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William of Rubruck: Cosmopolitan Curiosity and Restraint in an Age of Conquest and Mission

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Abstract

William of Rubruck's account of journeying to Mongolia (1253-55) remained relatively elusive in scholarly and popular discourses. A Franciscan friar, his mission helped tentatively acquaint two (literally/figuratively) distant civilizations, Latin Christendom and the Mongol Empire. We may assess the extent to which a critical reading of Rubruck can propel knowledge of a Christian Eastward mission. Rubruck's account was found to evince a degree of restraint and cosmopolitan curiosity that not only went against the grain of Christendom's exceptionalism and expansionism, but also enabled the pursuit of a rudimentary inter-civilizational dialogue.

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Introduction

To what extent can a critical reading of Rubruck propel knowledge of a Christian Eastward mission? This is the research question animating work for this paper. Rubruck journeyed to the Mongol¹ Empire² with companion Bartholomew of Cremona (Charpentier 1935: 255) between 1253 and 1255. That this Franciscan monk from Flanders (Frankopan 2015: 165) and his account³ largely eluded scholarly and popular discourses – that it “slipped almost immediately into relative obscurity” (Campbell 1991: 112) – is regrettable.

¹ The Mongols of this epoch have been referred to as the Tartars, but I only use the former term in this investigation. Note, however, that Frankopan identifies in ‘Tartar’ “a reference to Tartarus – the abyss of torment in classical mythology” (2015: 163).

² At the time of Rubruck's journey, the Mongol Empire contained “most of Asia, from the Manchurian coast in the east, to Persia, Kiev, and Konya in the west” (Watson 2011: 90-91).

³ The account I use here is Jackson and Morgan's (1990) translation and edition. I refer to Rubruck's account as Rubruck (1990). I took the deliberate decision to use Jackson and Morgan; it is a majestic *contemporary* work of translation and scholarship that captures Rubruck's account of his experiences with real people, in real places, in a manner that engages contemporary audiences. Meticulous attention is paid to linguistic and contextual accuracy, and Jackson and Morgan do not shy away from defending their translation and scholarship against others' inaccuracies. They discuss, in their copious introduction, the relative (de)merits of earlier translations, and surpass expectations in justifying their contribution.

Whilst first-person travel narratives did not prevail until the seventeenth century, Rubruck explored experiential ethnographic and literary modalities⁴ four centuries earlier, in the central Middle Ages,⁵ voicing “keen self-discovery in his sights and feelings” (Montalbano 2015: 598).

But why the obscurity? Firstly, Rubruck was eclipsed by such ‘celebrity’ explorers as Marco Polo, after whom the *Ovis Poli* sheep was named, despite already being identified and documented by Rubruck (Jackson 2016). Secondly, Rubruck was as elusive as his manuscript: his only description is his ‘very large size’, and one can only speculate what ultimately became of him (Jackson and Morgan 1990). Such ambiguity makes him and his account suitable objects for (re)investigation.

Rubruck was brought to my attention during archival work for a previous publication, wherein I traced a broader history of exploratory incursions into Central Asia. That investigation identified a good corpus of work on Marco Polo (Akbari et al 2008; Bergreen 2007; Hudson 1954; Jacoby 2006; Larner 1999; Latham 1958; Man 2009; Tucci 1954; Vogel 2013; Wood 2018), but relatively brief reference to Rubruck. Yes, there *is* coverage in the literature, and I hope to have employed it accordingly. But it appears that this character on the stage of early ethnography has, for the most part, been appearing in the shadows of the backdrop, and on the margins of the play.

Work sought the degree to which a critical (re)reading can propel understanding of a Christian⁶ Eastward mission. It found that Rubruck went against the grain of Christendom’s exceptionalism and expansionism, the doctrine that the heathen ‘otherland’ would be brought within the purview of Christendom – encountered, civilized, converted – through peace or war. Whilst “dominant cultures of Latin Christendom valorised the settled, the agrarian and the urban, over the roaming, the nomadic and the cityless” (Phillips 2016: 81), Rubruck studied the Mongols with an immersive ethnographic embrace of which today’s field researchers would (and should) be duly proud.

I identified, in Rubruck, a degree of *restraint* and *cosmopolitan curiosity* in contradistinction to the prevalent universalizing imperatives of conquest and mission.

⁴ Campbell notes that Rubruck’s account evinced “a freer sense of the importance and authority of first-person experience and a new interest in such secular topics as other human cultures” (1991: 9).

⁵ I join Burns in defining the central Middle Ages as that epoch “from 950 (or 1000) to 1300 (or 1350) ...an essentially frontier experience [wherein]...a suddenly urbanized, dangerously overpopulated, and...religiously energetic society overpoured its boundaries, transforming the world and the actors themselves” (1989: 313).

⁶ I join Jackson in orienting my analysis according to “Latin (Catholic) Christendom, embracing not only Western Europe and Scandinavia but also the ‘crusader states’ in Syria, Palestine and Greece, together with Poland, Hungary and the present-day Czech Republic – all those territories, in other words, that owed obedience to the Roman Church and the pope” (2018: 1).

I argue that the use of such restraint and cosmopolitan curiosity set the context in which intercivilizational (not international)⁷ dialogue could be pursued.

Four sections substantiate this. The next situates Rubruck in the historical context of conquest and mission. Thereafter, Rubruck's account is critically examined in one section that identifies his restraint and another that observes his cosmopolitan curiosity. The paper closes by discussing the civilizational purchase of 'bridging' two distant 'otherlands.'

Setting the Scene: Conquest and Mission

The Franciscans were an order of "penitents, living in total poverty and preaching to their fellow-men to repent and follow Christ" (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 1). Journeying beyond the order, they relied on charity to support them (Montalbano 2015: 588).

Rubruck, a Franciscan, was tasked with journeying,⁸ in 1253, from Acre (Biller 2000: 230) in Palestine⁹ to the Mongol Empire not only for mission but also for reportage to King Louis IX of France (hereafter Louis). Louis was an interesting character in the tale of conquest and mission. So devoted was he to his religion, supporting the Dominicans *and* Franciscans, that he pondered abdication, eventually striking balance between religion and kingship.¹⁰

⁷ I join Brummett in feeling "leery of the attribution of the 'national' to the peoples, cultures, and narratives of the long early modern era. Who exactly did our traveller authors think they were" (2009: 29)?

