

MARCO POLO'S WORLD

EAST TO WEST AND WEST TO EAST: RABBAN SAUMA, MONTECORVINO AND MARIGNOLLI

Carpini and Rubruck were not the only travellers who crossed Eurasia by the middle of the thirteenth century. Others made the journey the other way round. A little after the travels of the two Franciscans and about the same time as the Polo **brothers' journey**, a Chinese Nestorian monk, Rabban Sauma, left Cambalich, **today's** Beijing, to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Nestorians played a decisive role in medieval international cultural and religious exchanges. Once in Baghdad, the Il-Khan sent him as ambassador to the highest authorities of the Christian west in search of an alliance against the rising power of the Mamluks. He was received in audience by the emperor of Constantinople, the kings of England and France and the Pope, who in turn sent embassies to the Il-Khan. And the Pope also sent an envoy to Kubilai Khan. This envoy was the Franciscan Giovanni da Montecorvino, who arrived at Cambalich in 1294, two years after Kubilai's death, when Marco Polo had already left China. Montecorvino won the confidence of the new Khan despite fierce opposition from the Nestorians, who even brought him to trial accused of being a spy and a thief. In spite of this, Montecorvino **won a seat in the Khan's court** and founded the first catholic bishopric in Beijing. He lived there for 20 years, translated the New Testament and the Psalms, and in 1328 died in Beijing where he was buried. The Beijing bishopric would last for another 40 years until 1368 when it vanished together with its Mongol protectors.

Montecorvino wrote three letters more intended for his religious superior than for a general audience. In these letters he basically tells of his religious efforts to spread the catholic faith in Cathay. **What's interesting for us is the means that** he uses to induce conversion. He places enormous importance on music and images. He had a choir of 150 little boys, who in his own words, he bought from his pagan parents. He urges the Pope to send him books with musical notes in them, because the Khan and those that attend church services are delighted with the music of their chants. He also commissioned six pictures, illustrating the Old and New Testament, and had the explanations on them engraved in Latin, Uyghur and Persian. **We'll remember**

him when we talk of Matteo Ricci, because the similarities are noteworthy. But so are the differences. Ten years after Montecorvino's death, the pope sent a group of churchmen to Beijing, loaded with impressive gifts: among them two big black war horses, that are duly reported in the official history of the Yuan dynasty. Among the group was another Franciscan, Giovanni da Marignolli, who spent four years in Camballic and traveled extensively through South China for another couple of years. He travelled with an extense party of 32 men and 200 horses, and all the expenses were covered by the great Khan. **Giovanni da Marignolli's narrative provides a** glimpse of the medieval traveler mind. During his travels he finds monsters as Carpini and Rubruck had done, but he finds something else as well. He finds Paradise, which he places exactly and describes in detail. Earthly Paradise was so real for the medieval minds that it usually appeared on maps, like on this Hereford Mapamundi of 1285.

Together with a vast array of monsters this map shows the exact place from which Adam and Eve were expelled. The age of Discoveries will gradually displace Paradise to a more otherworldly location. All these travelers bear witness of the impressive production of textiles in the Mongol empire, particularly those woven with gold. Artisans produced a high-quality textile intertwined with gold thread, the so-called "cloth of gold" (*nasij*) that will adorn the ceremonial clothes of all Eurasia: **princes' mantles and priests chasubles** were all trimmed with them, as can be seen very often in Italian Renaissance paintings. Mongol fashion lingered in ecclesiastic and aristocratic wardrobes long after the Mongols had vanished.