
Eastern View and Knowledge of Europe in the Thirteenth Century

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Abstract:

Infrequent communications between the extremes of Eurasia existed prior to the Mongols, but they were often through intermediaries. Despite of its destructive force, the rise of the Mongol Empire allowed merchants and missionaries to transverse Eurasia. The conquests in many ways changed and enriched Eastern knowledge of Europe. This paper will firstly introduce what was known of Europe from a small quantity of Chinese and Mongol source material, including records mentioning the ‘Franks’ in the Early Yuan Period. The Mongol view and knowledge of Christian Europe in the thirteenth century will be discussed. The paper will be ended by examining Rabban Sawma’s mission to the Latin West.

Key Words: Eastern Knowledge of Europe, Mongol, Merchants and missionaries

Infrequent communications between the extremes of Eurasia existed prior to the Mongols, but they were often through intermediaries. From the moment when the Mongols rode into Eastern Europe in 1237, the Western and Eastern ends of the Eurasian landmass began to gain a new awareness of one another and to impinge on one another's histories more directly than ever before. Before the thirteenth century, not a great deal was known accurately in the East about the remoter regions in Europe. This paper will firstly introduce what was known of Europe from a small quantity of Chinese and Mongol source material, and what Records mentioning the 'Franks' in the Early Yuan Period. The Mongol view and knowledge of Christian Europe in the thirteenth century will be discussed, ended by examining Rabban Sawma's mission to the Latin West.

1. CHINA'S KNOWLEDGE OF EUROPE IN SONG TIMES

As for the Chinese view, not very much was known in China about Europe at that time. There appear to be references to Europe in the works of three thirteenth-century scholar-officials, but these references are all very sketchy, and the identification of the places is not completely certain. Moreover, these works mostly contain second-hand information.

One of the works referred to here was written by Zhao Rugua 赵汝适 (1170-1231). Zhao was an official of the Southern Song period (1127-1279). North China during the Song period (960-1279) was conquered by the Jin people, based in northeast China, in 1126. The capital of China, which had been at Bianliang (Kaifeng) was as a consequence moved south to Lin'an (Hangzhou), along with the Song ruling house. The period before 1126 is therefore known as the Northern Song, in contrast to the Southern Song, which is the period after 1126-1127 when the capital was at Hangzhou. North China was subsequently conquered in 1234 by the Mongols, who proclaimed the founding of the Yuan dynasty in 1271 and eventually completed their conquest of South China in 1279. The Yuan dynasty, under the Mongols, ruled China after 1271, although sometimes its starting date is given as 1279. It lasted until the founding of the Ming in 1368.

Zhao Rugua 赵汝适 completed his *Zhufan zhi* 诸蕃志 (Description of the Barbarian Peoples) in 1225. He was based in South China while the Mongols were overrunning North China. A descendant of the first Song emperor, he had been appointed as Inspector of Foreign Trade (*shibo shi* 市舶使) at Quanzhou, in Fujian province. He did not travel himself, however. Thus the information in the book is largely second-hand, taken from foreign traders who reached Quanzhou as well as from Chinese traders who sailed to foreign lands. He also included in his work extensive quotations from a work by another Chinese author, Zhou Qufei 周去非, assistant prefect of *Lingnan* 岭南 (Guilin, in Guangxi province). This work, *Lingwai daida* 岭外代答, was completed only a half-century earlier, in 1178. Zhou Qufei was also not a foreign traveler himself, but he discussed the geography, natural resources, ethnic groups, law, customs,

and economy of foreign countries in his work.¹ All the knowledge that Zhou and Zhao had about Europe at the time was probably based on information provided by Arab or other sailors. Zhao's work, which is thus a composite of Zhou's and his own, is divided into two parts: Part One concerns places (46 chapters) and Part Two concerns trade goods (43 chapters). The only extant English translation of Zhao's work, done over a century ago by Hirth and Rockhill under the title *Zhou Ju-Kua; His Work on the Chinese and Arab trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Chu Fan-Chi*,² indicates the passages taken from Zhou Qufei in quotation marks. Hirth and Rockhill praise Zhao's text for being 'of great value for a knowledge of the oriental sea-trade of the Song period', and note that the descriptions of foreign countries in the *Official History of the Song (Song shi 宋史)* are largely derived from it.³ For its sheer coverage alone, it had a wider vision of the world than can be found in any previous Chinese written materials, reflecting the extent to which China's horizons had expanded in the Southern Song period.

