

## Venice and the Mongol Hordes

The two Venetian Polo brothers and one of their sons, Marco, travelled in Asia throughout the second half of the Thirteenth century, serving for seventeen years in the court of Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and the ruler of China and the entire Mongol empire, from Peking to Europe. The story of Venetian intrigue with the Mongol hordes is infamous. With the “peace of the grave” imposed on most of the world by the butchery of the Khans, the Venetians were free to carry on their commerce and share in the plunder, including the vast wealth stolen and shipped out of China by the Mongols to their western territories.

The Polo family were traders, who headed off into Asia dealing in various goods, including slaves—primarily captives of war sold into slavery by the Mongols and others. Marco Polo’s book on his travels includes the following incredible description of the invasion of China by Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai, which in fact reduced China’s population from 115 million to 85 million within about twenty-five years:

When he conquered a province, he did no harm to the people or their property, but merely established some of his own men in the country among them, while he led the remainder to the conquest of other provinces. And when those whom he had conquered became aware how well and safely he protected them against all others, and how they suffered no ill at his hands, and saw what a noble prince he was, then they joined him heart and soul and became his devoted followers.

The Mongol dynasty was a pure Legalist regime, grinding up both the population and the technological infrastructure produced by the Sung Confucian Renaissance. The great trading ships were turned to the purposes of conquest, including failed efforts to occupy Japan and to move south into Southeast Asia. The internal economy was looted to exhaustion, such that the population declined by yet another ten million souls before the dynasty collapsed.

It is important to note that the silk routes, both through Persia and the northern route through Samarkand in the Turkish lands, had been dominated, since the T’ang Dynasty (Sixth-Eighth centuries A.D.) by various communities of gnostic Christians—in particular, Manichaeans and Nestorians.\* The

Manichaean sect converted the Uighars, one of the Turkish tribes in Central Asia, in the Eighth century. These Manichaean Uighars became the primary traders in the Tarim Basin, leading into China, and both as traders and as astrologers were welcomed into the Buddhist and Taoist dominated T’ang court.

Nestorian Christians played a critical role in the very formation of the Mongol aristocracy, even before the time of Genghis Khan. The Nestorians had already been established within China during the T’ang Dynasty in the Seventh century, but they were expelled along with the Buddhists and the Manichaeans in the Ninth century by a fanatical Taoist emperor (primarily for the wealth gained by seizing the extensive holdings of the various sects). Both the Nestorians and the Manichaeans came back in force with the Mongol hordes. Kublai Khan’s mother, in fact, was a Nestorian Christian, along with many of his leading officers throughout the empire.

The Polos made contact with both sects while in China, and helped the Manichaeans establish themselves with the Khan. The Manichaeans’ “World of Light/World of Darkness” gnostic ideology found fertile ground in Taoist *yin/yang* dualism, and in the Mahayana Buddhist sect’s denunciation of the material world as evil; it virtually merged with Buddhism, and later with Taoism, to the extent that one of the Manichaean texts was incorporated into the Taoist canon. The Mongols, heavily influenced by Taoism and by the extreme Tantric Buddhism of Tibet, found no problem accepting the Manichaeans into the fold. They also found agreement on the proscriptions against bathing—both Genghis Khan and Mani refused to bathe because it defiled the water!

\* Mani was a Third-century Persian gnostic whose dualistic doctrine of a “World of Light” and a “World of Darkness” came to be interlaced with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other gnostic sects, as well as Christianity, as it spread across Central Asia into China. Nestorius was a Fifth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, who denied the hypostasis of Christ as both God and man. Like Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity was centered in Persia, and accommodated itself to Zoroastrianism and other beliefs as it spread west to China. According to Nicolaus of Cusa, theological differences between Islam and Christianity on the question of the divinity of Christ, result from Nestorian influence on the Prophet Mohammed.