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Christian Material Culture and the Mongols: the Case of William of Rubruck

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Abstract

The paper discusses the role of Christian material culture for the encounter between the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (1220-93) and the Mongol rulers and high officers, as it is narrated in Rubruck's *Itinerarium*. The analysis of the amount and nature of the items taken by Rubruck lead us to reconsider his commitment to Christian mission, which is often underestimated in favour of diplomacy. The discourse of Rubruck's handling of Christian liturgical equipment, its loss and substitution reveals his faithfulness both to the ideals of the Franciscan order, as well as loyalty to the French King Louis IX. The frictions with Mongolian habits regarding gift giving reveal some of the practical troubles of the Franciscan mission among the Mongols.

Keywords

Franciscans – Mongols – William of Rubruck – Christian Mission – materiality

The Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (1220-93), who travelled to the Mongols between 1253 and 1255, brought with him, in addition to the letter of the French King Louis IX, a good amount of Christian liturgical objects.* The present paper aims to explore the items he took with him on his journey and focuses especially on how the handling of items by Rubruck and his fellows, as well as by the Mongols, is presented in the text. Analysing the Christian

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material objects – their selection, purpose, quality and especially the friar's and other peoples' handling of them within diplomatic situations – sheds light on the motives of his journey as well as on the activities he had planned to undertake, were he to be allowed to stay in the realm of the Mongol Empire. As has been recently pointed out by Harriet Rudolph, within the field of history of diplomacy, material aspects of diplomatic exchange have been rather under-researched.¹ Thus, this paper brings an example of how considerations of material aspects of intercultural encounters, as reflected in the sources, may refine our understanding of such situations occurring between the Mongols and European travellers in the Middle Ages.

1 Textual and Material Memories of the Franciscan Missions in Asia

There are unfortunately only a few items witnessing the Franciscan presence in the Mongol Empire which have survived the many past centuries, and none of them can be directly connected to the mission of Friar William. All of these preserved objects should be attributed, to my knowledge, to the Franciscan mission in Yuan China (1260-1368) founded by John of Montecorvino (1247-1328).² Among these objects is the recently restored so-called “Polo Bible”³ and the Christian tombstones found in Yangzhou.⁴ The identification of the ruins of

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- 1 Rudolph, Harriet, “Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to the History of Diplomacy”, in Ead. and Metzsig, Gregor M. (eds.), *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century (Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte/ European History Yearbook)*, xvii [2016]: pp. 1-28.
 - 2 Latin text in *Sinica Franciscana. Collegit, ad fidem codicum redegit et adnotavit* p. Athanasius van den Wyngaert O.F.M., 1 (Ad Claras Aquas [Quaracchi-Firenze]: apud Collegium s. Bonaventurae, 1929): pp. 340-55. For an English translation, see Dawson, Christopher, *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955): pp. 224-31, or Yule, Henry, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, 1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1866): pp. 197-218.
 - 3 Szcześniak, Boleslaw, “The Laurentian Bible of Marco Polo”, *JAOS*, LXXV/3 (1955): pp. 173-9. Toniolo, Lucia, D'Amato, Alfonsina, Saccenti, Riccardo, Gulotta, Davide, and Pier Giorgio Righetti, “The Silk Road, Marco Polo, a bible and its proteome”, *Journal of Proteomics*, LXXV/11 (2012): pp. 3365-73; Augelli, Francesco, “Studies on the Wooden Box Containing the ‘Marco Polo’ Bible”, *Heritage*, 11/1 (2019): 452-66. Melloni, Alberto (ed.), *In via in saecula: La Bibbia di Marco Polo tra Europa e Cina* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 2012).
 - 4 Rouleau, Francis A., “The Yangchow Latin Tombstone as a Landmark of Medieval Christianity in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, xvii/3-4 (1954): pp. 346-65. See also Purtle, Jennifer, “The Far Side: Expatriate Medieval Art and Its Languages in Sino-Mongol China”, *Medieval Encounters*, xvii (2011): pp. 167-97.

a church in Olon-Süme as the Catholic church in the territories of the Öngüt “King George” is somewhat unclear.⁵ Objects that would witness Rubruck’s presence among the Mongols and Christian material culture, either brought by himself, or produced in Qara Qorum by the French goldsmith Guillaume Bouchier, have not been found. Yet, Leonardo Olschki suggested already in 1947 that their remains might still be present in the Buddhist monastery of Erdene Zuu, which lies in the vicinity of Qara Qorum.⁶

The artistic quality of some of these items was, besides Olschki, also discussed by Marianna Shreve Simpson in her important study⁷ to which I am indebted for art-historical considerations, especially of the manuscripts brought by Rubruck.

