

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The Medieval West and Buddhism

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FOR THE MEDIEVAL WEST, the East was the land of one-footed and dog-headed men, of unicorns and griffins, of winged scorpions and gold-digging ants, of the Paradise of the Genesis account; of the people of Gog and Magog. The medieval picture of the East was the result of a rich synthesis of Biblical cosmography and Hellenistic geography that reached back through Isidore of Seville, Solinus, and Pliny to the works of Megasthenes and his contemporary Ktesias. It was a vision that was to maintain its hold on the European mind until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹

A major source of inspiration for the medieval view of the East was the so-called *Romance of Alexander*. This was probably composed before the fourth century A.D. by an unknown author, though ascribed in some manuscripts to Callisthenes, the companion and historian of Alexander the Great. An extremely popular biography of Alexander, it had appeared in over eighty versions in twenty-four languages by the seventeenth century. It reinforced the image of the Asia of Megasthenes, Ktesias, Pliny and Solinus with its stories of the Fountain of Youth, of the sun-and-moon trees at the ends of the earth, of strange peoples and monstrous animals. Leonard Olschki remarks that, as a result, "It was impossible to dissociate even the empirical im-

¹ See R. Wittkower, "Marvels of the East," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942), pp. 159-197; and R. Wittkower, "Marco Polo and the Pictorial Tradition of the Marvels of the East," *Oriente Poliano* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957), pp. 155-172.

age of Asia, derived from travels and exploration, from the legendary figure of Alexander, sketched by poetic imagination. This, then, is the reason why . . . everything relating to that continent appeared and persisted in the form of fables, as of a Utopia surrounded by poetic mystery."²

The East also contained the mystical Christian kingdom of Prester John. We first hear of Prester John in the Chronicle of Otto of Freising in the middle of the twelfth century as the Nestorian king of a country in the Far East. But he became a central figure in the medieval view of Asia on the strength of a letter purportedly sent by him to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus, to Frederick Barbarossa the Holy Roman emperor, and to Pope Alexander III. In this elaborate forgery, Prester John tells us that he is a Christian king ruling a vast and diverse empire of enormous power and wealth. The description of his Kingdom is embellished with accounts of the marvels there to be encountered drawn from the *Romance of Alexander*, from the legend of St. Thomas in India, and from the store of imagery that constituted the medieval picture of the East. Prester John was one of the main reasons for a new period of Asian exploration. Travellers set out to find him, missions were sent to his court, and there was the hope and expectation of his proving a crucial ally in the Christian struggle with the Saracens.³

This, then, was the imaginative vision of the East carried by travellers and missionaries when, in the middle of the thirteenth century, access to the East became possible once again. John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, John of Monte Corvino, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Marignolli, Friar Jordanus, all travelled to the East imbued with images of fabulous races, and wonderful

² L. Olschki, *Marco Polo's Precursors* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 13. See also G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).

³ For the texts, F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes* (Leipzig: Abhandlungen der Philologisch-historischen Classe der königlich sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, 1879-1883). See also, E. D. Ross, "Prester John and the Empire of Ethiopia," in A. P. Newton (ed.), *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), pp. 174-194; C. E. Nowell, "The Historical Prester John," *Speculum* 28 (1953), pp. 435-445; L. Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 381-397.

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marvels, of the heroic Alexander and the paradisaical Kingdom of John the priest and king. But in spite of the image of the East thus created, the reality present there nonetheless had an impact on these travellers. In this article I want to explore the way in which Buddhism, directly and indirectly, played a role in a developing medieval picture of the East.

The Medieval Encounter with Buddhism

The renewed encounter with the East was made possible by the expansion of the peoples of Mongolia united under the leadership of Chinghiz Khan. From 1206 until his death in 1227, Chinghiz extended the dominion of the Mongols over the whole of Asia, from the China Sea to the Black Sea. Under his successors, the Mongols swept further west. In 1240, Poland was ravaged and, in the following year, the Christian army of Henry of Silesia was defeated at Liegnitz near Breslau. At the same time, Hungary was subdued and occupied by the main Mongol army, driving the king of that country into Dalmatia. A divided Christendom was saved, in part at least, by the withdrawal of the Mongol armies to the plains of Russia in 1242 as a result of the death of the Great Khan Ogudai.

