

Contacts between the Mongols and the Latin West in the Thirteenth Century— Seen from Rabban Sawma’s Westward Mission¹

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Abstract:

The rising of the Mongol Empire made it convenient for missionaries, diplomats and merchants to travel across the Eurasia landmass. Direct contact between the extremes of Eurasia was thus possible. In the thirteenth century, Rabban Sawma from the East journeyed westward as far as Europe and left an account of his travels. Instead of focusing on his depiction of the political and religious situation in Western Asia, this paper looks at the aspects revealing his personal encounter with the Latin West, aiming to make contribution to our knowledge of the contacts between the Mongols and the Latin West in the thirteenth century.

Key Words: Rabban Sawma, Latin West, Mongols, Nestorian

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The rising of the Mongol Empire made it convenient for missionaries, diplomats and merchants to travel across the Eurasia landmass. Direct contact between the extremes of Eurasia was thus possible, yet few records were left depicting these contacts. In the thirteenth century, two Franciscan friars John of Pian de Carpini and William of Rubruck traveled to the Mongols in the East and both provided accounts of the Mongols. In the same century, Rabban Sawma from the East journeyed westward as far as Europe and left an account of his travels. Instead of focusing on his depiction of the political and religious situation in Western Asia, this paper examines the aspects revealing his personal encounter with the Latin West. By the time of Sawma's diplomatic mission from Baghdad to Western Europe, on which he was sent in 1287, the Mongol world had changed significantly from the way it was at the time of Carpini and Rubruck. The Mongols' policy toward the West had changed as well. To understand the contacts between the Mongols and the Latin West in the thirteenth century, this paper explains these changes, and possible reasons for the changes, which form the backdrop to Sawma's travels. It also describes the circumstances of his journey and analyses his purpose, motivation, official commissions, and his encounter with the Latin West as included in his travel account.

1. BACKGROUND OF RABBAN SAWMA'S TRAVEL TO THE WEST

Rabban Sawma was the first person from the East we know of to travel to Western Europe and leave an account of his contact with the West. It is important to understand what Sawma might have known about 'the West', or Europe and Latin Christendom in particular, before he traveled there, so we can see the impact the contact had on him. At the time of Sawma's departure in 1275, North China had been conquered by the Mongols and South China was about to fall. Thus these two worlds – Chinese and Mongol – overlapped for a time. In Sawma's case Eastern knowledge of the Latin West included both Chinese and Mongol view.

1.1 Early Contacts between the East and the West

Before the rise of the Mongol Empire, direct contact between the East and the West was rare. Few was known in the East about the remoter area in the Latin West. The image and information of Europe in Chinese works in the thirteenth century are generally sketchy and rely on second-hand information. The works referred to here were left by several scholar-officials, namely Zhao Rugua, Wang Yun and Chang De. Zhao Rugua's *Zhufan zhi* was completed in 1225. He was the Inspector of Foreign Trade at Quanzhou, in Fujian. He came into frequent contact with foreigners, including Arab traders and sailors. From them he learned many details about the outside world, which he included in his book. A few polities in *Zhufan zhi* could probably be identified with Europe. Although it is an important step in enriching China's knowledge of the outside world, people in Europe and their lives were not noticed and no discussion is made about their religion, namely Christianity. This is in striking contrast to Sawma's descriptions of Europe, which are dominated by a concern for Christianity.

When Rubruck journeyed to the Mongol world, two Han officials at the Mongol court, Wang Yun and Chang De, described the Europeans briefly in their works. Europeans were referred to as “Franks” by Chinese authors of the time. They probably borrowed this term for Europeans from Muslim sailors and traders. The image of the “Franks” visiting the Khan’s court in Wang Yun’s work is a reflection of limited relevant knowledge in the East. Unlike the other two scholars mentioned here, Chang De did go westward. He went to Persia to pay an official visit to Hulegu Khan, Möngke Khan’s brother. Chang De dictated his experience to Liu Yu, who left an account of this mission, *Xishi ji*, mentioning the land of “the Franks”. *Xishi ji* provides a relatively more detailed picture of the “Franks”: people’s outlook, dress, habits and rare animals were mentioned.¹ These accounts thus provide more ethnographic information than before, enriching Eastern knowledge of other civilized people in remote lands.