⁸ But Rubruck was not alone. The Dominican Andrew of Longjumeau participated in a Papal embassy to the Mongols in 1247, alongside Ascelin, Simon of St Quentin, and others (Charpentier 1935: 255). One year beforehand, the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini (hereafter John) observed, in Karakorum, the enthronement of Güyük Khan (Rubiés 2009: 52). Biller corroborates this, noting that in 1245, "Innocent IV commissioned the Franciscan John of Piano di Carpino and the Dominicans Andrew of Longjumeau, Ascelin of Cremona, and Simon of St Quentin to go on missions to the Great Khan, while Louis IX again commissioned Andrew in 1248" (2000: 230). Phillips insightfully remarks that whilst John and Rubruck "were travelling at a time when the terrors of the Mongol attacks on Europe were fresh in their minds and were describing a society that was alien almost beyond imagining, they nonetheless succeeded in treating the Mongols with *sympathetic understanding*" (2016: 6; emphasis added).

⁹ In 1099, following the First Crusade, a Latin Christian kingdom was established in Palestine, chiefly by French, Flemish and Norman nobles (Linehan et al 2018a: 5). Resultantly, as Phillips notes, "between 1099 and 1291, European colonists held a position of local dominance in Syria and Palestine in the crusader states of Antioch, Tripoli, and Jerusalem" (2016: 55). At the time of Rubruck's departure, Louis had been in the region on crusade (Jackson 2000: 207). For Kedar, Louis' "four-year stay in Palestine was mainly motivated by his hope of taking advantage of the Ayyubid-Mameluke struggle in order to enlarge the rump kingdom of Acre" (1984: 163).

¹⁰ Kedar recalls that Geoffroi of Beaulieu, Louis' confessor on both of his crusades, documented that when Louis was in Palestine, he had many Saracens baptised and "transported to France, where they and their families were provided for as long as they lived" (1984: 163).

This task was one in which he “succeeded in the eyes of most of his contemporaries [deeming] him worthy of sainthood” (Little 1964: 145-146). Louis maintained, from 1245 onwards, “a consistent policy that sought a peaceful, united Christian community” (Ibid: 130).

That Louis “was seeking information towards a possible military alliance between Christendom and the Mongols against Islam” (Phillips 2016: 84) indicates that Rubruck’s mission was imbued with field intelligence prerogatives.

Indeed, at the time of Rubruck’s journey, Christian mission coincided with the Seventh Crusade (Campbell 1991: 112). This was an era wherein, to deploy Linklater, “[n]ew social ideals emphasized the virtue of harnessing violence to religious objectives” (2016: 115). Latham identifies three elements of what he deems the “institution” of crusade: “First...the crusade [w]as a martial instrument for righting injustices and combating evil in the world...Second, the crusade was constituted as an instrument of *ecclesiastical* statecraft...Finally, the crusades were constituted in the medieval imagination as an act of piety, penance, and Christian love” (2011: 237; emphasis original).

This was also an era, then, wherein *Civita Dei*, “a potentially universal moral/spiritual community founded on Christian love” (Ibid: 230), was sought. Achieving this ‘City of God’ was replete with geopolitical fervor: it required “extending the spatial limits of the community of Christian believers ...by evangelizing and Christianizing the peoples beyond the pale of the Christian world and... expanding the *respublica Christiana* beyond its existing frontiers” (Ibid: 230).

But pursuing *Civita Dei* – seeking this elusive “vision of an all-embracing Christian society, the City of God on earth” (Dawson 1953: 88) – involved not only crusade but living out the *vita apostolica*, a life “dedicated to the saving of souls through preaching” (Little 1964: 126). It is exactly such expeditionary evangelism for which Rubruck was concerned.

The foregoing indicates, then, that the temporal locus of my enquiry is pre-Westphalian. Rubruck journeyed between *civilizations*. We are dealing here with different “meanings of sovereignty...[and] forms of geopolitical social organization that arose before modern statehood” (Teschke, 1998: 325).

This was an era of civilizational exceptionalism and expansionism. On one hand, Christendom and the Mongol Empire deemed themselves *exceptional* in their perceived divine right to mold the world as they saw fit. Each saw their respective worldview as yielding universal import and universal salvation. On the other hand, and resultantly, both evinced an expansionism deriving from such convictions.

The logic was that politico-religious *universalisation*, on the part of both Christians and Mongols, resulted from their self-perceived God-given rights to rule. The risk, here, is that the Mongols – and their shortly-to-be-discussed ultimatums – will be othered and ostracised as megalomaniac *Lebensraum* hunters.

Let me be clear: *both* civilizations were ardent in their expansionism. Louis' letter to Cairo, before he commenced crusade against the Sultanate of Egypt, is *just as* inflammatory as the Mongol ultimatum we are about to witness: "Were you to swear to me by every oath, present yourself to the priests and monks, and obediently carry candles before me to the crosses [good; otherwise] I will come to you and kill you in that part of your lands which is dearest to you" (in Kedar 1984: 162).

Indeed, Mongol susceptibility to conquest and mission arose as early as 1206, when their leader was "strong enough to be recognized [as] Chinggis Khan ('Universal ruler')" (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 11). For Montalbano, Chinggis Khan "induced political strife throughout Eurasia...[h]is ultimate goal [being] to unify the diverse tribes and conquered people of Mongolia" (2015: 591-592). His was "an almost constant programme of conquest" (Frankopan 2015: 159) precipitating "a worldview that stopped nothing short of global domination" (Ibid: 166).

The Mongols were propelled by a homogenizing dynamic seeking to subsume constituent *particularities* within a *universal* whole. Such universalisation surfaces in Chapter 36 of Rubruck's account, noting how Mongol ruler Mangu Chan declared at a feast: "I have dismissed my brothers and have sent them to *court danger* among foreign peoples: now it will emerge how you will act when I wish to send you out for the extension of our state" (Rubruck 1990: 246; emphasis added).