To this date, and to the best of our knowledge, no Chinese traveler had ever reached the Mediterranean before Rabban Sawma. The closest one to come to it was the envoy Gan Ying 甘英 in the Han dynasty, who was sent to visit the Roman Empire (Daqin) and supposedly reached the Persian Gulf in AD 97.⁴ Zhao had only a vague idea of where the Mediterranean was. Zhao included what appear to be three short chapters on Western polities in his book. These polities are called Lumei 芦眉, Mulanpi 木兰皮 and Sijialiyē 斯加里野, tentatively identified as Rome, Spain and Sicily, respectively. His descriptions in these chapters have been called 'a composite picture, a jumble of sundry bits of information concerning the remote Mediterranean region'.⁵ His text reflects his sources of information – sailors and merchants – as well as his own interest in maritime trade and commerce. This is why the descriptions focus on navigation, ports, ships, geography, products and commerce. For example, in his description of Lumei (perhaps Rome), he talks about its geographical position, topographical features, and something about its buildings and building materials.⁶ And there is very little discussion of the people and their lives, and no mention is made of the fact that their dominant religion was Christianity, although the layout of Lumei is described. Zhao's description of Mulanpi, possibly identified as the southern coast of Spain, also reflects his sailor-merchant sources, as it chiefly concerns aspects of navigation and commerce. He writes of the winds and sea, geography,

¹ Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida jiaozhu* 岭外代答校注 (Annotations on A Written Reply to Enquiries about Places Outside the Ridges) ed. Yang Wuquan, ed. Su Jiqing, *Zhongwai jiaotong shiji congkan* 中外交通史籍丛刊 Collected Writings of Historical Records of China and Foreign Countries Communication, 16 (Beijing, 1999)

² Zhao Rugua, *Zhou Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Chu-fan-chi*, trans. Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill (St. Petersburg, 1911).

³ Hirth and Rockhill, 'Introduction' to the translation of *Chu-fan-chi*, pp. 36.

⁴ Yan Zonglin, *History of Communication between China and the West* (Guangxi, 2007), pp. 5-6.

⁵ Zhao Rugua, *Chu-fan-chi*, p. 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

commercial networks and ships rather than the people's way of life. Zhao's short chapter on Sicily, if this identification is correct, focuses on its 'mountain of fire', probably Mt. Etna.⁷ The only comment he makes about the people of Sicily is that the clothing, customs and language are the same as those of Rome.

Such details concerning foreign countries did not attract Chinese public attention at the time when *Zhufan zhi* was written, and were also largely ignored by Confucian scholars, or dismissed as tall tales. It is extremely rare to find any information that can be identified with Europe in other early thirteenth century Chinese works, if at all. Yet this was an important first step in extending China's knowledge beyond its previously known horizons.

2. RECORDS MENTIONING THE 'FRANKS' IN THE EARLY YUAN PERIOD

As mentioned above, the Han Chinese did not have direct contacts with places as far away as Europe during the Song period. Zhao Rugua must have relied on foreign, perhaps largely Arab, traders and sailors for his information. The situation in the Yuan period was quite different. The Mongol invasions of Central Asia, Southwestern Asia, and Eastern Europe removed the manmade barriers to travel between these far-flung regions, setting the stage for both Westerners and Easterners to travel more freely, and leading to cultural exchange between distant parts of the globe.