1.2 The Change of Mongol Rulers’ View and Policy Toward the West

The Mongol court had limited geographical knowledge and confused picture of Europe and their policy and view toward the West changed with time. As to Mongol rulers’ view of Western Europe before 1260, there are letters from Mongol khans to the Pope and European kings, revealing some characteristic features of cultural encounters. One of these is the tendency of people from different backgrounds to misunderstand each other. The Pope’s role as a spiritual ruler in the Latin West was not understood by the Mongol khans. These Mongol rulers insisted that everyone in the world, Christian or non-Christian, obey the Mongol law (*yasa*), which constituted God’s command, and pay homage to the universal khan. They were warned of inevitable destruction if they did not.² Every Latin monarch who dispatched embassies to the Mongols was thus seen as ‘a suppliant or vassal’.³ These attitude of arrogance, superiority and hostility, from Güyük and Möngke, thus represented the first phase of interaction between the Mongols and Europe, often characterized by the phrase ‘No peace is acceptable without submission’.⁴

The Mongol leaders claimed that they personally had divine authority. Güyük Khan issued decrees to his subjects in the name of God. According to Rubruck, Möngke Khan referred to Chinggis Khan as the son of God.⁵ While seeing themselves as greater than human, they saw their enemies in the West as less than human. In 1245, Baichu, Mongolian military commander, calling both the Pope and all Christians ‘dogs’ when condemned by the Pope’s envoy of brutality.⁶ At the same time as such blatant animosity between the two sides prevailed, the

¹ Chen Gaohua, *Yuan Cultural History*, pp. 144-5.

² Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* (Harlow, 2005), p. 136

³ J. J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquest*, p. 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

⁵ William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253-1255*, trans. Peter Jackson (Indianapolis, 2009), p. 248.

⁶ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 136; E. Phillips, *The Mongols* (London, 1969), p. 83.

Mongols seemed to be tolerant toward Christianity and other religions. Tolerance did not necessarily mean conversion, however.⁷

Things began to change after Möngke Khan's death in 1259. Hulegu of Il-khanate sought to ally with the Latin West against the Mamluks. Hulegu and his grandson Arghun felt that it was impossible to defeat the Mamluks without the help of the Latin West. Over the years during their reign, they had been making this attempt by sending several different embassies to the Pope and Latin states. One of these diplomatic missions was carried out by Rabban Sawma. In the meantime, the attitude of the Latin West toward the Mongols was also softened by the news brought back by John the Hungarian that Hulegu wished to accept Christianity.⁸

1.3 Possible Reason for Mongol Policy Change—The Development of Christianity in the East

The Mongol's changing attitude towards the Latin states was caused not only by political reason, but also by the expanding Christian activities and the spread of Christianity in the East. The Mongol period was the second and more lively period of growth of Christianity in the East, compared to the first, in Tang times.⁹ As Christopher Dawson said, it was in Mongol Asia that the Church of the East reached its most prosperous stage and 'became for a time a real factor in world affairs'.¹⁰

Many Nestorians were closely associated with the Mongol court as Carpini and Rubruck observed.¹¹ Mongol rulers themselves did not become Christians, but the increasing prevalence of Christianity at their courts and the interest of their Christian courtiers in the religious practices of Europe played a part in changing their views of Latin Christendom. A large number of tablet inscriptions dating from this period have been found in China, providing evidence of the spread of Christianity during Yuan times. The appearance of the term *Arcaouns* (the name for 'Nestorians' in the Yuan period) in so many imperial edict tablets suggests that Christians had a position in Yuan society similar to that of the Buddhists – a religious minority whose pious practices were protected, though not necessarily followed, by their warlike overlords.

Rabban Sawma grew up and was educated in such context of the increasing prevalence of Christianity at Mongol courts. This ecclesiastical education and training probably smoothed his diplomatic mission to the Christendom and prepared him for his religious and cultural encounter with the Latin West.

⁷ Richard Foltz, 'Ecumenical Mischief under the Mongols', *Central Asiatic Journal*, 43 (1999), pp. 42-69, esp. pp. 44.

⁸ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 166

⁹ Henry Yule (ed. and trans.), *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. I, p. xcvii-xcix.; D. Morgan, *The Mongols*, p. 140.

¹⁰ C. Dawson, 'Introduction', *The Mongol Mission*, pp. xxvi, xxvii.

¹¹ William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, p. 179. Carpini, 'History of the Mongols by John of Plano Carpini', in C. Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission*, p. 68

2. RABBAN SAWMA AND HIS ENCOUNTER WITH THE LATIN WEST

2.1 Rabban Sawma and His Journey to the West

Despite being from Khanbaligh (Beijing), Sawma was not Han Chinese in ethnicity, nor did he adhere to any of the three dominant ways of thought in China (Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism), but he was a monk in the Nestorian Church (the Church of the East). Thus, despite being from the East, his religious beliefs originated in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, far to the west of China. This affinity gave him a strong desire to travel to the West to see the places where his religion originated and flourished, to visit the tombs of the saints and to venerate holy relics. It also contributed to the awe and wonder he experienced when he finally saw Rome.