Thirteen years before Rubruck's departure for Mongolia, by 1240, the Mongols had already attacked Kiev (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 14).¹¹ Two years before then, in 1238, Muslim rulers from the Middle East had visited England asking for assistance against the Mongols. Bishop of Winchester, Peter des Roches, stated: "Let us allow...[them] to devour one another...When we come upon those of Christ's enemies who remain, we shall slaughter them...so that the whole world may be subject to one catholic church, and there may be one shepherd and one flock" (in Ibid: 15).¹²

¹¹ Biller notes that in December 1240, Kiev was reduced "to 200 houses and piles of human bones which later travellers (such as John of Pian di Carpine) could still see" (2000: 229).

¹² This coheres with Biller's observation that, "[i]n St Albans [chronicler] Matthew Paris wrote under the year 1238 of Saracen [Muslim] emissaries coming to the kings of England and France, with reports about the Tartars, adding his famous observation on herring prices in Yarmouth, which were driven down because Frisian and Baltic merchants, terrified by the Tartar threat, had not turned up" (2000: 228-229).

It was in 1241 that the battles of Liegnitz and Mohi witnessed the Mongols defeat Hungary, Poland and their German allies (Phillips 2016: 42-43; see also Jackson 2018: 1). Liegnitz witnessed the defeat and death of Polish Duke Henry II of Silesia (Jackson 2000: 206), whose head was “paraded on the end of a lance, together with nine sacks filled with ‘the ears of the dead’” (Frankopan 2015: 163).

By July 1241, Mongol raiding units had reached Neustadt by Vienna, and it was only the death of Khan Ogotai that led them to withdraw from these western reaches (Billler 2000: 229). In fact, Frankopan deems that occasion one on which Europe was “saved by a stroke of great fortune...This was not the moment to be chasing troublesome monarchs through the Balkans. It was time to be at home, watching the [succession] situation unfurl. And with that, the Mongols took their foot off the throat of Christian Europe” (2015: 164).

Although the Mongols never fully incorporated Poland and Hungary (Jackson 2000: 206), the turmoil prompted Pope Gregory to sanction crusade against the Mongols (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 17) and caused Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen to appeal, *inter alia*, to Henry III of England “for aid to resist their [the Mongols’] expected advance into western Europe” (Phillips 2016: 43).

It is in this context that the Mongols were othered in the western civilizational imagination as barbarians: as people lacking civilization in the sense of (a) *environment*: grounded, emplaced, urbane civilization and (b) *collective psyche*: a ‘civilized’ societal habitus. The Mongols could “readily be identified with...the image of the barbarian... distinguished by such features as his lack of an ordered urban or rural existence, his inability to manufacture and to employ the material artefacts of more advanced civilizations, and by the absence of a sophisticated spoken and written literary culture...

Barbarism...was particularly ascribed by the members of settled civilizations to neighbors whose way of life was *conspicuously different* from the accepted norms. When the ‘barbarian’ was not simply someone of a different culture but was also perceived as a threat, the idea became a very emotive one” (Ibid: 49-50; emphasis added).¹³

Indeed, the Mongols were the “most familiar” barbarians to thirteenth-century Europe (Jones 1971: 398), feared to be the dreaded Biblical peoples of Gog and Magog “who, according to the Book of Revelation, would overrun the civilised world at the end of time” (Jackson 2000: 209). Gog and Magog were, according to myth, quarantined by Alexander from civilization behind “stout walls of iron or brass traditionally located in the Caucasus at the passes of Dariel or Derbend” (Ibid: 399).

¹³ For Jones, the “classical criticism of the barbarian...often equated him with the dumb brute...the retarded, disoriented, irrational infancy of mankind, before man had begun to achieve better things for himself through his submission to law and the exercise of reason” (1971: 397).

Such popular medieval equations of the Mongols with these heralds of doom were of politico-religious benefit, serving “not only to identify the various historical challengers of civilization but also [give] hope for the eventual triumph of Christian civilization over the forces of Antichrist...satisf[ying] European curiosity about an astonishing and frightening people...and reassur[ing] medieval man that they occupied a place in the Christian plan of salvation” (Ibid: 400).

By the time the Mongols withdrew from Eastern Europe in 1242, Pope Innocent IV despatched three embassies to them, one of Franciscans and two of Dominicans. Such fusion of cooperation/conflict should not be shocking: Kedar notes that “[i]t fell to Pope Innocent IV, the erstwhile canon lawyer Sinibaldo dei Fieschi, to formulate the linkage between Christian warfare and infidel conversion that would become normative” (1984: 159). This linkage embodied the “notion of warfare waged to force open the way for missionaries” (Ibid: 161).

From this perspective, crusade warfare was the violent force that ‘laid the table’ for subsequent attempts to win unbelievers’ hearts and minds. It is in this context that Rubruck was sent not only to preach but to gather field intelligence for dissemination to Louis.

Rubruck was thus caught amidst centrifugal geopolitical forces pushing *out* from Christendom and the Mongol Empire, and *towards* if not *into* one another. There was a ‘clash of civilizations’, to use Huntington’s clichéd but apt lexicon (2002). Both sought exception and expansion.

Rubruck’s task was to permeate the otherland and capture the people and places that embodied the Mongols’ outward ‘push’. Rubruck noted that the Mongols “believe the whole world is longing to make peace with them” (1990: 173).

No better evidence of this ‘push’ is found than the Mongol ultimatum, which gave its recipient two choices: submit to the Mongols (‘making peace’) or risk invasion and prepare for war. The logic was bipolar: the world had been bestowed on the Mongols “by the Eternal Heaven (Tenggeri), and all other rulers – whether they recognized the fact or not – were their subjects. Pliant submission...was consequently mere recognition of a duty” (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 25).¹⁴

Christendom’s response was that Mongol conversion “would either follow or (even better) precede any successful agreement” between the civilizations (Rubiés 2009: 95).

¹⁴ Note Frankopan’s finding that “[t]he Mongols cultivated such fears carefully, for the reality was that Genghis Khan used violence selectively and deliberately. The sack of one city was calculated to encourage others to submit peacefully and quickly; theatrically gruesome deaths were used to persuade other rulers that it was better to negotiate than to offer resistance...Peaceful submission was rewarded; resistance was punished brutally” (2015: 160).

Christendom's propensity for such logic becomes more comprehensible, from a pragmatic angle, when one considers the Mongol ultimatum that Rubruck relayed to Louis in Chapter 36:¹⁵

“In Heaven there is only one eternal God; on earth there is only one lord...From the moment they hear my order [to submit to the Mongol Empire] and understand it, but place no credence in it and wish to make war against us, you will hear and see that though they have eyes they shall be without sight; and when they would hold anything they shall have no hands; and when they would walk they shall have no feet” (1990: 248).