When the Mongols once again turned to the West, it was Islam that was to feel their impact. In 1258, Baghdad fell and with it, the Abbasid caliphate. In the following year, Aleppo and Damascus, the capitals of Muslim Syria were captured. With the collapse of Muslim supremacy over these regions, and the rest of central Asia, the East was once again accessible directly to the West. Missionaries and merchants took advantage of the Mongolian hegemony to enter Asia, and subsequently brought back to Europe news of a continent that had been closed off to the West for six hundred years.

But before the Mongols' subjugation of Islam, it was the threat to Europe which they presented that motivated Pope Innocent IV to send two Franciscans to the Emperor of the Tartars in order to forestall the impending danger. After enormous hardships, John of Plano Carpini and his companion Benedict the Pole reached the camp of Kuyuk Khan near Karakorum in July 1246, some fifteen months after John's departure from Lyons. Four months later, the Khan sent them back to the Pope with a letter demanding universal submission to the Khan of the

great Mongol nation.⁴ Upon his return in 1247, John wrote an account of his journey, *The History of the Mongols*, which, by virtue of its incorporation into Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, became the most widely known of all the medieval descriptions of the Mongols.

It is to John that we owe the first Western description of the Chinese. The Kitayans, he informs us,

are pagans and they have their own special writing; it is said that they also have an Old and New Testament; and they have lives of Fathers and hermits and buildings made like churches, in which they pray at stated times; and they say they have some saints. They worship one God, they honour our Lord Jesus Christ, and they believe in eternal life, but they are not baptised. They show honour and respect to our Scriptures, they love Christians, and give much in alms. They seem to be most affable and kindly men.⁵

It is difficult to discern to which religious tradition John of Plano Carpini is here referring, if to any *one* in particular. J. W. de Jong suggests that John is speaking of Confucians, although he gives no reasons for so saying; and it is difficult to see affinities between Confucianism and this description.⁶

It is possible that John is referring to Nestorian Christianity. For, apart from the statement that they are not baptized, the description could fit this group. Nestorian Christianity had been present in China for at least seven hundred years before this time, and had pervaded Central Asia also. Among the Mongols themselves, Nestorianism had been influential. Chinghiz probably had Nestorians in his own family, the mother of Kuyuk Khan was a Nestorian as was the mother of Kublai Khan, and Nestorian priests were present at the court of Mangu Khan.⁷ But John does say that they are *pagans*, and he would not describe Nestorians in this way: heretics they were, but not pagans.

⁴ For the two bulls of Innocent IV to the Khan, and the Khan's reply, see C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), pp. 73-76, 85-86.

⁵ Dawson, pp. 21-22.

⁶ J. W. de Jong, "A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America," *Eastern Buddhist* 7, 1 (1974), p. 61.

⁷ See G. W. Houston, "An Overview of Nestorians in Inner Asia," *Central Asiatic Journal* 24 (1980), pp. 60-68.

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Although Henri de Lubac's declaration that "one can scarcely doubt that these men are Buddhists"⁸ is far too definite a judgement in the light of the information we have, it is feasible to suggest that Buddhism is here alluded to. And, if so, we could read the reference to the two Testaments as implying the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna scriptures,⁹ and the references to lives of the Fathers, hermits, and temples as redolent of a Buddhism that was the dominant religion of China at this time.

But it is perhaps improper to impose the somewhat artificial distinctions of Western scholarship on the religious life of China. In all probability, we have here a composite picture of the religious life of China, although one in which Buddhism plays a normative role. The very positive description of the position of Christianity which John gives may be illuminated by asking how John might have come by this information. It is reasonable to suggest that John's informants were Nestorians at the camp of Kuyuk Khan who, for purposes of self-esteem perhaps, attempted to persuade the Papal representatives of the very influential position that Nestorian Christianity held among the people of China.

From the purely religious mission of the Franciscan William of Rubruck, the West gained a much clearer picture of Buddhism. Setting out from Cyprus in March 1253, William reached the camp of the Great Khan Mangu in December of the same year, and remained there some three months. Although the account of his journey made little impact on his Franciscan contemporaries, or on later Franciscan chroniclers until the mid-nineteenth century,¹⁰ his references to Buddhism became known to the West through their inclusion in Roger Bacon's *Opus Majus* in the mid-thirteenth century, and in Samuel Purchas' *His Pilgrimes* early in the seventeenth.¹¹

It is from William that the West hears for the first time of the Bud-

⁸ H. de Lubac, *La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l'Occident* (Paris: Aubier, 1952), p. 36.