Sawma made his trip westward in two phases. Initially, he went from China in his religious role, intending to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. However, because of political unrest he was unable to go that far, and his travels terminated in Persia, where he spent the next twelve years. His account does not say much about his impressions of the people in Persia or elsewhere. He was then sent on a second journey as an ambassador from the Il-khanate in Baghdad to the Latin West. The Latin Christian world, 'the headquarters of the Christian religion',¹² was a place which Sawma, as a Christian, longed to visit.

Rabban Sawma was uniquely suitable and capable to go on this diplomatic mission. First, his religious position as Visitor-General and deacon to Mar Yahbh-Allaha the Catholicus gave him some authority in his discussions with Western Christian monarchs. As Sawma himself said when he met the Cardinals in Rome, 'Being a Christian, my word will be believed by you'.¹³ Second, his position made him familiar with the Christian missionary work in the East, especially among the Mongol rulers. Thus he was able to give the Cardinals news of this work, and also to tell them of the inroads Christianity seemed to be making among the Mongols themselves. He told them that many Mongols of high standing were believers, that queens and sons of the Mongol rulers, as well as senior officials of the court had been baptized, that the Mongol kings held Christians in esteem, and even that churches had been set up in their military camps. This pleased the Cardinals and made them favorably disposed towards Sawma's diplomatic message. While he did not speak any European languages, Sawma had a good command of several other languages. Having lived the first four decades of his life in Khanbaligh, his mother tongue was Mongolian, which was also the courtly language of the Il-khans of Persia. According to Sawma's account, when asked to help Arghun find an envoy, the Catholicus had said, 'there was no man who knew the language [i.e. Mongolian] except Rabban Sawma'.¹⁴ Having lived among the Persians and worked as a deacon and director of disciples

¹² David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford, 2007), p. 163.

¹³ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China...*, pp. 173-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

there for ten years, he knew Persian as well, and had also integrated himself into local life.¹⁵ Being from China, he could also speak and write Chinese,¹⁶ and thus seems to have been eloquent in all three languages. While still in China, his discourses on Christian doctrine had attracted many listeners, and he later developed persuasive abilities in Persian. Finally, he had practical travel experience. Having journeyed from China to Persia, and undergone all kinds of hazards and hardships, he was thus now unfazed by the perils of long-distance travel. The Catholicus apparently had every confidence in him, as Sawma's account says, 'knowing that he was fully capable of this, [the Catholicus] commanded him to go [on the embassy].'¹⁷ In all respects, therefore, there was no one more suitable for the Il-khan's mission to Latin Christendom than Rabban Sawma.

According to his account, when Sawma was appointed emissary of the Il-khanate to Europe by Arghun, he replied promptly to the king, 'I desire this embassy greatly, and I long to go'.¹⁸ He had his own personal religious reasons for wanting to travel to the West. He looked forward to meeting the Pope, visiting the tombs of saints and venerating holy relics, many of which had been brought to Europe from the Holy Land during the Crusades. To devout Christians like Sawma, the tombs of the holy martyrs and the relics of the saints could help believers enhance their understanding of the teachings of Christ and purify their souls from of contamination.

2.2 Sawma's Encounter with the Latin West

As Il-khan's embassy to the Pope and Latin Christendom, Sawma met the Christian monarchs of England and France, and convince them to collaborate with the Il-khan in order to defeat the Mamluks of Egypt. When he finished his diplomatic mission and went back, he managed to get agreement to ally with the Il-khans from both religious and secular leaders in the Latin West. However, this ally between the Mongols and the Latin Christendom against the Mamluks never came into being as Arghun and the Pope died in 1291 and 1292.¹⁹

Amid his religious encounter with the Latin West, Sawma had the opportunity to communicate first with the Cardinals and then with the Pope about the state of the Church of the East as well as the tenets of his faith. On his first visit to Rome, he was summoned to the Cardinals' presence for a theological discussion. The conversation was in large part an attempt to avoid discussing politics, because no commitment could be made before a new Pope was elected.²⁰ This discussion took place after the death of Pope Honorius IV in 1287, but before the election of his successor Nicholas IV in 1288. Hence the Cardinals could not give him a concrete answer to the request from the Il-khan for an alliance, or promise any military support. Sawma

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 5, 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 165-166.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁹ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p. 169.