Striking is how the rhetoric here is similar to Louis' above. Both Christendom and the Mongols were *rhetorically* crusading in the sense that they were giving (potential) adversaries two options: submit and come within my jurisdictional purview, or prepare for war. I do not claim that Rubruck stimulated Rubiés' 'successful agreement', or that he overcame such exceptionalism and expansionism. What I *do* claim, however, is that his account goes against the grain of such universalization and set the context in which intercivilizational dialogue could be pursued.

Work for this paper observed *restraint* in his dealings with the Mongols and *cosmopolitan curiosity* surrounding the politico-religious culture in which he found himself. As Khanmohamadi puts it, Rubruck “adapts to his environment in ways that he probably never imagined he would” (2008: 112). Rubruck's ethnographic immersion in the otherland enabled him to have “bridged” Christendom and the Mongols, weaving one tentative thread of east/west convergence (Montalbano 2015: 590). His embrace of the otherland afforded one of “the first important ethnographies of the East written in medieval Europe, preceding Marco Polo by decades” (Rubiés 2009: 96).

And to deem Rubruck's narrative an ethnography is neither exaggeration nor academic folly: within his account are “records [of] having actually met and conversed with – and feared, and quarrelled with, and warred to – *individuals*” (Jackson 1987: 92; emphasis added).

But before we proceed any further, caveats are due. In narrowing my sights on Rubruck's diplomatic *traits* – his restraint, his attentiveness to others and the otherland, I am consciously avoiding the trap of deeming him a diplomat *per se*.

¹⁵ Seven chapters beforehand, Rubruck paints a violent portrait of Mongol sentiment: “Mangu had a very strong bow made...His instructions to the [Mongol] whom he was to send...were as follows: ‘You will go to the king of the French...and you will present him with these things...If he wants peace with us, we shall conquer on the one hand from the Saracens the territory as far as his, and we grant him on the other the remaining land to the west. If not, you will bring back to us the bow and arrows, and tell him that with bows like this we shoot far and hit hard’ (Rubruck 1990: 185-186).

That he was not party to a formal embassy, he indeed confirmed in a sermon in Constantinople (Watson 2011: 93). Scholars have lamented (a) omissions of Rubruck's religious work and (b) inaccurate portraits of him as an ambassador (Jackson 1987: 95). One might forget, for instance, Rubruck's chief objective of attending and proselytizing in the camp of Mongol prince Sartaq, rumoured Christian (Jackson 2016: 273). One might also forget Rubruck's intention to bring "spiritual comfort" to a group of Germans enslaved by the Mongols during the latter's invasion of Hungary in 1241-1242 (Ibid: 273).

Such obfuscations are not my intention. I will resist the tendency "to portray these journeys mutually exclusively, as either diplomatic or evangelistic" (Ho 2012: 947). I heed Ho's injunction to avoid old "missionary vs diplomat" debates (Ibid: 948). It is worth reaffirming that Rubruck bore "a letter¹⁶ of introduction from the French king, in which Louis asked that he be allowed to stay and preach the Gospel" (Jackson and Morgan 1990: 43). As I began this paper, so too I close this section: Rubruck was despatched by Louis – a pious politician, to both spread the Word *and* to record, for conquest and crusade purposes, his observations of an otherland that had, by the time of his departure, already carried intrigue and fear.

Self-Restraint

Work for this paper identified deliberate restraint in Rubruck's account. This bolstered him against Mongol iterations of superiority and hostility. Whilst restraint surfaces in his coverage of such incivilities as drinking, plight and extortion, they are most palpable in his discretely geopolitico-religious dealings. I will address each in turn.

Concerning drinking, Rubruck draws incivility distinctions between Mongol incivility and Christian presuppositions of civility. Crucially, he *avoided* universalising Christian ethics and imposing them on the otherland. He observes, for instance, that when the Mongols "want to challenge someone to drink, they seize him by the ears, tugging them vigorously to make him open his gullet, and clap and dance in front of him" (1990: 77). This remains a discretely ethnographic observation, rather than an iteration of disgust or ethical opposition.

In Chapter 28, he recounts being offered alcohol at the Imperial court. His reply was diplomatic: "My lord... we are not men who look to drink to fulfil their desire: we shall be satisfied with whatever you please" (Ibid: 179). There is a sense of courtesy here: Rubruck neither wished to offend his hosts, nor indulge in vice.

¹⁶ Such a document bears resemblance to the letters issued by local bishops affirming their approval of friars' missions, "which would have added to the crusade preacher's authority and safety" (Maier 1994: 104). Maier identifies evidence of such affirmations a decade before Louis' letter to Rubruck, in August 1243, when "Bishop Henry of Constance issued a safe conduct for Franciscan crusade preachers against the Mongols" (Ibid: 104).

He was mindful of the need to adapt to the customs of the otherland, but equally cognisant to his Franciscan prerogatives.

In the following chapter, he recalls the chief wife's visit to the court, whose participation in a drinking ritual again receives ethnographic *treatment* rather than ethical *judgement*: “[D]rink was brought – rice ale, red wine...and comos. The lady held the full cup...and on her knees asked for a blessing. The priests all chanted¹⁷ in a loud voice, while she drained the cup. My colleague and I were also obliged to sing at another juncture when she wanted to drink...The lady was by [the end of her visit] drunk, and climbed into her cart, to the chanting and wailing of the priests, and went on her way” (Ibid: 191).

Rubruck observes affinity, here, between religious practice (priests' chanting) and Imperial drinking. Implicit is a sanctity: the chief wife received 'a blessing' as she 'drained' her cup. Not only did the host priests chant as she drank; Rubruck was 'obliged' to 'sing'. This places Rubruck in an ethical quandary. On one hand, he must comply with the norms of a hostile host. On the other, he must fulfil his (literal/figurative) mission of spreading the Word. Either way, restraint was adopted as a means of balancing these priorities; it was a form of insurance policy that facilitated concomitant proximity to, and distance from, the Mongols.