Although the Franciscan travels to the Mongols around the mid-13th century are often presented within the context of diplomatic exchange between the papal curia or European kings and the Mongols, I argue that for Rubruck’s journey the missionary aim of spreading the Gospel to all inhabitants of the Mongol Empire was of great importance.

2 Diplomacy, or a Mission?

The journey of the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (1253-4) to the Mongols documented in his report⁸ has long attracted scholarly attention from various

5 The ruins were identified as the Catholic church by Egami, Namio, “Olon-sume et la découverte de l’église catholique romaine de Jean de Montecorvino”, *JA*, CCXL/1 (1952): pp. 155-67. Id., “Olon-sume: The remains of the royal capital of the Yuan-period Ongut tribe”, *Orient*, xxx/xxxI (1995): pp. 1-67. However, the evidence is not convincing, as pointed out by Borbone, Pier Giorgio, “Les églises d’Asie centrale et de Chine: état de la question à partir des textes et des découvertes archéologiques: essai de synthèse”, in Chatonnet, F.B. (ed.), *Les églises en monde syriaque* (Paris: Geuthner, 2013): pp. 441-65, here p. 460.

6 Olschki, Leonardo, *Guillaume Boucher, a French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1946): p. 4. Unfortunately, I was unable to verify this information prior to the publication of this study.

7 Shreve Simpson, Marianna, “Manuscripts and Mongols: Some Documented and Speculative Moments in East-West / Muslim-Christian Relations”, *French Historical Studies*, xxx/3 (2007): pp. 351-94.

8 The most recent edition of Rubruck’s report was prepared by Paolo Chiesa and published as Guglielmo di Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia*, edited by Paolo Chiesa (Milano: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 2011) (hereafter: “*Viaggio in Mongolia*”). For an English translation with notes see Jackson, Peter, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck. His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253-1255* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990). The Latin text of his account is also published in *Sinica Franciscana*: 1, pp. 164-332. An older English translation is that by Dawson, Christopher (ed.), *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955).

perspectives, including gift giving,⁹ general misunderstanding in communication with the Mongols,¹⁰ the import of Western manuscripts to the Mongols¹¹ and artistic exchange.¹² The overall assessment of the actual purpose of Rubruck's journey is usually seen within the context of the French-Mongol diplomacy of the 1240s and 1250s; however, I suggest that taking into account the material aspect of his journey, in this case focusing on the Christian objects, leads us to consider the missionary purpose of his journey more seriously and acknowledge it as a fundamental part of his original plan.

The scepticism of scholars about the character of Rubruck's journey, which balanced diplomatic and missionary aims,¹³ stems from two main reasons. The first is the extraordinary content of his account, recently studied within the discourse of the history of European ethnography.¹⁴ Indeed, Rubruck was asked to describe his experience with the Mongols and their world. The focus on "the Other", which brings the Mongols to the centre of his description, at the same time obscures those actions which were self-evident for Rubruck. Among them would be his and his companions' daily practice of prayer and missionary activities, about which he makes only a few remarks here and there. Given Rubruck's adherence to the liturgical calendar and consistent fasting throughout his journey, he must have also prayed regularly, although these prayers were probably shorter as was usual among Franciscans who needed to prioritize work or travel.¹⁵

Secondly, I assume that the missionary character of Rubruck's journey is somewhat overlooked due to the limited results of his mission – according to his report, he was able to baptize only six people.¹⁶ Compared to the letters of John of Montecorvino and his fellow friars, which report thousands of