⁹ Dawson, p. 22.

¹⁰ See W. W. Rockhill, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55, as Narrated by Himself, with Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian de Carpine* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), pp. xl-xli.

¹¹ See R. B. Burke (trans.), *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), i.388, ii.806; S. Purchas, *His Pilgrimes* (London: Henric Fetherstone, 1625), iii.1-52.

dhism of Tibet represented by the Tibetan lamas he encountered at Karakorum. All their priests, he tells us,

shave their heads all over and their beards, and they wear saffron garments and observe chastity from the time they shave their heads; they live together, one or two hundred in one community. The days on which they go into their temple, they bring two benches and they sit on the floor facing each other, choir to choir, holding their books in their hands and these from time to time they put down on the benches. As long as they are in the temple they keep their heads uncovered, and read to themselves and keep silence. . . . They also have in their hands wherever they go a string of one or two hundred beads, just as we carry our rosaries, and they always say these words, "On man baccam" [Om mani padme hum], that is, "O God, thou knowest" so one of them translated it for me and they expect to be rewarded by God as many times as they make mention of Him by saying this.¹²

Although William gave this remarkable description of the ritual, temples, rosaries, and major cultic formula of Tibetan Buddhism, he failed to gain much insight into the doctrines of Buddhism. Still, at the behest of Mangu, he did participate in what amounts to the first dialogue between world religions with representatives of Nestorianism, Islam, and Buddhism. As a result, some clues to specifically Buddhist doctrines reached William's readers.

In this colloquy, William hears of a boy from Cathay, not yet three years old and yet with a fully developed mind, who could read and write, and who himself said that he had had three reincarnations.¹³ Here, in embryo at least, is the Tibetan notion of incarnate lamas, manifestations of the Buddha in a human being. This is a precursor of the later, more developed theory of an unbroken chain of incarnations holding the same monastic office, a theory applied particularly to the position of Dalai Lama.¹⁴ William is also informed by the Buddhist *tuin* in the colloquy of the multitude of gods in the different regions of

¹² Dawson, p. 139. See also Burke, ii.788.

¹³ Dawson, p. 192

¹⁴ See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 134-135.

the earth, a statement that corresponds with the Tibetan notion of the gods of the everyday world, that multitude of deities concerned with mundane matters rather than with enlightenment. Apart from these gods, William is told, there is "one supreme God in heaven, of whose origin we are still ignorant, below him are ten, and under them is one lower."¹⁵ It would be inappropriate to attempt too exact a correlation of this account with the Tibetan tradition. But it does seem reminiscent of the Mahāyāna division of the transcendent realm into three realms of being: the impersonal essence of the Buddha-nature, sometimes personified as the primeval Adi-Buddha; the five so-called Dhyani Buddhas with their five attendant heavenly Bodhisattvas; and the Buddha-nature in its earthly manifestation, most notably as Gautama. And something the same may be said of a similar account in *The Book of the Estate of the Great Caan* written around 1330. This reports that many idols are worshipped over which are set four gods. Above these four gods "they say that there is a greater God who is over all the gods, great and small."¹⁶ The relationship of earthly deities, heavenly Buddhas, and the supreme Adi-Buddha is here implicit.

The Khans and Buddhism

It is interesting to note that Mangu Khan was concerned to abjure any special commitment to Buddhism. In William's last audience with him, he declared his belief in one God "by whom we live and by whom we die and towards him we have an upright heart."¹⁷ And such a monotheism reflected the traditional Mongol religion."¹⁸ But he went on to outline the way in which this could be correlated with the religious pluralism of his empire: "Just as God gave different fingers to the hand so has He given different ways to men."¹⁹ It is possible that Mangu did have a predilection for Buddhism in spite of William's account. In a Chinese version of his declaration of faith, Buddhism is referred to as the palm of the hand, upon which all the fingers depend.

¹⁵ Dawson, p. 193.