Around the time when the Franciscan William of Rubruck were traveling to the East, Wang Yun 王恽 (1227-1304) and Chang De 常德 (fl. 1259-1261),⁸ two Yuan court officials of Han nationality, provided brief descriptions of the 'Franks' (the common name for Europeans borrowed from Muslim informants used by Chinese authors). Their accounts help to show the extent of China's knowledge about Europeans at the time. Wang Yun had been appointed an editor (*xiangdingguan* 祥定官) in the Central Secretariat (*zhongshusheng* 中书省) of the Mongol government in the first year of Qubilai Khan's reign, when he was beginning 'to build up a Chinese-style administration'.⁹ This appointment gave Wang access to detailed records of affairs of state in the Khan's early reign, and provided him with sources for his work, entitled *Annals of the Prime Ministers' Administrative Work* (*Zhongtang shiji* 中堂事记), which was contained in *Qiuqian xiansheng daquan wenji* 秋涧先生大全文集. Included together with summaries of important documents is a report on the first visit of European travelers in Yuan China.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, pp. 153-4.

⁸ Wang Yun, Hanlin Academician Chengzhi (Recipient of Edicts), *Qiuqian xiansheng daquan wenji* 秋涧集 (The Collected Works of Qiuqian); Chang De, Yuan court's envoy to the Il-khanate, who dictated his travels *Xi shi ji* 西使记 (Record of an Embassy to the Regions in the West) to Liu Yu in 1263; Liu Yu was an Investigating Censor 监察御史 of the Yuan dynasty.

⁹ Herbert Franke, *China under Mongol Rule* (Variorum, 1994), X, p. 158.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Wang Yun's record of the arrival of Europeans at Qubilai Khan's court reflects the court's geographical knowledge and picture of Europe. It says that 'in 1261, the Franks sent envoys to Shangdu (Kaiping 开平, known in the West as Xanadu), presenting clothing made of kudzu-hemp cloth. Their country lies much further west than the Uighurs. Their women are very beautiful and the men have blue eyes and blonde hair.'¹¹ The homeland of the Uighurs is presented as the western extremity of his knowledge, with the Franks coming from somewhere beyond that point. Wang's attempt to describe the Franks and their place of origin was novel; he is the only known Han official in the Yuan court to write about them in an account of foreign affairs. Wang himself was an appropriate arbiter of intercultural exchange, since he had helped to bring Han Chinese culture to the Mongol court; Herbert Franke regards Wang Yun as 'a transmitter of Chinese values'.¹²

Chang De, a Yuan official who was contemporary with Wang Yun, was one of these who traveled westward himself. He was sent by Möngke Khan on an embassy to see Möngke's brother, the Il-khan Hulegu in Persia. Chang dictated his account of this mission, *Xi shi ji* 西使记 (Record of an Embassy to the Regions in the West), to Liu Yu 刘郁, an Investigating Censor in the Yuan government, and the work was included in *Qiuqian xiansheng daquan wenji*. The account tells of the Mongol expansion westward into Persia. After receiving his orders to travel westward, Chang De left Qaraqorum in 1259 on his fourteen-month journey and returned in 1260. His record of the journey, which is over two thousand words long, describes more than thirty cities, rivers, and small kingdoms across the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, and Africa, including Mecca, Egypt (Mixi'er), India and the land of 'the Franks'. Although it is by no means detailed or accurate, it allows us to see slightly more information about Europeans as seen through Chinese eyes than before. Later it was translated twice into French, first by A. Remusat in 1825, from the edition in *Yuanshi leibian* 元史类编, and second by Guillaume Pauthier in 1865, from the version in *Haiguo tuzhi* 海国图志. E. Bretschneider translated it into English in 1875 and included it in his *Medieval Researches*. Yan Zonglin 阎宗临 commented that these translations played a positive role in the study of medieval Central Asian history.¹³

The Chinese geographer Ding Qian 丁谦 (1843-1919) conducted textual research on the geography of *Xi shi ji* and published a book on it, entitled *Yuan liuyu xi shi ji dili kaozheng* 元刘郁西使记地理考证 (Geographical Research on *Xi shi ji* by Liu Yu of the Yuan Dynasty).¹⁴ The historian Chen Gaohua 陈高华 calls Chang De's *Xi shi ji* the source from which China first acquired information about the geography, local conditions and customs of the regions west of Qocho (Turfan) and Kustana (Hetian, or Khotan). He notes that such written accounts

¹¹ Wang Yun, 'Zhongtang shiji' 中堂事记, in *Qiu jianji*, printed in *Qinding siku quanshu huiyao* 钦定四库全书会要, annotated by Xie Dengjuan, (500 fascicules, Taipei, 1988), fascs. 401, vol. 81, pp. 396-401.

