

## **John of Monte Corvino: Report from China 1305**

*John of Monte Corvino (1247-1328) was a Franciscan priest and the first archbishop of Cambalec (present-day Beijing) in 1307. He crossed central Asia during a rare interval of peace when that region was controlled by the Mongol Khans.*

*Despite disappointment at the Mongols' reception of their early embassies to the Great Khan and his lieutenants, popes and kings in the West did not abandon hope of converting the Mongols to Roman Christianity and allying with them against Islam. On their part, various Mongol khans continued to flirt with the idea of joining with European Christian powers against a common Muslim foe.*

*In 1287 Arghun, il-khan of Persia (r. 1284-1291), a nephew and subordinate of the Great Khan, Kubilai (r. 1260-1294), sent a Nestorian Christian monk, Rabban (Master) Sauma (ca. 1230-1294) to the West, bearing letters for the pope, the kings of France and England, and the emperor of Constantinople, in which the Mongol prince offered to become a Christian in return for an alliance against a common enemy, the Muslim Mamluks of Egypt. The Mamluks had rolled back a Mongol invasion of Syria-Palestine with a decisive victory at 'Ayn Jalut in 1260, and they were on the threshold of capturing the last of the crusader strongholds in that same region. Arghun died before he or anyone else could act on the proposal, and in 1295 his successor embraced Islam, thereby ending any hope of a Mongol-European crusade in the Holy Land. Arghun's overtures, however, set in motion a remarkable adventure for one European missionary.*

*In response to Rabban Sauma's appearance, in Rome in 1289, Pope Nicholas IV dispatched a Franciscan friar, John of Monte Corvino (1247-ca. 1328), to the Mongols with letters for Arghun and other khans farther to the east, including the khan of khans, Kubilai. Friar John had only just returned to Rome after having served as a missionary in Armenia and Mongol-controlled Persia between about 1280 and 1289. Apparently his report so impressed Pope Nicholas that the pope ordered John to return immediately to the Middle East and then to travel on to the Great Khan in northern China.*

*In 1291 John was in Tauris (modern Tabriz), Arghun's capital, but the il-khan died in March of that year, and between May and July of the same year the last Crusader strongholds in the Holy Land fell to Muslim forces. With nothing further to be accomplished in Persia, John set out for the court of the Great Khan in China. Civil war among the Mongols delayed Friar John's journey across Central Asia and resulted in a detour to India, from where Friar John sent back to Rome a derailed report on India's native Christian communities. Due to this delay, John arrived at the Mongol capital of Khanbalik (modern Beijing) in 1295, a year after Kubilai's death. Making the best of his situation, John remained in China as a missionary.*

*In the course of his long stay in China, Friar John wrote two letters to his fellow Franciscans back home. In response, Pope Clement V appointed him archbishop of Khanbalik in 1307 and dispatched several assistant missionaries. The new archbishop remained at his post until his death around 1328, and Pope Benedict XII subsequently sent a replacement. Notwithstanding this effort, the Roman Catholic mission in China barely limped along. When the Mongols finally were expelled from China in 1368, European missionary activity in China ended and would not be revived until the coming of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century.*

*The following document is one of the letters that Friar John sent to the West from China. In it he relates his Success working with the late King Kerguz, or George, leader of the Ongut Turks, whose family had intermarried with that of Chinggis Khan.*

### **QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS**

1. What problems did Friar John encounter?
2. How was Friar John able to gain most of his converts, and from which group(s) does he seem to have won most of his converts: the Turkic Nestorian Christians, the non-Christian Mongols, or the Chinese? What do you conclude from your answers?
3. What picture does John draw of the Mongol empire?
4. How easy or difficult was it to reach China from the West at the end of the thirteenth century? Be specific in your answer.
5. What does this letter allow us to infer about European-Chinese contacts during this period?
6. What does John's letter suggest about Mongol attitudes and policy toward Christians?

I, Friar John of Monte Corvino, of the order of Minor Friars, departed from Tauris, a city of the Persians, in the year of the Lord 1291, and proceeded to India. And I remained in the country of India, wherein stands the church of St. Thomas the Apostle, for thirteen months, and in that region baptized in different places about one hundred persons. The companion of my journey was Friar Nicholas of Pistoia, of the order of Preachers, who died there, and was buried in the church aforesaid.

I proceeded on my further journey and made my way to Cathay, the realm of the Emperor of the Tartars who is called the Grand Cham. To him I presented the letter of our lord the Pope, and invited him to adopt the Catholic Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, but he had grown too old in idolatry. However he bestows many kindnesses upon the Christians, and these two years past I am abiding with him. . . . In this mission I abode alone and without any associate for eleven years; but it is now going on for two years since I was joined by Friar Arnold, a German of the province of Cologne.

I have built a church in the city of Cambaliec, [Beijing] in which the king has his chief residence. This I completed six years ago; and I have built a bell-tower to it, and put three bells in it. I have baptized there, as well as I can estimate, up to this time some 6000 persons; and if those charges against me of which I have spoken had not been made, I should have baptized more than 30,000. And I am often still engaged in baptizing.

Also I have gradually bought one hundred and fifty boys, the children of pagan parents, and of ages varying from seven to eleven, who had never learned any religion. These boys I have baptized, and I have taught them Greek and Latin after our manner. Also I have written out Psalters for them, with thirty Hymnaries and two Breviaries. By help of these, eleven of the boys already know our service, and form a choir and take their weekly turn of duty as they do in convents, whether I am there or not. Many of the boys are also employed in writing out Psalters and other things suitable. His Majesty the Emperor moreover delights much to hear them chanting. I have the bells rung at all the canonical hours, and with my congregation of babes and sucklings I perform divine service, and the chanting we do by ear because I have no service book with the notes.

Indeed if I had had but two or three comrades to aid me 'tis possible that the Emperor Cham would have been baptized by this time! I ask then for such brethren to come, if any are willing to come, such I mean as will make it their great business to lead exemplary lives. . . .

As for the road hither I may tell you that the way through the land of the Goths, subject to the Emperor of the Northern Tartars, is the shortest and safest; and by it the friars might come, along with the letter-carriers, in five or six months. The other route again is very long and very dangerous, involving two sea-voyages; . . . But, on the other hand, the first-mentioned route has not been open for a considerable time, on account of wars that have been going on.

It is twelve years since I have had any news of the Papal court, or of our Order, or of the state of affairs generally in the west. . . .

I have myself grown old and grey, more with toil and trouble than with years; for I am not more than fifty-eight. I have got a competent knowledge of the language and character which is most generally used by the Tartars. And I have already translated into that language and character the New Testament and the Psalter, and have caused them to be written out in the fairest penmanship they have; and so by writing, reading, and preaching, I bear open and public testimony to the Law of Christ. . . .

As far as I ever saw or heard tell, I do not believe that any king or prince in the world can be compared to his majesty the Cham in respect of the extent of his dominions, the vastness of their population, or the amount of his wealth. Here I stop.

Dated at the city of Cambalec in the kingdom of Cathay, in the year of the Lord 1305, and on the 8th day of January.

**Source.** Letter of John Monte Corvino, in *Cathay and the Way Thither*, translated and edited by Sir Henry Yule, second edition revised by Henri Cordier (London: Hakluyt Society, 1914), Vol. III, Second Series, Vol. 37, pp. 45-51, passim. Slightly abridged and reprinted in Leon Barnard and Theodore B. Hodges, *Readings in European History*, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 107-108

This text is part of the [Internet Medieval Source Book](#). The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.