In relation to plight, Rubruck observes but does not politicize suffering. He notes in Chapter 5 that “slaves fill their bellies with dirty water, and with that rest content” (Ibid: 84). There is a sense of compassion here. Slaves are portrayed as resigned to the notion that their circumstances are sufficient. In Chapter 13, Rubruck links plight to the *wildness* and *wilderness* of Mongolia's environment: “We travelled on for three days without encountering human beings. We, and the oxen, likewise, were thoroughly exhausted...When on the fourth day we finally came across some people, we *rejoiced* like shipwrecked men coming into harbor” (Ibid: 110; emphasis added).

Human/animal distinctions blur; the explorers are equated with their vehicles: both are worn out. The environment is cast as a hostile, barren void from which human life itself is absent. Three days of isolation 'shipwrecked' Rubruck and his troupe; such a notion implies the likelihood of death in the otherland without rescue.

Similarly, in Chapter 22 he notes: “There is no counting the times we were famished, thirsty, frozen and exhausted” (Ibid: 141).

¹⁷ This is not the only occasion on which priests were observed to officiate in drinking ceremonies. Later, Rubruck recounts how he was “in the residence of [a] young princess...and she gave the priests a good deal to drink...[T]he priests made a great howling as they chanted in their drunkenness: a state not viewed there with disapproval either in a man or a woman” (Ibid: 196).

In Chapter 29 he ponders the ultimate sacrifice: “[T]here are so many starving people who are not provided with food, and the instant they saw us preparing a meal they would crowd in upon us and we had to share it with them. It was there that I experienced what a martyrdom it is, when destitute, to give bountifully” (Ibid: 188).

The foregoing imagery of wilderness, destitution and solitude in the otherland should be understood in the context of medieval preoccupations with *ars bene moriendi*, the art of dying. Etiquette governing ‘good death’ followed Christian *pro-* and *prescriptions* surrounding certain actions during death (Lahtinen and Korpiola 2017). Rubruck faced spiritual as well as existential peril. Put bluntly, he was “lucky to come out alive” (Rubiés 2009: 96). The duration, climatic hostility and environmental risks of the journey were such that “the friars’ mere survival seems a success in itself” (Ho 2012: 948). Rubruck demonstrated humility and discipline in the face of such risk. He avoided taking umbrage at the otherland in which he found himself.

Concerning extortion, Rubruck recalls in Chapter 9 how, on acquaintance with the Mongols, “they began brazenly to demand some of our rations...Having drunk one flagon of wine, they demanded another, claiming that a man does not enter a house on one foot. We gave it to them, saying by way of apology that we did not have much” (Ibid: 97; emphasis added). In the same chapter, he observes how the Mongols “laid wondering and covetous eyes on everything they could see on our attendants – knives, gloves, purses and belts. I refused on the pretext that we had a long way still to go and ought not to divest ourselves so soon of the items we needed to complete such a journey. At this they said I was an impostor” (Ibid: 98).

One chapter later, Rubruck recalls how an interpreter, working for Mongol commander Scacatai, “demanded some of our food, which we gave him. He also asked for some garment or other...We made our excuses. He enquired what we were taking for his master. We took a flagon of wine and filled a jar with biscuit and a dish with apples and other fruit. He was *disgruntled* that we were not taking some valuable cloth. Nevertheless, *in fear and diffidence*, this was how we entered” (Ibid: 100; emphasis added).

In Chapter 16, Rubruck recounts how, “anticipating their [the Mongols’] greed I had removed...the Bible...and other volumes to which I was more attached. But my lady the Queen’s psalter I had not dared remove, as it had attracted too much attention by reason of the gold illuminations it contained” (Ibid: 120). These reflections offer valuable insights into Rubruck’s restraint in the face of material demands. Whilst he gave wine, he was left with no choice other than to deny greater provisions. For already “[o]n the outward journey...Rubruck found himself quickly stripped of most of his valuables by acquisitive members of the Mongol camps he encountered” (Watson 2011: 91).

Rather than framing these circumstances within the context of Mongol hostility, he exercised relative discipline by arguing – truthfully – that the length of his onward journey necessitated those goods. When Scacatai’s interpreter was ‘disgruntled’ at Rubruck’s provision of wine, biscuit and fruit, he entered in ‘fear and diffidence’, anticipating hostility. And whilst Rubruck removed the Bible from his person given his perception of the others’ ‘greed’, he ‘had not dared’ alter the location of his Psalter due to the Mongols’ interest in its gold illuminations. Rubruck’s discipline manifests itself as a tempered adaptation to the otherland. He neither ‘submitted’ nor sought to impose his beliefs on the people and places in which he was a guest.

But Rubruck’s restraint is most evident in his politico-religious dealings. Work found that Chapter 28 contained the richest evidence. There, he recalls being questioned why he journeyed to Mongolia:

“I would reply: ... ‘the King of the French sent by us a sealed letter... I tell you that he has never done you any injury. If he *had* done you any, so that you were obliged to wage war on him and his people, he himself, as a man of justice, would be willing on his own accord to make amends and to seek peace’... They were *amazed* and kept repeating constantly: ‘Why have you come, seeing that you did not come to make peace?’” (Ibid: 172; emphasis added)

The interrogators were ‘amazed’, I argue, at Rubruck’s restraint. The earlier universalising logic – logic of exceptionalism and expansionism applied by both Christendom and the Mongols – was cast as bipolar(izing) in consigning the other as either ‘with’ or ‘against’ the collective self. Christendom was either ‘with’ or ‘against’ the Mongols, and vice versa.

Rubruck’s response to the interrogators, however, goes against the grain of universalization. He neither cast Christendom as ‘pliantly submissive’ nor ready for war. He *confirmed* royal authority to travel and *affirmed* that Louis had never hurt the Mongols, and that peace would have been sought had this been the case. Such tact is disciplined in both (a) complying with Rubruck’s Franciscan prerogative – avoiding contravention of Christendom’s politico-religious objectives – and (b) avoiding harm done to the otherland in which he is a guest.

In the same chapter, Rubruck recalls being questioned about France, namely “whether it contained many sheep, cattle and horses – as if they were due to move in and take it all over...I had to exercise *great self-control* in order to conceal my indignation and fury, and I replied: ‘It contains many fine things, which you will see for yourselves if you happen to go there’” (Ibid: 180; emphasis added). The tone indicates Rubruck’s concomitant grievance at Mongol insensitivity and self-discipline, acknowledging the fragility of his own otherness abroad.