¹² H. Franke, *China under Mongol Rule*, X, p. 154-5.

¹³ Yan Zonglin, *History of Communication between China and the West*, p. 207.

¹⁴ Ding Qian, *Yuan liuyu xi shi ji dili kaozheng* (Yiwen Publishing, 1915).

broadened China's range of vision.¹⁵ Yan Zonglin points out that Wang Yun, who had read Chang De's account, composed two poems about the latter's heroism in crossing such long distances and overcoming such huge obstacles. These poems are also included in *Qiuqian xiansheng daquan wenji*.¹⁶

Chang De provides a vivid description of the dress, habits and customs of 'the Franks', as well as their homeland, including the rare animals found there:¹⁷

In the west on the way to the country (Egypt) there is a great sea, and to the west of that sea are the Franks. Their women are dressed beautifully, like Bodhisattvas in paintings (*pusa huaxiang* 菩萨画像); their men wear foreign (*hu* 胡) dress, and all sleep in pyjamas (literally, with clothes on). Husband and wife live separately. There is a large bird with ostrich feet, dark green in color, and over 3.33 meters tall (one *zhang* 丈) in height; it eats fire, walk by flapping their wings; their eggs each are about one *sheng* 升 (about 1.07 litres or 1.88 pints).¹⁸ (Yan Zonglin thinks that the bird refers to the African ostrich.¹⁹)

The accounts of Wang Yun and Chang De thus provide more ethnographic information than Zhao Rugua's, extending China's knowledge of Europeans (if these are who is meant by 'the Franks') and corroborating the presence of other civilized peoples and natural resources in distant lands. Still, these are scattered references rather than comprehensive discussions of Western Europe, and again, the place identifications are not entirely certain.

3. THE MONGOL VIEW OF CHRISTIAN EUROPE BEFORE 1260

According to letters from several Mongol rulers to the Pope and various European monarchs, the Mongol monarchs did not understand the Pope's role as a spiritual ruler. These letters show a sharp contrast in the Mongols' views of the West before and after the year 1260. Before 1260, Europeans were seen as enemies to be conquered, while after that date they were viewed as potential allies. The period before 1260 corresponds to the visits of John of Pian de Carpini and William of Rubruck to the Mongols, whereas the period after 1260 corresponds to Rabban Sawma's journey westward.

Güyük Khan's (r. 1246–1249) letter of 1246 to Pope Innocent IV, which Carpini brought back to the latter from Qaraqorum provides some profound insights into the Mongols' views of Western Europeans, as does the letter from Möngke Khan (r. 1251–1259) to King Louis IX of France, delivered by Rubruck. They were both written, it will be remembered, in response to

¹⁵ Chen Gaohua, *Yuan Cultural History* (Guangdong, 2009), pp. 145-6.

¹⁶ Yan Zonglin, *History of Communication between China and the West*, pp. 206-7.

¹⁷ Chen Gaohua, *Yuan Cultural History*, pp. 144-5.