²⁰ Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanada* (London, 1992.), p. 123.

used the opportunity of meeting the Cardinals to articulate his theological position to them and present the Church of the East in a favorable light. On doctrinal matters, Sawma unequivocally acknowledged his belief in 'One God and in the concept of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', much to the relief of the Cardinals.²¹ He also asserted that 'the Father is the Begetter, the Son is the Begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds', which also accorded with the Cardinals' beliefs. However, there were some matters that contradicted official Roman Catholic views, such as that 'the Son has two Natures and two Persons'.²² The official view is that 'both natures were fused in one Christ'. When such differences emerged in the discussion, the Cardinals did not refute the points or charge Sawma with heresy,²³ but stated only that they wanted to understand the extent of Sawma's theological learning.²⁴ His account states that 'they held him in high esteem because of his power of argument'.²⁵ For his part, Sawma left some of his views ambiguous, trying not to upset the Cardinals.²⁶

Sawma's meeting with the Pope probably opened a new phase in the history of Roman Catholic evangelization in the East. His report on the Christian missionary work in that part of the world deepened the Pope's understanding of the political and religious situation there at that time. David Morgan shows in his chronology of events that Rabban Sawma's mission to Europe in 1287 led directly to the mission of the Franciscan John of Montecorvino, who was sent to China as the Papal legate and arrived in China in 1294.²⁷ On his way to China, John of Montecorvino took with him letters for Arghun Khan in Persia and Qubilai Khan in Khanbaligh,²⁸ probably as a result of Sawma's influence. The connection between Sawma's diplomatic mission and increased missionary activity in China has also been noted by Chinese historians such as Zhang Qizhi.²⁹

The smoothness of the encounter, which according to his account was facilitated by Sawma's personable demeanor,³⁰ may have been due to a desire on both sides to avoid controversy, as well as a shared will to unite against the Mamluks. They both had an interest in preventing their exchange of theological views from derailing the potential alliance. This avoidance of out-and-out theological dispute continued in Sawma's later interview with the new Pope on his second trip to Rome. Pope Nicholas IV had been elected in February 1288 while Sawma was away in

²¹ Ibid., p. 124.

²² W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, p. 175.

²³ M. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu*, p. 124.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁵ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, p. 177; M. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu*, pp. 121-2.

²⁶ M. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu*, p. 124.

²⁷ D. Morgan, *The Mongols*, p. 229.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 258; Yan Zonglin, *History of Communication between China and the West*, p. 86; Zhang Qizhi, *History of China: Volume of Yuan, Ming and Qing*, pp. 61, 107.

²⁹ Zhang Qizhi, *History of China: Volume of Yuan, Ming and Qing*, p. 107.

³⁰ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, p. 177.

France and England. As with the Cardinals, there was no hint that the Pope thought him heretical. In fact, Nicholas responded positively to Sawma's description of Church missionary work in the East. Here again, it seems that both sides were primarily concerned with forming a military alliance, and had an active political interest in sidelining the doctrinal debate.³¹ According to Christopher Dawson, the differences between the Roman and Nestorian churches had been 'half-forgotten' by this time anyway;³² Wallis Budge raises the possibility that the 'Nestorians' in the Far East had for the most part not 'understood the details of doctrine' that originally caused the teachings of Nestorians to be considered heretical.³³ For Sawma himself the most important religious outcomes of his mission were that he was able to meet and talk with Pope Nicholas IV, who made a profound impression on him; that he was able to convey his devotion to Christian faith, theological training, and eloquence to the Pope and make a positive impression on him; and that he was able to share his views on doctrinal issues with the leaders of the Church without any animosity or accusation of heresy.

2.3 Sawma's Travel Account

One of the most important historical outcomes of Sawma's encounter with the Latin West was his travel account itself, which has made important contribution to our understanding of the history of East-West relations. Sawma's role in the communications between the East and the West, Europe and China, has often been ignored, however, in large part because the account was not discovered until 1887, when Désiré Salomon, a Kurdish Chaldean Christian of the Lazarist Order, borrowed a medieval manuscript in Syriac from a young Turkish Christian named Oshana from the Church of the East in Tkhuma, and copied it at Urmiah.³⁴ He sent his copy of the Syriac text to Paul Bedjan, a fellow Lazarist, in Europe. Bedjan, a well-known scholar of Syriac, immediately recognized the importance of the work and published an edition of it in Paris in 1888: *Histoire de Mar Jab-alaha, patriarche, et de Raban Sauma* (Paris: Maisonneuve & C. Leclerk). Bedjan was unaware that his edition had been anticipated. The American Protestant missionary Isaac Hollister Hall had announced in 1886 the discovery of a manuscript of the same work in a church in the village of Minganish in Eastern Kurdistan in 1883. Oshana had apparently made another copy and taken it to Urmia in 1885, while placing the original, in 1886, in the care of the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Shimun XVIII. Copies were in turn made from Oshana's transcription, while he himself orally translated the text into Neo-Aramaic. This version was printed in the monthly periodical *Zahriri d-Bahra* ('Rays of Light') at the missionary press between October 1885 and May 1886. There are now five manuscripts of the text in existence, including a copy at the British Library, but all are from the 1880's and seem to derive from Oshana's original, which is now lost. It is clear that the surviving Syriac text is a translation and abridgement of a much longer Persian original,