Another interrogation, in Chapter 33, narrowly avoids bloodshed. Rubruck recalls being asked “numerous questions about the Pope and the king of the French, and about the routes by which they were reached. But [a] monk overheard this and...warned me not to answer [the interrogator], on the grounds that he was seeking to get himself sent as the ambassador. Consequently, I *held my tongue*...He made some insulting remark...to me, for which the Nestorian¹⁸ priests wanted to denounce him, and he would have been either executed or beaten to a pulp; *but I would not have it*” (Rubruck 1990: 227-228; emphasis added).

Two italicizations indicate Rubruck’s restraint in this instance of an aspiring ambassador seeking intelligence on Christendom. On one hand, he maintained silence under questioning, out of loyalty not only to Louis and Christendom, but also the host who counselled caution. On the other, he prevented the host priests from executing or beating ‘to a pulp’ the would-be ambassador after the latter insulted Rubruck. Discipline was used to avoid harm not only to Christendom and France, but also the Mongol whose insolence would have cost him his life.

That is not the only occasion on which Rubruck mediated with his hosts. Revisiting Chapter 28, Rubruck recalls the Nestorians asking if he would follow their customs or his own. His reply was bold: ““We are priests, dedicated to the service of God...We have come a long way. First, with your permission, we shall sing praises to God, Who has safely brought us this far from so great a distance; and after that we shall do as your master wishes, provided we are given no order which is contrary to the worship and honour of God” (Ibid: 177).

Here, Rubruck *conditionally* agrees to participate in Nestorian practices, with the condition being that no order is given that contradicts Rubruck’s perception of holiness. Palpable is his avoidance of value universalization. He did not exceptionalize Latin Christian protocols. He accepted his own otherness abroad, and with the Nestorians’ *permission* proceeded to worship God in the Franciscan way. Rubruck *shall* do as the Nestorians wish, so long as he is not ordered to contravene his doctrines.

¹⁸ The Nestorians, an Eastern Christian community, had established themselves in Mongolia by the eighth century, but remained unfamiliar to the West until the Fifth Crusade (1218-1221) (Montalbano 2015: 591). The Nestorians belonged to that group of “Oriental Christians – Greeks, Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobites and other churches considered ‘heretical’” by Latin Christendom” (Rubiés 2016a: xiii-xiv). The Nestorians were “declared heretical at the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon but established themselves in Mesopotamia and Persia. Nestorius of Constantinople had himself studied at Antioch but his teachings on the nature of Christ and the Virgin Mary were nevertheless declared heretical at the council of Ephesus in 431” (Goody 2015: 285). Such observations illuminate the deeper chasms within Christianity in the medieval period. Rome was but one of five patriarchal sees: “the other four, reflecting the eastern Mediterranean origins of Christianity itself, were located in the eastern Roman Empire, in Constantinople...and in Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria” (Linehan et al 2018a: 3).

Rubruck situates himself ‘between’ west/east, seeking common ground between both domains’ priesthoods, and disciplining himself in such a way as to be willing to practice in Nestorian fashion, conditional on not contravening Franciscan custom. Considering the Nestorians were deemed heretical (Ho 2012: 949), this is no small feat.

Work for this section identified restraint and discipline in Rubruck’s account. Not only did he control himself in the face of perceived Mongol incivility. Not only did he demonstrate tact – giving wine, expressing ‘fear and diffidence’, safeguarding his Bible whilst ‘daring not’ remove his Psalter – in the face of extortion. Rubruck’s restraint was most evident in his politico-religious dealings. He controlled himself to the extent he permitted the possibility of Latin-Nestorian collaborative practice, on the condition he did nothing to jeopardise his Franciscan duty. These manifestations of discipline set the context in which intercivilizational dialogue could be pursued between (literally/figuratively) distant civilizations.

If it is true, as Tolan suggests, that “denigration of the other is the back side of Christian *universalism*...[which] crystalized...in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (2002: 283; emphasis added), Rubruck conducted himself *contra* universalism, seeking common ground on which relatively hostile actors could tentatively converge. Pursuing common ground involved attuning himself to the needs and mores of the Other, *alongside* acknowledging his own otherness abroad.

Attunement denotes here an open mindset, receptive to alterity and mindful of one’s own alterity beyond frontiers. To be attuned is to be cosmopolitan and curious. It is to demonstrate attentiveness to the ‘others’ around oneself, and to be inclined towards reflecting on one’s own otherness in the world. It is to such attunement that the paper now turns.

Cosmopolitan Curiosity

It was Montalbano who questioned how one’s “entry into a new physical space oblige[s] an individual to re-evaluate his or her cultural assumptions” (2015: 606) in a world of multiple particularities.

By crossing the frontier of homeland/otherland, and entering a *new* space – new for the traveller, and in this instance relatively new for the origin civilization – one’s presuppositions are thrown in stark relief; they are illuminated in contradistinction to the *new* environment, the *new* surroundings in which one is a guest, the *new* presuppositions of otherland.

Cosmopolitan curiosity is about such reflection and re-evaluation in ‘other’ spaces that are not one’s homeland. It involves engagement with, and attentiveness to, otherness: both *others’* and one’s *own*.

Rubruck's is an account of such attunement: he navigates Mongol particularities, making sense of them and their distinctiveness. He avoids quarantining the Mongols in the realm of the barbaric alien. He is aware that *he* may be deemed by the Mongols the barbaric and alien other, his earlier 'fear and diffidence' indicating the figurative thinness and frailty of the ice upon which he was treading.

Rubruck's ethnography, then, "is filled with his gazes upon Mongols" (Khanmohamadi 2008: 90). In each of his encounters, "we find the subject-viewer of the scene, William, represented as an object within the frame of description...[making] his own subjectivity and emotions part of the message, locating himself as an inextricable part of the scene he is setting" (Ibid: 101). His was an attempt "to *understand*...rather than criticize their [the Mongols'] culture and society" (Montalbano 2015: 600; emphasis added).