¹⁶ H. Yule (revised by H. Cordier), *Cathay and the Way Thither being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1915), iii.94; hereafter cited as *Cathay and the Way Thither*.

¹⁷ Dawson, p. 195.

¹⁸ N. Pallisen, "Die alte Religion der Mongolen," *Numen* 3 (1956), pp. 178-229.

¹⁹ Dawson, p. 195.

But it is impossible to be certain whether we have in the Buddhist case a propagandistic addition, or in the case of William a diplomatic omission.²⁰ However that may be, of the influence of Mongolian shamanism at the courts of the Khans there can be no doubt. "God has given you the Scriptures," Mangu declares to William, "and you do not keep them; to us, on the other hand, He has given soothsayers, and we do what they tell us, and live in peace."²¹ And both John of Plano Carpini and Marco Polo tell us of the domestic gods of the Mongols.²²

In general, though, a politically motivated policy of tolerance was the basis of the Mongolian dynasty's attitude to the multiplicity of religions within its domains. A place for all the religions was found in the courts of the Khans. Leonard Olschki remarks,

There beat upon the imperial ears, in a contest of sonority and propaganda, the chimes of the Catholics, the reverberation of the Nestorian tablets, the intonation of the muezzin, and the raucous sound of the powerful Lamaistic trumpets, not to mention the drums of the shamans, the gongs of the *tuins*, and, at Peking, perhaps even the shofar of the Jews.²³

This is certainly the impression that William gives of the court of Mangu. On certain feast days, he tells us, "The Christian priests come first with their paraphernalia, and they pray for him and bless his cup; when they retire the Saracen priests come and do likewise; they are followed by the pagan priests who do the same."²⁴

This is also the situation that Marco Polo encountered when he reached the court of Kublai Khan in or around 1275. The policy of the whole Mongolian dynasty on religion is accurately expressed in

²⁰ See de Lubac, p. 36; Olschki, pp. 181-182, n. 14; and P. Demiéville, "La Situation religieuse en China au Temps de Marco Polo," *Oriente Poliano* (Rome: ISMEO, 1957), p. 195.

²¹ Dawson, p. 195.

²² See Dawson, p. 9; A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1938), i.170-171; see also W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 7. Interestingly, John's description of Mongolian religion received wide circulation through its inclusion in Mandeville's *Travels*. See M. Letts, *Mandeville's Travels: Texts and Translations* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), i.171.

²³ Olschki, p. 197.

²⁴ Dawson, p. 160.

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Marco's report of Kublai's confession of faith. On being asked why he observed the chief feasts, not only of the Christians, but also of the Saracens, Jews, and idolaters, he replied, "There are four prophets who are worshipped and to whom everybody does reverence. The Christians say their God was Jesus Christ; the Saracens Mahomet; the Jews Moses; and the idolaters Sagamoni Burcan, who was the first god of the idols; and I do honour and reverence all four, that is, to him who is the greatest in heaven and more true, and him I pray to help me."²⁵

It is difficult to be certain which of the religious traditions, if any, Kublai found intellectually congenial. But undoubtedly, in practice, it was the religion of Sagamoni Burcan, that is, Buddhism, in its Tibetan form, which prevailed over all the other religions during his reign and during that of his direct successors until the decline of the Mongolian dynasty. In part, this was the result of the greater efficacy Kublai perceived in its utilization of occult forces and magical practices. In part too, it was the result of the influence on Kublai of the Tibetan Phags-pa, who provided the Mongol rulers with a religio-political theory incorporating them into the line of successors of Buddhist universal emperors.²⁶

In spite of this practical inclination for Tibetan Buddhism, the politics of the Empire demanded tolerance. For Marco, coming from a context in which unity in belief and practice was the ideal of a rapidly fragmenting Catholic Christendom, the conjunction of political stability and religious multiplicity must have appeared inexplicable. One of the versions of Marco's work begins with an account of the relation between religion and the Mongolian state: "These Tartars do not care what God is worshipped in their lands. If only all are faithful to the Lord Kan and quite obedient and give therefore the appointed tribute, and justice is well kept, thou mayest do what pleaseth thee with the soul."²⁷

Other travellers were similarly struck by this contrast between West and East. In 1326, in his letter to the warden of his Franciscan house in

²⁵ Moule and Pelliot, i.201.