¹⁸ Yan Zonglin, *History of Communication between China and the West*, p. 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

letters from these respective Western eminences, who pleaded with the Mongols to stop killing Christians and convert to Christianity. J. J. Saunders decodes these letters and uses them to analyze the Mongols' views of the West.²⁰ The attitudes of Güyük Khan, his wife Oghul Khaimish, and Möngke Khan at the time of Carpini and Rubruck toward Europeans were characterized by arrogance and a sense of superiority. In 1245, the Dominican friar Ascelin, head of one of the four Latin missions dispatched by Pope Innocent IV to the Mongols, reached the camp of Baichu, Güyük's military commander in Western Asia on the Mughan Steppe. He conveyed the Pope's condemnation of the Mongols' brutal killings and great destruction, and also the Pope's demand that Baichu accept the Christian faith. Baichu, who was tasked with administering such affairs as census-taking and tax collection, took offense at the Pope's message, calling both the Pope and all Christians 'dogs'.²¹

The letters also show the Mongols' ignorance and misunderstanding of Christian Europe and Latin Christendom. Güyük thought that the Pope was the ruler of a large country and assumed that the various Christian kings were rulers of smaller states protected by the Pope. Believing that his own position was sanctioned by *Tenggeri*, Güyük naturally doubted God's sanction of the Pope's position.²² Rubruck had also noticed their ignorance of the West.²³ Richard Foltz argues that one reason why Mongol monarchs did not understand the Pope's role as a spiritual ruler was because of their Shamanistic beliefs, which focused mainly on real-life matters, 'like acquisition of food, victory in battle, and personal health', rather than spiritual matters.²⁴

4. THE LATIN WEST IN THE IMAGINATION OF THE IL-KHANS AFTER 1260

The sudden and unexpected death of Möngke Khan in 1259, and the subsequent division of the Mongol empire into separate khanates, which were smaller and weaker than before, had a dramatic effect on Mongol attitudes towards Europeans.

Hulegu of Il-khanate pursued a policy of expansion in West Asia, capturing and sacking Baghdad in 1258, extending his wave of conquest into Syria and taking Aleppo and Damascus (1260). The destruction of the Ayyubid dynasty, which this brought about, caused a shift in the center of Islamic power to the Mamluks of Egypt. News of Möngke's death arrived just as Hulegu was planning to attack Egypt. He had to depart for the Mongol homeland immediately, leaving a reduced force in Syria. The Mamluks took advantage of this weakness, invaded Palestine and defeated Hulegu's forces at Ayn Jalut. Suddenly Hulegu's invincibility was called into question, and his forces were threatened on all sides by both the Mamluks and the khan's

²⁰ J. J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquest* (London, 1971), pp. 94-95.

²¹ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 136; E. Phillips, *The Mongols* (London, 1969), p. 83.

²² C. Dawson, 'Appendix' in C. Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission* (London and New York, 1955), pp. 85-6.

²³ William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, pp. 120, 142.

²⁴ Richard Foltz, 'Ecumenical Mischief under the Mongols', *Central Asiatic Journal*, 43 (1999), pp. 42-69, esp. pp. 44.

Mongol kinsman. A conflict between Hulegu and Berke khan of the Golden Horde (Batu's brother) led to an outbreak of war in 1262,²⁵ thus he was 'nearly surrounded by hostile states'.²⁶

As a result of this precarious situation, Hulegu sought alliances with the Latin West against the Mamluks. As Muslims, the Mamluks were also enemies of the European Christians. Hulegu therefore made repeated overtures to the European powers. In 1262 he wrote to Louis IX of France, for example, officially requesting that the French join in the effort and attack Egypt by sea.²⁷ This new attitude on the part of the Il-khanate towards the Latin West has been analyzed by Christopher Dawson.²⁸ It had a profound effect on the Mongols' views of Europe and policies toward them. As expressed by Peter Jackson, the Il-khans' willingness to seek Latin collaboration to fight the Mamluks marked the 'dissolution of the Mongol empire and the onset of a new phase in relations with the outside world'.²⁹

While the main cause of the change in the Mongols' attitude toward Christian Europe was political, the development of Christianity in the East also had an impact. The Mongol period was an age in which Christian activities had expanded. This was particularly due to missionary work by the Church of the East in China, Central Asia and Southwest Asia. It was in the context of this widespread Christian missionary work that Rabban Sawma received his ecclesiastical education as a young man, training that ultimately prepared him to contribute to religious and cultural exchange between the East and the West.