Work found that such attentiveness to the otherland, such cosmopolitan curiosity, manifests itself most palpably in the otherworldly imagery used in Rubruck's account. Whilst I am not aware of otherworldliness receiving discrete coverage in the extant Rubruck corpus, the use of such imagery should not be entirely surprising: for Rubiés, "[i]f the opposition between barbarism and civilization constituted a powerful paradigm for explaining cultural differences, *geography and 'climate'* – both associated with *astrological influences and distinct national 'temperaments'* – offered an important alternative" (2016a: xxxv; emphasis added).

And Jackson attributes "the meagre harvest of... mission" not only to the physical distance between Christendom and the Mongols, the dearth of missionaries, and language obstacles, "but also to the universe the Mongols themselves inhabited and in particular to their preoccupations in matters of religion, nature and magic" (2018: 5). There is a sense, then, that spiritual and environmental otherworldliness – captured in the Mongols' *world* and *worldview* – was itself a hindrance to Rubruck's Franciscan prerogatives.

Imagery contains figurative capital with which otherness is illuminated in contradistinction to selfhood. Otherworldly imagery helps delineate the competing 'we' feelings of Christendom and the Mongols, but Rubruck avoids barbarising the 'other' civilization.

As early as Chapter 1, he notes how "I really felt as if I were entering some other world" (1990: 71). Rubiés identifies this statement as "a qualified experience of otherness" (2009: 95). And Montalbano cites this statement in substantiating Rubruck's use of "metaphysical language, suggesting the inefficacy of words to describe his surroundings" (2015: 599).

The fact Rubruck's available lexicon could only go so far in describing the otherland is crucial: *his* worldview, *his* homeland, hinged on Christendom.

The chasm between homeland/otherland was so vast that language could only do so much. In experiencing the *feeling* of ‘entering some other world’, Rubruck becomes the object of his own ethnography, at one and the same time author and protagonist in a narrative wherein *he* is the other in someone else’s homeland. “Sometimes,” as Khanmohamadi observes, Rubruck “is simply at a loss for words” (2008: 100).

Nowhere is otherworldliness more evident than in Rubruck’s coverage of the (human/natural) environment in which he finds himself. In Chapter 35, soothsayers are said to “*disturb the atmosphere* with their incantations, and when the cold is so severe...that they can find no means of relief, they hunt out people in the camp whom they accuse of *bringing on the cold*; and these are put to death without delay” (Ibid: 244; emphasis added). Two italicisations denote otherworldliness. Firstly, the atmosphere is ‘disturbed’ – deliberately altered for the worse – by soothsayers with ungodly powers. Secondly, environmental peril is an outcome, in the Mongols’ eyes, of people ‘bringing on’ climatic ills. Human beings are cast as conduits of evil.

Importantly, Rubruck does not question the moral and theological presuppositions causing the soothsayers to see that bringers of the cold are ‘put to death without delay’. Neither does he question the theological and moral probity of the soothsayers *per se*. He records his observations, disciplining himself in terms of the extent—or even presence—of normative opposition. The otherworld forms a rhetorical locus of his enquiry; the attention he pays to it exemplifies his attentiveness to otherness. He demonstrates a curiosity for the world beyond his Franciscan horizons, casting the otherworld as firmly of another civilization, without barbarising the other.

As with soothsayers and ‘bringers of the cold’, so too spirits and winds. Rubruck notes, in Chapter 8, that when a prominent member of society falls ill, “guards are stationed at a distance around the camp and allow nobody to pass within those limits, since they are afraid an evil spirit or wind may come in with those who enter” (1990: 96). Evident here is a form of environmental malevolence: the spiritualization of the environment. Such an ‘evil’ environment is a *life-taking* rather than *life-giving* rhetorical phenomenon (see Weaver 2018: 7), embodying evil, a force Christians trace to original sin. Evil ‘comes in with those who enter’; entrants are outsiders whose trust is contingent on Imperial acceptance. ‘Others’ hailing from beyond boundaries bring (or may be tailgated by) malign extra-jurisdictional forces. By deploying guardspersons and cordoning the ill from the otherworldly, the Mongols conduct bordering¹⁹ practices that control ingress/egress and protect their homeland.

¹⁹ Bordering is a concept widely used in critical political geography to denote the act of “separat[ing] and bring[ing] together. Borders allow certain expressions of identity and memory to exist while blocking others” (Paasi in Johnson et al 2011: 62). Bordering is evident in Rubruck’s assessment of the threshold taboo, a prohibition on touching the Mongol equivalent of a front doorframe. This offence was punishable by death (Rubruck 1990: 117).

Such evil is associated with demonic forces. In Chapter 27 Rubruck recalls, when traversing the Tarbaghatai range (Watson 2011: 98), his guide asking him “to recite some auspicious phrase that would put *demons* to flight, since along this pass it was usual for demons suddenly to carry men off... Sometimes they would seize the horse, leaving the rider behind, and at others they would pull out a man’s innards and leave the corpse on the horse” (Ibid: 166; emphasis added).

Rubruck observes the guide linking *human* mortality to *non-human* risk. Rather than dismissing or barbarizing his guide, Rubruck complies, chanting the *Credo in unum Deum*, and noting that “by the grace of God we passed through unharmed” (Ibid: 166). Rubruck became ‘other’. ‘Other’ attuned himself to host, orienting his conduct to the norms and mores of Montalbano’s (2015) ‘new physical space’, the otherland. Rubruck’s was “the role of protecting the small group [his travelling party] from the supernatural; his usefulness within Mongol society was thereby confirmed, and his status as a holy man with power akin to that of a Mongol shaman was established” (Watson 2011: 98).

Finally, consideration should be paid to Rubruck’s observation of Mongol ritual, which is also replete with otherworldly imagery. The ritual that struck a chord, during work for this paper, was one that appears to sanctify the classical elements (earth, air, fire, water). In Chapter 2, Rubruck notes that during Mongol celebrations, “the steward leaves the dwelling with a goblet and some drink, and sprinkles it three times towards the south, genuflecting each time, in honour of fire; next towards the east, in honour of the air; next towards the west, in honour of water; and some is thrown towards the north for the sake of the dead” (1990: 75-76); the latter can be profitably associated with the earth.

Rubruck’s treatment of those elements situates the Mongols in a temporal-civilizational (pre-Christian) hinterland that is (literally/figuratively) distant from Christendom. But his observation of this ritual is objective and avoids value-loaded moral or theological critique. He avoids barbarizing the Mongols.