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- 9 Watson, A.J., "Mongol inhospitality, or how to do more with less? Gift giving in William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium*", *Journal of Medieval History*, xxxvii/1 (2011): pp. 90-101.
- 10 Montalbano, Kathryn A., "Misunderstanding the Mongols: Intercultural Communication in Three Thirteenth-Century Franciscan Travel Accounts", *Information & Culture*, L/4 (2015): pp. 588-611.
- 11 Shreve Simpson, "Manuscripts and Mongols": pp. 351-94.
- 12 Watt, James C.Y., "A Note on Artistic Exchanges in the Mongol Empire", in Komaroff, Linda and Carboni, Stefano (eds.), *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353* (New York – New Haven – London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2003): pp. 62-73.
- 13 Cf. also Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 44.
- 14 Khanmohammadi, Shirin A., *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).
- 15 For liturgical practice within the early Franciscan order see Foley, Edward, "Franciscan Liturgical prayer", in Johnson, Timothy J. (ed.), *Franciscans at Prayer* (Leiden: Brill, 2007): pp. 385-412. On production and usage of breviaries, see *ibid.*: pp. 409-11.
- 16 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 284 (xxxvi,20).

baptisms,¹⁷ this is indeed a small number. In spite of these small results (and few explicit claims), I argue that Rubruck's original plan was to provide a long-term mission and that he was very well supplied for it. The fact that this plan failed should be ascribed to the related circumstances, as well as to the khan's refusal to allow Rubruck to stay, and to the material aspects of his journey.

It might seem that, by stressing the importance of the missionary character of Rubruck's journey, I am pushing at open doors since he was a travelling Franciscan friar, but there is a particular reason for this argument. In recent years, after the publication of Robin Vose's book *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*,¹⁸ there have emerged opinions applying Vose's conclusions regarding the Dominican missionary practice among non-Christians beyond the mentioned region.¹⁹ While I certainly do not intend to challenge Vose's conclusion that the Dominicans in the Crown of Aragon were not particularly concerned with missionary activities among the non-Christians, I would be cautious to extend this conclusion to Asia as well.²⁰

There are several sources which clearly tell us that there were friars concerned with missionary activities among non-Christians, and who made many attempts to convert them: the Dominicans Riccoldo of Montecroce (c. 1243-1320), who lived and worked in Baghdad during the last decade of the 13th century,²¹ and Jordan of Catalan, who evangelized in Persia and India in 1320s;²² and Franciscans such as John of Montecorvino (1247-1328)²³ and John of

17 *Sinica Franciscana*: 1, pp. 347, 366.

18 Vose, Robin, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

19 Roest, Bernt, "From Reconquista to Mission in the Early Modern World", in Id. and Mixson, James D. (eds.), *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2015): pp. 333-4.

20 Amanda Power in her book *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): pp. 245-7 also points out the existing discrepancy between the literary sources reflecting scholastic disputations with infidels, and reality of mission. It is certainly true that polemical works do not testify everyday missionary practice; on the other hand, this should not lead us to ignore those friars who were involved in mission among the "infidels".

21 Riccoldo claims that he went to the East to preach to the Mongols and Muslims. See George-Tvrtković, Rita, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012): pp. 145, 152.

22 Jordan of Catalan was recorded to have baptized about three hundred people in India, of which many were pagans and Muslims. See Gadrat, Christine, *Une image de l'Orient au XIV^e siècle: les Mirabilia descripta de Jordan Catala de Sévérac* (Paris: École des chartes, 2005): p. 251: "Ibi in ista Yndia, ego baptizavi et reduxi ad fidem fere trecentas animas, de quibus fuerunt multi ydolatre et Saraceni".

23 John of Montecorvino mentions that he bought young "pagan" boys, whom he converted and educated. *Sinica Franciscana*: 1, p. 347.

Marignolli,²⁴ who travelled through Asia between 1338 and 1353. Rubruck also attempted several times to approach non-Christians: a Muslim,²⁵ a group of local guides whom he provided with a written prayer,²⁶ and of course the Great Khan Möngke (r. 1251-9), to whom the illuminated bible and breviary were presented.²⁷ At the court of Möngke in a conversation with an Armenian monk Rubruck claims that his “purpose of coming was to preach this [i.e. Christian doctrine] to all men”.²⁸ Later on, when asked again about the purpose of his coming, he refers to the general call for evangelization: “It is the duty of our faith [*religionis*] to preach the Gospel to all men. When I heard of the fame of the Mo'al people, therefore, I formed a desire to visit them; and while this desire was upon me, we heard that Sartaq was a Christian. I thereupon made my way to him [...]”.²⁹ During his last audience with the Great Khan Möngke, after delivering his letter and asking for permission to return to his country, Rubruck again stressed his intention to preach the Gospel to all men and to serve Christian captives.³⁰