In the wake of Hulegu, who had felt that he would be unable to defeat the Mamluks without the help of the Latin states,³⁰ his grandson the Il-khan Arghun (1258-1291, r. 1284-1291) was still making this attempt during his reign years later by sending four different embassies to the Pope and Western kingdoms.³¹ These missions were sent in 1285, 1287, 1289-1290 and 1290. The first, 'accompanied by an envoy from Qubilai', carried a letter for the Pope, promising to cooperate in a campaign against the Saracens between the Il-khanate and the West, and then to conquer Egypt and share the land with the Franks.³² The second of these embassies, in 1287, was the diplomatic mission of Rabban Sawma.

5. SAWMA'S MISSION AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING EUROPE

²⁵ J. J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquest*, pp. 116-7, 130-1.

²⁶ Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 24.

²⁷ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 166.

²⁸ C. Dawson, 'Introduction', *The Mongol Mission*, p. xxvii.

²⁹ Peter Jackson, 'The Crisis in the Holy Land in 1260', *The English Historical Review*, 95-367 (1980), 481-513, p. 484.

³⁰ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China* (London, 1928), pp. 166-7.

³¹ C. Dawson, 'Appendix', *The Mongol Mission*, pp. 85-6; 'Introduction', *The Mongol Mission*, p. xxx.

³² P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 169 .

Sawma was born, brought up, and educated in a well-to-do Uighur (more likely Ongut/Önggüt) Christian family living in Khanbaligh. The date of his birth is not known, but it is estimated to be around 1225. He was trained in ecclesiastical learning, and when he was in his twenties he renounced secular life and became a monk in the Church of the East.³³ He later gave away all his belongings, left the city and withdrew to an ascetic life in the mountains. He attracted followers and was greatly admired for his discourse on the faith and the style of his speech.³⁴ One of his disciples was a young man named Markos (Mark, 1245-1317) from Kawshang in the province of Shanxi.³⁵ Later Markos was to rise to great prominence and become 'the Catholicus', the Patriarch of the Church of the East in Baghdad.

The two monks set out from Khanbaligh in 1275, travelling westward along the silk route. In Maraghah, the capital of Azerbaijan, on the way to Baghdad, they met the Catholicus Mar Denha for the first time. They then journeyed to Mosul and other places in what is today Iraq. On account of their ability to speak Mongol, Mar Denha asked them to take a message to the new Mongol ruler Abaqa Khan, son of Hulegu.³⁶ On their return to Baghdad, Mar Denha appointed Markos to the post of Metropolitan of the See of the Cathay (or Northern China), bestowed on him the title Mar and the name Yahbh-Allaha, and also made Rabban Sawma a Visitor-General.³⁷ When the Patriarch Mar Denha passed away in early 1281, the Nestorian fathers had to choose his successor. Although there were many contenders, they eventually chose Mar Yahbh-Allaha, primarily because of his linguistic ability and this decision was approved by Abaqa Khan who had been kind and generous to Christians.

Abaqa's son Arghun (fourth ruler of the Il-khanate, r. 1284-1291) shared the tolerant attitude of his father toward Christians, and ascended to power in the Il-khanate. As noted above, Sawma's mission to Western Europe was the second of the four missions Arghun sent to the West. Sawma's account does not mention the others, but says only that Arghun 'intended to go into the countries of Palestine and Syria and to subjugate them and take possession of them'. By this he meant that he wanted to force the Mamluks out of Syria and the Holy Land. Knowing that he needed the assistance of the Western kings, he asked the Catholicus Mar Yahbh-Allaha to find him 'a wise man . . . suitable and . . . capable of undertaking an embassy'.³⁸ The Catholicus recommended Rabban Sawma for the task. He also asked Sawma to report to the Pope concerning the development of Eastern Christianity. Sawma was then appointed emissary of the Il-khanate to Europe by Arghun.

