensis cum continuationibus in Monasterio S. Pantaleonis*, ed. Hermann Cardauns, In *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores XXII*, ed. Georg H. Pertz (Hanover: Hahn, 1872), 542.

Benedict the Pole).²⁴ The *Relatio* is brief but contains information not found elsewhere.

Friar John's celebrity continued for some time after his arrival at the papal court in 1247. The Franciscan chronicler Salimbene de Adam writes that John was frequently invited to dine out, invited by people eager to hear his story. At these events, John's book was read aloud and he then would explain difficult-to-understand passages.²⁵ Having attended several dinner readings, Salimbene included in his *Chronicle* a few details found nowhere else. He also underscored an aspect of the friars' adventure that serves as a leitmotif in the *HM*: the journey out and back was marked by great effort and fatigue and extreme hunger, cold, and heat.²⁶ The new Silk Road highway, the so-called Grasslands Route, was not for the weak or the faint of heart.

The Silk Road's Grasslands Route

For more than a millennium, the two major eastern routes of the Silk Road's multiple and often-shifting east-to-west pathways skirted the northern and southern peripheries of the Taklamakan Desert, whereby travelers and their animals moved slowly, at the rate of about 20-25 kilometers per day, often traversing arid, inhospitable lands. For persons traveling to Eastern Mediterranean entrepôts, once the Pamirs were crossed, the main western routes ran through the present-day former Soviet republics of western Central Asia and on to Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It was the rare individual, however, who journeyed far along this network. Most ventured only a few hundred kilometers, from one settlement to another, passing along goods and ideas in the process. As far as we know, no one ventured all the way from the Mediterranean to East Asia or vice versa before the thirteenth century CE. The rise of the Mongol Empire changed that.

From the perspective of Europe, the Grasslands Route, running initially to Mongolia and later to China, enabled travelers to skirt the formidable Pamir Mountains and the desert lands of the older Silk Road, although it presented other mountains and equally intimidating deserts. Europeans could begin their travel by crossing Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and southern Russia and passing north of the Black, Caspian, and Aral Seas. They could also begin in Crimea at the Genoese colony at Caffa or the Venetian colony at Tana, both vassal states of the khanate of the Golden Horde, and head in an easterly direction, also traveling north of the Caspian and Aral Seas.

At first glance, the Grasslands Route might appear relatively safe, easy, and fast. As one might argue, the vast ocean of grasses supplied ready fodder for animals, likewise persons on official business carried a Mongol-issued *paiza* or tablet of authority. The *paiza*, a metal disk, entitled the wearer to use the *yam*, the Mongol post station system, which Chinggis

²⁴ *Relatio Fr. Benedicti Poloni*, in *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol. I, ed. van den Wyngaert, 135-43. Hereafter cited as *RBP*; Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 79-84, presents an English translation.

²⁵ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, 2 vols., ed. Giuseppe Scalia (Turnholt, Belgium: Brepols, 1998-99), 1: 313 and 321.

²⁶ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, 1: 312.

Khan established late in his reign and his son and successor Ögö dai (r. 1229-41) completed. Originally intended for the swift passage of military dispatch riders, the yam later extended its services to envoys and even, for a limited time, merchants. Set at roughly fifty-kilometer intervals across the breadth of the empire (but at greater distances in more desolate areas), the stations offered free accommodation, food, and fresh mounts, thereby affording dispatch riders and a few other travelers reasonably fast and safe transit. Apart from the fact that Asia's grasslands vary from lush grasses to scrub, and can hardly be characterized as a continuous feast of nutritious fodder, it is true the Mongol yam system offered some non-military personnel a measure of respite along the way, but as the friars noted, hospitality was often less than satisfactory. Envoys bearing tribute were provided horses, carts, and supplies, but other envoys carrying no tribute or gifts were given inadequate food and clothing. When their stay was prolonged in a prince's camp, ten of them were given food that scarcely two could subsist on.²⁷