This section gauged, in Rubruck’s account, a *cosmopolitan curiosity* for the otherland.

Whilst my next investigation will trace the origins of the threshold taboo and cast it as one historical birth of geopolitics – namely a stimulus of the inside/outside delineation – let us content ourselves in here observing Rubruck’s objective observation of this phenomenon. He reports, in Chapter 15, how “we were given a stern warning to be careful not to touch the threshold” (Ibid: 117). In Chapter 29, Rubruck recounts how, on exiting the ruler Mangu Chan’s residence and bowing to Chan, his colleague “stumbled over the threshold... [and] the men keeping watch...laid hold of my colleague and made him halt so that he could not follow us: someone was called and ordered to escort him to Bulgai, the chief secretary at court, who condemns accused persons to death” (Ibid: 194).

The next investigation must identify the reasons for, and presuppositions underpinning, this taboo. It must, through a historical lens, assess the threshold taboo’s geographical and historical prevalence.

By this, I mean Rubruck was attentive not only to the ‘other’ but also, crucially, his own otherness in a realm beyond his homeland. He offered what Watson termed “his ‘gift of self’” (2011: 90). Otherworldly imagery was observed to temper the way he ‘read’ and ‘wrote’ the (human/natural) environment in which he was guest and observer. Environmental peril was observed by Rubruck to be associated with evil forces, the soothsayers ‘putting to death’ bringers of the cold, the demonic forces knocking riders off their horses.

The Mongols were observed by Rubruck to be situated in a temporal and civilizational hinterland, with classical elements animating celebratory rituals. The otherland he observes is one of wildness and wilderness. But nonetheless, Rubruck avoids barbarizing the ‘other’. He avoids drawing civil/uncivil binaries that delineate the (un)holy. He avoids quarantining the Mongols in the realm of the alien. The findings presented in this section cohere with Khanmohamadi’s claim that “William discovers...not the prescribed aimlessness and unreason of nomadic society, but precisely the opposite...[going] out of his way to affirm Mongol humanity, eschewing in all but rare instances the varied discourses of dehumanization available to him in favor of an affirmation of Mongolian humanity and reason” (2008: 93-94).

Conclusion

“...there has never been an age in which Christianity attained so complete a cultural expression as in the thirteenth century. Europe has seen no greater Christian hero than St. Francis...perhaps even no greater Christian ruler than St. Louis”

(Dawson 1953: 183)

Dawson’s is an apt quote with which to close this investigation. Despite existing differences of opinion, it can be agreed that the central Middle Ages were a time of exploration, conquest, and pathfinding. Latin Christendom sought to universalise its *Civita Dei*, pushing its extant frontiers to the limit. At the same time, the Mongol Empire evinced equivalent exceptionalism and expansionism, stretching its very boundaries seemingly *ad infinitum*, only to turn away from Austria as a result of internal politicking.

Centrifugal geopolitical forces pushed away from these respective civilizations and – in very particular instances – *into* one another. One such instance of frontier penetration, in this ‘clash of civilizations’, was Rubruck’s passage to Mongolia at the behest of Louis. It was an unenviable task: preach the Word and collect field intelligence for dissemination to Louis on return. ‘Crusade and mission’ (Kedar 1984) went hand in hand.

Whilst there is a small corpus on Rubruck, it is nowhere near as expansive as its counterpart on Marco Polo, graced not only with an explorer's stardom but academic honor (recall the *Ovis Poli*). Noting this understudy status on the civilizational stage, my goal was to seek the extent to which a critical (re)reading of Rubruck could propel extant understandings of a Christian eastward mission, in an era when "the classical image of civilized man's degenerate, deceitful, and deadly antagonist" (Jones 1971: 406) prevailed.

What followed was an acquaintance with a Franciscan friar about whom the academic and public domains seemingly know little: a man whose report has but bobbed upon the ocean of history and anthropology, and whose subsequent history following the report's dissemination is unknown. The ensuing work exposed an ethnography that was human, intimate, and replete with personal and experiential learning (Jackson 2016).

Rubruck's account brought into question such prevalent notions of the barbarian. There was no indication that Gog and Magog would be breaching Alexander's walls. Whilst the Mongols were portrayed as Other, Rubruck also *portrays himself* as Other: he is aware of his own otherness, his awkward alterity in a land that hosted *him* as a guest and a potential enemy. Rubruck was sandwiched between and within civilizations pursuing concurrent policies of exceptionalism and expansionism.

Two palpable themes became evident in the analysis: Rubruck's restraint in the face of perceived incivility and his cosmopolitan curiosity, defined here as attentiveness to otherness: both *others'* and his *own*. Rubruck evinced self-discipline by observing but not ethico-theologically ostracising the Mongols in their circumstances of drinking, plight and extortion. His narrative is one of self-control in his discretely politico-religious dealings. In fact, perhaps he was *too* restrained: after all, he converted only six persons on his journey (Montalbano 2015: 599). "His is indeed", for Rubiés, "a narrative of disappointment" (2009: 109).

Meanwhile, his concomitant attentiveness to otherness yet avoidance of barbarization was demonstrated in his use of otherworldly imagery. The soothsayers, spirits and sanctification of classical elements each helped distinguish self/other, but such distinctions were not weaponised in favour of Latin Christendom and against the Mongol Empire.

They responsibly delineated homeland/otherland, observing but not rendering alien the incongruous otherworldliness of nature, magic and spiritualisation. He did not fight these particularities; he noted them and accommodated them to the extent that his Franciscan prerogatives were not placed in jeopardy. Think of the *Credo in unum Deum* and the Franciscan-Nestorian collaborative practice.

In the final analysis, the restraint and cosmopolitan curiosity evident in Rubruck's account sets a context in which disparate civilizations could be tentatively *bridged* in a dialogue of civilizations, to use Lynch's lexicon (2000). Rubruck took one fractional, cautious step forwards in intercivilizational history. His was an attempt at "cross-cultural comprehension" in an age of crusade and mission (Phillips 2016: 81), a display of "*willingness to attempt some understanding* of those diverse peoples and their alien cultures" (Ibid: 85; emphasis added).

Rubruck's "great self-extension towards the other" (Khanmohamadi 2008: 89) is as radical today as it was in the thirteenth century. I just hope that scholars will discover more about this ethnographer of otherness.

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