³³ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, pp. 126.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-132.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148, 173-174.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Rabban Sawma was well prepared to undertake this diplomatic task. The outcomes of his mission fall into three main categories: diplomatic, religious and historical. He fulfilled his diplomatic mission by meeting with the Christian kings of France and England, and persuading them to ally with Arghun khan against the Mamluks of Egypt. When he returned to Baghdad, he brought with him letters of support from Pope Nicholas IV, Edward I of England and Philip IV of France. Despite their agreement, however, the joint campaign that the Il-khan of Persia had proposed to force the Mamluks out of Syria and the Holy Land failed to occur –Arghun died when his last mission to the Pope was still in Europe in 1291 and Pope Nicholas died a year later.³⁹

Sawma's account revealed the experience of an individual Easterner encountering Western culture for the first time. He had his eyes opened by what he saw in Western Europe. Sawma was most impressed by the architecture of the Western Christian world, particularly the churches, and also the various tombs and relics he saw. He also remarked on the different funeral customs, coronation ceremonies, educational systems, urban development, and even naval warfare, which was particularly striking to him because of the restraint shown by the victors in refraining from attacking the civilian population. Most of what he commented on were aspects that were unfamiliar to him, different from what he was used to in his home environment. Rabban Sawma's travel account was the earliest account of the West as seen from an Easterner's eyes, and it fills an important gap in our knowledge of East-West encounters in the thirteenth century.

6. CONCLUSION

The Chinese authors of the Song and Yuan period, cited at the beginning of the paper, had a passing interest in and curiosity about the West, but no more than any other people they had heard about. Although they were eager to learn more about the outside world, the three early Chinese writers, Zhao Rugua, Wang Yun and Chang De had very limited knowledge of the West, and only a vague idea about the Mediterranean and the countries on its shores. They remarked on Western Europeans' physical features, wrote about aspects of navigation, shipping and trade, and recorded details that were unusual and strange about different peoples and lands. However, these records did not reflect any deep understanding of Europe, any long period of study and thinking about Europeans, or any extended experience by the authors of living there and seeing for themselves – they reflected no knowledge about them from the inside – as did the writings of Rabban Sawma. They were only snippets of information that their authors had heard and written down. Rabban Sawma's work was thus the first in-depth account of the West written by a traveller from China.

The main sources for the Mongols' view of Europe examined here are the letters of their rulers to the Pope and Western kings. These letters reveal a dramatic shift in policy after 1260. Before

³⁹ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 169.

that time, during the visits of Carpini and Rubruck, the Mongols viewed Europeans with an air of arrogance and contempt, believing that they would soon threaten them into submission or bring them to their knees through conquest, and they did everything in their power to bring that about. The Mongols' point of view was based partly on ignorance of the West, except about their military preparedness, and partly on their thirst for conquest and expansion. The West was only spared the fate of conquest by chance, because the death of Möngke Khan in 1259 recalled the Mongol leaders to choose a successor. Then the formerly almost invincible Empire broke up into separate, more vulnerable khanates.

After 1260, the policy of the Mongols shifted and their letters to the Pope and Western kings were more conciliatory. Faced with the threat of the Mamluks from Egypt, as well as challenges from other competing khanates and Mongol clan members, the Il-khans of Persia attempted to form alliances with the European powers against the Mamluks. Their initiatives showed a change in attitude and tone of communication with the Latin West. They were also more open toward non-Mongol religions, allowing Christian relations and clan members to play important roles, and even expressing interest in conversion themselves in order to keep these religionists on their side, while using them for their own ends.

This is where Rabban Sawma came into the picture. He was one of those Christians, and the Il-khans were fortunate to have him as an ambassador to the West. He was well-educated, well-versed in many languages and obviously competent as a diplomat, since he succeeded in obtaining letters promising cooperation with the Il-khans from the Pope and two European kings. Historians are fortunate to have Rabban Sawma's travel account, the earliest account of the West as seen from an Easterner's eyes, as it fills an important gap in our knowledge of East-West encounters in the thirteenth century. Sawma possessed a wealth of curiosity about Europe and was a keen observer, who made insightful observations, and thus was uniquely able person to instantiate the East-West encounter.

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