

MARCO POLO'S WORLD

PAPAL ENVOYS TO THE KHAN: GIOVANNI CARPINI

The first news of the Mongol whirlwind reached Western Europe in 1220, when Chinggis launched his attack on Central Asia. Some notions about an Asian Christian king called Prester John had been spreading throughout Europe since the mid-12th century, fuelled in 1164 by a letter supposedly sent by Prester John with a detailed description of his fairy tale land, teeming with magic and richness.

The Pope and most European kings gave credit to it because at that moment they were involved in the Crusades and the idea of a Christian power emerging at the Muslims rearguard was a source of hope. Then, during the Fifth Crusade, the first **rumors about the Mongols'** advance reached the Crusaders. And because these Mongols were fighting against Islam, the Crusaders took it for granted that they must be Christians, albeit Nestorians, who were **numerous in the caravan's trails**. But the **Crusaders' hopes were short-lived**. In 1241 Ogodei, who was Chinggis successor, invaded Poland and Hungary and first-person accounts about Mongol warfare began to spread, bringing news of a systematic slaughter, without distinction of age and sex.

For the Europeans, the shock was overwhelming, and they became aware both of the danger and of the urgent need to gather more information about these ferocious invaders. The terrified Europeans called the Mongols by the name of one of their subject tribes, the Tatars, and changed it to Tartars, people springing up from Tartarus, the worst of hells.

The English Chronicler Matthew Paris, writing in mid 13th century qualified Mongols as a detestable nation of Satan that poured forth like devils from the Tartarus. In 1245, the Pope sent an emissary with letters to the new khan, Guyuk, exhorting him to convert to Christianity. The ambassador was Giovanni di Plano Carpini, a 65-year-old Franciscan, extremely fat and in poor health. He was commissioned to report as much as he could about the Mongols. His account, in which he blends his travel experiences with the report of what he saw, is the first direct European description of Asia and is a milestone for travel literature in the European middle ages.

Carpini sent the first reports about **the Mongols' everyday life**, explaining that they ate with their hands everything that could be eaten and went around extremely dirty with the grease of the meat. Carpini left a detailed account of the decimal military organization of the Mongols, their cunning abilities in war, their systematic levy of artisans for their own service, and of the remarkable power that the emperor had over everyone. He commented that they paid great attention to divinations, auguries, soothsaying, sorceries and incantations. He also informed that the majority of men in Russia had been killed or taken off into captivity by these Tartars, **claiming that he had seen "bones of dead men lying in the ground like dung"**.

Carpini also reported about a country where men had the shape of dogs: in the medieval mind all kinds of monsters lived in the fringes of the known world. He arrived in **time for Guyuk's coronation feast** in the vicinity of Karakorum and left a vivid picture of it. He describes the large pavilion of white velvet, so big that more than two thousand men could have gone into it, and writes about the four thousand envoys that were there, the lavish expenditure on gold brocade, and the five hundred carts of presents, all filled with gold and silver, and silken garments. He commented on the Khitans, in other words the Chinese, a people that had their own language and their own special writing. They were, he said, the best artisans in the world, and came from a land rich in all the things that support human life. He also gave a detailed overview of the foreign merchants with whom he came in contact-people from Poland, Austria, Constantinople, Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Acre and a lot of others with French and Italian names.

His report aroused immediate interest and was widely diffused, but his diplomatic mission was a complete failure. The papal letters infuriated Guyuk, who in turn sent a menacing letter to the Pope urging him to submit to the Mongols together with all Christian princes.