³¹ C. Dawson, 'Introduction', *The Mongol Mission*, p. xxix.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ W. Budge (trans.), *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

probably written, judging by internal evidence, in 1317. When Paul Bedjan became aware of the existence of other copies of what he had originally assumed to be a unique text, he collated all five manuscripts and issued an improved edition of the text in 1895. This was the text used by Wallis Budge for his translation published in 1928 under the title *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China*. Budge's translation occupies 182 pages. Of these 36 recount Sawma's journey from Baghdad to Europe via Constantinople. Most of the book by far is concerned with the Patriarchate of Mar Yab-allaha and the internal affairs of the Il-khanate, for which it is a primary source. The original Persian may have given a much more detailed account of Sawma's travels and observations in Europe, and the Syriac translator may well have cut from the original the things we would most like to know. This possibility must be borne in mind by the reader.³⁵

3. CONCLUSION

Sawma's journey is often used to throw light on the political and religious situation in Western Asia, rather than for its own sake. This paper started with a brief introduction of Eastern knowledge of Europe at early stage of contacts between the East and the West, then explained the changes of Mongol policy toward the West, possibly caused not only by political reason, but also by the expanding Christian activities in the East. It then examined the account of his journey by Sawma, which depicted his diplomatic and religious encounter with the Latin West.

Rabban Sawma was a competent diplomat, erudite and eloquent, fluent in several languages. He managed to obtain promises to cooperate with the Il-khans from both religious and secular leaders in the Latin West. Because of his religious affiliation, Sawma was already predisposed toward the West, and this helps to account for his positive view of Latin Christianity. Sawma found in Europe a host of well-ordered territories under Christian influence. Sawma had come from war-torn China, which had been subjugated by Mongol conquerors. He also had a diverse cultural background – Uighur, Chinese, Mongol, and Eastern Christian as well – which may have made him more open-minded to what he saw. He also longed to see the culture in which Christianity flourished. When he finally saw the West, he was full of awe and wonder. For these reasons, Sawma did not find the Latin Europeans as strange as Carpini or Rubruck found the Mongols. As a Christian, something about that world already resonated with him, and he was receptive to it.

It did not emerge immediately to Rabban Sawma, but eventually he saw clearly that in Western Europe religious authority was more powerful than political authority, and more central to life, whereas the reverse was true in the East (including both in Chinese and Mongol cultures). This insight came to him when observing the prevalence of ecclesiastical buildings in the Western landscape, compared to his homeland where the most impressive examples of architecture were

³⁵ For textual history, etc see: Pier Giorgio Borbone, *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma. Un orientale in Occidente ai tempi di Marco Polo* (Torino, 2000), pp. 11-49.

imperial in nature. It was reinforced when he realized that secular authority was conferred by the Pope in the West, something that would never happen in China or under the Mongols. He had personally witnessed this Eastern tendency in Persia when his friend Markos had to go to the political ruler Abaqa to have his religious role as Patriarch confirmed. Carpini and Rubruck lacked this insight in their effort to understand the Mongols' apparent tolerance of other religions. The Mongols were willing to entertain any religion as long as it served political ends. It did not matter what people believed as long as they submitted to the Emperor's or Khan's authority.

Sawma's tone of wonder at this reality conveys two key characteristics of Sawma's outlook that come through in his narrative: first, his awe of and respect for Latin Christendom, and second, his previously limited knowledge of the West. His embassy to Europe enabled him to acquire a great deal of knowledge about the West, not least because his awe and respect kept him open and attentive to various aspects of Western culture. His writings, as genuine first-hand accounts, were far more thorough than any records of Europe previously available in China, most of which, as noted above, had been penned by Song and Yuan court officials on the basis of second-hand information. It makes important contribution to our knowledge of the contacts between the Mongols and the Latin West in the thirteenth century.

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