²⁶ See especially Demiéville, p. 195; also H. Franke, "Tibetans in Yuan China," J. D. Langlois, Jr. (ed.), *China under Mongol Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 296-328.

²⁷ Moule and Pelliot, i.97.

Perugia, Andrew, Bishop of Zayton in China, noted that "in this vast empire there are verily men of every nation under heaven and of every sect; and each and all are allowed to live according to their own sect. For this is their opinion, or I should say their error, that every man is saved in his own sect."²⁸ Sir John Mandeville had also heard of the religious policy of the Khans. In his mid-fourteenth century *Travels*, he assured his supposedly incredulous readers that in the land of the Great Caan of Tartary "no man is forbidden . . . to trow in what law that him list."²⁹

The Medieval Buddha

Of all the medieval travellers to Asia who encountered Buddhism only two transmitted information about the Buddha. The first of these was Hethum or Hayton I, King of Lesser Armenia, who visited the court of Mangu Khan immediately after William of Rubruck. In the land of the Mongols, he tells us,

there are still many idolaters who worship an extremely large clay image whose name is *Chakemonia*. They say that he has been God for three thousand and forty years, and that he still has thirty-five *touman* to govern the world; a *touman* is worth ten thousand years, and then he will be deprived of divinity. There is also another God whose name is Madri; a clay figure of incredible size has been made of him in a beautiful temple.³⁰

According to Hethum, then, if we assume the Buddha's divinization is equivalent to his enlightenment, then this took place in about 1785 B.C., a date which incidentally doesn't correspond to either Chinese, Tibetan, or Mongolian calculations. Still, with his suggestion that the Buddha will lose his divinity in the future, we can surmise that Hethum gained some insight into Buddhist cyclical chronology, a surmise reinforced by his reference to the future Buddha Madri, that is, Maitreya.

²⁸ Dawson, p. 237.

²⁹ Letts, i.153.

³⁰ J. Klaproth, "Voyage du pieux Roi des Arméniens, Héthoum, auprès de Batou et de Mangou Khan, dans les Années 703 et 704 de l'Ère Arménienne, ou 1254 et 1255 de J.C.," *Nouveau Journal Asiatique* 12 (1833), p. 289.

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But it was Marco Polo who gave to the West its most substantial picture of the Buddha.³¹ To Marco, the Buddha was *Sagamoni Burcan*. "Sagamoni" was, of course, the Mongolized form of Sakyamuni. In contrast, "burkhan" was a term derived from Siberian Shamanism. It signified not only deity, god, and gods, but also their images and representations. It was fixed in this meaning among the Tungusians, Mongols, and Turks, well before being affixed to the name of Buddha.³² As a consequence, so Olschki maintains, "What Marco saw and understood of his doctrines and worship in the regions where Buddhism had become the dominant religion was restricted to the Shamanist interpretation of the Turks and Mongols, who had been converted to this cult in the XIII century by the Uigur and Tibetan lamas who flocked to the Chinghizide courts."³³ The Buddha was, for Marco Polo, primarily a magical, thaumaturgic, being.

Sagamoni Burcan, according to Marco, was chief among the idols. It is to the Buddha that *Il Milione* ascribes all the diverse aspects of Asiatic religion attributed to the idolaters. In Kublai's confession of faith, Sagamoni Burcan is "the first god of the idols";³⁴ elsewhere Marco informs us that the idolaters hold him "for the best God, and for the greatest that they have. And they worship his image, for you may know that as they say this was the first idol which the idolaters have, and from him they say are descended all the other idols of those provinces."³⁵ It was not unreasonable for Marco to have come to this conclusion. For on the one hand, his experience of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would have led him to expect that, just as these were founded by Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, so also the multitude of religious phenomena he encountered in Asia were attributable to one founder. And, on the other hand, his encounter with Mahāyāna Buddhism and its predominance among courtly circles may well have engendered this impression.

³¹ For this account of Marco on the Buddha, I am indebted to Olschki's definitive *Marco Polo's Asia*.

³² B. Laufer, "Burkhan," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 36 (1917), p. 395.

³³ Olschki, pp. 254-255.

³⁴ Moule and Pelliot, i.201.

