

MARCO POLO'S WORLD
THE RUBRUCK MISSION

In 1253, when Hulegu's campaigns were devastating the Abbasid Caliphate, another Franciscan, Wilhelm von Rubruck, headed to Karakorum, where he met the newly enthroned Khan Mongke. The sharp-eyed friar wrote a lengthy record of his travels, a splendid anthropological document of almost cinematographic quality. He was well aware of the power of the images that he conveyed, because he said "I would have made pictures of everything if I only knew how to paint". As soon as he entered the Mongol's lands he felt as if he were stepping into another world. The enormous tents drawn by 22 oxen made him feel that an entire city was coming towards him. On his way, he noticed the postal stations scattered all over the territory and took good note of the many westerners that crossed his way, mainly women and artisans, both widely deported and dispersed by the Mongols.

The astute friar admired the vitality and works of Mongol women and was disgusted with the enormous quantities of liquor the Mongols consumed. He left a thorough account of the Nestorians and of their continuing presence in all the caravan trails, down to far-east Cathay, where they had churches in fifteen cities and even a bishopric. He had a keen interest in writing and described in detail how the Mongol script had been adapted from other scripts. He also commented on Tibetan writing. As Carpini had done before, he noticed the eating habits of the Mongols, and he also reported the existence of some monsters in Cathay who were like people but couldn't bend their knees, and whose blood was used to dye purple cloth.

The climax of Rubruck's narrative comes with his description of Karakorum, even if he thinks that it is not worth a suburb of Paris. But he describes an incredibly cosmopolitan city, served daily by four hundred carts of provisions. It is a city in which all kind of religions, known and unknown, live together in a convivial manner. There are districts of Saracens, with mosques and markets, and 12 pagan temples, most of them Buddhist, and he has to explain to the shocked Europeans who these heathen were. And there is also a Christian church. He was well aware of Mongol religious tolerance, although he had already noted that the Mongols showed more interest in religious objects than in religious creeds. He noted how the Khans used the religious diversity of their empire to provide entertainment: Mongke forced him

to participate in dialectic and extremely harsh religious debating tournaments with Buddhists and Saracens. It was a show that gathered a huge crowd and lasted for days. He also took good **notice of the Mongols'** shamanism and saw Khan Mongke using the shoulder blades of sheep for divination. While in Karakorum, to the utter astonishment of the European readers, he gathered more information about the numerous Cathaians who lived in the city, and that he identified for the first time with the Seres of classical literature. He described them as being excellent artisans in all manner of crafts, and producers of the best silk stuffs. Rubruck also provided the first European impression about Chinese medicine saying that "their physicians know a great deal about the power of herbs and diagnose very cleverly from the pulse." He certainly had western medicine in mind when he added that the Chinese knew nothing about urine.

Furthermore, he explained that the Cathaians had paper-money and that they wrote with a brush like those with which painters paint, and that in a single character they made several letters which form one word. **It's worth noting that the Khans'** treatment of both Carpini and Rubruck was civil but not very welcoming. Carpini, who attended the coronation of Guyuk Khan, complained that the Mongols were arrogant and treated people rather badly. Rubruk was received in a huge tent, completely covered inside with cloth of gold, by a suspicious Khan Mongke that **dismissed Rubruck's request** to be allowed to remain in Mongolia and sent him back to Europe. Kubilai will receive the Polos in a much more welcoming manner.