Rubruck's status as a traveller was somewhat complicated from the very beginning of his journey. He claims on several occasions that he was not travelling as an official envoy of the king and that he went among the “unbelievers in accordance with our Rule”,³¹ which means he was travelling with the consent of his Provincial Minister.³²

The reason Rubruck distanced himself from being an official ambassador lies in a previous experience of the French King Louis IX (1226-70) with an earlier embassy he had sent to the Mongols. In 1248 an embassy from the Mongolian noyan³³ Eljigidey (†1251/2), led by two Christians from Mosul, arrived in Cyprus to King Louis IX and stimulated rumours about the khan's

24 Malfatto, Irene (ed.), *Le digressioni sull'Oriente nel Chronicon Bohemorum di Giovanni de' Marignolli* (2015): Electronic edition: <http://ecodicibus.sismelfirenze.it/index.php/iohannes-de-marignollis-chronicon-bohemorum-excerpta-de-rebus-orientalibus>.

25 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 58 (XII,1-2).

26 *Ibid.*: pp. 136, 138 (XXVII,4).

27 *Ibid.*: p. 176 (XXIV,20).

28 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 174. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 150 (XXVIII,8).

29 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 230. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 244 (XXXIII,8).

30 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 260 (XXXIV,6).

31 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 67. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 12 (1,6).

32 Cf. the *Regula Bullata* of St. Francis, chap. XII, in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. by Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: The Dolphin Press, 1906): p. 73.

33 *Noyan* in this context is a higher officer or a commander of military units commissioned by the sovereign or khan. *Noyans* are not descendants of the ruling family. Cf. Atwood, Christopher P., *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004): p. 412.

inclination to Christianity.³⁴ The French King Louis IX (1226-70) decided to support this allegedly auspicious development and together with his reply he sent a beautiful tent chapel decorated with six pictures representing “the Annunciation of the Angel, the Nativity, the Baptism wherewith God was baptised, and all the Passion, and Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Ghost”.³⁵ In addition to these, the chapel was equipped with “chalices and books and all that is needful for singing mass and two preaching friars to sing masses before them”.³⁶ The tent was sent, as Joinville reports – “to entice them [i.e. the Mongols] if possible into our faith”.³⁷ When King Louis’ embassy arrived at the camp of Eljigidey, it was received by Oghul Qaimish (1248-51), the widow of Güyük Khan (r. 1246-8) and the regent of the Mongol Empire. She accepted the “gift” and in her reply, which arrived to King Louis in 1251, asked for a similar tribute to be sent in the future.³⁸

Valuable things, such as gold, silver, silk cloths or livestock³⁹ were demanded by the Mongols from those who wished to “live in peace” with them; thus, presenting such things to the Mongols was equated with acknowledgement of the khan’s supremacy. This created a serious problem for diplomatic exchanges between European kings and the Pope and the Mongols in the 13th century.⁴⁰

After receiving an answer from Oghul Qaimish, King Louis deeply regretted having ever sent any embassy to the Mongols.⁴¹ This experience with the tent chapel may be understood as the reason why Rubruck was travelling to the Mongols not as an official envoy, but only as a “bearer of the king’s letter” and a friar with practically no gifts. The only “gifts” he was offering was a little food, such as biscuits, fruits and wine.⁴²

34 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: pp. 33-4. For the edition of Eljigidey’s letter see Pelliot, Paul, “Les Mongols et la papauté. Chapitre II”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien*, xxviii (1931-2): pp. 22-26.

35 *The Memoirs of the Lord of Joinville*, trans. by Ethel Wedgewood (London: John Murray, 1906): p. 249.

36 *The Memoirs of the Lord of Joinville*: pp. 249-50.

37 *Ibid.*: p. 58.

38 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 36.

39 For the material exchange among the Mongols see Allsen, Thomas T., *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization]).

40 For the case of an embassy led by John of Marignolli which brought a beautiful horse to the khan Toghon Temür (Shundi) in 1342 see Arnold, Lauren, “The Heavenly Horse is come from the West to the West: Two Paintings illuminating the Role of Latin Christians at the Mongol Court”, *Orientalia*, XLV/7 (Oct. 2014): pp. 1-4.

41 *The Memoirs of the Lord of Joinville*: p. 259.

42 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 52 (x,2).