³⁵ Moule and Pelliot, i.410; see also i.407. Marco elsewhere limits the number of idols to eighty-four, to each of which God assigned an appropriate number. See Moule and Pelliot, i.305; Olschki, pp. 294-295.

Marco believed the origin of Buddhism, hence the origin of all idolatry, to have been Kashmir. The idolaters of Kashmir, he tells us, "are the head and source of all the other idolaters of the world, and from them the idols descend."³⁶ Probably, it was to Kashmir that the lamas with whom Marco came into contact pointed as the source of their religion. Kashmir had been one of the major links in the spread of Buddhism into both Tibet and Central Asia. And it was from Kashmir that Buddhists came to Tibet in the eleventh century to re-establish the tradition after its suppression by Glang dar ma in the ninth century.³⁷

It would appear though that, in Sri Lanka on his return to Europe between 1292 and 1295, Marco accepted the opinion that the Buddha lived in Sri Lanka. The origin of idolatry is said to be "in the Isle of Seilan in Indie."³⁸ Be that as it may, it was there that Marco was to hear the story of the life of the Buddha. Although one must not overestimate the influence of Marco's work on his own or subsequent generations,³⁹ with this account the first clear description of the *Buddha's* life was available to the West.

According to Marco, Sagamoni Burcan was the son of a great king and wished to renounce the world. The king moved the Buddha into a palace and tempted him with the sensual delights of thirty thousand maidens, but he was unmoved in his resolve. When his father allowed him to leave the palace for the first time, he encountered a dead man, and an infirm old man. He returned to the palace "frightened and all astonished and says to himself that they stay no more in this evil, deceitful and imperfect world where he must die or become so old as to need the help of another . . . but says that he will go to seek for him who never dies and for him who has made him."⁴⁰ The Buddha left the palace secretly and lived the life of a celibate recluse "and makes very great abstinence just as if he had been a Christian."⁴¹

³⁶ Moule and Pelliot, i.140.

³⁷ See Tucci, chs. 1 and 2.

³⁸ Moule and Pelliot, i.410.

³⁹ See H. Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (London: John Murray, 1929) i.116-129; hereafter cited as *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*.

⁴⁰ Moule and Pelliot, i.409.

⁴¹ Moule and Pelliot, i.409.

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Buddhist Cult and Practice

Upon Sagamoni's death, Marco tells us, his father made an image in his likeness of gold and precious stones to be worshipped as their god by all his subjects. This story has no analogies in the Buddhist tradition, although it may reflect the tradition of his father's conversion to Buddhism after his enlightenment. But it does reinforce the importance which Buddhist statuary assumed in the minds of many medieval travellers to Asia.

Buddhist architecture certainly made an impression on William of Rubruck. He was particularly struck by the size of the images: "They place their chief idol facing south: the one I saw at Caracorum was as big as St. Christopher is depicted. A certain Nestorian priest who had come from Cathay told me that in that country there is an idol so large that it can be seen two days' journey off."⁴² The comparison of the Buddha with St. Christopher, often depicted as a giant in Christian iconography, was also made by Odoric of Pordenone, a Franciscan who made an epic journey by sea to China and returned overland from about 1316 to 1330. In the region of Coromandel in India, he encountered "a certain wonderful idol, which all the provinces of India greatly revere. It is as big as St. Christopher is commonly represented by the painters, and it is entirely of gold seated on a great throne, which is also of gold."⁴³ And on the basis of Odoric's work, Mandeville informed his readers that in the churches of China "are great idols, as they were giants the which they give meat and drink unto on festival days."⁴⁴

Marco Polo also was appreciative of the multitude of idols in Campçio. He saw well-worked and wonderful idols, made of wood, clay, and stone, in the form of colossal reclining Buddhas surrounded by others sculptured in attitudes of humility and reverence,⁴⁵ a common theme in Buddhist iconography of that moment in which the Buddha entered final nirvana surrounded by his disciples. Marco has heard too of the importance to Sri Lankan Buddhism of Adam's peak, for

⁴² Dawson, p. 138.

⁴³ H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.142-143.

⁴⁴ Letts, i.144. See Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.184-185.