Steppe grasses and post stations are only part of the story and emphasizing them hides the Grasslands Route's inherent difficulties, discomforts, and dangers. In the prologue to his report, Carpini notes he and his companions suffered hunger, thirst, cold, heat, injuries, and trials beyond measure, well beyond what they had feared and almost more than they could endure.²⁸ He further reports how, before reaching Kyiv, he became "ill to the point of death" and had to be borne in a vehicle through extreme cold and snow.²⁹ Beyond the intense extremes of temperature on Central Asia's steppes, which made high summer and mid-winter miserable, and unknown microparasites threatening to lay low or kill travelers lacking immunities, bandits and periodic war, including internecine Mongol conflicts, often closed down or made perilous portions of this route. The *HM* notes that the "Lithuanian terror," namely invasions by pagan Lithuanians, made the roads from Poland to within a short distance of the Mongol encampments exceedingly dangerous.³⁰ What is more, grasslands did not cover the entire route. Riders taking the Grasslands Route from Central and Eastern Europe or Crimea passed through the formidable Kazakh Desert and, as they approached Mongolia, there was the extensive Gobi Desert. Moreover, no matter where one rode, a broken-down horse could be life-threatening for the rider.

Added to a difficult, at times mortally dangerous environment, the lack of physical fitness of the person in the saddle and that person's discomfort with horse-riding were factors potentially turning any journey across the Grasslands Route into a nightmare, and they certainly did so for Friars John and Benedict and probably all of the other persons traveling this route who were not people of the steppe. Day after day on horseback for someone unused to it or aged results in excruciating muscle and joint inflammation and

²⁷ *HM1*, 68; *HM2*, 268. According to the *Tartar Relation*, foreign envoys were fed frugally, with five persons given the food that would satisfy two or three: *TR1*, 95; *TR2*, 32.

²⁸ *HM1*, 27; *HM2*, 228.

²⁹ *HM1*, 104; *HM2*, 305.

³⁰ *HM1*, 106; *HM2*, 308. Instead of *Luthuanorum timorem*, *HM1* mistakenly reads *Ruthuanorum timorem* (Ruthenian terror).

painful saddle sores. Friar Benedict noted that on their leaving Batu Khan's camp to return home, the friars bound their legs with strips of cloth to lessen the pain from riding.³¹ As we trace the friars' journey, we shall discover the pains and privations they experienced.

On the Road from Lyons to Ukraine

On Easter Sunday, 16 April 1245, fearful of what awaited but obedient to the pope, Carpini, accompanied by a fellow friar, Ceslaus the Bohemian, left Lyons headed for the East. The fact that John's companion was Bohemian (Czech) is significant. Friar John's secondary mission, to forge strong ties with Eastern Europe's Christian states, thereby creating a more effective defense against future Mongol attacks, would be well served by a Slavic companion. Headed toward the land of the Orthodox Ruthenians, or Rus,' whose Byzantine-inspired Christianity made them "schismatics" as far as Rome was concerned, Carpini first visited the court of Catholic King Wenceslaus I of Bohemia, who advised him to head east by way of Poland. The friars' progress through Central and Eastern Europe was slow, taking all of ten months. The pace was dictated, at least in part, by long stops at various courts of aristocratic friends and allies along the way to receive intelligence and supplies, especially gifts for the Mongols whom they would eventually encounter, and to strengthen alliances with the Catholic leaders of Bohemia, Silesia, and Poland.

In Silesian Breslau, Friar Benedict joined John to serve as "an interpreter and companion in his labors and cares."³² Benedict had some fluency in a variety of Slavic languages beyond his native Polish, making him an invaluable companion not only for Friar John's coming diplomatic overtures to the Rus,' but also for interrogating the many Eastern Slavs whom the friars would encounter amid the Mongols. Beyond that, the reported conversations Benedict subsequently had with various Mongols,³³ as well as the *Tartar Relation's* sometimes successful attempt to translate a few Turkish and Mongolian words,³⁴ suggest he possessed at least a rudimentary knowledge of Mongolian and a Turkic steppe dialect. If so, he likely acquired both in the wake of the Mongol invasion of Poland, in which large numbers of Turkic peoples served as Mongol allies.

From Silesia, the friars traveled to Duke Konrad I of Masovia, Poland's most powerful noble and a Catholic married to an Orthodox Christian princess from Kyiv. At Konrad's court in Kraków, they met Vasilko (Basil) Romanovych, a Rus' prince of Galicia-Volhynia. While Vasilko was at Konrad's court seeking assistance in avoiding the Tatar Yoke, his elder brother Danylo (Daniel) was on the Volga, offering humiliating obeisance to Batu Khan. Despite

³¹ *RBP*, 137.