This does not mean that he had no valuables with him. In fact, he had one wagon loaded with precious items. These, however, he did not intend to offer as gifts, as is clear from the description of his first meeting with Chaghatai [mentioned as *Scacatai*]⁴³ as well as his meeting with Sartaq some two months later.⁴⁴

3 Christian Liturgical Objects Displayed

The load of Christian liturgical objects which Rubruck had with him may be classified into three broad categories – books, liturgical vestments and vessels used for liturgy. Rubruck does not provide a complete list of these things, which would have been expected if he had taken them as gifts, so we may learn about them only from his description of his audience with Sartaq in the summer of 1253 in his camp. Additional information can be gleaned from his list of items which were or were not returned to him on his return journey from the court of Möngke.

The audience with Sartaq was arranged by a Nestorian⁴⁵ officer named Coyac, who after examining Rubruck's valuables ordered him to present all the objects to the khan. Among these objects there was an unspecified number of books – a bible, an illuminated psalter, a breviary, a missal, and a book of Sentences, probably the one by Peter Lombard. He also had a book in Arabic of unknown content. Its language, however, suggests that he expected to encounter readers of Arabic. Besides books, there were multiple pieces of liturgical vestments and various vessels used for Mass. Rubruck also had a phial with chrism, which is used for the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. Chrism would be thus essential for proper ritual treatment of newly baptized Christian converts, and also was necessary for any potential ordination of priests. At the time of Rubruck chrism was also necessary for consecration of patens and chalices. The presence of the Book of Sentences, if it indeed was Peter Lombard's work, as an overview of Christian theology suggests

43 Ibid.: Precious cloth was expected, but Rubruck "made his excuses".

44 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 72 (xv,2). Again, the Mongol guide was "highly outraged on seeing that we were not getting ready anything to take". Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: pp. 114-5. See also Shreve Simpson, "Manuscripts and Mongols": p. 362 and note 40.

45 I am aware of the discussions about the term Nestorian, which is considered as inappropriate both by the Church of the East, as well as by some scholars. See Brock, Sebastian, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer", *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, LXXVIII/3 (1996): pp. 23-35. In this text I use the term 'Nestorian' as an emic term used by the Latin sources.

that Rubruck might have rightly expected interfaith polemics. It is a question whether the travelling company had a portable altar. Some hints might lead us to think so. Firstly, among the items that Rubruck had with him was also a cloth, which he calls *tualia ornata aufringio*, which could be interpreted as an altar cloth.⁴⁶ It would make little sense, if it indeed was an altar cloth, to have one without having an altar. Secondly, already since 1224 the Franciscans were allowed to celebrate Mass on portable altars.⁴⁷ Their usage is explicitly documented half a century after Rubruck, by Giovanni Elemosina, who reports that the friars in the Golden Horde had movable *loca* which provided them with full material background for missionary activities.⁴⁸

The fact that liturgical objects carried by Rubruck were not intended only for personal use of the travelling company, but also for the foundation of a long-term mission is testified by their amount. Rubruck needed one wagon to load all these things to bring them to the khan's court. This represented a quarter of the whole load of the travelling company. Among the items there were multiple pieces of the same type – bibles, liturgical vestments and chalices. Yet, nothing was intended as a gift. Considering the Franciscan emphasis on poverty,⁴⁹ this indicates, that they were not intended only for personal usage of the small travelling company.⁵⁰ The load attracted much attention from all people, as Rubruck mentions,⁵¹ which was also caused by the fact that the objects were made from valuable materials, such as silk, gold, and silver. It is not surprising then to read that Rubruck was “struck with fear”⁵² when he was getting ready for his audience with the khan with all these precious objects displayed. He realised that these items could be taken from him – as “gifts”. To prevent that, he offered bread, fruits and wine as “a blessing”. He also

46 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 294 (xxxvii,10). For different meanings see *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55: As Narrated by Himself. With Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian De Carpine*, trans and edited by William Rockhill (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900): p. 259.

47 Foley, “Franciscan Liturgical prayer”: p. 393.

48 Golubovich, Girolamo, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra santa e dell'Oriente francescano*, 11, *Addenda al sec. XIII e fonti pel sec. XIV* (Firenze: Quaracchi, 1913): p. 125. For other details of Franciscan mission in Golden Horde see Hautala, Roman, “Latin Sources on the Religious Situation in the Golden Horde in the Early Reign of Uzbek Khan”, *Zolotoordynskoe Obozrenie*, iv/2 (2016): pp. 336-46.

