

An introductory sketch

# The Monks of Kublai Khan

## From Beijing to Baghdad and Beyond

Gareth Hughes

Oxford, 2009

IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, two Christian monks of the Öngüt tribe of Inner Mongolia set out from Beijing to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Beijing from which they began their journey was known to them as Khanbaliq, the capital of Kublai Khan, Mongol Great Khan (1260–94), founder of the Yuan dynasty of China and suzerain of territory spread as far as Turkey in the west.

The story of the two pilgrim monks is preserved in only a handful of manuscripts. The most complete telling is in Syriac, the liturgical language used by these monks in much the same way that mediaeval European monks used Latin.

Sauma, the elder of the two, was a distinguished hermit from Beijing, while his companion, Markos, was his younger student from the Öngüt homeland where the ‘Great Bend’ of the Yellow River embraces the Ordos steppe in a gentle curve of Inner Mongolia. Sauma is usually called *Rabban Sauma* or ‘Master Sauma’ in the manuscripts, using a Syriac title similar in origin to ‘rabbi’. His given name is also a Syriac word, meaning ‘fasting’, probably given because he was born during Lent. In contrast, Markos’s name is more familiar, the ancient Roman name, popularised among Christians by the author of the second gospel, Mark.

Both Sauma and Markos were Öngüt, a Turkic people speaking a language similar to the Uyghur language spoken today in the Xinjiang Region of eastern China. Politically, the Öngüt were well connected with their Mongol rulers, being considered almost honorary Mongols. Culturally, although East Turkic nomads, they adopted much urban Chinese life and art. Religiously, many Öngüt were Christian, belonging to the Church of the East, governed by its Catholicos-Patriarch from Baghdad. A church that had followers in India, South-East Asia, China, Siberia, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. A church that is dubbed *Nestorian*, an ancient heresy, by the European churches of Rome and Constantinople. However, many other Öngüt practised Buddhism or followed the teachings of the Persian, vegetarian syncretist Mani.

Sauma and Markos travelled across northern China with its mixed Chinese, Mongol and Turkic influences. They travelled west out of Kublai Khan's immediate domain and into lands controlled by federate khans and opposing warlords. In today's terms this is the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The long first leg of their journey ended in the city of Maraghah. Maraghah, a city in the northwest of modern Iran, was the capital of the Ilkhanate, Mongol-ruled Persia, which stretched over modern-day Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, and took in bits of Turkey and Syria, ruled on behalf of the Great Khan, Kublai, by his brother Hülegü Khan, and his descendants.

The two monks were forced to stop in Maraghah because of ongoing warfare between the Ilkhanate and the Seljuq Turks. Safe in the city, they met their religious leader, the Catholicos-Patriarch Denkha I, who ordained Markos as the metropolitan bishop of *Kati w-Ong* (Cathay and Öng), that is of northern China and the Öngüt homeland. Documents of the Church of the East tell us that there were often shortages of bishops to minister in East Asia, so maybe it is not so surprising that the Catholicos-Patriarch took this opportunity to consecrate the younger monk, who could give many years of service on returning to China.

In 1281, while still in Maraghah, the Catholicos-Patriarch died. A synod of bishops was convened to elect a successor, and settled on Markos, as a newly qualified bishop, to be the head of the church. This was perhaps a shrewd political move by the bishops who saw Markos's connections with the court of Kublai Khan as leverage on the Il-Khan. Thus, this Turkic pilgrim from China assumed leadership of the Christians of Asia taking up the title Yahballaha III; his name, the Syriac translation of 'Theodore', *God-given*. Apart from moving back and forth between Baghdad, the spiritual seat of the Catholicos-Patriarch, and Maraghah, the capital of the Il-Khan, Yahballaha Markos's election put pay to his dream of making it to Jerusalem.