³² *RBP*, 135. The *HR's* Prologue describes Benedict as "the companion in our tribulations and interpreter": *HMI*, 28; *HM2*, 228.

³³ E.g., *TR1*, 65 and 73; *TR2*, 9 and 14.

³⁴ E.g., when the *TR* correctly points out that Coniuzzu (Sheep's Water) derives from the "Tartar" words *coni* (sheep) and *уꙗꙋ* (water): *TR1*, 73; *TR2*, 15.

Danylo's necessary capitulation, Vasilko was willing to entertain the prospect of joining a papal-Polish-Hungarian alliance against the Mongols, even if that entailed submission of his Church to the Roman papacy, which seemed less onerous than Mongol domination.

In addition to the papal letters of 5 and 13 March, John carried the bull *Cum simus super* (Inasmuch as we have [been set] over) of 25 March 1245. Addressed to the Christians of the East, it affirmed papal primacy over all Christendom and called for church unity under Rome.³⁵ Innocent's overtures, sweetened by the promise of a united crusade against the Mongols, were tempting for Vasilko. Around the turn of the year, 1245-1246, the Franciscans left with Vasilko for Halych in western Ukraine, where negotiations continued. Because Danylo was absent, Vasilko could not offer a definitive answer and, after offering John and his companions hospitality, he sent them with a guide to Kyiv. As already noted, Friar John was seriously ill during that stage of the trip.

In Kyiv, a capital city in ruins and now under Mongol rule, the friars met their first Mongols and one of the leaders informed them their horses were totally unfit for travel across the snow-encrusted grasslands. Only Mongol ponies, trained to dig through deep snow to find grass, would survive. Here also the friars experienced another aspect of life on the Eurasian steppes. The Mongol captain gave them pack animals and a guide, but only in exchange for "gifts" out of the Franciscans' limited supply of items they carried to meet such exigencies. While in Kraków, Vasilko had informed the Franciscans that they had to offer the Mongols costly gifts, otherwise they would be considered worthless and could not fulfill their mission. "Not wishing the business of the Lord Pope and the Church to be impeded because of this,"³⁶ John purchased some animal pelts, to which Duke Konrad and the city's bishop added more.

Leaving Kyiv on 3 February 1246, they arrived in Kaniv, a central Ukrainian town on the Dnieper, where they likely left an ill Brother Ceslaus, several servants, and their Western horses. Although the city lies only about 140 km from Kyiv, it took them six days to reach the town—a daily travel rate of between 23 and 28 km, depending on whether they traveled six full days or fewer. This pace was very much like, as we shall see, their painful, deep-in-winter rate of progress from Mongolia to the Volga in 1247.

On to the Ordu of Batu Khan

Thus unencumbered, John and Benedict picked up the pace a bit and proceeded farther, meeting more Mongols. In exchange for more gifts, the Mongols provided fresh pack horses and guides to the frontier encampment of Corenza, an otherwise unknown Mongol leader, who demanded to know what tribute they brought him. Having already exhausted their store of gifts, the friars gave him some of their necessities. When this did not satisfy him,

³⁵ *Acta Innocentii PP. IV*, 43-46 and 48, nos. 20 and 21.

³⁶ *HM1*, 102; *HM2*, 303

they gave more because “we were obliged to do so if we wished to live and to bring to a successful conclusion the Lord Pope’s orders.”³⁷ Upon surrendering whatever they could from their supplies, they were led to the commander’s tent, where they were initiated into another aspect of Mongol protocol. There they were ordered to genuflect three times before the opening and to avoid stepping on the threshold as they entered. Anyone who trod on a commander’s threshold would be summarily executed. John and Benedict complied. Upon carefully entering, they had to kneel and repeat the purpose of their visit. When the friars handed over the pope’s letters, no one could translate them, so the emissaries were given horses and two guides and set off on 26 February 1246, for Batu Khan’s camp.