49 Cf. *Regula Bullata* of St. Francis, chap. vi, in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*: pp. 68-9.

50 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: pp. 74, 78 (xv,5; xvi,2).

51 *Ibid.*: p. 74 (xv,5).

52 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 116. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 74 (xv,5): “Quo audito expavi. Et displicuit michi verbum”.

attempted to bind the precious liturgical equipment closely with himself when he warned the Nestorian officer that “the vestments are consecrated and may be touched only by priests”.⁵³ This indeed sounds like an attempt to keep the Nestorian and Mongol hands off these things.

Announcing the sacred and untouchable character of these objects, however, had a negative effect upon Rubruck’s own social status. As already pointed out by Watson, without precious gifts Rubruck’s only social capital was his status of a “holy man” who offered blessings and prayers. Therefore, instead of precious gifts, Rubruck offered himself and his belongings to the service of the great khan.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, not even this helped him to secure the liturgical items for himself. After the audience these items were taken by the Nestorians until Rubruck delivered his letter to the Great Khan Möngke. He was able to keep only the vestment that he was wearing in front of Sartaq. He also secretly took a bible, a book of Sentences and “other volumes to which [he] was more attached”.⁵⁵ This statement is somewhat contradictory to his claim that he had only a bible and a breviary on his further journey.⁵⁶ But if this is the case, that he took two or more books, including an illuminated one which he presented to Möngke,⁵⁷ this means that his load must have included a good number of volumes altogether, if a removal of several of them was no great risk.

All other liturgical objects were taken by the Nestorians and only some of them were returned to Rubruck on his return journey. Among the objects which were not returned to Rubruck was an illuminated book of psalms which was kept for Sartaq. According to Rubruck, the khans were deeply interested in Latin books and examined them diligently. However, this interest should not be ascribed to their alleged leanings towards Christianity, but rather to their interest in the technology of book-making, and the culture of writing in general, as even Rubruck himself noted.⁵⁸ It is possible that the Western manuscripts could make an impact upon the literary and also artificial production of the Mongols, as Shreve Simpson suggests.⁵⁹

53 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 116. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 74 (xv,5).

54 Watson, “Mongol inhospitality”: pp. 97-101. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: pp. 156-8 (xxviii,16).

55 Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William*: p. 120. *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 80 (xvi,3).

56 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 176 (xxix,20).

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.: p. 294 (xxxvii,11).

59 Shreve Simpson, “Manuscripts and Mongols”.

4 Motives of Removal: Lack, or Strategy?

Interestingly, besides books, liturgical vessels and vestments, the Nestorians also kept a little phial with chrism, even though chrism is not used in the Church of the East. This naturally raises the question of the Nestorian motivation to take these things from Rubruck. There are several explanations which do not exclude each other, and rather might be considered as complementary: Firstly, they probably were attracted by the precious materials such as silk, gold, or silver from which the items were made. Secondly, they might have needed some of the objects for their own liturgical practices, because they were lacking them. Certainly, there is a question regarding the usage of certain items which are not normally used in the ritual practice of the Church of the East, such as chrism.

Nestorian usage of chrism produced and consecrated by Latin Christians would support the opinion of the French historian Jean Deauvillier, who pointed out that the Nestorians in Asia did not perceive themselves as essentially divided from Rome.⁶⁰ Using objects which were consecrated outside their church and brought by friars would therefore be acceptable for them. We cannot say that the friars had a similar approach. Before Easter 1254 in Qaraqorum Rubruck was very much hesitant to use liturgical vestments and vessels and to receive the Sacrament from the Nestorians on the occasion of a Mass.⁶¹

The third level of explanation as to why the Nestorians took liturgical objects brought by Rubruck, would ascribe the Nestorian officer advanced strategic thinking. This would mean that the liturgical objects were removed *intentionally*, in order to minimize Rubruck's missionary potential. Rubruck was travelling with a load of precious things which could have impressed the Great Khan Möngke, would he be allowed to bring them to him. The coexistence of different religious communities and their status as supported by the khans certainly did not mean that there were no tensions and rivalry among them. I assume that the Nestorians did not welcome another concurrence, not only in the religious market of the region, but especially not at the khan's court. Taking into account the complaints of John of Montecorvino and his fellows from the beginning of the 14th century regarding the sharp hostility of the Nestorians towards the friars ("they did not allow any Christian of another

60 Dauvillier, Jean, "Guillaume de Rubrouck et les communautés chaldéennes d'Asie centrale au moyen âge", *L'Orient Syrien*, 11 (1957): pp. 223-42, here pp. 229-31. Reprinted in Dauvillier, Jean, *Histoire et institutions des Églises orientales au Moyen Âge* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1983).