Yahballaha Markos's companion Sauma was not sitting by quietly while his student governed the church. He was summoned by Arghun Khan, the Il-Khan ruler (1284–91) and grand-nephew of Kublai Khan, and sent as ambassador to Europe. Sauma's main ambassadorial task was to urge the Pope and European kings to call for a new crusade to retake Jerusalem from Mamluk and Seljuq control. For Arghun Khan, there was the opportunity to extend and stabilise his western border, and perhaps achieve the economic boon of a Mediterranean port through which he might monopolize the trade in silk and other Asian goods with the élite of European society. Sauma's ambassadorial role took him first to Constantinople to meet with the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (reigned 1282–1328), then past a volatile Mount Etna (recorded to be in eruption 1284–5) to Naples and an audience with its king (called *Irid Shardalo* in the Syriac account, 'Il Re [di] Charles d'Anjou', that is Charles II, reigned 1285–1309), before arriving in Rome. However, approaching Rome, Sauma received the news that Pope Honorius IV had died (1287, after two years as pope), and so was received by twelve cardinals, who questioned the orthodoxy of his faith. From Rome, Sauma continued to Paris to meet King Philip IV the Fair of France (reigned 1285–1314), and then on to Bordeaux to meet King Edward I of England (or *Ilnaghtar* in the Syriac account). Edward (reigned 1272–1307), being also Duke of Aquitaine, had a palace at Bordeaux. Sauma returned to Rome for the election of a new Pope, Nicholas IV (in 1288), and the honour of celebrating the mass in Syriac at the papal altar. Received well, yet without success, Sauma returned to Baghdad where he lived out his final years.

Neither monk attained his dream of seeing Jerusalem.

Like reversed Marco Polos, the story of Sauma and Markos shows the growth of internationalism in the thirteenth century, the kernel of today's global village. Their journey spans not only continents and territories, but cultures, languages and religions too — finding commonality and exploring difference. The adventures of Sauma and Markos also break a number of Western preconceptions. Firstly, the subjects of the story are Christian, but are truly Asian Christians, untouched by the theology and culture of 'mainstream' Christianity — that which is so often considered the religion's only true manifestation. Their world is one in which Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other religions jostle for prominence and for proselytes, yet thrive in acknowledged co-existence. Here there is no Western notion of 'Eastern mysticism' or 'Eastern religion': all three religions entered the Far East via the Silk Road — Buddhism, then Christianity, then Islam — from the west.

Sauma and Markos's journey into the west raises questions about ethnicity and identity in Asia today. Being Öngüt, they belonged to a minority within China; the path they trod is today home to Mongols, Hui Muslims and Uyghur alongside Han Chinese in the People's Republic of China. As the path continues, it wends through the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, heavily Russified, far from becoming functioning democracies, and in search of their true identity or identities. Their sojourn in what is today Iran and Iraq, presents itself with many questions, including the plight of the Assyro-Chaldaeian Christians in Iraq. The court of Arghun Khan tells us much of the cosmopolitan nature of these lands. The Il-Khan himself was a Buddhist Mongol, born to a Christian Turkic mother. His chief minister was an Arabic-speaking Jew, and Arghun's sons later converted to Islam, even though one had previously been baptized. The story of Sauma and Markos also helps put perceptions of the crusades in their historical context. Yes, they were religious wars, yet they were motivated much more by underlying political and economic conditions. Seen thus, Arghun Khan's desire for a new crusade makes more sense. Sauma's embassy to Europe allows us to see that continent through the eyes of a mediæval traveller from Beijing: a land of strange names and customs, which conducts what Sauma describes as 'nice warfare' (perhaps there is the nub of what the vaunted European civilisation is all about).

This pilgrims' progress is a tale to fascinate on numerous levels. Not only does it take us through the lands of the great Mongol Empire, along the Silk Road, but it also helps to re-examine modern views of Asia and Europe: one continent ever pretending to be two.

## Bibliography

- Bedjan, P. (1895). *Histoire de Mar ʿġab-alaha, patriarche, et de Raban Sauma*. Paris-Leipzig [Syr. text].
- Borbone, P. G. (2000). *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma*. Turin [It. tr. & nn.].
- Budge, E. A. W. (1928). *The Monks of Kūblāi Khān: Emperor of China*. London [En. tr. & nn.].
- Chabot, J.-B. (1894). *Histoire de Mar ʿġabalaha III et du moine Rabban ʿCauma*. Paris [Fr. tr. & nn.].
- Пигулевская, Н. В. (1958). *История Мар Ябалахи III и Раббан Саумы*. Moscow [Ru. tr. & nn.].