The winter-encased shores of the Dnieper River and the Black Sea, along which they rode, were dangerously icy.³⁸ Despite the treacherous terrain, the Mongols pushed John and Benedict to the limit. Changing horses three or four times daily, they rode from morning to nightfall and often during a portion of the night.³⁹ Regardless, at best, they probably averaged no more than 31 km per day. Adding to their misery, it was the Lenten season, a time of strict fast for Christians. While their Mongol guides presumably ate meat daily, the friars’ food was millet gruel made with melted snow and salt, which left them so weak they could scarcely ride.⁴⁰

On 4 April 1246, the friars, exhausted by the ordeal, arrived at the outskirts of Batu’s encampment, where they were instructed to pass between two fires. Reluctant at first, when told it was a cleansing process to ensure they meant no harm to the khan, they agreed, thereby demonstrating their goodwill.⁴¹ After passing through the fire, they were told to worship a statue of Chinggis Khan. That was a step too far for even the diplomatic John and Benedict who refused to do so. The Mongols compromised, simply compelling the friars to bow before the statue.⁴² Arriving at the camp, they were again asked what gifts they brought. Replying that the pope had not sent any presents, they offered some of their supplies, which were accepted.⁴³ Then they bowed before the tent and entered. On bended knees, they delivered the pope’s letters and requested translators, who, working with the friars, rendered them into Ruthenian (surely Benedict’s doing), Persian, and Mongolian. The letters were then given to Batu who read them attentively.⁴⁴

³⁷ *HM1*, 106-07; *HM2*, 307-08.

³⁸ *HM1*, 108; *HM2*, 309-10.

³⁹ *HM1*, 107; *HM2*, 309.

⁴⁰ *HM1*, 111; *HM2*, 312.

⁴¹ *HM1*, 107; *HM2*, 308-09.

⁴² *RBP*, 137.

⁴³ *HM1*, 109; *HM2*, 310. According to Benedict’s *Relatio*, the friars surrendered forty beaver skins and eighty badger pelts to Batu’s servants: *RBP*, 136. Given *HM3*’s superior testimony, this is not believable. It is likely the Cologne churchman was told the friars carried with them a total of 120 pelts, which they exhausted before reaching Batu, and he then mixed up the story.

⁴⁴ *HM1*, 109-10; *HM2*, 311.

On to the Great Khan's *Sira Ordu*⁴⁵

On 7 April, Batu's chief steward informed John and Benedict they must travel to the Great Khan. But before they moved on, they were to leave behind some of their company, who would travel back to the pope. Believing this, John and Benedict entrusted the men with a letter for Innocent. The letter never arrived; in point of fact, they were hostages. It was normal Mongol practice to demand hostages from any party traveling into Mongol lands. The hostages were then sent on to the Mongol leader, Mouci, who resided near the Dnieper.⁴⁶

Ignorant of this deception, the two friars departed the following day, Easter Sunday, even though they were still exhausted from their journey to Batu's camp. Given their physical and mental state, they left "with many tears, not knowing whether we were going to death or life. We were so weak we could scarcely ride a horse."⁴⁷ But ride they did, all the way to the heart of Mongolia, reaching the Syra Ordu (Yellow Camp) in central Mongolia on 22 July 1246, after an exhausting three-and-one-half-month journey.

In Residence at Güyüg's Encampment

John and Benedict remained at the encampment for almost four months, leaving only toward the middle of November. Preceding their arrival was a translation of the pope's letter and a report of what John and Benedict had told Batu. Inasmuch as the Mongols perceived all diplomatic overtures as acts of submission, the friars were immediately assigned a tent and supplies and reportedly were better treated than the other envoys.⁴⁸ Because Güyüg had not yet been elected Great Khan, they could not meet him but were sent to his mother Töregene, who became their patroness. Early on, the friars encountered thousands of visitors, including sultans and royalty from Central Asia, Russia, Baghdad, and elsewhere, there to honor the new Great Khan. About four weeks after the friars' arrival, Güyüg was elected and enthroned. Thereafter, the friars were summoned into the Great Khan's presence, genuflecting four times and searched for weapons before they were allowed to enter his tent. The gifts presented Güyüg filled more than five hundred carts (not including all the horses and camels given him), but when asked if they brought him any tribute, John and Benedict had to confess that they now had nothing to offer.⁴⁹

Regardless, they were summoned into the Great Khan's presence several more times, and on each occasion, the friars were required to don purple in his honor.⁵⁰ Diplomacy outweighed the Franciscan rule of wearing an unadorned garment of rough wool. Although

⁴⁵ The Yellow Camp.

⁴⁶ *HMI*, 111; *HM2*, 312.

⁴⁷ *HMI*, 111; *HM2*, 312.