⁴⁵ Moule and Pelliot, i.158-159. See also Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, i.221-222, n. 2.

the Saracens the sepulchre of Adam, for the idolaters the monument of Sagamoni Burcan.⁴⁶ In the writings of the papal emissary John of Marignolli, in Sri Lanka around 1340, we find mention not only of Adam's Peak, but also of a statue of and the footprint of the Buddha.⁴⁷

Adam's Peak was also the repository of certain relics of the Buddha, notably his teeth, hair, and alms bowl. Marco gives us an entrancing account of Kublai's bid to obtain these, and of the triumphal procession with which they were brought to his court.⁴⁸ These relics symbolized not only the triumph of Buddhism at the court of Kublai, but also the "centralization of spiritual and political power which Kublai claimed for himself and his dynasty in the sense of Chinghizide universalism."⁴⁹

It was also at the court of Kublai that Marco was to have his closest encounter with the magical practices of the *bacsi*, the representatives of Lamaist Buddhism who thronged the Khan's court. For Marco, in spite of their claim that their powers were the result of their holiness and divine assistance, all their practices were devils' art. Marco was critical too of their lack of cleanliness,⁵⁰ their necromancy, and what he took to be their cannibalism. But he was nonetheless astounded by their apparent ability to move full wine cups through the air—"a great marvel past all belief"⁵¹—as was Odoric of Pordenone.⁵²

Virtually all the medieval travellers to Asia commented, generally favourably, on the Buddhist monks they there met. King Hethum, for example, remarked of the Touin, "They shave the hair of their head, also the beard; they have yellow robes similar to those of Christian priests, with this difference that they do not wear them on the

⁴⁶ Moule and Pelliot, i.407.

⁴⁷ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.232-233. See also, p. 233, n. 1. Odoric of Pordenone also mentions Adam's Peak; see Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.170-171.

⁴⁸ Moule and Pelliot, i.412.

⁴⁹ Olschki, pp. 200-201. On the symbolic relation of the crib of Christ to the Buddha's bowl, see L. Olschki, "The Crib of Christ and the Bowl of Buddha," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 70 (1950), pp. 161-164. On the history of these relics, see Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, ii.328-330. The mythology of the Buddha's bowl may also have influenced that of the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend.

⁵⁰ But on this imputation, see Olschki, pp. 287-288, n. 103.

⁵¹ Moule and Pelliot, i.189.

⁵² Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.239.

shoulders, but only around the chest. They are moderate in their nourishment; they marry at twenty years old and exercise the rights of husbands until they are fifty; for they regard that as very necessary to the conservation of their health."⁵³ Friar Jordanus in his *Mirabilia* around 1330, also noted the parallels between Buddhist and Christian monasticism. In the empire of the Great Khan, we read, "are idol-temples, and also monasteries of men and women as with us; and they have a choral service and sermons just like us; and the great pontiffs of the idols wear red hats and capes like our cardinals."⁵⁴ And at about the same time, *The Book of the Estate of the Great Caan* tells us of the sovereign bishop of Cathay, "such as the Pope is with us," who "hath always the head and beard shaven, and weareth on his head a red hat, and is always clothed in red."⁵⁵

The abstinence of Buddhist monks was much remarked upon. John of Monte Corvino, the founder of Catholic missions in China and the first Archbishop of Peking, wrote in 1306, "Here are many persons attached to religious orders of different sects, and wearing different habits; and these practice greater abstinence and austerity than our Latin monks."⁵⁶ And in *The Book of the Estate of the Great Khan*, we are told that the monks live an orderly life, "They keep chastity and none of their clerks and monks do marry."⁵⁷ As we have seen, Marco Polo was critical of the *bacsi* at the Kublai's court. But he did admire the Buddhist monks of Kashmir. Some of these, he tells us, spent a solitary life in their hermitages "and make great abstinence from food and from drink, and are very pure from self-indulgence and keep themselves beyond measure from doing any . . . sin which may be against their . . . faith";⁵⁸ others, with tonsures like the Brothers Preachers and Minors, lead a strict life in their monasteries and abbeys. Of the monks at Campsay in China, John of Marignolli wrote, "I must say that their rigid attention to prayer and fasting and other religious duties, if they but held the true faith, would far surpass any

⁵³ Klaproth, p. 289.