61 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 218 (XXX,10).

rite to have any place of worship, however small"),⁶² this explanation seems quite possible.

No matter whether intentionally, or not, there can be no doubt that the removal of the liturgical items complicated Rubruck's further work. On his onward journey, when he met Hungarian former clerks, he could not give them any books for which they asked him;⁶³ likewise, without proper liturgical items and vestments, he hesitated to celebrate the Easter Eucharist in Qaraqorum, as already mentioned.⁶⁴

Material items connected to Christian liturgy played an important role in mutual encounters and their removal had a direct impact on the journey of Rubruck. We may even speculate whether he would have made a better impression on the Great Khan Möngke if he was allowed to bring these things which had been taken from him by the Nestorians. Certainly, Christian liturgical objects, as the only precious objects that Rubruck had with him, turned out to be sources of great tension manifesting in several aspects of the encounter: in the Mongols' desire for precious things, the reluctance of Rubruck to provide any precious gifts and the limitations of the use of liturgical items, which in this case was limited to authorized persons – priests.

5 Beyond Material Representation of Christianity

Disarmed from liturgical objects of Christian practice, there was still one means of mission that Rubruck could use and which could not be taken from him: it was his voice. Since the occasion of the audience with Sartaq, Rubruck presented himself by singing Latin hymns. Interestingly, it was not his own invention, but rather the result of a favourable harmony between the Christian practice of prayer and the Mongol fondness for music. Rubruck mentions that when they were entering Sartaq's tent, they were asked to sing a blessing.⁶⁵ For the Franciscans, following the example of St. Francis, singing and music were important parts of their religious practice, preaching and public self-presentation.⁶⁶ Singing was also included in the Franciscan training of

62 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*: p. 224; for Latin see *Sinica Franciscana*: I, p. 346.

63 *Viaggio in Mongolia*: p. 100 (XX,3).

64 *Ibid.*: p. 218 (XXX,10).

65 *Ibid.*: p. 76 (XV,6).

66 More on Franciscan music see Loewen, Peter Victor, *Music in Early Franciscan Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

novices, which is testified by several treatises from the 1240s and 1250s.⁶⁷ The positive effects of singing were both acknowledged by the Franciscans, and also appreciated by the Mongols. We may remind the reader here, for comparison, of John of Montecorvino's remarks regarding the impact of the sound of Christian liturgy on the khan in Khanbaliq around the year 1305.⁶⁸

Since this first occasion of singing to Sartaq, Rubruck and his company used Latin hymns on various occasions, whenever allowed and encouraged. Thus, the lack of material representation of Christian doctrine was substituted by singing as the only "object" that was left to them.

Rubruck's account reveals the complexity of material aspects of the friar's encounter with the Mongols. The account combines two discourses on objects and demonstrates the problematic tension among European diplomacy, and the Franciscan and Mongol ways of treating gifts and possessions. The first discourse stresses the generosity and piety of King Louis IX by mentioning rich, representative objects of Christian liturgy, such as illuminated books, and expensive liturgical vestments. On the other hand, Rubruck's identity as a Franciscan monk is reflected not only in his repeated refusal of various gifts, but also in the very fact that he never complains about the loss of these things.⁶⁹

The lack of Christian liturgical objects during the larger part of Rubruck's journey is compensated on a non-material level, which is that of sound. This sound, which for the Mongols could have been perceived as appealing entertainment and a part of any social event, was fulfilled with the message of the "true faith". Thus, Rubruck proved his loyalty to the king, by ascribing him generosity of gifts. At the same time, however, he proved loyalty to the Franciscan order by showing his missionary zeal, which indeed is transformed into songs of often missionary content.⁷⁰

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68 *Sinica Franciscana*: 1, p. 353.

69 Watson, "Mongol inhospitality": pp. 100-1.

70 Including *Salve regina*, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, or even *Vexilla regis prodeunt*.

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