⁴⁸ *HMI*, 116; *HM2*, 317.

⁴⁹ *HMI*, 118-20; *HM2*, 319-21.

⁵⁰ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, 1: 313.

John and Benedict had the honor of entering Güyüg's tent, a privilege, John later asserted, accorded only a few envoys,⁵¹ they endured a month or more with little to eat or drink, possibly because they had brought no gifts. Their being treated better than other envoys was now apparently a thing of the past. Were it not for the generosity of Cosmas, an enslaved Ruthenian goldsmith, they might well have starved, or so John thought.⁵²

In addition to Cosmas, during their four-month stay at the camp, the friars made friends with a fair number of other Europeans, especially Ruthenians and Hungarians, many of whom had been with the Mongols for upwards of three decades and with whom John could converse in Latin and French. Consequently, "through them we were able to investigate all matters, and they told us everything willingly and sometimes without being asked because they knew what we wanted."⁵³ Good spies build up networks of trusted informants.

After several additional visits to the Great Khan, on 11 November, they received Güyüg's letter to the pope in Mongolian and had it translated for them, so they could render it into Latin. A copy in "Sarracenic" (Persian) was then added. The letter would not have surprised or pleased the friars inasmuch as it demanded that Innocent and all the kings and princes of Western Christendom travel to Güyüg and offer total submission.⁵⁴ Güyüg then entertained the notion of sending envoys back with the friars and certain Mongol councilors advised John and Benedict to request them, which the friars refused to do, fearing the envoys would see how divided the Western powers were, thereby further encouraging an assault on the West. Simply put, they believed the real objective of the proposed Mongol ambassadors was to spy out the land. Since the friars did not offer the suggested petition, the matter was dropped.⁵⁵

Going Home

On 13 November, the friars received permission to return home.⁵⁶ The return trip was slow, long, and painful, during which they found themselves "often lying down in desert snows, except when we were able to clear a place for ourselves with a foot...and we found ourselves totally covered with snow whenever the wind drove it."⁵⁷ They finally arrived back at Batu's encampment on the Volga on 9 May 1247. A journey taking three-and-one-half months going out took almost six months going back—a daily rate of 28 km.

⁵¹ *HM1*, 120; *HM2*, 321.

⁵² *HM1*, 122; *HM2*, 323-24.

⁵³ *HM1*, 122-23; *HM2*, 324.

⁵⁴ *HM1*, 123-24; *HM2*, 324-26. Güyüg Khan's letter survives in its Persian and Latin forms. Paul Pelliot, *Les Mongols*, has printed the Latin text at 11-12; the Persian text with a French translation is at 15-21. An English translation of the Persian version is available at de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys*, 213-14, and Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 85-86.

⁵⁵ *HM1*, 125-26; *HM2*, 327-28.

⁵⁶ *HM1*, 126; *HM2*, 328.

⁵⁷ *HM1*, 126; *HM2*, 329.

With a letter from Batu ordering those who read it to provide horses and food, they traveled to Mouci, reaching him on 25 May. There they received the release of their hostage fellow travelers. On 9 June, they reached Kyiv, where they could now bid goodbye to their Mongol escort.⁵⁸ Traveling on to Volhynia, they were entertained for eight days by Danyl and Vasilko. During that visit, the Ruthenian princes affirmed their willingness to accept papal primacy and dispatched letter-bearing envoys to travel to the pope in the friars' company.⁵⁹ Finally, after passing through Poland, Bohemia, and Germany the friars arrived at Lyons, where John presented his intelligence report.

An Intelligence Report and Operational Plan

The *HM* begins with a systematic description of Mongolia and its people—a geographic and ethnographic overview in four chapters. Numerous external sources confirm that John's (and Benedict's?) eye for physical and cultural details was finely tuned. It would seem, especially from Chapter 3, which focuses on the Mongols' shamanistic beliefs and rites as well as cultural practices and taboos, that in addition to providing a know-your-enemy report, Friar John was providing information to assist the efforts of missionaries who would follow his and Benedict's path.