⁵⁴ H. Yule, *Mirabilia Descripta. The Wonders of the East, by Friar Jordanus* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1863), p. 46.

⁵⁵ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.93-94. See also p. 93, n. 1.

⁵⁶ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.57.

⁵⁷ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.94.

⁵⁸ Moule and Pelliot, i.140.

strictness and self-denial that we practise.”⁵⁹ And of the monks in Sri Lanka? They are well-conducted and of surpassing cleanliness. They pray, he wrote, “with great propriety of manner.” They eat no flesh, dine only once a day, and drink nothing but milk or water.⁶⁰

Buddhist Precept

We hear little from any of the medieval travellers about Buddhist doctrinal teachings. Although much interested in the similarities of cult and practice to that of their own faith, they showed little appreciation of Buddhist precept, and at times, some little confusion. John of Marignolli, for instance, tells us of the trees which the monks of Adam’s Peak worshipped. According to him, “they adore those trees because Adam looked for future salvation to come from wood.”⁶¹ Clearly, these trees represented for the Buddhists there the so-called Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha is said to have gained enlightenment; thus Marignolli’s obscure suggestion that salvation is to come from wood.

It is in Sri Lanka too that Marco Polo hears of the rebirth of the Buddha eighty-four times: “every time they say that he became an animal, either a dog or other thing, but at the eighty-fourth time they say that he died and became a god.”⁶² Marco was correct in his recognition that the doctrine of rebirth in Buddhism implied rebirth in non-human form. Moreover, he had heard of the doctrine before this, while in China, for he was aware that the nature of future existences is a consequence of one’s good or evil actions in this one.⁶³ But neither Marco, nor any of his contemporaries came to any appreciation of Nirvana as the *summum bonum* of the Buddhist’s life. For Marco, the Buddha’s aim was perceived only in Christian terms of seeking the eternal

⁵⁹ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.260.

⁶⁰ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.233-234, 242. Though we do hear elsewhere, from Marco Polo, of meat-eating Buddhists. See Moule and Pelliot, i.151. Marco’s report may well be accurate. See Demiéville, p. 226. Odoric of Pordenone reports that in Lhasa there is no shedding of blood, whether of man or beast. See Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.249-250.

⁶¹ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.243.

⁶² Moule and Pelliot, i.410.

⁶³ Moule and Pelliot, i.254.

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creator,⁶⁴ and he sees the process of rebirth as one which reaches its conclusion in absorption into God.⁶⁵

Odoric of Pordenone also heard of the doctrine of rebirth. On a visit to a Chinese Buddhist monastery, he is entertained by the feeding of a multitude of apes and monkeys. To clarify the meaning of this, a resident monk explained:

“These animals are the souls of gentlemen, which we feed in this fashion for the love of God!” But quoth I: “No souls be these but brute beasts of sundry kinds.” And he said: “No, forsooth, they be naught else but the souls of gentlemen. For if a man be noble his soul entereth the form of some of these nobler animals; but the souls of boors enter the forms of baser animals and dwell therein!” And say what I list against it, nought else would he believe.⁶⁶

This story, derived from Odoric, was repeated with obvious delight by Mandeville in his *Travels*.⁶⁷ And interestingly, the same phenomenon was encountered by John of Marignolli. He somewhat peremptorily dismissed the suggestion that these apes were the souls of the departed as a delusion which such unbelievers deserved.⁶⁸

John of Marignolli was the last of the Franciscan missionaries to reach China in the period of the Mongol dynasty. By the time he left China in 1347, the Mongol Empire was already in decline. The overthrow of the Mongols in China in 1368 was followed by the expulsion of the Christians from China the following year. No Christians were to return to China until the Jesuits arrived at the end of the sixteenth century. The Buddhism of China, and of the rest of Asia, was once again lost to Western view. Allied with the decline of the Mongols and the ascendancy of the Ming, an expanding Islam again severed communication between the East and a West which, ravaged by war, disease, and economic decline, was itself ill-equipped to extend the engagement with Buddhism facilitated by the Mongol hegemony.

⁶⁴ Moule and Pelliot, i.409.

⁶⁵ Moule and Pelliot, i.255.

⁶⁶ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, ii.203.

⁶⁷ Letts, i.145-146.

⁶⁸ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, iii.259-260.