Knowing the history of an adversary is equally important inasmuch as it can serve as a means of forecasting what to expect. With that end in view, the *Historia's* fifth chapter, the longest of the report's first eight chapters by a factor of three and exceeded in length only by Chapter 9, presents a somewhat garbled but not totally inaccurate survey of the rise of the Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan and his sons.⁶⁰ Here, unlike the first four chapters, John depended mainly on the testimony of others, not on personal observations. Consequently, a fair number of fables, tall tales, half-truths, and distorted realities crept into the account. Yet, gems of correct reportage can also be found, such as the formerly illiterate Mongols' adoption of the Uyghur alphabet.⁶¹ Fantasy aside, the theme of Chapter 5 is correct: recent history has shown that the Mongols' imperial war machine is formidable, but it is not invincible, as occasional reverses have demonstrated.

Consonant with the theme that the fearsome Mongols can be met and beaten and, therefore, to set up the next three chapters in which he plays the role of military analyst, Friar John offers a strange combination of fact and myth. According to the code of law that Chinggis Khan gave the Mongols:

They are to subjugate every land and not make peace with any people before they submit to them until the time of their own

⁵⁸ *HM1*, 126-27 and 129; *HM2*, 329-30 and 332.

⁵⁹ *HM1*, 127; *HM2*, 330.

⁶⁰ *HM1*, 51-76; *HM2*, 252-75.

⁶¹ *HM1*, 55-56; *HM2*, 255-56.

destruction arrives. They have fought now for forty-two years, and should rule for eighteen more. After that, as they say, they will be conquered by another nation, yet they do not know who it might be. So this has been foretold to them.⁶²

It is far from certain that Chinggis gave the Mongols a coherent code of law known as the Great Yasa⁶³ and the prophecy appears to be wishful thinking circulated as a camp rumor by persons in thrall to the Mongols. Regardless, John was spot on regarding the Mongol intention to subjugate all peoples. Given that reality, the mythic prophecy that the Mongols' days were numbered offered hope and the following three chapters provide information, a strategy, and tactics to bring that prediction to fruition.

Knowing the enemy's order of battle is of prime importance and Friar John begins Chapter 6 with a description of the Mongols' decimal system of organization, an efficient system that broke down their armies into units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand.⁶⁴ After describing Mongol armaments and armor, the chapter describes their tactics in the field, ending with a sobering description of what happens to prisoners taken in battle or by siege—they are largely killed and the few survivors are enslaved.⁶⁵ The next chapter describes the dire fortunes of Mongol-held slaves.

Chapter 7 contains additional useful intelligence describing Mongol stratagems, with the goal of putting backbone in the readers. Noting again that the Mongols only make peace with those who submit, it goes on to describe how their word cannot be trusted by those who do submit. What is worse, they mistreat all their subjects, but slaves especially are abused, an abuse that he describes in detail.⁶⁶ The implication is transparent; submission is not an option.

Chapter 8, "In what manner war ought to be waged against the Tartars, and what their intentions are. Regarding [our] armaments and the deployment of [our] troops, and how one might confront their cunning in battle, the fortification of camps and cities, and what should be done with captives",⁶⁷ offers strategic advice. Reminding the reader that the Mongols "intend to subjugate the entire world, if they can," he underscores that fact by citing Güyüg Khan's letter to the pope and describing what he had observed at the Great Khan's camp.⁶⁸ Lest the message of the preceding chapter be lost, he declares, "Christians should not be subject to them because of their abominations....and souls are perishing and bodies are afflicted in many ways beyond belief."⁶⁹ If such is the case for all who suffer under Tartar dominion, Christians in the West should not lose heart because the Mongols are "fewer in

⁶² *HM1*, 64; *HM2*, 264.

⁶³ David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 96-99.

⁶⁴ *HM1*, 76-77; *HM2*, 275-76.

⁶⁵ *HM1*, 77-84; *HM2*, 276-84.

⁶⁶ *HM1*, 84-92; *HM2*, 284-92.

⁶⁷ *HM1*, 93; *HM2*, 293.

⁶⁸ *HM1*, 93-94; *HM2*, 293-94.

⁶⁹ *HM1*, 94; *HM2*, 294.

number and weaker as a body than the Christian people.”⁷⁰

He then predicts the Mongols will send armies against Hungary and Poland. When? He is unsure, but they are coming. Because no single land can withstand them alone, all Christian leaders must unite to resist them and must do so not by shutting themselves up in fortresses. Friar John was secure enough in the correctness of his information and analysis that he dared to disagree with the strategy set forth by the Council of Lyons and earlier advocated by the pope. After listing the armaments that are needed for a vigorous defense in the field, including crossbows with specially tempered bolt heads to pierce Mongol armor and lances with hooks to drag Tartars from their horses, he states that the Western armies should be organized like Mongol armies and fight in the same manner—battle tactics he describes in detail. Finally, captives taken in battle should be spared. If they are Mongols, they are bargaining chips for peace or, at least, can be ransomed off at a high price. If they are allies of the Mongols, many of them, once shown mercy, would willingly and effectively fight against the Tartars.⁷¹

Friar John ends the chapter by stating he has reported what he has seen and heard in order to offer ideas to men more experienced in the ways of war. He hopes he has stimulated them and provided material for thought.⁷² Perhaps he was sincere in admitting his shortcomings as a strategist, but up to that point the tone of his report was “here is what I witnessed, heard, and learned, and you better take heed.” Feigned humility was a standard trope in the writings of medieval clerics and this almost throw-away expression of inadequacy strikes one as somewhat disingenuous.

Getting the Word Out

The final words of Chapter 8 and, even more so, John’s addressing “all the faithful of Christ to whom the present text might come” in the *HM*’s prologue,⁷³ make it clear that this report was not just for the pope’s eyes. As Salimbene reports, Carpini reported his adventures to brother Franciscans before arriving at the papal court. Stopping at a Franciscan convent just outside of Lyons, Friar John showed the brothers several gifts he was carrying to the pope and proceeded to tell them about his experiences and the Mongols whom he had visited.⁷⁴ After leaving the papal court, at which Innocent IV kept him for three months,⁷⁵ the friar, as we saw, went on a book-reading tour, bringing a manuscript of his report on his visits to Franciscan convents, monastic houses, and “other important places.”

⁷⁰ *HM1*, 94; *HM2*, 295.

⁷¹ *HM1*, 94-101; *HM2*, 295-301.

⁷² *HM1*, 101; *HM2*, 302.

⁷³ *HM1*, 27; *HM2*, 227.

⁷⁴ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, 1: 311-13.

⁷⁵ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, 1: 317.

The Pax Mongolica

Despite Friar John's certainty that the Mongols would renew their assault on the West, the anticipated onslaught never came due to multiple factors, chief of which was the Mongols' greater interest in the Islamic states of Southwest Asia. And then there was the so-called *Pax Mongolica* (the Mongol Peace), a century-long era of supposed stasis, ca. 1250-ca. 1350. The term is hyperbolic. Very much like the *Pax Romana* of late antiquity, it was not an era of general peace, and the concept underlying the term fails to recognize the high level of violence during that roughly hundred-year period. This included the many internecine conflicts that plagued the Mongol Empire and continued Mongol attacks on South China, Korea, Japan, Southwest and Southeast Asia, and northern India, some of which persisted into the fourteenth century.

Regardless, the Mongol Empire, now divided into four khanates, provided the means, along the new Grasslands Route but also along older Silk Road routes and through the waters of the "Maritime Silk Road," for the transit of unknown numbers of Western Europeans to East Asia. Many of these intrepid merchants and missionaries took up residence for extended periods of time and even died there. In 1294, the Franciscan friar John of Montecorvino established a short-lived Roman Church in China, a mission effort that limped along until sometime following the collapse of the Mongols' Yuan dynasty in 1368.

A number of factors shut down most Western travel along the Central and East Asian portions of the Silk Road after the breakup of the Mongol Empire in the latter half of the fourteenth century. Western Europeans, however, never forgot their former ability to reach the lands of the Great Khan by way of the Silk Road, a way shown them by Friars John of Plano Carpini and Benedict the Pole and those who followed. Blocked by land, they took to the sea and in the process added new seaways to the long-existing Maritime Silk Road. But that is another story.

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- HM1. John of Plano Carpini. *Historia Mongalorum*, ed. Anastasius van den Wyngaert.
HM2. John of Plano Carpini. *Historia Mongalorum*, ed. Enrico Menestò.
RBP. *Relatio Fr. Benedicti Poloni*, ed. Anastasius van den Wyngaert.
TR1. *Tartar Relation*. C. de Bridia. *Hystoria Tartarorum*, ed. George D. Painter.
TR2. *Tartar Relation*. C. de Bridia. *Hystoria Tartarorum*, ed. Alf Önnersfors.

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